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# Excluded from school: Getting a second chance at a 'meaningful' education

Glenda McGregora, Martin Mills<sup>b</sup>, Kitty te Riele<sup>c</sup> and Debra Hayes<sup>d</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia;* <sup>b</sup>*School of Education, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia;* <sup>c</sup>*The Victoria Institute of Education, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia;* <sup>d</sup>*Faculty of Education and Social Work, Sydney University, Sydney, Australia.*

In this paper, we draw upon the experiences of a group of young people who have been excluded from mainstream schools in two Australian states to provide an account of the ways in which they have found their way to education in educational sites that are variously referred to as 'flexible learning centres', 'second chance schools' and 'alternative schools'. Whilst often clashing with school authorities in their original schools, these young people described how, when given the opportunity, they were able to engage in more meaningful learning in environments that recognized and accommodated their personal circumstances, and avoided authoritarian rule. A question we address is: What kinds of educational experiences facilitate 'meaningful learning' for these students?

## Introduction

For several decades there have been many debates in respect of the nature and intent of educational policies in Australia. Given the constitutional structure in Australia that gives responsibility for education to the states, successive federal governments have sought to influence educational policies via a range of funding models; perhaps the most controversial of these has been the recent, so-called 'Gonski' reforms, named after David Gonski who was commissioned by the Gillard Labor government in 2010 to lead a review of educational funding in Australia. The report was delivered in November 2011 (see Gonski 2011; Kenway 2013; Keating and Klatt 2013). One of its main recommendations was that school funding should be based on a 'per student' amount with additional loadings to combat issues contributing to social inequality; for example, locality, race and poverty. This report signified an important milestone in policy initiatives aimed to address a persistent (and growing) achievement gap between students from different backgrounds, a gap which has been highlighted in international testing regimes such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA). Recent PISA results have confirmed the role played by students' backgrounds in determining schooling success (PISA 2012). However, since the Australian Labor Party lost the 2013 federal election, the conservative Liberal-National Party Coalition government has indicated its reluctance to continue with this funding model beyond its first year. For young people from disadvantaged and/or marginalised backgrounds this is bad news.

Apparently ignoring national and international research, (see for example, Apple 2010; Hemphill et al. 2010; Savelsberg and Martin-Giles 2008; Ball 2006; Ross and Gray 2005; Lamb et al. 2004), the conservative federal Education Minister, Christopher Pyne, has argued that increasing funding and resources does not bring better educational results (*The Australian*, Dec. 5 2013). Citing teacher quality, principal autonomy and parental involvement as being more important than school

funding, Pyne has ignored the organic nature of school communities. Clearly, teachers, school leaders and parents are vital to educational outcomes but within resource-poor schools situated in disadvantaged communities, such stakeholders face enormous challenges. Funding, for example, may provide extra time for teaching assistants and youth workers to work with teachers to attend to a broader range of needs of marginalised and socially disadvantaged young people; more flexible organisational structures; and more resources. Unfortunately, the current neoliberal focus on individual accountability tends to situate the blame within individual children if they do not 'fit' the system.

One consequence of this deficit view of young people is that within some jurisdictions, for example, the State of Queensland, school principals have become increasingly autonomous and face less 'red tape' when responding to behavioural issues in schools. Since 2010, they have had the power to exclude students from their schools (DETE Reports and Statistics 2014); and from 2014, they have had access to a range of longer suspensions and may discipline young people for actions outside of school, 'that adversely impact [sic] other students, the good order and management of the school, or pose a risk to the safety and wellbeing of students and staff' (Queensland Government Media Statement, online, October 2013). Other changes to disciplinary powers include Saturday detentions and community service. Because a suspension 'prohibits a student from attending an educational institution for a nominated period of time [from 1-5 days or 6-20 days]' (DETE Reports and Statistics 2014), the consequences for the educational progress of the young people involved may be very serious, leading to learning gaps and cycles of educational failure and disengagement.

Although publically available data indicates that suspensions peak in the upper primary/lower secondary years (DETE School Disciplinary Absences 2013), there are worrying indications that increasing the power of Queensland school principals may have facilitated suspension spikes in the early years of schooling. The number of disciplinary absences in preparatory or Year 1 rose by about 50 per cent from just over 1,400 in 2010 to more than 2,100 in 2013; and the number of disciplinary absences in Year 3 almost doubled between 2010 and 2013 (DETE School Disciplinary Absences 2013). We argue that such punitive responses are unlikely to address behavioural problems and learning needs effectively when the young people return to class and are very likely to alienate students even more, leading to cycles of conflict that eventually see 'the problem' (students) 'removed' from the school either because the principal refuses to have them back or the young people refuse to return; either way, these young people almost inevitably find themselves excluded from formal education.

