Response to The Better and Fairer Education Consultation Paper

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Summary

The Better and Fairer Education consultation paper emphasises learning through evidence-based practice defined by national and international rankings There is a concentration on early intervention and supporting students in the primary years and early intervention in secondary education. Despite this emphasis Indigenous students, students in poverty and students in outer metropolitan, rural and remote settings will continue to fall out of schooling in the senior years. The experience of young people in the last two years of schooling and how schools respond to the changing issues that young adults face while still at school drives many young people out of school. Retaining young people in school and having them achieve meaningful certification for their learning that has wide community acceptance is an important consideration in discussions about equity. Our response, based on our research, specifically concerns young people disengaging and detaching from school in the Senior Years of schooling, year 11 and 12, and the need to develop broader more responsive forms of curriculum and schooling structures. In a report published in 2021**, Its Time to Act,** we called for a youth compact that would guarantee every young person 12 years of education that would support them in gaining meaningful accreditation and negotiating their next transition to further training, work, and meaningful community life. We are committed to this definition of equity in schooling.

Improving How Students Do at School:

Curriculum and Accreditation in Mainstream School and Flexible and Alternative Sites

For young people to do better at school we need to recognise a broad range of achievement. The next National State School Reform Agreement can lead to mainstream schools being able to better respond to the superdiversity of young people and ensuring that there are interventions in place that keep young people connected to their school. The **Evidence Base** in better addressing school dropout goes to a curriculum that is broad, project based and links young people with their community including employers.

The emphasis in the consultation report on improving basic skills is understandable but many young people fall out of schooling not because they lack the basic skills but because the learning and school structures of the later years of schooling fail to respond to their aspirations, their needs, and their lived experience of young adulthood. Many young people from disadvantaged cohorts cannot see themselves, their futures or their achievements reflected in the curriculum of schooling and narrow versions of success defined in the curriculum, pedagogy and accreditation at senior school.

The **Evidence Base** demonstrates that if schools are able tailor learning and the day-to-day experience of young people in school to better meet their diverse needs, this will help more young people engage in a curriculum because it is relevant and meaningful to themselves and their community. *"We recommend that schools implement CTE programming that engages students in authentic learning experiences that use project-based learning and other forms of active learning to meet student, school, and employer needs. Be sure to engage the community as well, including employers.… findings support decisions to prioritize CTE programming because of its ability to prevent dropouts and help students move beyond high school onto meaningful college or career pathways and into successful lives.*

(Career and Technical Education: An evidence-based dropout prevention strategy [2020)

Schools can only respond to the needs of students if the wider system allows them to respond and values what different schools can bring to our understanding of guaranteeing 12 years of education for all students. We must look at how the achievement of students can be recognised in ways that are responsive to the super diversity of our schools. As part of the National Schools Reform Agreement, there needs to be an exploration of how we can develop Culturally Responsive Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment forms responsive to the super diversity in our classrooms, and acknowledge a wider range of achievement in the senior years.

*Active learning embraces teaching and learning strategies that engage and involve students in the learning process. Students find new and creative ways to solve problems, achieve success, and become lifelong learners when educators show them that there are different ways to learn (***National Drop Out Prevention Centre)**

Improving How Students Do at School

Improving outcomes at Flexible and Alternative Sites and Specialised Assistance Schools:

The Evidence Base is that for some students who disengage and are detached from schooling Alternative Provision can be beneficial. But the alternatives cannot be ad hoc. Alternative Education sites, including the new Specialised Assistance Schools (SAS) are not the solution to low retention and achievement. They must not be seen as letting mainstream schools off the hook for catering to the super diversity of school enrolments, but they have a place in the eco-system of senior school education. They must be designed as an integral part of the schooling system that supports young people. We need to develop an understanding of SAS and other Flexible and Alternative sites in order to gauge their effect on the ecosystem of schooling and how they can be an integral part of the system and not an overflow/exclusion model for mainstream schools.

Attention must be paid to the way young people are enrolled and access alternatives, the patterns of attendance and engagement and the curriculum and pedagogical frameworks within the school and whether they offer a curriculum that will encourage rigorous learning leading to a meaningful accreditation in a timely manner.

