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## 2. THE TOOWOOMBA FLEXI SCHOOL MODEL: ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

“...when it comes to schools, one size cannot possibly fit all”.  
(Raywid 2001: 582)

### *2.1. Introduction: Inclusive Education*

To be inclusive, schools must enable students to fully participate in all aspects of the school environment. They must provide alternative models of learning for students who cannot engage in particular activities. This requires a transformation of schools to be more inclusive, rather than physically integrating learners into schools which remain largely unchanged (*Scerra 2011*). But how much adaptation is possible within a one-size-fits-all national curriculum, given the pressures of accountability? A system which pressures teachers to ensure that the maximum number of pupils meets pre-specified objectives inevitably gives rise to a discourse of deficit for those who do not make it. Greater flexibility is essential.

Teachers confront difficult tensions in trying to manage disruptive classroom behaviour. It is here that a broad definition of inclusion confronts a literal definition of exclusion. Teachers face highly charged interpersonal situations, involving disorderly and even unintelligible behaviour. Much of their personal energy and professional identity is invested in maintaining the norms of schooling. It seems natural to regard the child's behaviour as deviant and deficient, rather than questioning whether it is the environment that has failed the child. It is not just a matter of a problem individual; there are structural and cultural problems as well. Schools face pressures to produce academic success, to secure a favourable position in league tables and to generate media coverage on their successes. The number of children excluded from schools has jumped dramatically in recent years. However, this does not reflect a sudden increase in disruptive behaviour in young people. Evidence from Croll and Moses (2000) shows that the incidence of emotional and behavioural disorders has changed very little in 20 years.

What has changed is schools' tolerance for pupils with disruptive behaviour.

Broader society may also play a role. The contemporary Western way of life promotes aggressive individualism. Combined with market fundamentalism, this has altered not just how individuals think of themselves but how they relate to each other. In a world of aggressive individualism there is little need for community and no need for trust (Dunlop 2013).

The Federal Government has identified poor educational outcomes as a factor driving social exclusion in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009). Statistics about mental health support this assertion, revealing double the prevalence of psychological distress in young people who do not work or study (Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS, 2008). About 20% of Australia's population is aged 12 to 24 years (Muir *et al.* 2009). The State of Australia's Young People Report (*Ibid.*) described concerning statistics about this group. It outlined that (a) culture-related health disparities are increasing, (b) one in four youth has a mental disorder, (c) one in three report psychological distress, (d) almost a quarter are obese, (e) 15-19 year olds have the highest rate of alcohol-related hospitalisations in the Australian population, and (f) suicide is the leading cause of death in people aged 15-24. Recent ABS figures confirm that suicide remains the leading cause of death of young Australians, although the rate has almost plateaued in recent years with 324 deaths in 2012 of young people aged 15 to 24 (Burdon 2014).

The Federal Government's social inclusion strategy (Australian Social Inclusion Board, 2010; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) aims to create a stronger, fairer Australia by "building a nation in which all Australians have the opportunity and support they need to participate fully in the nation's economic and community life, develop their own potential and be treated with dignity and respect" (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 2). Given the aforementioned statistics, realising those goals is still some way off.

Te Riele (2006) argued that educational marginalisation of youth is not restricted to a problematic minority, but pervades a significant percentage of youth. Wide reaching factors impact educational outcomes. In Australia, statistics have shown that educational outcomes are influenced by gender, geographic location, socio-economic status, and whether or not an individual is of Indigenous heritage (Muir *et al.* 2009). Non-completion rates depend upon grade point average, school suspension, and socio-economic status (Suh, Suh, and Houston 2007). Technology also plays a role in educational marginalisation (Brown 2000; Maltby and Mackie 2009).

