Joined-up practice

Five areas of exemplary practice for social workers and educators to re-engage homeless youth

Young people seen as 'at risk' are a substantial focus across a wide range of policy and practice fields in national and international contexts. This article addresses two of those fields, youth homelessness and youth failing to obtain a basic education that will give them access to employment and full community participation as active citizens. By comparing solutions to the problems of youth homelessness and youth educationally at risk, the article distils key meta-characteristics useful for both social workers and educators in mutually supporting some of the most at risk young people in our communities today. This is what the authors term 'a joined-up practice'.

by Phil Crane & Cheryl Livock

With the object of distilling essential meta-characteristics for a "joined-up" practice, we have compared specific research findings: from the field of youth homelessness research, findings emanate from the Reconnect program, an Australia-wide program that aims to reconnect homeless youths back into their family/community environments; and from the field of education research, findings emanate from a doctoral study investigating three forms of alternative education for "at risk" youth in Queensland, Australia (Livock 2009), with a particular focus on literacy and numeracy.

Previously, an array of studies have *separately* examined practices to re-engage young people seen to be "at risk" in the fields of education and human services. It is striking, however, the extent to which good practice in the field of education and alternative schooling resonates with the field of human services early intervention programs for homeless youth (Evans & Shaver 2001; Ryan 2003). The education field has been particularly interested in preventing early school leaving, and more recently in enhancing literacy and numeracy. As a result, various school-based and school-focused interventions have been developed to support at risk young people to remain in schooling (Brooks et al. 1997), including the development of various forms of alternative (to mainstream) education. Most recently, rather than operating in relative isolation, education provision and human service support have become more closely

associated, at times integrated. There can, of course, be a tension in these two fields of practice. For example, where youth workers in or associated with schools are seeking to maintain the young person's connection with school as a protective factor against various social problems, while at the same time school administrators are seeking to maintain school standards and discipline. We therefore suggest that it is of benefit to compare findings about good practice across these two fields, and that in so doing we may be better able to suggest critical *shared* characteristics for good practice.

The field of youth homelessness: early intervention programs & good practices

In the arena of human services, successive Australian governments since the early 1990s have supported early intervention into youth homelessness. Between 1996 and 1998 the Youth Homelessness Pilot Program (YHPP), involving 26 non-government-delivered services and, based on an action research strategy together with extensive evaluation, developed a framework for early intervention. The framework developed was used to expand the pilot program into what is now called Reconnect, which, in 2010, included 114 services nationally. A unique characteristic of the program is the requirement for all funded services to undertake ongoing action research to continually refine context responsive services.

Reconnect uses family-focused early intervention strategies to help the young person who is recently homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, "achieve family reconciliation and an improved level of engagement with work, education, training and the community" (Australian Government, Dept. of FaHCSIA 2009). Schools are considered a key "first to know" agency (Crane & Brannock 1996) and thus an important venue for delivery of early intervention.

Further data from successful early intervention practice for homeless youth was gathered in two comprehensive national evaluations conducted in 1998 (ARTD 1998)

and 2003 (Ryan 2003), along with a number of specifically commissioned research studies (RPR Consulting 2003; Evans & Shaver 2001). Consequently, a process has been developed to produce good practice principles for this field of social work that was derived from the systematic analysis of action research reports by various consultants over the period 1998 to 2009 (Parker 2001-02; Porter Orchard various; ARTD 2009, cited in Crane & O'Regan 2010). In the case of the two national evaluations, it was found that the studied early intervention was successful in improving stability in the young person's living situation, and in achieving broadly defined family reconciliation (ARTD 1998; Ryan 2003).

The above studies regarding early intervention into youth homelessness contributed to and confirmed the evidence base for and articulation of good practice. Good practices in this field of youth homelessness included meeting the immediate needs of clients; responding quickly when assistance is sought; explicitly involving the young persons' supports – most importantly family; having a "toolbox" of intervention strategies that allow for client-driven, flexible, holistic and collaborative responses; using language and approaches that are seen as supportive to client young people and their families; delivering direct services to young people while simultaneously working to build community capacity to provide positive support (for example, a more supportive school environment); and service providers using action research to systematically investigate strategies for effective practice. Thus, after more than a decade of sustained use and reflection, these Reconnect "good practice principles" (RPR Consulting 1998; Ryan 2003, pp.23-24) provide the glue for early intervention practice across diverse contexts that range from the inner city to remote indigenous communities.

Rather than identifying one or more specific models of service that are then "scaled up", the experience of these early intervention programs shows that a wide range of specific service delivery approaches should be used. The individually based approaches can be effective in achieving the goal of increased

connection of young people to family, education, work and community. What is critical is a *deliberate pursuit* of good practice within and across services, and the *ongoing development and use* of good practice principles as identified above.