Thus, we are concerned that the current political context in Australia is not conducive to retaining and supporting young people with complex material, social and personal needs in mainstream schools. This willingness to shift 'the problem' elsewhere indicates a worrying tendency for some school leaders to abrogate their responsibility to young people as is their brief as state institutions. In most Australian jurisdictions there appears to be ample scope for school principals to interpret and apply the rules governing suspensions and expulsions as they wish. For example, in New South Wales (NSW), students may be excluded for 'repeated refusal to follow the school discipline code' (NSW Department of Education and Training 2011: 9). Such a broad definition allows for suspensions to be given in respect of behaviours that do not pose a threat to other people such as uniform breaches, manners of speech (e.g. swearing) or, as noted in Queensland's Disciplinary Absences data 'failing to participate in the program of instruction' – even if the student is still only five years of age and in the Preparatory Year (DETE School Disciplinary Absences 2013). Some school administrators often want such students removed from the school as illustrated in this

comment by one school principal who stated that, 'You don't get it ... we don't want to understand these kids; we want to get them out' (Skiba and Peterson 2000, 340). Whilst not suggesting that this principal is representative of all school leaders, his comment indicates the emotionally charged nature of this issue. Again, turning to Queensland, the conservative Education Minister in that state, Paul Langbroek, foreshadowed this very scenario when he said 'the changes [to disciplinary measures] included an enhanced commitment to alternative learning centres that provide highly specialised support to students with the most complex needs' (Queensland Government Media Statement, online, October 2013). Once excluded, where do young people turn for their educational needs? We have two concerns: first, that current educational policy imperatives, here described, are not sympathetic to answering this question in ways that would require mainstream schools to develop less punitive, more supportive strategies for retaining struggling young people; second, that even if excluded young people find their way to an alternative educational site, the lack of educational consistency in the sector means that a 'meaningful' education may still be out of their reach.

This paper draws upon recent research into a range of alternative educational sites across several Australian states. We begin with a discussion of the concept of a 'meaningful education' followed by an overview of the research and its methodology; we then present data from two of the alternative educational sites in our study and a final discussion about their significance. Our aim is to interrogate the approaches taken at each site with regards to their educational goals and strategies and the ways in which they attempt to provide access to a 'meaningful' education for young people who find themselves outside of the mainstream educational sector either through personal circumstances or expulsion.

### **Defining a 'meaningful' education**

The pursuit of a 'good' education for young people preoccupies parents, politicians and bureaucrats alike although their conceptions of such may be quite different. Young people are mostly expected to accept what they are given educationally; however, research reveals that as young people approach the secondary years of schooling they are more likely to assert their opinions and needs in respect of what to learn and how to learn it (Smyth et. al. 2003). For some young people, who for various reasons do not feel 'at home' at school, this is also a time when they experience higher levels of conflict with teachers; if they have accumulated years of educational 'failure' and lack of belonging their feelings are exacerbated. Cycles of suspension and absenteeism culminating in exclusion or dropping out frequently define the educational journeys of these students (Smyth and Hattam 2004).

If young people are no longer permitted to attend a mainstream school what options remain for them to access an education? Apart from forms of distance education, alternative education sites offer a 'second chance'. It was to these such that we turned in order to investigate the degree to which alternative providers sought to construct programs that connected with the lives of those young people who turned to them for their educational needs. In the following discussion, we have adopted the term 'meaningful' education to describe programs that resonate with the needs and aspirations of young people who find themselves on the outside of mainstream schooling pathways. Opportunities to engage in a 'meaningful' education are not limited to either mainstream or alternative schools but for purposes of this research we are focussing on the latter because excluded or alienated young people frequently have no choice but to turn to them for a 'second chance'. We are aware that notions of a 'meaningful education' are highly contested and so begin with a brief review of two common perspectives.

### ***Educating for economic prosperity***

One way to define a 'meaningful' education is to consider the degree to which it provides long term capital in the form of skills and knowledge that may be exchanged for economic gain. In our recent industrial past, it was easier to see links between the focus of education and the types of jobs that industry required. However, the rapid advance of technology and globalisation in the new Millennium has destabilised attempts to determine the skill-sets required for future modes of employment apart from the obvious need to train young people to be 'life-long' learners.