To address social inclusion, the Federal Government has stipulated that education “better meet the needs of all Australians” and that “flexible, tailored support that targets those experiencing disadvantage” is needed (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 65). They add that this will require “regional and local partnerships that help people work together in new and different ways to support those at risk of social exclusion” (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, p. 68). Beyond this focus, Te Riele (2006, 2014) has argued for creative and flexible policies in all educational settings to address and reverse marginalisation. Others want to broaden educational policies and accountabilities beyond just academic education to include social and behavioural skills (Sailor, Stowe, Turnbull III, and Kleinhammer-Tramill 2007). It seems intuitive that integrating creativity and flexibility in the academic, social, behavioural and cultural practices at educational facilities will cater for the emergent needs of youth and maximise social inclusion.

Within Australia, the Federal Government has strived to address marginalised youth through a range of alternative education policies, procedures, and programs over the years. These are briefly outlined below.

In 2002-2003, a series of 21 pilot programs – the Partnership Outreach Education Model (POEM) Pilots – aimed to re-engage youth with education and/or employment using Learning Pathway Plans (LPPs) and community support networks. The program evaluation was based on quantitative and qualitative quarterly data collected throughout the pilot period. The pilots serviced over 2400 youth in either full-time or part-time capacity. Within the full-time group, 40% of the young people went back to school or on to further education and training, 18.9% exited to employment, and 9.8% exited to another program by the end of the program. Qualitative data showed that community involvement, flexible teacher roles, adult learning principles, and the presence of LPPs were necessary to success. On-going government funding, and collaboration across sectors, were also identified as crucial to the success of future programs. Overall the POEM Pilot was believed to have helped participants to develop social competence and become lifelong learners, and helped reduce the likelihood of their marginalisation.

POEM Pilots was followed by a new initiative called Connections, then the Youth Pathways and Connections initiatives. Te Riele (2007) noted that a prolific and unintegrated array of alternative pathways options were developed in response to government pressure to increase retention rates in Australian high schools. Te Riele proposed a model for alternative education that focussed on changing the education system (as opposed to a focus

of changing the youth), supported by the stability of ongoing government funding (as opposed to pilot or charity reliant programs).

More recently, the Federal Government launched the National Strategy for Young Australians in 2010. This strategy is based on social inclusion and equity principles and highlights eight priority areas, including education. The strategy aims to meet national youth participation requirement targets that the Council of Australian Governments set in 2009 in the Compact with Young Australians. The requirement states that youth participate in education until a minimum year 10, then a minimum 25 hours education/employment/training a week until age 17 (i.e., “working or earning”). There is a goal for 90% national achievement by 2015 of a Year 12/equivalent or Certificate II or above. This goal was set when the Bradley Report (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, and Scales 2008) showed that Australia had a comparatively lower proportion of its population with higher education degrees than other developed countries. Students struggling to meet these participation standards were referred to the Youth Connections program. The Australian Government invested \$268.8 million over a four year period in the Youth Connections program.

Importantly, the Federal Government (2009) identified the need to establish an evidence-base for social inclusion, to help realise its goals. In outlining the findings of a large scale research project commissioned by the Youth Affairs Network of Queensland, Mills and McGregor (2010) noted that “[t]here is much that mainstream schools can learn from ‘successful’ alternative schools in order to provide an education that caters to a wide range of students”. Common success factors they identified included that the students were committed, that they found their teachers approachable and respectful, and that the school provided wider psychosocial supports.

Rumberger and Lim’s (2008) review of 25 years of research into non-completion of school, proposed a conceptual model of high school completion, including individual characteristics and institutional characteristics. The individual factors included educational performance factors (achievement, persistence, attainment), behavioural factors (engagement, coursework, deviance, peers, employment), attitudes (goals, values, self-perceptions), and background factors (demographics, health, prior performance, and past experiences). The institutional factors included communities (composition, resources), schools (composition, structure, resources, practices), and families (structure, resources, practices). Research with upper primary school urban poor students found that 15% of the variance in academic achievement was accounted for by individual characteristics, 5.4% by family characteristics, and 4.3% by school characteristics (Engin-Demir

2009). Gavazzi, Khurana and Russell (2009) noted that a broad ecological framework is necessary when considering educational marginalisation. Together, this information reveals the complexity and challenge in ensuring the educational success of young people today.