Falling out of school is not a single event but a journey that comes to a head in great numbers in the senior years. This journey can involve periods of absence from school, suspension and exclusion, growing disengagement with their learning and relationships leading to detachment from school. Some young people leave mainstream schooling and take up alternative placement in a growing number of alternative education sites. For some this is successful but for others, it may give some respite but does not lead to accredited learning.

Writing in 2014, Kitty Te Riele noted that 70,000 young people were enrolled in school but engaged in a range of learning choice programmes that were on the edge of schooling.   For years we have been researching flexible and alternative education in South Australia, both the SA State School program called Flexible Learning Options (FLO) and in recent years the growth of Independent SAS. Whether they are an adjunct to mainstream sites (FLO) or independent businesses (SAS), the aim of these sites is to cater for young people who wish to continue secondary schooling outside of the mainstream school. They are usually small, staffed by a mix of teachers, youth workers and other adults and offer a wraparound service delivery model for young people.

For the young people who engage in these sites on a regular basis, their teachers and their parents are staunchly positive about the affect they have had in contrast to their experience of mainstream schooling.

Though we believe that mainstream schools can learn a lot from flexible and alternative sites we acknowledge that the lack of formal educational outcomes and subsequent pathways for students leaving demands greater scrutiny. **There needs to be more research to understand the experiences of students in these sites and how to develop strong and meaningful curriculum that is rigorous and responsive to their needs and can be accredited.**

(Best Practice in Alternative Schooling) the curriculum is: relevant and connected to young people's experiences, needs, aspirations and interests; has clear goals tailored to each individual; combines experiential learning with opportunities to catch up and accelerate learning; builds knowledge, skills and habits of mind; offers challenging tasks with real world applications; and uses feedback and authentic forms of assessment to build belief in the capacity to learn. There is flexibility, choice and routine; adult learning principles are used rather than didactic instructional methods. Students' learning is carefully monitored and progress is celebrated.

Best Practices in alternative Education Pat Thomson

In 2021 there were some three hundred schools registered as SAS in Australia, 50% of these schools were less than five years old. In South Australia there are now seven SAS, 6 less than five years old. Over the last five years we have worked closely with SAS in South Australia to develop a deep understanding of how they work and the purpose they serve. All the SAS we work with are young newly emergent schools.

SAS have much to teach mainstream schools. Their strength comes from being small, usually with less than 150 students, with a focus on relationships that foster understanding and flexible forms of responding to their students. These schools work with generalist teachers and a range of youth workers, social workers, makers, coaches and other adults to support student wellbeing. The curriculum is emergent and follows students' interests and passions.

Their strength comes from being small relational schools allowing them better to understand and respond to the young people. They are the opposite of a "uniform" school in that they celebrate and revel in diversity. The students accessing these schools arrive with their own issues, ideas, aspirations, skills and capabilities. These young people have exercised choice in wanting to continue their education. For some they want to do learning in the way they did it at school but in a smaller, more respectful place. Others come with a clear idea of what they want to achieve but not knowing how to

get there. For others it is about testing the water. The teachers and adults know their students well. They talk about young people who have found their confidence and their voice. Sometimes this happens slowly, other times it seems triggered by an event - an act of trust extended to the young person – the young people self-report- "they treat me like an adult".

These schools place care and responsiveness at the centre. They work with the interests of young people and support them in working with the community on issues that are significant. These schools have a pedagogy that places care and wellbeing at the centre that does not fit easily into the current regime of Higher School Certification.

Our work with SAS has unearthed areas that need further research to inform the evidence base. To understand the role of SAS in the education of young people we need to ensure that:

- young people are making informed decisions to access SAS and Flexible and Alternative and are simply not being "pushed" from mainstream school?
- with expansion of SAS that the right students are getting the right support
- the patterns of attendance commensurate with engagement and support
- young people able to access curriculum that would give them access to a secondary qualification in a timely manner.
- students are supported in making the next transition to further work, training or employment.