The inherited traditions and practices of systems of mass education were shaped during the rise of industrial societies and fashioned to provide levels of education needed to facilitate the growth of capitalist systems of mass production. Prior to the modern era a comprehensive education was only accessible to the wealthy, powerful and privileged classes; however, with the rise of industrialisation and the modern nation state, came a range of skills required by citizens and workers and subsequently the need for mass schooling (Green 1990). Thus, during the 19th century, the social, economic and industrial conditions of rising nation states in the global North facilitated policies that would see the eventual extension of education to all. Fast-forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and it is clear that the government concern with educating-for-national-prosperity is still dominant. Regardless of political persuasion, political parties of the global North continue to reaffirm the production of human capital as a fundamental element of international competitiveness (see for example, Apple 2004, 2006, 2007; Ball 2012). However, as the uneven processes of economic globalisation continue to allocate jobs in industrial production to the low-paid workers in developing nations, the range of occupations in developed nations increasingly demands higher levels of certification. This situation has encouraged equity agendas with the intention of getting more young people, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, to complete year 12 and into some form of tertiary education (OECD 2012); however, questions have been raised as to whether the promise of social mobility via education can actually be fulfilled in the current circumstances. Sellar (2013) cites Berlant's (2011) notion of 'cruel optimism' in his analysis of the efforts to increase the participation of disadvantaged young people in tertiary education; he suggests that as the job market shrinks a form of 'credential inflation' might also worsen this situation as competition for the best positions increases.

Thus, we suggest that a single-minded focus on credentialing for current employment carries serious long-term risks for the socio-economic wellbeing of all young people, but especially for those who are already marginalised and/or disadvantaged. Rather than recognising the gaps in their educational history, such an approach reinforces a deficit view of these young people as being incapable of challenging intellectual work. Educating for individual and national economic livelihood *is* necessary and meaningful but we suggest that it should be shaped by a futures perspective and be part of a broader educational framework. That is generally the case in mainstream schools but once young people find themselves outside of the system they are faced with the challenge of finding programs and alternative sites that deliver more than a short-term skills/employment fix.

### ***Educating for personal and social meanings***

The importance of catering to the personal and social needs of young people, connecting to their worlds and creating supportive learning environments has been well established in educational research (see for example, Dewey, 1938; Newmann & Associates 1996; Hayes et al. 2006). In particular, Dewey (1919, 1934) argued that the arts are fundamental to this and, subsequently, to supporting broad educational goals because they develop skills of creativity, self-expression and empathy. This view continues to be supported today, with current researchers warning of the loss

of arts-based programs as schools get caught up in the testing regimes and accountability agendas of neoliberal governments (Corner 2012; Sahlberg 2010). Seidel's (2013, 4) claim that 'learning in and through the arts can play a catalysing role in the creation of a just and healthy society' supports the view that greater layers of 'meaning' for young people may be found in educational programs that go beyond basic skills and allow them to explore their personal and social selves. Evidence from our own research presented later in this paper provides substantial support for the central role played by the arts in helping young people who have left or have been excluded from the mainstream, explore their personal histories, identify their present needs and facilitate their future pathways. Reasons as to why they were unable to do that in the context of their former schools may be found in the myriad of issues that led to their disconnection or sense of alienation from those institutions.

There is a growing body of literature that explores the contexts of student disengagement from learning (see for example, Evans et. al. 2009; Francis and Mills 2012; Gable et al. 2006; Hayes 2012; Kilpatrick et al. 2007; Mills and McGregor 2010, 2013, 2014; Smyth and Fasoli 2007; te Riele 2006, 2011; Thomson and Russell 2007). Significant factors include: low socio-economic status (SES); complex family situations; social difficulties and/or bullying by peers; gender issues; language problems; cultural, racial or ethnic barriers; learning difficulties; mental illness; and carer responsibilities. For the most vulnerable young people these elements are exacerbated by a host of school related needs that may be unavailable to them; for example, uniforms, stationery, books and a variety of fees. Young people who live in households that face multidimensional challenges frequently find it difficult to comply with many of the cultural expectations of mainstream, middle class schools (Skattebol et al. 2012). Others may struggle with school rules for a variety of reasons that range from behaviours associated with special needs to personal philosophies of individual freedom (McGregor 2009). Thus, there are a great many reasons why some young people are unable to take advantage of programs within mainstream schools that allow access to meaningful forms of education. Bardsley (2007) suggests that because such students are most vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a global neoliberal economy, it is imperative that national governments formulate educational policies that ensure that access to an 'effective' education is a *right*, not a privilege.

In this paper, we echo those sentiments by calling for excluded young people to have access to a 'meaningful' education: one that builds a bridge between their personal contexts and needs and a desired future. It is our view that such educational 'bridges' need to be constructed in such a way as to: avoid deficit assumptions of young people; assist them in filling in the gaps in their formal education; extend their educational horizons; and plot pathways of possibility towards the future.