The current paper focuses on examining many of the factors which are inherent in Rumberger and Lim's (2008) conceptual model, by presenting data from interviews with high school students at Toowoomba Flexi School, a flexible learning school in regional Australia.

## *2.2. Alternative Education Models*

Many research studies support the multidimensional nature of educational success, as conceptualised above, within alternative education institutions. Qualitative methodology including focus group interviews and case study examinations have been commonly used (see Bagnoli and Clark 2010; Boratav 2005; Kubik, Lytle, and Fulkerson 2005; Nichols and Steffy 1999).

For example, March and Gaffney (2010) conducted retrospective case study examinations of the learning journeys of two students currently attending an alternative education facility, considering the interaction of student, school, and family identities. The authors concluded that "when students, families, and school professionals successfully negotiate their relationships, students are able to thrive in school contexts, refine their own identities, and effectively traverse educational pathways toward goal attainment" (p. 4). March and Gaffney added that educators are "critical mediators" (p. 3) in students learning journeys.

Conchas and Clark (2002) used a qualitative case study approach to examine two career academies (that is vocational-based schools within schools) in California. They found that in comparison to the general school population, students who attended the academies had increased optimism, higher graduation rates, and higher college enrolment rates. The authors highlighted difficulties in replicating the cultures of the academies, but said some success factors could be replicated, such as small class sizes and mutual goal-setting between teachers and students. More recent reports support this assertion, continuing to identify success factors with marginalised students to include small schools, strong teacher-student relationships, and teachers having high expectations of students which are backed up by support (Stuht 2008). The benefits of alternative education options thus include individualised learning, fewer students per teacher, committed and experienced teachers, and better access to community support services.

An important factor that influences the success of alternative education programs is their ability to establish effective student-teacher communication and to have reflective, dynamic strategies to incorporate emergent feedback (Stuht 2008). Australian research by Sanguinetti, Waterhouse, and Maunders (2005) presented five teacher elements that contribute to successful pedagogy in alternative educational settings: engagement with learners, personal teaching and learning self-reflection, improvisation and risk-taking, power dynamic awareness, and patience and trust in learning as a process. Similarly, Hajii (2006) examined how marginalised youth conceptualised respect and found four common themes: challenge, attention, responsiveness, and expectations (CARE).

Research by Ream and Rumberger (2008) has indicated that increased student engagement is related to friendship networks being established within schools (e.g., through participation in non-organised school activities and extracurricular activities) and together these factors reduce the likelihood of non-completion. Boratav (2005) in a qualitative study using focus groups examined the resources that Turkish youth, living in an economically disadvantaged neighbourhood, identified as important. They reported that being connected with the educational system and being involved in organised sports were important to their well-being and future expectations. Additionally, alternative learning facilities often use experiential learning which draws on challenge and adventure to facilitate the personal growth and problem-solving ability of students (Brendtro and Strother 2007; Walsh and Aubry 2007).

Researchers have also examined influential factors in non-completion. For example, Nesman (2007) examined the reasons for the relatively high non-completion of high school rate in Latino adolescents using qualitative data from semi-structured focus group interviews. These students reported that negative relationships with adults, particularly lack of caring and limited time investment from their teachers, as well as lack of capacity to provide academic support from the adults in their families, and behavioural issues, all contributed to their non-completion. To help address retention issues, students recommended that shared responsibilities, improved communication, problem-solving assistance, and counselling would be beneficial. In regards to academic support, the students identified that a more practical and personal application of learning concepts, paced to individual ability levels, and highly interactive in nature, would be of benefit. Nesman (2007) recommended a holistic school-based intervention to address student retention and ongoing research inclusive of all stakeholders to refine strategies.

