Educational Alternatives for Marginalised Youth

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Abstract

In the context of pressure to increase retention rates a wide variety of alternative educational programs has developed in Australia over the past few decades. The purpose of this paper is to provide a map of the alternative education landscape for marginalised youth in New South Wales, in order to reduce confusion and enable communication between programs, practitioners and scholars, locally and internationally. This paper focuses on two dimensions to do with the program's purpose in relation to locus of change and with the stability of the program to construct a proposed map of alternative education for marginalised youth in Australia. Based on this map, the paper argues that one type of program is most useful, not only for marginalised young people but also for suggesting possibilities for reform in mainstream education.

Introduction

Completion of senior secondary education has almost become a minimum requirement for successful entry into the labour market in Australia and across the western world (Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn, 2000, OECD, 2000). During the past two decades, in a context of increasing youth unemployment, the Australian national government has emphasised the need for increasing the retention from the start (Year 7/8) to the end (Year 12) of high school (eg. Australian Education Council Review Committee 1991, Nelson 2002a).

The dramatic increase in this retention – from 46 percent in 1985 to 75 percent in 2002 (ABS 2002, DEET 1993) – is likely to be due to both economic reasons (e.g. young people avoiding unemployment) and educational reasons (e.g. broadening of the senior secondary curriculum). Nevertheless, the quarter of young people not completing Year 12 remains of concern to State and federal governments, especially since this proportion has remained largely unchanged since the mid 1990s. A recent

report (Australian Industry Group and Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2007) has called upon governments to adopt a target of 90 percent of young adults (aged 20-24) having completed Year 12 or an equivalent by 2015, and suggests more 'second chance' options are needed for this.

In the past few decades a wide variety of alternative (second or last chance) educational programs has developed in Australia. Governments in Australia have set up targeted programs to assist young people to remain in or return to education. Variously led by education departments or community initiatives, alternative schools or units/annexes have also been established. The result of these initiatives is a bewildering array of projects, rather than the integrated and comprehensive transition support system envisaged by the national Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce report (YPAPT 2001).

The multitude of programs has led to confusion and inefficiency. Finding the right program can be difficult for young people, and their parents and youth workers. Communication between programs, to develop better pathways and to share expertise, is hindered by lack of stability or lack of knowledge about other programs. Communication between practitioners and scholars with an interest in alternative education is hindered by lack of a shared framework for understanding the variety of educational alternatives.

The purpose of this paper is to propose the beginnings of a map of the alternative education landscape for marginalised youth in New South Wales, in order to reduce confusion and enable communication between programs, practitioners and scholars – locally and internationally. The focus of this paper is therefore on educational programs at the level of immediate post-compulsory school education, aimed at young people who – for whatever reason – are unlikely to complete Year 12 (or equivalent) schooling in mainstream settings.

Even with this specific focus confusion remains because, as argued by Aron and Zweig (2003, pp. 20-21) in the USA:

> There is no commonly-accepted, or commonly-understood, definition of what constitutes 'alternative education'. In part this reflects the newness of the field (at least as an area that is attracting widespread and mainstream interest), the variety of environments and contexts in which alternative education programming has evolved, and the many sub-groups of vulnerable youth who might benefit from some type of alternative education, broadly defined.

They go on to suggest that a typology of alternative education would be helpful for establishing common terminology, for understanding various kinds of alternative education and for contributing to knowledge about high quality alternative education.

An often quoted classification, also in the USA, by Raywid (1994) includes three types of programs: Type I is made up of full time schools and programs for students needing more individualisation, wanting a different curriculum, or wishing to return to school to earn a diploma after dropping out. Type II programs are short-term and have a discipline focus, aimed at reforming disruptive students who are usually forced to attend. In the US context these are sometimes referred to as 'last chance' or 'soft jail' programs. Type III programs also tend to be short term, but have a more therapeutic and voluntary rather than disciplinary and coerced approach. More recently, Raywid (in Aron and Zweig 2003, p. 27) has proposed a new classification based on the focus of change of the programs: changing the school (the old Type I), changing the student (the old Types II and III) and changing the educational system (a new grouping).

Related to this latter classification this paper draws on two opposing perspectives, outlined below, that help explain some of the fundamental differences between alternative educational programs, before turning to the proposed map of the alternative education landscape.

Perspectives

Two opposing conceptualisations underpin much of the provision of educational alternatives. The first one takes a *youth at risk* perspective, while the second one takes a *learning choice* perspective. These will be outlined below.