## **Methodology**

There is significant diversity in the types of programs and sites operating in the alternative education sector. For our research, we avoided those schools that were structured around a particular educational ideology (for example, Montessori, Steiner etc.) because the official practices were already strongly shaped by their belief systems. We also rejected referral or behaviour management centres because, rather than offering an 'alternative' pathway, such places are often about 'fixing up' young people to return them to their original school. We also wanted schools that were 'irregular' (Slee 2011) in the sense that they were not driven by dominant neo-liberal discourses, but were, instead, underpinned by a stated commitment to social justice. Thus, a strong criterion for our selection was that the site recognized the disadvantages that some young people face because of various kinds of discrimination and/or

material circumstances. We searched public websites and databases and drew upon anecdotal information from colleagues before deciding upon our research sites.

Once appropriate permissions had been obtained from University Ethics Committees and relevant gatekeepers we scheduled regular visits to sites and recorded interviews with teachers, workers and students. Sometimes we simply visited, observed, took notes and collected educational artefacts. In so doing, we were mindful of the tensions inherent in such fieldwork; namely, our positionality as outsiders and university academics with our individual subjectivities, perspectives and life stories, all of which influence what we see and how we interpret data. Our selections of data for this paper have been chosen according to the thematic connections we have identified between our understandings of 'meaningful education' and the evidence we found. We acknowledge the contested nature of this concept and our conclusions and therefore invite our readers to add their perspectives and join the conversation. Pseudonyms are used for both sites and participants throughout. We now turn to two case study sites that are drawn from a larger sample of schools participating in a study of the relationship between second chances schools and social justice (see for example, Mills et al. in press)<sup>1</sup>. This broader project includes two other sites and is due to conclude at the end of 2014. The first case study for this paper, Boronia Flexi School, provides an example of ways of facilitating access to a meaningful education via a 'stand-alone' alternative school; and the second case study, Kurrajong College, shows how a 'boutique' alternative program may work as an embedded part of a mainstream senior government high school. Data for this paper was derived from school websites and documents and interviews with 26 staff and 33 students.

## Case studies

### *Boronia Flexi School*

Recently established, Boronia Flexi School is a metropolitan Year 7-12 alternative school. The school is part of the Edmund Rice Education Australia (EREA) *Youth+* network, which 'seeks to respond to the needs of young people disenfranchised and disengaged from education (and to provide a place and an opportunity to re-engage in a suitable, flexible learning environment' (*Youth+* 2013). Whilst being run by a branch of the Catholic education system, the school does not have the appearance of a religious school. Adrian, a youth worker who says he is 'not religious at all', confirmed that the organisation lives up to this vision:

There is something in the network and the attachment to the Christian Brothers [EREA] that I do get more impressed with over time. [...] there is something in their understanding of social justice that I believe is more progressive than most organisations I have worked for. [...] there is an ability to have your opinions voiced and for you to bring up things on a social justice kind of level and have them heard and be honestly weighed up. I don't believe there is tokenism there.

At a practical level, the financial support through EREA *Youth+* provides the school with a generous space, material resources such as information technologies, and a relatively low student-staff ratio. For the majority of the 130 students their life experiences have been challenging – including poverty, mental illness, out-of-home care, drug dependency, juvenile justice, and settlement as a recent migrant. According to Adrian: 'you can generalise in ways but you should really be treating

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<sup>1</sup> The data for this paper are derived a project funded by an Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery grant.

them all as individuals and say their only common factor is they have been rejected by or chose to reject mainstream schools’.

As a registered school, Boronia Flexi School offers Year 7-12 including formal junior and senior secondary credentials. The way in which this curriculum is delivered, however, is very different from mainstream schooling. At a general level, the curriculum at Boronia Flexi School takes students’ personal interests and goals as a starting point. This begins by being able to take the time to get to know students, as Claudia (the head of campus) explained: ‘we are a registered school but through the *Youth+* umbrella we’ve been given the realistic flexibility that we need to take time to develop relationships with young people’. Connie, a teacher, commented that she was ‘allowed to create or negotiate programs to work with the young people’. A major emphasis is on articulating goals. Ike (another teacher) suggested that successful learning relates to ‘what particular goals that they’ve set for themselves. In some instances they set them, in some instances the teacher helps them, directs them, and sometimes their parents or guardians will’. Such goal-setting is formalised through ‘personal learning plans’ (PLPs). Every student has their own folder of work through which they can work at their own pace. As one student told us:

*Nancy: I’m just doing my own work at the moment, because I have my folder, everybody in the class has their own folder where there’s a set of works in there that they have to complete. Like, some English stuff and some maths stuff and when they’re done, like, it gets ticked off.*

Each student’s work may be quite different from that of other students in their class, either in the actual topics or in the level at which they tackle a topic, as Connie illustrated:

*I’ve got a class of young people ranging [in ability level] from Year 1 to Year 10, within one class [...] so it’s about ‘yes we are going to do some numeracy work’ [...]. So you’ve really got to be organised and prepared, but we’re still doing the same topic but we’re catering for the needs of each specific student. So in their PLP that would be identified that they’re the goals that they’re working towards.*