Research further indicates that leaving school before completing Year 12 can have negative consequences for both individuals and society (Te Riele 2014). Individual costs include difficulty in gaining and maintaining employment, lack of earnings and a comparatively lower standard of living (Porter 2000). Early school leavers are more likely to experience financial hardship and poverty, which can lead to debt, homelessness and housing stress, family tensions and breakdown, boredom, alienation, shame and stigma, increased social isolation, crime, erosion of confidence and self-esteem, the atrophying of work skills and ill-health (Deloitte Access Economics, 2012). Recent research from the US argues that employing early interventions within schools focussed on positive engagement with students and families can have multiple long term impacts (Henry et al. 2012).

Kortering and Braziel (1999) used retrospective approach to identify factors related to non-completion of high school. Thematic analysis revealed that across the 44 students interviewed important factors reported included: teachers changing their perspectives of, and behaviour towards, students; students changing their own attitudes and behaviours; and institutional changes including restructuring of the learning instruction and materials, as well as reformed attendance, and discipline policies. Knipe, Reynolds, and Milner (2007) used focus group discussions with students aged 11-16 to explore their attitudes to school exclusion. The students said alternative education options should be offered to students who are excluded from mainstream school.

McCall (2003) examined factors that influenced students who had been successful in alternative education settings to not complete school once they re-enter mainstream schooling. McCall (2003) concluded that it is necessary to transfer the qualities of alternative school educators to educators in mainstream schools. Specifically, these qualities included the ability to turn problems into opportunities, to create cultural safety, and the ability to create a respectful school climate.

Although their research did not examine success in the educational setting, Lindsey, Kurtz, Jarvis, Williams, and Nackerud (2000) used focus group discussions and individual interviews to explore the factors that helped youth faced with homelessness or premature leaving of home to successfully navigate the transition to adulthood. These identified several key personal strengths and resources that had contributed to their success, including: learning more about themselves; learning more about relationships with others; being able to learn both vicariously and through their own experience; possessing personal qualities of independence, maturity, responsibility, and determination; and spirituality. A second part of this

same study (Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, and Nackerud 2000) also found that successful transition in these youth could be understood by looking at both formal and informal sources of helpers. The youth reported that important helpers included a combination of family, friends, and professionals. The qualities that the youth reported helpful professionals to possess included that they were authentic, committed, patient, nurturing, accepting, emotionally invested, and capable of communication was open and two-way. As well as this the youth described their relationships with helpful professionals to go beyond the boundary of normal professional roles. Students' perceived caring of their teachers has been shown to influence student motivation (Wentzel 1997).

Another qualitative study by Murray and Naranjo (2008) focussed on the protective factors that facilitated the graduation of 11 marginalised African-American youth living in a poor suburb. Protective factors included: individual factors of self-determination, willingness to seek support, and belief in the societal value of education; family factors of parental involvement and parental structure; deliberate isolation from peers as a strategy to avoid trouble; teacher qualities of care, ongoing involvement, persistence, ability to provide instrumental support by breaking down of tasks, and being able to be simultaneously strict and nice. Recent policies and guidelines in various societies are evidence of an emerging model of education that directly and strategically encourages and facilitates parental and family involvement in their child's education (see Field and Hoffman 2002; Pleet and Wandry 2009).

Brendtro and Longhurst (2005) drew on advancing biological understandings of the brain and argued that resilience is hard wired in all of us. The authors outlined practical strategies for those who work with marginalised youth, to help create positive experiences for youth, which in turn will "rewire" the brains of the youths. The strategies they suggested included, first disengaging from harmful conflict, then reaching out, avoiding judgement, connecting during conflict, understanding behaviour, clarifying problems, and restoring harmony and respect.

When considering educational motivation, self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan and Deci 2000a; Deci and Ryan 2000) is prevalent in the research (e.g. see Assor, Kaplan, and Roth 2002; Browder, Wood, Test, Karvonen, and Algozzine 2001; Field and Hoffman 2002).