Further, recent research into case management practice provides additional support for acknowledging several key characteristics to effective practice with young people who are disengaged or disengaging from key social systems. In a systematic review of evidence (53 studies) Gronda (2009, p.9) found that case management works when the relationship between the worker and the client is typified by persistence, reliability, intimacy and respect, and delivers comprehensive, practical support. These qualities were significant across various client categories, including young people, regardless of the particular case management model used. It is interesting therefore to compare these findings to the separate, yet related, field of education, where a significant number of young people are likewise disengaging or disengaged (Livock 2009).

The field of educational disengagement: alternative schooling and good practices to re-engage 'at risk' young people

Background and purpose of study

Livock's (2009) doctoral study distilled similar insights as those in the Reconnect program regarding "at risk" young people. Young people disengaged or disengaging from education have been a growing concern worldwide since the 1960s (Blyth & Milner 1996; Currie 2000; Epstein, Rothman, & Sabatino 1978; Grunsell 1980) when high school education in developed nations became compulsory and school "drop outs" became labelled as "youth at risk" (Department of Education (Tasmania) 2003). Although a contested topic, "youth at risk" (Bessant 2002; Cieslik & Pollock 2002; Kemshall, Boeck & Fleming 2009; Te Riele 2006) were identified in Livock's study as school-aged (10–18) young people, who had disengaged from mainstream schooling and also experienced a

continuum of risk factors in their lives which could include: homelessness, being bullied and bullying at school, drug taking, sexual and physical abusive home situations, living in poverty, school drop outs, and illiteracy. Alternative forms of schooling have sprung up in relatively recent times to re-engage such young people in education (Blyth & Milner 1996; Currie 2000; Grunsell 1980; Livock 2005; Mills & McGregor 2010; Reid 1986; Sabatino & Mauser 1978) but are these forms of schooling just parking lots or are they really making a difference to life outcomes for youth at risk? What is good educational practice that can effectively re-engage these young people? To answer to these questions, Livock's study asked:

What alternative provisions of schooling are working for youth at risk?

What provisions are working academically?

What provisions are working socially?"

Academic provisions focused solely on literacy outcomes: are alternative schools improving the literacy standards of their students; are alternative schools facilitating a social & critical practice of literacy; and what pedagogies are being employed to facilitate literacy learning? A lack of complex literacy skills can be a major barrier to not only continued educational engagement but also engagement in the workforce and social life (Gee 1996, 2000).

Social provisions were seen in the context of social support needed to retain students in school – not only classroom teaching practices, but also school-wide practices at the alternative schooling sites and, additionally, institutional practices of the educational institutions where the schools were embedded, such as Education Queensland, TAFE, and also state and federal governments. These practices could include: uniform policies, the way staff talk to students (including administrative staff), mandated attendance policies, the way students talk to staff (including administrative staff) and behaviour policies. In other words: Just how is the social interaction between institutions, adults and young people keeping youth at risk engaged in schooling?

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Methodology

Four different forms of alternative schooling in southern Queensland became three main case study sites, along with one pilot site, in areas representative of the state: small and large country towns, a regional hub, and a Brisbane suburban site. The alternative forms included: Flexi model, Education Queensland's school annexes titled Alternative Education Centres, LLNP (Language, Literacy and Numeracy Program) for unemployed youth and adults delivered at a TAFE, and a specifically designed TAFE program, Certificate I in Workplace Access for Youth At Risk. With an enrolment of approximately 30 students, each alternative school was intended as a place for young people disenchanted with and disengaged from mainstream schooling to re-engage and gain the necessary skills, skills both academic and social, which would allow for full community participation.

Over a three-year period between 2004 and 2006, with follow-up phone interviews until 2007, each of the schools collected data in the form of historical documentation, workbook and textbook samples, recorded and noted classroom observations, as well as recorded and noted individual interviews with three staff and four students at each alternative school.

Findings

Data was analysed in three different ways:

1. Staff narratives for each site were interrogated by a series of critical questions (Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen & Karlsson 2002) relating to the fundamental issue: What are the necessary (essential) conditions that brought each alternative schooling site into being, and that made it possible for their continued existence?

   The key components were: The characteristics of the at risk students and their need for a "different approach", compared to mainstream schools' rule/task-based approach.

2. All student and staff narratives were coded using a modified form of grounded theory, with categories developed in order of the "most spoken about" concerns regarding the "different" approach of the alternative schools.

   Top two categories were: "Different teaching approaches and social support, where teachers sat next to and persisted with students until the topic was mastered", and "Where young people learned social skills by learning, eating and laughing with their teachers (where) they learned to support and laugh with fellow students (not at them)".