Students enjoy feeling that they have some control over what and how much work they do. Nancy said: ‘the basic thing about it is they don’t make you do anything you don’t want to do, because it’s your choice at the end of the day and it’s your life’. Jonathan agreed: ‘You can choose to do work. Like you don’t have to do it, you can just do whatever you want really’. At times staff may become frustrated because a student may choose to do very little; however, they suggested that it pays off in the end because once students decide to start working they are genuinely engaged. One way in which staff encourage students to engage with learning is by making it authentic. They set topics according to students’ needs, for example:

*Connie: I’ve worked with a couple of young people who’ve said ‘I can’t tell the time’. Digital? No, nothing, can’t even tell it. So let’s work on that. So that’s meaningful, because that’s what they need, it’s something they actually need and have identified themselves. Could be just reading timetables, could be we’ve done a lot of work with reading bills, how to interpret accounts.*

Similarly, specific electives may be offered based on student’ interests: ‘we saw a lot of the young boys were showing an interest in carpentry, so Ike then organised that’ (Connie). Staff also draw on real-life situations as they occur to provide authentic learning. For example, discussions about

spending school funds to remove graffiti, or about the affordability of various activities for the holiday program, are important to students:

*Adrian: When you are having those conversations about democracy and making sure that there is consultation involved, in my experiences the ones that involve budgetary decisions of some sort have got the most authenticity. They really feel as though there is something actually in it for them, we are talking cash now so ears prick up.*

Learning thus happens in both the formal and informal curriculum, and preparation for active citizenship is considered as valuable as preparation for further study or work. Staff appear genuine in their attempts to take young people's views seriously:

*Claudia: Every day the young people surprise me with their perspective of a situation and their perspective is right for them and so it's being able to take that in and realise how real that is to someone else and negotiate your own beliefs with their beliefs and come to a point in the middle somewhere.*

Typical of the schools in the broader study, staff negotiate honestly with students when behaviour problems occur; if it becomes necessary to ask young people to go home, it is always done within an underlying principle of returning the next day to begin again with 'a clean slate'. At this school and at many similar sites, young people frequently comment that the staff 'never give up on you'.

Finally, the school has invested in setting up a well-equipped music studio, with Adrian as a dedicated music teacher. Adrian explained that music 'is a way of marrying the outside world and home life in a school setting'. Moreover, writing their own song lyrics offers many students an opportunity to experience success that does not rely on traditional literacy skills. For Nicholas, a student, the music studio offered enjoyable learning:

*It's just fun and I enjoy doing the thing that I love which is singing. I really love singing and some people say I'm pretty good so it's nice. [...] we're also doing a live performance with most of the people in the session at the end of the year. Right now we've got two things on our set list. I think we maybe need three or four. So I've actually chosen one of the songs there, we're doing "Eye of the Tiger" which is an amazing song. [...] I'm lead vocals and we've got Martin, one of the other students, on drums, we've got Trevor on I think it's kind of like backing guitars I guess because we've got two guitarists; we've got Trevor, who's one of the other students, but we've also got Julian on the guitar. Julian's one of the teachers.*

The excitement Nicholas felt about the upcoming performance was palpable. The work he and his peers were doing was intended to count towards a vocational qualification (Certificate II) in Music; but perhaps more important was the sense of achievement it engendered. Adrian highlighted how 'the staff and the students see people walking out of this room with such big chests, you know. The pride is just visibly obvious to see when they have just had some success'. A strategy across the school, not just in the music studio but by all staff, is to 'focus on the success of the students, not on their failure'. Students such as Nicholas value the work of the staff:

*I just want people to know that the teachers here are amazing, honestly. They're really amazing. They share so much. Sometimes I feel a bit bad for Claudia and Rachael for all the work they have to do and all that, running an entire school with rowdy kids.*



*[Interviewer: Why do you think they keep doing it?]*

*Because they care about us. They care that we get an education.*

Thus, Boronia Flexi School works towards crafting personally meaningful learning experiences and pathways for its students. This is not achieved via regimes of external testing and disciplinary regimes that further marginalise disadvantaged young people by compounding their learning gaps; rather, the approach of this 'second chance' school is to begin with holistic assessments of where the young people are situated – personally and academically – and then to respond practically, supportively and with guided educational pathways towards the achievement of personal goals.