Youth at Risk

The term 'youth at risk' is increasingly common in Australian policy and media. It has connotations of deficiencies in young people themselves – whether of knowledge, qualifications, or behaviour (Dwyer & Wyn 2001). In Douglas' (1992) terms, a minority of young people are perceived as 'risky other', not only different from 'most of us' but also a threat to both themselves and society. In particular, early school leavers, who did not complete senior secondary education, are perceived as 'at risk' in Australian policy.

The constructions of certain young people as *at risk* 'inevitably involve political, ethical, and moral judgements by some in relation to others' (Cieslik & Pollock 2002, p. 2). Since governments and their various policy advice committees have the power

to make these judgements, it is not surprising that the construction of youth 'at risk' may be more in the interest of government than in the interest of youth. Although factors that can place young people 'at risk' may include school- and society-based ones, as well as student- and family-based factors (Aron & Zweig 2003, Batten & Russell 1995), the emphasis in Australian policy has tended to be on the latter, originating from a deficit perspective (Te Riele 2006). For example, characteristics of youth 'at risk' identified in Australian materials for use by teachers include family dysfunction, pregnancy and 'individual and family perceptions of the future and the role schooling plays in it' (Paterson 1995, p. 12). Similarly, the reasons for young people being 'at risk of becoming disconnected from their families or from mainstream education' are listed in a media release by the then federal Minister for Education as 'issues such as drugs and alcohol, physical and emotional abuse, aggressive behaviour, criminal activity or family breakdown' (Nelson 2002b, p. 1).

The assumption in policy for 'youth at risk' is that 'the majority of young people are doing well' and policy merely needs to target the small number of young people who are 'at risk, disconnected or in vulnerable circumstances' (MCEETYA 2002, n.p.). This assumption has allowed Australian policy to focus on developing measurable indicators of problematic behaviour or conditions and technical intervention strategies aimed at reintegrating 'youth at risk' into the mainstream. In such policy, schools are seen as 'essential in any early intervention strategy' for youth at risk of 'disconnecting' (YPAPT 2001, p. 8). As a result, alternative projects as well as alternative units or schools are established which aim to 'fix' the young person in some way.

Learning Choice

The second conceptualisation takes a radically opposed perspective. Rather than assuming that something about the young person needs to change, it suggests something about educational provision needs to change. This perspective is more common among educational practitioners and scholars. It is expressed clearly by Blakers and Nicholson in relation to second chance education (1988, p. 46):

> Schools [must] ask a different question about each student: not, as at present, Where does this student fit into our categories and processes?, but rather, How can we build on the interests, capacities and experiences which make her or him a unique individual?

A key assumption here is that all young people have the capacity to learn and gain school credentials as long as the educational environment is right (Raywid, 1990). A second important assumption is that mainstream education is inappropriate to the needs of at least some young people (Holdsworth 2004) and that schooling may play a direct or intermediary role in 'activating or enabling the risk of some young people' (Strategic Partners 2001, p. 16).

Importantly, however, it is *not* the intention of this perspective to blame schools and teachers for the marginalisation of young people. Students' marginalisation by schooling can be 'as much a struggle for the schools and teachers as it is for the young people' (Smyth & Hattam 2001, p. 403). Rather, it is to accept that educational practices are historically and socially constructed, and therefore to question common practices and suggest other practices which may be worth trying. As a result, alternative projects may be aimed at empowering students and institutional units or schools to engage in whole-school-change in curriculum and/or pedagogy. For example, a teacher in an alternative school observed that 'I see that the purpose of the College is to meet [students'] needs, what ever they may be. To me that is *not* offering them what they have had before. If they haven't succeeded at what we call a normal sort of school then we would not want to offer them the same again' (cited in te Riele 2000, n.p.).

Mapping alternative education

The findings outlined here are based on document analysis of brochures, websites and other public documents produced directly by – or in close cooperation with – people involved in programs (projects, units and schools) that provide alternative education for marginalised youth. As all these documents are publicly available, often on the internet, it was not necessary to gain consent to include them in the analysis nor to use pseudonyms. Of particular use has been the website of the Dusseldorp Skills Forum (www.dsf.org.au) which provides a comprehensive overview of Australian alternative programs and schools, especially outside the state government school system. The collection of material from alternative programs is ongoing, so there is no claim that all possible, relevant sources have been included here. The analysis has focused on educational alternatives in the state of New South Wales, although this includes nation-wide programs.