Fitting in and finding a place of belonging are important to young people who have had poor experience of mainstream school, but they want more out of being in a school. The SAS have low formal educational outcomes because they are working within a different structure than the mainstream. Following student interest means continual remaking of the curriculum in response to the needs of the young people enrolled. This is constrained by the institutional framework of the State's higher school certificate accrediting authority, which is outside of the control of SAS. The Higher School Certificate and VET frameworks within which SAS must work were designed for a different purpose, a different 'grammar of schooling' and a different cohort of students. Without a wholesale re-examination of the curriculum and pedagogical tools that alternative sites can use, we are forcing them to use inadequate tools left over from the system that young people have already rejected.

Improving Student Mental Health and Wellbeing – Making students matter in schools.

When we talk to students who are engaged in school, they tell us how they fit in, how good they feel about fitting in and how they see themselves staying until the end of their schooling. They believe their school will support them through to the senior years, they are confident their school will guide them to achieve their career goals, and they are confident their school will help them if they experience difficulties.

When we talk to young people who are disengaging or detached from school, they tell us they did not feel as though they fitted into school. This can be socially, academically, or a belief the work they are doing at school does not connect with the work they see themselves doing in the future.

They tell us they could not see themselves staying on, they tell us they could not see how their learning was relevant to them and they tell us they didn't believe their school would (or did) support them as they faced difficulties. They tell us of the disconnect between their lives at home and in the community and their experience of school.

What young people say about their experience of school should inform our practice. Our Experience as Teachers and School Leaders involved in "doing school differently" was built on responding to the young people and their community of developing school-based solutions that were place based and involved young people in their community. It involved making sure that the lives of young people and the community and the issues a pressure they faced were visible in the curriculum and that young people were able to develop the knowledge, skills and capabilities to tackle those issues.

Supporting Teachers – Making Reflective Practitioners

Despite the expansion of non-mainstream schooling options that include Flexible and Inclusive sites, specialised assistance schools and a rise in small specialised schools there is no University course or support for ongoing tertiary supported learning in flexible and alternative education settings.

It is important that schools and teachers engage with the evidence base in developing responses to lower retention and achievement in disadvantaged communities. It is also important that the practice of schools and teachers inform the evidence base. What we learnt from COVID is that the evidence keeps changing in relationship to a range of factors, as the evidence base changed so to did the advice given to the wider population. There was built into the response a feedback loop.

In asking teachers to engage with evidence-based teaching we need to develop with them the knowledge and skills to be reflective practitioners to apply the evidence in a way that is respectful and aware of their context of their circumstance. They need to be aware of how to understand the evidence base and how it relates to their context and their students.

'Expanding the skill to recognise quality research is essential to help teachers and school leaders become better evaluators and consumers of evidence,' It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish practices that are robustly supported by research from those that are based on more limited findings. Knowing what questions to ask when engaging with research can help build confidence in using evidence in practice. (AITSL Spotlight)

All evidence is context specific and requires a deep understanding of the issues being addressed. Involving teachers in programs such as Critical Practitioner Action Research, would skill teachers in using evidence-based practice in a way that allows them to feedback into the evidence and recognise their skills and professionalism.

Collecting more data

What are the stories of young people Disengaging and Detaching from Schooling?

Disaggregating the data on attendance, retention and achievement reflects a pattern of social inequalities; Aboriginal students, students in poverty, students in rural and remote areas, and those with disabilities are overrepresented in the cohorts of young people on the edge of schooling (Lamb et al., 2020).

Current statistical indicators render the students' experiences of schooling invisible because they are devoid of the stories, context and issues faced by children and young people. The indicators hide and obfuscate the lived reality of young people because they:

- exclude significant numbers of children and young people of school age who are not accounted for in the system because they are not enrolled.