### **Kurrajong College**

For our second case study, we turn to Kurrajong College, a mainstream senior high school in a major Australian city that runs several alternative programs for students who have difficulties fitting into the mainstream. The program under discussion here is what a Deputy Principal, Grant, refers to as 'a Big Picture inspired school'. This program, or school within a school, draws inspiration from the interest-based approach to schooling known as Big Picture Education (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Grant explained that being 'inspired' means they are not expected to fully adopt Big Picture principles:

*You don't have to do absolutely everything that's Big Picture, but we do. So we have an advisory program. We work on internships with kids. We do exhibitions. We do projects. We do empirical quantitative and verbal reasoning with them. As much as possible we stick to the letter of the program. Initially, it's only ever going to be 15 kids in Year 11 and 15 kids in Year 12. Together you get 30 but in reality we have got 38 in the program and a waiting list.*

The Big Picture model of schooling has its origins in the USA; its basic principles articulated on its Australian website state:

The Big Picture's rigorous and highly personalised approach to education combines academic work with real world learning. It focuses on educating 'one student at a time' and inverts the traditional education model by placing the student, their passions and their interests, at the centre of the learning process (Big Picture Education Australia 2014).

As with Boronia, the students who access this program at Kurrajong College usually come from very difficult circumstances as noted by Grant: 'I have got to say that some of the stories we get to hear are amongst the worst I have experienced in 20 years of teaching, what's happening to some of these young people'. We too heard some terrible stories from students. However, the key teacher in the program, Janine, spent a lot of her time supporting students in non-education related matters. For instance, we were told by one student:

*Lara: Well, one of my mates, Julia, she's having a hard time with being homeless at the moment and she's been moved on from refuge to refuge and she calls up the first point and that and then they can't find a place for her but Janine will be on the phone nonstop with her in the office, all day, trying to find her a place.*

At the same time the ways in which the teachers worked with the young people to develop meaningful learning paths yielded great results. According to Grant in their first group: 'out of the

eight kids that we completed we got four into university'. Teachers, however, were constantly reflecting upon the delivery of their program:

*Grant: So working out the staffing of things and the nature of the program always leads to the question that you are trying to answer is: so what is it that's working? How can we replicate the things that are working? Relationship would be the first word that I would use.*

Facilitating meaningful learning experiences for the young people in the Big Picture program started with building relationships with them; supporting their material needs; and exploring their interests, passions and dreams – dreams that seemed completely impossible in their circumstances. Janine, a core teacher explained her approach:

*I buy them two minute noodles. But it just means if you have had nothing to eat or you need a hot drink ... I say to them, 'Look, you know, even if you are not feeling good or whatever or things are happening, just come. Just come and you can walk in. You can say to me, "Janine, I have had a horrible morning or last night". I will say, 'go and make a cup of tea when you are ready. We will have a chat about it. When we deal with that, then we will get you on to some work'.*

The students were highly appreciative of this and acknowledged the ways in which Janine treated them as a person:

*Christopher: Yes, she works - she has a different relationship - she has a relationship with everyone but it's different, which is really good. She sits there and knows everyone but she will have to change her, like, talking and that. She's like, "Alright, I am talking to this student now, so I have got to talk to her in this way," you know what I mean.*

Along with the personalisation and support went high expectations:

*Janine: Yeah, I want them to be engaged; I want them to be happy; I want to set work that is of a high enough standard that they can still achieve it but still with enough basic skills in it so that they can do it but not realise it, you know.*

Consequently Janine sought to provide the students with challenging work:

*The Year 12s have finished what we call an investigative report. Big Picture has different learning goals. There's empirical learning goals, quantitative/social reasoning. So they had to design a survey on a social issue, interview 20 mainstream students, interview 20 Big Picture students, collate their results, graph it, analyse it, and hand it back in to me... And they were fascinated by what other people were doing and, you know, they were doing things on drugs and the age of consent and all sorts of things. Each had their own little niche and they were so proud of it ... At the end of each semester we have an exhibition, parents coming in. So they will be able to go through their portfolio and be explicit about what they have done, what they learnt. So more success.*

According to Grant, who oversees the program as part of his duties as a Deputy Principal, meaningful learning is fundamental to how they work with these young people. There is one-to-one mentoring and a focus on meeting students where they are academically and then planning the journey with them:

*[Some people in other programs] do their best to do what I call 'See Spot run'<sup>2</sup> curriculum'. You read, so I will give you 'See Spot run', which is going to entertain a 17-year-old? No way! And the rigour has to be there. But it has to be, if I can say, negotiated rigour. And respect.*

*You can't jump so far ahead in numeracy that it is not making any sense to them. So with some of the kids that are really disconnected from us, we come all the way back to, 'Okay, let's do some things about tax,'- things that will meet them in the world that they are going to and then we move them from there. But we will have a kid in the program who could quite easily be doing tertiary maths in the school and they can do that if they wish to.*

Interestingly one of the students who had previously seen himself as not being very good at mathematics told us:

*Christopher: I actually like maths at the moment. I am getting all my work done and I get it, which is really odd.*

Grant also described how they tried to make meaningful connections between the students' lives and some of the projects. For example, many of these students had or were experiencing varying degrees of homelessness:

*They [students] have pretty much all had difficult circumstances ... some people have had the most destructive and terrible things ... so wherever possible we do a leadership or a community service thing. It is not a formal part of the program, as such, but it is something that's really strongly encouraged in the students. We are going to aim to make some swags with an industrial sewing machine, roll them with toothpaste, toothbrushes, towel, whatever we find, soap, and then we will give them to one of our local homeless shelters for the winter.*

There were also attempts to facilitate opportunities for the students to pursue their interests and possible future employments through deliberately focussed placements. For instance, students told us about having had opportunities to work in, for example, restaurants, and the theatre and mechanics workshops. One student who was enthusiastic about fitness and working with young children told us:

*Lara: I do work experience on Wednesdays with - what is it? - Social Inclusion Company, Indigenous Inclusion Company. At the moment it's teaching me about fitness and that and it's really good at the moment because it's getting me to work with kids as well; teaching them about fitness and nutrition.*

One of the particular advantages of the Big Picture program at Kurrajong College was that the students had the opportunity to attend mainstream classes as well. This was explained to us by one student:

*Lara: Yes, you can do that because you talk to Janine, "Look, I really want to do this subject. Like" - say you want to do Science, "I like Science and that." She would be like, "Alright, okay, we will take this line off - out of Big Picture and then you go to mainstream and go and do that class," if you are doing really well and that. If it's too hard for you, you can go*

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<sup>2</sup> Reference to a popular children's book for the early years of schooling

*out to Janine and go, "Look, it's not working out." If it's working for you - yeah. You can do mainstream if you want to.*

Janine facilitated this by preparing the teachers:

*When I go and talk to mainstream teachers about Big Picture students who want to come and do a (class) there, I give them a little bit of background and say, 'Look, you know, they are very anxious. They might need to sit near the door. If she leaves, she will leave, but she will come back. It's okay. Don't take it personally. You haven't done anything wrong. She doesn't hate you. But if it becomes too much or other things are happening, she will need to leave. But she will just be outside the door, so you can see what she's doing.' And the teachers have generally been very, very receptive to that.*

However, according to some students this did not always work out. Lara went on to tell us:

*I tried it, though, on the first - in Year 11, I tried to do a couple of mainstream. The teachers didn't work for me at all. They were just like, 'If you miss more than two classes, you will be graded [your grades will be affected]' and I was just like, "I can't do this. You are mean".*

The Big Picture program at Kurrajong College demonstrates that with appropriate social structures and educational opportunities, young people who are excluded from mainstream classes can reconnect to learning that is meaningful to them in terms of their current life circumstances and their futures. This program also worked to develop a sense of belonging to a community, within the schools and in the broader society. Such was the sentiment and positive attitudes towards the program that many students echoed statements made by Lara and Louisa. Lara told us how during grade 10 'I literally gave up on school altogether' because it was 'not working for me'. However, her Indigenous worker had taken her along to the Big Picture program. Her view was that: 'I am very thankful for this program. If I didn't have this program, I probably wouldn't have been at school'. Louisa, who had moved cities to escape family sexual and physical abuse, and who had had several periods of homelessness was also forthright in her praise of the program:

*I don't think I would be able to finish Year 12 without Big Picture. There's no way that could have happened.*

## Discussion

These two case studies provide evidence of effective ways of re-engaging young people, who have failed to thrive within current neoliberal paradigms of schooling and have subsequently left or been excluded from the mainstream sector. Whilst it appears that conventional schooling structures struggle to accommodate the diverse learning and personal challenges and needs of marginalised young people, some alternative institutions established as 'second chance schools' and 'flexible learning centres' seem to have responded with a different way of 'doing school' that includes: wraparound social services; a range of practical supports; individual learning plans; and, supportive and respectful relational contexts. The competitive accountability regimes currently dominant within mainstream schools have been replaced by an ethos of care for the individual young person and his/her personal goals. Thus, Borenia Flexi School and Kurrajong College serve as counterpoints to the mainstream sector in respect of their efforts to achieve socially just outcomes for their students not just in economic terms but also socially and personally.