Possible dimensions of a typology of alternative education suggested by Aron and Zweig (2003) are: general type, target population, focus/purpose, operational setting, educational focus, sponsor/administration, credentials offered, and funding sources. Adapting this suggestion, the document analysis included the following aspects: purpose or objective, target population, educational content, planned outcomes/credentials, sponsor, duration, and stability (e.g. short term funding or established unit).

Findings from initial analysis suggest that two dimensions are especially useful for mapping the variety in the alternative education landscape, to do first with the purpose in relation to locus of change and second with the stability of the program. This paper focuses only on these two dimensions to construct a proposed map of

alternative education for marginalised youth in Australia (see Figure 1 for a diagram of the proposed map).

The first dimension is based on the purpose of the program, and is linked to the two perspectives outlined above. One end of this dimension has the aim of changing the young person in some way. The assumption is that the young person is lacking in knowledge, skills, or 'proper' behaviour, and that once this deficit has been addressed the young person can successfully complete their schooling, usually by returning to a mainstream setting. At the other end, the aim is to change the provision of education. The assumption is that a changed curriculum and/or different pedagogical approach will better meet the needs of young people, and thus enable them to learn and gain educational qualifications.

The second dimension is based on the stability of the alternative program. One end of the dimension refers to programs with low stability, usually due to uncertain funding. These educational programs tend to be connected to a charity or community organization and often (but not always) offer short-term projects with an *ad hoc* nature on a part time basis. At the other end of the dimension are highly stable educational alternatives. These are usually established schools or units/annexes within schools that offer either full-time withdrawal programs for some weeks or months, or a long-term comprehensive program as an alternative to mainstream schools, leading to school credentials.

Combining the two dimensions leads to a map with four sections, which will be discussed in more detail below with illustrations of programs that are deemed to be located in each quarter. A word of caution first though: as with any model, the map is a reduction of reality. It is provided in the hope that it will form a useful tool for both practitioners and scholars, but inevitably some programs will sit near the borders between quarters, rather than neatly inside one.

First quarter: Unstable/Changing the young person

Many projects funded by federal and state programs fit within this quarter. A good example is the Links to Learning program of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training (NSW DET). Links to Learning is specifically aimed at young people between the ages of 12 and 24, who have left school early, or are 'at risk' of doing so, with the purpose of helping them to stay in education or to re-enter mainstream education and training (NSW DET Community Grants Programs 2007). Specifically, the Links to Learning program aims to assist young people to:

• Develop and maintain regular attendance and involvement in planned learning activities;
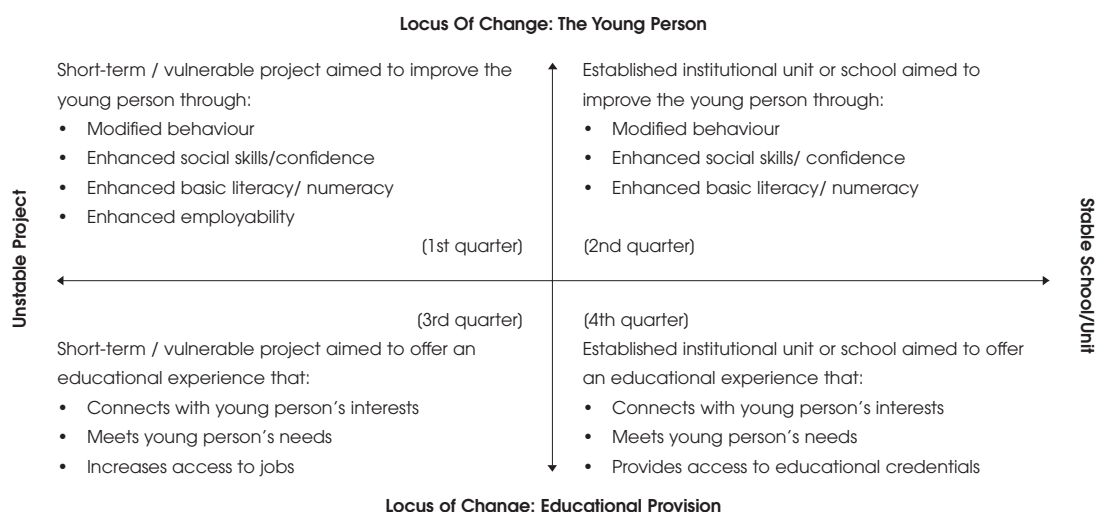
• Set and achieve a range of individual goals in developing key skills and abilities; and

• Negotiate and implement plans which show how they will access or remain in education or training following the project.