3. Two students from each site's educational engagement, and standard of literacy improvement were analysed in depth – using three practical but theoretically based models common in mainstream schools to reveal: literacy improvements, types of literacies learnt, and the teaching practices.

   Findings – Literacy: All students improved functional literacy skills; however, complex critical skills were largely missing.

   Findings – Teaching practices keeping students engaged included considerable teacher talk (story telling and detailed but simplified explanations), tasks relating to the real world. Student control (direct input regarding tasks and timetabling) acceptance, valuing and support of students' "different" educational and socio-cultural experiences.

   In all three analyses two further recurring themes emerged. First, the importance of educational structures which enabled agency of staff and involved parents. Success of teachers and parents in implementing the needed "different" approach was enabled or limited to the extent that connected educational institutions gave their support. A second theme was how the word "different" was stressed by the majority of participants when talking about their alternative school. A flexi school teacher said, "We're different. And its important we're different. That's our reason for being – that we are different. More, more student centred." And a TAFE Personal Development teacher said:

   It's a different level of resilience that they need to learn. I guess they've been through a

lot of physical hardship, or social or family, emotional stuff. And they definitely need to learn skills to be able to cope with that.

This was a "different" approach that allowed their students to "flourish" (Bhaskar 2002) by accepting the diverse identities of young people labelled "at risk", and which continued to practice inclusiveness, even in times of crisis. As in the human services sphere, it was an approach that focused on building stable, trusting relationships, not only with these young people, but also with parents and carers. It was an approach that acknowledged the role of care-givers and afforded them agency, where in the past they had often been pariahs, also disengaged from the schooling system.

The inclusion of natural networks of support in a respectful way is important for appreciating a person's lived experience

Joined-up practice in educational and human services fields: key meta-characteristics

Significantly, when comparing Livock's research to research surrounding the Reconnect program we see a resonance in the two fields of education and human services. This is in spite of the very dissimilar contexts of the two in terms of the issue of primary focus, the institutional location, the worker role and the discipline base. What emerges, however, is a clear overlap between characteristics of good practice in the fields of alternative education and youth homelessness. Appreciating these has the potential to provide a common ground for practice with young people variously considered "at risk".

In some senses this should not surprise as the cohorts of young people overlap. Difficulty in remaining at school has often been found to be associated with being homeless (MacKenzie & Chamberlain 1995). What is needed is a "joined-up practice" for both education and social workers, so that all individuals and institutions involved are on the same page. From the studies mentioned above, the authors have distilled five key meta-characteristics, which they suggest should form the basis of good practice for those involved with youth at risk: 1) person-centred, 2) inclusive of natural

networks, 3) responsive and flexible, 4) inquiry oriented and active learning, and 5) institutionally supported.

1. Person-centred

Livock identified individuation, a fine-grained attention to each young person's lived experience, as a key requirement for the sustained engagement of young people in alternative education settings. In such a person-centred approach the building of trust and relationship provides the foundation for moving towards institutionally sanctioned outcomes. A person-centred approach provides the practitioner with an opportunity to locate the young person in their broader contexts, to appreciate something of the complexity and unique texture of their everyday world, and provides the young person with evidence that they have standing as a person rather than as an educational or (in the case of youth homelessness practice) a family commodity. This is illustrated by the accompanying vignettes.

VIGNETTE 1 Person-centred approach

At the Alternative Education Centre in Livock's study (2009, pp.216-222), one student with chosen pseudonym Alf had been excluded from three schools for violent behaviour. This was by age 9, when he came to the school as a non-verbal child with a speech language impairment. By age 15 Alf had mastered the Army Cadet's handbook and had become not only an army cadet but a sergeant responsible for a group of younger boys.

One of his teachers explained, "There were lots of issues with trust. And lots of negative experiences of learning ... In the old days he would have thrown stuff around and stormed out." However, this alternative school implemented the Glasser philosophy emphasising "love and belonging" (Glasser 1998, p.31) as opposed to the "get tough" approach (Glasser 2001, p.80).

According to well-trodden frameworks in social work and behavioural sciences, this type of approach known as an ecological perspective linked with a strengths-based approach to assessment and intervention (Payne 2005). Fitting well within the *person-centred* approach, these frameworks

variously emphasise the development of interventions which encourage holistic understandings and individual agency.

2. Inclusive of natural networks

In both fields an inclusive approach to young people's families (and other sources of social support) is important. Family, broadly defined, is a critical source of support for young people of school age, given the extended period of economic and social dependency on families that has come to typify young people's pathways to full-time adult wage employment.