The two sets of data come from very different alternative education structures. In the first instance, Boronia is firmly located within the second chance school system being created through Edmund Rice Education Australia, and is perhaps typical of many other flexible schools. The Big Picture program at Kurrajong College is an on-site program that operates within a mainstream school setting. This is far less common. Both schools cater to young people who have been excluded by their former schools, or were in danger of such. They both operate within a set of social justice principles that view education as a right of all students. This was made very clear to us at Kurrajong College when we were discussing the alternative education programs with the College principal, Daniel. When we raised the issue of disengagement with him, he responded with the following statement:

*I really hate the word "disengaged". Every time I get the chance I say to people like yourself and others that the real word is "disenfranchised", because "disengaged" suggests that it's the student's fault when the reality of it usually is that it's just that the education system doesn't provide anything that meets the needs of the disenfranchised.*

This view aligns with that on the Edmund Rice Australia website indicated earlier. An acknowledgement of this disenfranchisement was apparent in the way in which each school addressed the out-of-school factors that may have inhibited attendance at school. Each school had measures in place, for example help with crisis accommodation, meals, and support in relation to dealings with the youth justice system. Such measures are a critical component of a concern with providing a socially just education (see Mills et al., in press). However, whilst out-of-school factors, such as homelessness and carer responsibilities, constrain young people's ability to attend school, and also impact upon the perceived meaningfulness of the education provided, in-school factors are also complicit in some young people's negative reaction, indeed resistance, to school structures, pedagogies and curricula.

The students attending Boronia and Kurrajong typify many of those young people who have been excluded by their former schools, often for what has been seen as disruptive and poor behaviours, yet at their current schools are highly engaged. Indeed, as some students suggest, if it were not for their current schools they would not now be in any form of education. Thus, ensuring that students attend school is insufficient in terms of addressing the educational disenfranchisement faced by many young people. What happens within schools educationally is also important. Here we can point to the ways in which students see the teachers as caring about them, the spaces made available for students to negotiate and create the curriculum (as well as other aspects of their schooling experience), the opportunity to obtain formal qualifications, and to open up new possibilities and futures for the students.

In order to provide 'meaningful' learning, therefore, each of the two schools we have represented here work around the principle of knowing their students thereby enabling the teachers to: develop personal learning plans; support the students to develop their own learning goals; and, to identify knowledge and skills that are relevant to the students' worlds beyond the classroom. Some of this is project-based and some of it is integrated into current units of work. Some of the work is personal, some completed for teachers and some is displayed through public presentation such as exhibitions. However, in each instance, the student is located at the centre of all decisions. Furthermore, what the teachers in these schools are striving for is for something that is not seen as a 'dumbed down' curriculum. There are efforts to ensure that high expectations and intellectual rigour permeate the work being given to the students. Indeed as Grant told us about the curricular intentions of the program at Kurrajong College, 'I think it's good for any kid no matter what... We

could take some of our real high flying tertiary package students into this and they would love it.' Thus, unlike commonly held assumptions about the young people who are suspended or excluded from mainstream or those who are deemed to have 'dropped out', deficit constructions of the students attending these 'second chance' sites are *not* shaping the education provided for them.

While we think that schools like Boronia and Kurrajong show the mainstream what is possible in terms of catering to these young people in pedagogical and curricular terms, some structural features of the schools are also important. While there has been significant debate over the relative effects of class and school size (see for example Blatchford 2003), there is a growing bank of data supporting the benefits of smaller configurations; for instance, Bosworth's (2014) analysis of achievement data from the North Carolina public school system, albeit with younger students than the two schools discussed in this paper. There is also some evidence that small schools are better for students who come from marginalised backgrounds (Bloom and Unterman 2012). This point is well supported by both students and teachers at the two case study sites. It is apparent from their comments that the small size of the schools and the classes within them worked to facilitate the kinds of personal knowledge of the students that enabled teachers to tailor learning programs and projects to the students' needs and interests.

Boronia Flexi School and Kurrajong College both provide an education to young people who have been excluded from other schools. For many of these students it was the first time that they felt that they have been engaged with school and with learning. Drawing on Nancy Fraser's (1997, 2009) articulation of social justice as including distributive, recognitive and representative elements, we believe that attending to a range of social justice factors assists in this (see Mills and McGregor 2014). Such factors include: making it possible to attend school by addressing out of school needs (distributive justice); valuing of difference (recognitive justice) within each setting; as well as a willingness to listen to students' views on a range of matters (representative justice). However, we are also of the view that a 'curricular justice' that ensures that students regard their learning as meaningful is also critical to the provision of a socially just education. These two alternative educational environments appeared to be working towards developing an understanding of such a justice. The education they provide does indeed serve an economic imperative by facilitating the credentialing that is necessary for personal livelihood and contributions to national prosperity; however, via the incorporation of arts-based subjects and by encouraging the holistic development of young people, it does more than this. Whilst valuing the life-worlds, experiences and talents that young people already possess, it also provides them with opportunities: to explore their personal and social selves; to build on their existing understandings of their worlds; and to think differently about their futures so as to open up possibilities that may have once been denied to them.

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Special issue *International Journal of Inclusive Education*

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