(NSW DET Community Grants Programs n.d., p.2)

Most projects take place in a community setting, rather than in schools, and run for at least 100 hours (NSW DET Community Grants Programs n.d.). Organisations regularly have to tender for funding, with projects funded for a maximum of three years and specific contracts negotiated annually (NSW DET Community Grants Programs 2006). Participants are often referred by their school, or find out about the project through youth services, community colleges or other local organisations.

Locus Of Change: The Young Person

Short-term / vulnerable project aimed to improve the young person through:
• Modified behaviour
• Enhanced social skills/confidence
• Enhanced basic literacy/ numeracy
• Enhanced employability

(1st quarter)

Established institutional unit or school aimed to improve the young person through:
• Modified behaviour
• Enhanced social skills/ confidence
• Enhanced basic literacy/ numeracy

(2nd quarter)

Unstable Project ← → *Stable School/Unit*

(3rd quarter)

Short-term / vulnerable project aimed to offer an educational experience that:
• Connects with young person's interests
• Meets young person's needs
• Increases access to jobs

(4th quarter)

Established institutional unit or school aimed to offer an educational experience that:
• Connects with young person's interests
• Meets young person's needs
• Provides access to educational credentials

Locus of Change: Educational Provision

Figure 1: Map of educational alternatives for marginalised youth

The NSW DET specifies both a range of key competency skills (such as personal management and planning, conflict resolution, computer skills and using mathematical ideas and techniques) and life skills (including attendance and punctuality, positive self esteem, sense of humour and personal presentation) which funded projects must contribute to (NSW DET Community Grants Programs 2006, pp. 3-4). Examples of 'successful' projects include:

• Mobile literacy and numeracy training, with tutors visiting unemployed early school leavers, and students 'at risk' of leaving school early, at home for one-on-one tuition; and

- Performing arts production of a traditional Aboriginal story by indigenous students 'at risk' of leaving school early, aimed at improving school attendance and attitude to school, and developing social skills and improved self esteem.

<div align="right">(Youth Assistance Strategies Section 1999)</div>

It is important to point out that the Links to Learning program does not mandate that projects focus on changing the young person. However, the location of most projects outside of schools and their short duration make a focus on changing educational provision less likely.

Second quarter: Stable/Changing the young person

Alternative schools and programs that are well-established and highly stable, and that are aimed at improving or reforming the young person include schools and units for behaviour management. This type of alternative program is currently popular with governments. For example, in the 2005 budget the New South Wales Government announced that '$73.6 million will be spent over the next four years on 20 new suspension centres, eight new behaviour schools and seven new tutorial centres' (Refshauge 2005, n.p.). Suspension centres and behaviour schools fall within Raywid's (1994) Type II alternatives, with an emphasis on discipline and with students usually coerced to attend. Often the purpose is as much to give the regular classroom teacher and students a break, as it is to improve skills and attitudes in the students attending these programs. Mongon (1988) goes as far as to suggest special units tend to benefit the students who do *not* attend them, rather than the young people who do.

In New South Wales behaviour schools are categorised as a School for Specific Purposes (SSP). These schools are not listed among ones parents can choose from for their child – rather students are allocated to SSPs, due to their behaviour, learning difficulty, or other perceived problem in the student. An example of a current behaviour school in the NSW public system is Campbell House School. According to its website (Campbell House School 2006, n.p.) students in the school are diagnosed as Conduct Disordered or Emotionally Disordered, or have been 'observed as having other behavioural deficits'. The school provides access to Year 10 (School Certificate) subjects through distance education as well as Vocational Education subjects with the support of TAFE and social skills and behavioural programs. As is typical for such programs, the school's objective is not so much achieving qualifications but rather the skills and changed behaviours necessary for return to regular education or work: 'the main priority is to prepare the student for their next environment, whether it be a mainstream school, entry into a TAFE program or the workforce' (n.p.).

Third quarter: Unstable/Changing educational provision

Programs in this quarter are rare – the short-term nature and insecurity of funding that characterise these programs militate against a focus on changing educational provision. A typical program in this quarter is the Dale Young Mothers' Program (Dusseldorp Skills Forum 2004). It aims to change educational provision to better cater for the needs of young mothers, aged 14-20. The program notes that the difficulties these young women experience in mainstream education include discrimination and isolation, financial pressures and practical problems. The program therefore not only provides an on-site crèche, but also a flexible learning environment and a peer support structure to assist the young mothers.