The inclusion of natural networks of support in a respectful way is important for appreciating a person's lived experience and activating support that has long-term meaningfulness and sustainability. While the context of alternative education is less oriented to engagement with natural networks, the capacity of these to assist or undermine educational effort is identified in Livock's study and supported by other evidence (Levitas 2005; Mitchell 2000; Australian Industry Group & Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2007; The National Youth Commission 2008).

VIGNETTE 2 Inclusive of natural networks + institutionally supported

Cert I Workplace Access for Youth At Risk, TAFE program had a situation develop which exemplified how important it is to keep the communication channels open with young people's families/significant others; and also the importance of institutions supporting their staff emotionally and physically.

That year, for the first time in nine years, one out of the five classes imploded. They were extremely irate that an inadequate replacement teacher had caused them to fail a vocational workshop so they could not gain their Certificate I.

Prior to this incident students reported that this was the first time their parents, partners, significant others had regular positive contact with teachers. One student reported her partner not only encouraged her to enrol, but also constantly encouraged her regular attendance.

3. Responsive and flexible

VIGNETTE 3 Responsive & flexible approach

Flexi School

This alternative school provided a flexible academic program that responded to student needs: it gave learning support to help students successfully complete their Distance Education workbooks, negotiated extensions for final end of year tasks, and also responded to students' social situations, such as re-issuing workbooks for homeless students. Additionally, not only present but also past students were assisted with employment and daily living issues such as filling in Centrelink forms, assisting with resume preparation and sending faxes.

Para teacher commented: "I think the most effective part is that we exist, that we are here. And we have like the old kids come back. Just the fact that one we exist. Two that we're approachable and that they trust us, generally I think. We've built relationships with them, and its just long-term relationships. Because they leave, they go off into the world and they come back. It's a sense of a centre for them I think. It centres them" (Livock 2009, p.107).

The need for a flexible, context-responsive approach to practice is indicated in both fields. The pursuit of individual outcomes rather than adherence to pre-conceived models of service is necessary in order to match intervention to a particular young person. Instead of using pre-conceived models, applying the notion of a "toolbox approach" facilitates greater flexibility and responsiveness. A toolbox approach allows a suite of well-founded intervention strategies to be identified and sanctioned organisationally, while providing sufficient room for flexibly responding to client needs at a particular point in time and process. Effective practice can also have creative and micro-political management elements as it may need to go outside the dominant model of service and institutional habits. Working with "at risk" young people should therefore provide some additional scope for practitioners to develop "customised" responses given the complexities these young people are seen to present.

Front line practitioners in both the alternative education and human services spheres are role based rather than role bound. They tend to see their role as a platform for providing important services and support and are willing to interpret their mandate broadly rather than narrowly in the pursuit of outcomes they are employed to work towards. This view is reflected in Livock's (2009) recorded alternative education staff's interview comments, and in literature surrounding alternative education going back as far as the 1970s (Grunsell 1980; Mitchell 1996; Normington 1996; Stephenson 1996). Frontline practitioners facilitate opportunities and support, and don't use their role as an excuse not to engage. Gronda (2009, p.12) found that, for clients, direct service delivery by the worker is generally preferable to brokerage or referral. This involves the practitioner working at the intersection of their role with others (perhaps in multi-disciplinary teams), being able to comprehensively assess needs, and being able to respond directly to a broad range of needs (Gronda 2009, p.12). More broadly "joined-up" service delivery that links a suite of service resources together is of substantial current interest in various social policy arenas (The National Youth Commission 2008, pp.370-72).

4. Inquiry oriented and active learning

Effective early intervention services are characterised by active and explicit reflective processes to consider what is effective and how service delivery can be improved or be more responsive to presented needs (Crane & Brannock 1996). Various terminologies exist to describe such a character, including reflective practice, action research, action learning and continuous improvement (Crane & O'Regan 2010). Tools for inquiry allow a worker, service or program to link observations, feedback and data to both individual and service level change. Models of service are understood as dynamic and context-responsive rather than static.

5. Institutionally supported

Enabling system and institutional conditions are important. In particular, time is important

for relationship formation and maintenance (Gronda 2009, p.12). Livock found that alternative education teachers demonstrated a capacity to continue working with a young person until there was a resolution or natural conclusion, and remained open to re-engagement. This has also been evident in early intervention into youth homelessness practice. The issue of having sufficient time is often reflective of a combination of institutional requirements, for example, class size/required caseload and case complexity.

Conclusion

This paper therefore concludes that there is an identifiable overlap between characteristics of good practice in the fields of early intervention into youth homelessness practice and alternative education. There is evidence to suggest that young people "at risk" are most likely to be assisted when the approach

to front-line practice is person-centred, inclusive of natural networks, responsive and flexible, inquiry oriented and institutionally supported. Crucial in the implementation of these practices is a joined-up response from both educational and human services spheres if young people considered "at risk" are to be supported effectively.

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