- use averages for school attendance that hide the number of students who are chronic non-attenders and the significant number of students who miss more than one week of schooling per term;

7

- overinflate the percentage of students who are retained up to Year 12 by using measures called 'apparent retention rates and not counting students who 'drop out' during the year;

- are opaque when trying to determine the number of students completing Year 12 by hedging around with caveats on what completion is; and

- fail to account for children and young people in non-school based programs and alternative education settings. (Bills & Howard, 2021)

Disaggregating the data can increase our understanding of what is happening in order to discover why it is happening we need to dive deeper into the lives of young people on the edge of schooling. We need to know how disadvantage in school and society works to exclude young people that do not fit or achieve the pre-planned outcomes that standardised and performative educational measurement demands. We need to recognise their communities and the knowledge, skills and aspirations that they bring to school that are not measured by standardised tests or a competitive academic assessment system and that solutions are place based and need continual revision and reinvention. We can only do this by engaging with young people to find their stories and working with them to codesign curriculum and structures that keep them connected to school.

Our current school population is super diverse in our schools, and we seek to prepare them for an uncertain world. To ensure that young people feel connected to school and learning we need to make decisions about education alongside or with young people. In Australia, the national education goals outlined in the *Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration* declare that 'Our best efforts will translate into opportunities for every young Australian. We will ensure that we place young Australians at the centre of our education system as they navigate their learning and set out on their own journey … to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives' (Education Council, 2019, pp. 3–4). To achieve this with young people in the senior years of schooling we need to involve them in discussions about what they should learn, how they are part of the world or even the capabilities they need to be active members of the community.

Throughout the formal educational years, many young people feel the educational system is not responding to their needs, interests, capabilities, perspectives and visions, and increasingly they are pushed to the edges of formal education, thus feeling less visible, valued, engaged and empowered. This comes to a head in the final years of schooling the decline in retention and

achievement has impact on the life world chances of the young people that leave school and on the economic, democratic and social life of the community.

Conclusion

All young people have right to imagine a better world and a better life for themselves and need the support and the pedagogical approach that helps them realise that world. This is a complex pedagogical and organisational challenge and one that can be out of the reach of mainstream schools constrained by the notions of what makes successful students. For SAS they are in effect independent businesses, so the support and collaboration needed to meet the challenge is not easily accessible.

We are asking that the States and the Commonwealth through the National State Reform Agreement work together to ensure that all young people can complete 12 years of schooling with the support they need to negotiate the next transition to further education, work and engagement in community life. This is curriculum and pedagogical challenge that we must meet as a nation to realise the goals of the Mparntwe Declaration.

Mainstream schools need to offer greater connectedness and care for all students, more personalised learning/inquiry-based approaches to learning and greater negotiation of curriculum with the young people they serve. Young people benefit from head, heart and hands on learning and a curriculum that attends to what the world is calling for. Literacy and numeracy are of course important, but the capabilities young people now need to make the world a better place stretches far beyond the basics. Young people are now taking action on climate change and government inaction. Schools can harness the lifeworld concerns of young people through new curriculum design with a keen focus on changing workforce demands. Mainstream schools must redesign structurally, culturally and pedagogically to better meet these challenges out of respect and care for the young people they teach and serve. They need to ensure all young people thrive during their schooling years.

THE AUTHORS

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We have worked for years as teachers, school leaders and academics and have watched as aspirational young people of intelligence, talent, and commitment to their community have fallen out of schooling, their aspirations dashed or delayed because of their experience of school, or because school has not responded to the issues and concerns that the young people presented.

As teachers and school leaders we developed a range of programs to support diverse young people in staying on at school under difficult circumstances and have established schooling programs that gave young people on the edge or who had fallen out of schooling a "second." chance in schooling curriculum responsive to their lives. We developed programs that increased retention and achievement for Indigenous young people, young people in poverty, students with disabilities, young mothers and students disengaging from school in both urban and rural settings.

As academics we have continued to research why young people fall out of school and the possibilities for engaging more young people in schooling that contributes to the skills, knowledge and capabilities they need to negotiate successful transition into further education, work and engaged community life.

In our research we make extensive use of the data about attendance, retention and achievement to help us understand the lived experiences of young people who are disengaging and detaching from school. The data can tell us what is happening. Talking to young people, their communities and their schools gives us the picture of why it is happening and what can be done about it.