The Dale Young Mothers' Program is funded as a pilot project under the federal governments' Partnership Outreach Education Model Pilots (POEMs) program (Nelson 2002c). The POEMs program was set up as a response to the Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce (YPAPT 2001) and specifically targets youth 'at risk'. Most pilot projects are offered by schools or community organisations – the Dale Young Mothers' Program is administered by the St Phillips Christian Education Foundation. As part of a pilot program with insecure funding and subject to changing political priorities, the Dale Young Mothers' Program and other projects that are part of POEMs are vulnerable and insecure.

Blacktown Youth College is another small non-government school, described on its website as 'a semi-democratic school with a negotiated curriculum. As far as is possible we attempt to meet the needs of individual learners, honouring that individuality' (Blacktown Youth College 2005, n.p.). The school offers access to a Year 10 qualification through a modified School Certificate without exams. This 'Life Skills' School Certificate was originally developed for intellectually disabled students and although none of the Blacktown Youth College have intellectual disabilities, their School Certificate may not be perceived by employers and further education providers as having the same value as a regular Year 10 qualification. Such inequality in the perceived value of alternative certificates has been noted in the US (Lamb & Rumberger 1999). Financial vulnerability is evident in the school, which relies heavily on volunteer staff. The school operated out of three Policy Community Youth Clubs (PCYC), but had to close one site in 2005 when that PCYC decided to move from charging a subsidised to a commercial rent.

Fourth quarter: Stable/ Changing educational provision

With ongoing support, especially through guaranteed funding, programs such as the Dale Young Mothers' Program and Blacktown Youth College, could move to this final quarter, of stable program and schools that aim to change the way they provide education to better suit the young people they serve. Such secure support and

funding can come through a committed non-government organisation or through being part of the public school system.

An example of the former is Key College, which is supported through the Catholic Church and specifically through the *Youth off the Streets* organisation. While initially highly dependent on a single champion (Father Chris Riley) and on sporadic funding, Key College has become so established it can now be seen as a stable, ongoing organisation. Nevertheless, similarities with the Dale Young Mothers' Program and Blacktown Youth College remain, for example as a recipient of federal government grants (Nelson 2002b) and in its small size of about ten students at one time (Youth off the Streets 2005). Key College offers individual learning programs for Years 7-12 leading to Year 10 and Year 12 certificates. It mainly caters for young people who are homeless or without stable accommodation. The 2004 Annual Report describes the school as 'an accredited high school [... but] the school environment is considerably different to that of a mainstream high school' (Youth off the Streets 2005, n.p.). Students are often referred by youth workers and by the Department of Community Services, rather than by other schools. Besides providing access to school qualifications, Key College uses the Duke of Edinburgh Awards and a range of Performing Arts activities to engage students and celebrate their achievements.

Bankstown Senior College is an example of a public system alternative school in this quarter (Bankstown Senior College 2005). Established in 1992, the school offers Years 10-12 education, with access to the Certificate II in General and Vocational Education, which is modularised and more flexible than the NSW School Certificate for Year 10, as well as to the standard Year 12 certificate. The school includes the only Intensive English Centre in NSW for newly arrived young adult migrants, aged sixteen years and over. Students come from many different language and cultural backgrounds, as well as many mature age and re-entry students. In a 'welcome' message on the school's website the principal explains the school as a 'place with a difference' because:

> We realise that the students who enrol at the College bring with them skills and knowledge gained formally and informally throughout their life experiences. All of these factors are taken into account by the teaching staff in their planning for the learning activities that will take place in their lessons. Staff understand that people learn in different ways and therefore require different sorts of instruction to ensure real learning takes place. (Bankstown Senior College 2005, n.p.)

The College has a strong focus on providing Year 10 and Year 12 credentials in preparation for TAFE and the workforce, although Year 12 subjects that provide access to university are also available. As a public school Bankstown Senior College is subject to the same regulations as other public high schools – for example staff are

appointed by the Department of Education and Training, not by the school. Being part of the public system had provided the school with stability to grow and develop, with student numbers in the hundreds rather than the tens as common among alternative programs and schools.

Discussion

In this final section, the paper will briefly discuss disadvantages of the first three quarters before arguing for the advantages of schools in the fourth quarter not just for marginalised young people but also as a 'laboratory for change' (Holdsworth 2004, p. 11) for reform in mainstream education.

