DISENGAGEMENT FROM MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

LESSONS FROM A COMMUNITY VCAL EXPERIENCE

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BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT

LESSONS FROM A COMMUNITY VCAL EXPERIENCE
Some barriers to engagement

External
• The cost of education
• Problems at home

Internal
• The school environment
• Bullying
• Poor relations with teachers and authority
• Poor self esteem
“... you have to do six electives a year, but you didn’t know there was a catch, each course costs $200 each subject. Just to do art it was $200 and you have to do it so you were paying $800 to $1,000 and something just to do your electives.

... it’s [tough] because we [three siblings] all have different interests and some courses are more expensive like the computer courses and both my brothers are really into them.”
“...the school jumpers are like $80 [each], like $70 just for a pair of shorts and they expect us to buy like pairs and pairs of them every year. It’s really bad.

...I didn’t have a lock for my locker, like people don’t care at school, they just grab shit out of people’s lockers...and like I lost like three jumpers in one year and so Mum didn’t end up buying me another one because they just cost way too much”.
“One of my mates his mum didn’t want him so he went to...his dad, then his dad died, then he went to his sister’s and then his sister...didn’t want him no more, so she sent him back to England and then his real mum didn’t want him no more, so she sent him back to Australia and then about two weeks later, his sister didn’t want him so he went to live with his mate and then his mate’s mum didn’t want him, so he is now living with his brother.”
Approaching school

“you walk in and you have to walk through these big gates. It’s kind of like walking into a jail. You walk in and this depression just goes onto you, you’re just ‘I don’t want to be here’”
The size of school

“...there are so many kids. There are too many people, and everyone gets in the way of everyone, there are just too many people...”

Q  So what do you feel when you’re having to learn in that situation?

“...I get distracted very, very easily, so there are so many distractions in the room, and I just - my whole learning just goes out the window and I just muck up. It’s just too many distractions.”
Feeling lost at school

“[my] school was a place where anybody can become nobody”
“my mum is terminally ill, it got...around the whole school and sooner or later I’d be the one in the middle, ‘Don’t touch her. You could get that from her. Don’t talk to her, or don’t go near her, you can get this because her mum’s got this.’
The impact of bullying

“One of my very close friends who died in a car accident a couple of years ago, him and his mate...were driving and drinking, they were on drugs and everything.

That was only because they got bullied at school. He was terribly bullied at school...

...he was bullied pretty much his whole life as well, and he got bashed quite a lot of times outside school. His house got egged and people would follow him home from school and smash up his bike or something. It’s just horrible.”
"Some of the teachers were really mean and they were always angry...but we can’t really learn from them when they’re constantly angry and I had a teacher that always talked about how much he hated teaching, so you can’t really learn from someone who hates teaching".
“... it kind of makes it hard for people to want to be at school when no one wants to be there.

If you’re around people who want to be at school, it kind of makes you want to come to school...we all hated going to school, it’s like you don’t actually want to be there because nobody wants to be there.”
“...I keep telling myself I’m dumb. Like it’s what I’ve been told since high school...I dropped out when I was 12. And I said ‘Yeah, I’m dumb. I can’t do it.’ Honestly, I think that’s what it is. I don’t even bother attempting [tasks] because I’m dumb so I don’t want to fail even more, and make myself feel even more worse...

If I don’t do it, I can’t say that I can’t do it...but if I attempt it, and I do shit, well I’m just going to put myself down even more. And teachers don’t realise that. They just don’t realise there’s a reason why I don’t do it, because I don’t want to make myself feel even worse than what I feel now.”
Other common barriers

- Illness
- Learning difficulties
- Family responsibilities
- Substance abuse
- Criminal behaviour
- Pregnancy
- Violence, abuse and trauma
LESSONS FROM A COMMUNITY VCAL EXPERIENCE
Course profiles, outcomes

2009 pre-Community VCAL ‘Taster’

A 10 week course, modelled on VCAL providing a Cert II in Community Services, attracting 15 enrolments.

**Staffing:** 1 x Trainer, 1 x VIT registered coordinator, 1 x p/t arts and cooking trainer, and 1 x trainee welfare officer

**Attendance:** 77%

**Outcomes:** 11 of 15 were awarded the Certificate (3 were ineligible due to late start). All 15 enrolled for the 2010 FHSC Community VCAL course.

2010 fully accredited Community VCAL

Offering the VCAL with a mixed cohort of 25 ‘intermediate’ (y 11 equivalent), and ‘senior’ (y 12 equivalent) students.

**Staffing:** 2 VIT teachers (1.0 & 0.5 FTE), 0.4 FTE Admin and 1.0 Coordinator. 2 x volunteers; a Student Counsellor (0.2-0.4) and an Integration Aide (casual, 2 hours per week).

**Attendance:** Approximately 90% with authorized absences; 76% when all absences are tallied, though this would be 80%+ were it not for 4 late starters

**Academic outcomes:** pending, though all students are enrolled in at least 1 VET course; 1 has a school based apprenticeship and 5 have a school based traineeship.

Working for an Australia free of poverty
“I [soon] found out everyone practically had the same problems I had; they couldn’t cope at school because of dramas they were having there and then they got here and it was like it was a better environment for everyone. Yeah, everyone just fitted in”.
“They treat us like young adults here and at school you’re just bad children”
“It’s heaps different. These teachers, it’s like they have more time for you. They can explain things better...and I think that’s only because it’s smaller classes.”

“Well we actually do work...There’s always a teacher around, always, and they always help you [and] it’s quiet, no distractions around, it’s better”.

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Mixed learning

“Last year … the classes were bigger so we all had to do our work really fast, I just fell behind. I stopped understanding it.”

“… but here they want us to all work together and so everyone knows what they do and they ask questions constantly, just to make sure we all know what’s going on and to make sure we understand”
"Like I've got a different personality. I am not what I used to be at high school getting in to trouble and mucking around. I actually do my work...I get it finished.

...I just feel like I've got a whole new personality inside me which is good. I feel like a whole new person."
What seems to work - 1

Engagement and wellbeing

1. A student-first ethos
2. Trust, autonomy, empathy
3. Touchstone expectations
4. Access to specialist support
5. Stability, resilience, persistence
6. Engage parents/guardians/partners
What seems to work - 2

Pedagogy

1. Applied and adult learning principles: relevance, practicality
2. Team teaching/mixed learning
3. Integrated teaching/assessment
4. Extra curricula activities
5. Effective VET oversight
6. Keep standards high
What seems to work - 3

Structures

1. Low student teacher ratios
2. Simple yet effective rules for students
3. Collaboration with schools and specialist services
4. Student mapping: needs and risk factors
5. Strong support for staff: wellbeing and professional development
Challenges

Expectations: how much compromise?

The demands on staff

Addressing poor levels of literacy, and sometimes numeracy

The VET overlap and finding appropriate placements

Overuse of mobile phones and ipods
And yet more challenges

Substance abuse

Information sharing across educational and welfare settings and fragmented services

Societal and professional resistance to alternative education

Working for an Australia free of poverty
“It needs to be about the kids, it needs to be about the kids. It needs to be about the kids...it needs to be brought back to the kids and what they need, even if they’re the most – worst behaved kids ever, still, you need to work on them and work on them because they will get somewhere, definitely.

Interviewer: Well, thank you, again... I appreciate it very much–

“No, too easy. Remember, ‘It’s all about the kids’.