In relation to the 'locus of change' dimension (see Figure 1), locating the need for change in the student (1st and 2nd quarter) may leave young people feeling stigmatised by such programs (Taylor 1995) which hinders re-integration into a mainstream school. Holdsworth (2004) suggests that, at best, such programs provide temporary relief. In the US, research has shown that short-term disciplinary programs (Raywid's Type II) 'contributed nothing toward resolving the problems they were launched to solve' (Raywid 1994, p. 28).

In relation to the 'stability' dimension in Figure 1 (1st and 3rd quarter) specific, short-term, *ad hoc* projects may provide benefits to young people in terms of providing information about education and work options, brokering of traineeships and jobs, delivery of courses and referral to welfare services. Evaluation studies of particular programs report on positive feedback from young people, schools and employers (Strategic Partners 2001). Despite such positive outcomes, there are also several problems due to the lack of stability:

> Without systemic change, effective practice that serves marginalised young people will mostly remain isolated, and eventually disappear when the personal energy or funding runs out. (p. 93)

The usual tendering process means that when a different group is awarded funding, schools and other organisations have to re-establish a connection, while rapport and expertise are lost. Finally, there is some evidence of young people moving from one project to another, with little coherence between projects nor a clear pathway to ongoing work or study (Stokes 2000).

A major problem with many projects for marginalised youth is that, even when the outcomes from these programs are valuable to the young people and/or to society, they rarely lead to any recognised qualification. In the context of both realities and

rhetoric about the knowledge economy, such credentials are increasingly important for employment and further study as well as for personal well-being (te Riele and Crump 2003). Without providing such credentials, alternative projects may lead to further, long-term marginalisation of young people, as highlighted by Holdsworth (2004, p. 5): 'while there is much student and parental interest in doing something different, there is also fear of alternatives that might lock students out of access to success'.

The point of view of this paper, therefore, is that opportunity and hope for marginalised young people are concentrated in the 4th quarter of the map: changing educational provision within stable units or schools. These forms of alternative education have been shown in the US to have more pronounced and long-lasting successful outcomes, and may even be cheaper, than short-term disciplinary or therapeutic programs (Raywid 1994). In the Australian context, a small study of two such alternative schools similarly found that they provided positive learning experiences for their students. For example, students in these schools commented that 'the learning is so much better than when I went to school' and 'the College is a great place where you get the teachers' support [...] the best thing I have ever done' (cited in te Riele 2000, n.p.).

Importantly, these types of successful alternative programs have the potential to inform change in mainstream schooling. As suggested above, Australian education policy suggests that 'youth at risk' have specific problems and that the majority of young people are fine. In contrast, this paper agrees with Raywid (1994) that marginalised students are quite similar to the rest of the student population. Many students take a pragmatic approach to school – they are what Brown (1987) in his British research called the *ordinary kids*, who put up with what the school expects of them, even if it is not ideal for them. As Holdsworth (2004, p. 4) described, these young people 'sit in classrooms, passively cooperating, even responding positively, but waiting for the bell'. Although they do not actively rebel against school, it does not serve them well.

Thus, distinguishing a minority of 'at risk youth' is likely to misrepresent the lives of most young people. The focus on identifying groups of young people who are 'at risk' sets up a 'false distinction' (Dwyer & Wyn 2001, p.154) between the mainstream and a 'problematic' minority, which denies the possibility of common concerns across all or most youth, and of problems in the mainstream as well as strengths in the minority (see Cieslik & Pollock 2002).

As Raywid (1994, p. 27) proposes, the main difference is that marginalised students 'are just more dependent on a good education'. The reforms that make schooling

work better for marginalised students in alternative programs can improve schooling for most students in regular schools as well (see Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, N. & Fernandez 1989). This does not mean that all schools should become like 4th quarter alternative programs. Rather, these kinds of alternative schools emphasise the need to replace uniformity with diversity, based on (paraphrasing Blakers & Nicholson's (1988) recommendation) building on the unique interests, capacities and experiences of the students the school serves.

Too often alternative programs are perceived as marginal to mainstream schooling, which limits the extent to which they can influence more traditional schools (Spierings 2003). The questions posed by Holdsworth (2004, p. 12) are crucial: 'Are we ready to recognise that the educational learnings from these 'alternatives' need to 'come in from the cold'? Are we ready to shift these practices from the margins to the centre of what we do?'. He advocates that alternative programs can be a 'laboratory for change' (Holdsworth 2004, p. 11) and mainstream schools have much to learn from their experiences.

The map provided in this paper supports this proposal, by clarifying some of the meanings of alternative schooling, and pointing to the type of alternative schooling that is most likely to lead to fruitful directions for more general educational reforms.

Acknowledgements

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