Self-determination has been defined as "taking charge of one's life" (Browder et al. 2001: 233). Self-determination theory proposes that well-being is optimised when the three basic needs of competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met (Ryan and Deci 2000b; Deci and Ryan 2000). In

their research, which examined teacher behaviours that help develop autonomy (drawing on self-determination theory), Assor *et al.* (2002) found that fostering relevance predicted positive affect and engagement, and that suppressing student criticisms was the best predictor of negative affect and lack of engagement. Also drawing on SDT in their research with marginalised youth, Dicintio and Gee (1999) found that control and challenge predicted the motivation. Field and Hoffman (2002) reported a review of multiple implementations across a variety of school settings, including high schools serving marginalised youth, of a SDT-based program named Steps. The review summarised that self-determined teachers can better serve to develop self-determination in students, self-determination concepts are most efficacious if integrated across subject areas, and that it is important to involve and inform parents of the benefits and processes involved in self-determination development.

Providing evidence for the cross-cultural applicability of SDT, particularly the autonomy component, Chirkov and Ryan (2001) found that autonomy-support predicted academic self-motivation and well-being in both Russian and American adolescents. These findings were extended in research by Sheldon, Abad, and Omoile (2009) who found that perceived autonomy support from teachers was related to positive course evaluations and increased need satisfaction in Nigerian and Indian adolescent students. Relatedness to others (which transposes easily onto relatedness conceptualised in SDT) tempered by the other being both caring and having expectations, was identified in research with Australian youth, some of whom had experienced significant life difficulties, to be a factor influencing their re-engagement with life (De Souza, Cartwright and McGilp 2004). These authors concluded by calling on educators to be aware of their role in facilitating the spiritual development of self that occurs in adolescence. A self-determination resource map has been proposed that can help teachers to locate, plan, and implement SDT in their classrooms (Browder *et al.* 2001).

### *2.3. Toowoomba Flexi School and the Intergenerational Mentoring Program*

Toowoomba Flexi School is a successful and sustainable alternative educational model catering for 70 senior secondary school students who, for one reason or another, became disengaged from mainstream schooling. The students come from a variety of backgrounds and many have been challenged by their life experiences. The Toowoomba Flexi School

is part of Centenary Heights State High School in Toowoomba and incorporates an intergenerational mentoring program in partnership with The Older Men's Network (TOMNET). The program involves older men (and women) volunteering their time and experience to build relationships with students, supporting them to develop their numeracy and literacy skills, and to undertake special projects. This dynamic intergenerational partnership seeks to redress issues of marginalisation of disenfranchised youth and older people in the community.

According to Findsen (2005), there are several myths concerning older people which persist in our society. These include: (a) homogeneity – older people are typically grouped together as possessing the same characteristics, however, the reality is there is increased diversity with ageing; (b) decline – older people are typically described as frail and weak, and while the physical capabilities of older people do slow down, many have extensive life experience and insight to draw from; (c) independence – older people in the last period of life do typically require some dependence, however, many older adults are largely independent, self-sufficient and lead highly productive lives; and (d) consumerism – older people are typically referred to as consumers of goods and services, however, many actively contribute to society through volunteering, mentoring and other part-time employment opportunities.

In the mentoring program at the Flexi School, mentors model critical social interactions through listening, constructive activity, and showing respect and support. The mentoring program provides leadership to the youth in a grand-parenting role through:

- listening without judgement;
- being a source of information;
- teaching specific life skills;
- giving guidance and support, and
- generally helping the young people to recognise their strengths.

The mentoring program brings benefits to both student and mentor. Mental health is fundamental to physical health, quality of life and productivity, especially in childhood and adolescence (von Rueden, Gosch, Rajmil, and Bisegger 2005). Good mental health during this time often underpins mental health and well-being throughout later life. In 2000, 14.2% of boys and 17.6% of men experienced a mental health problem. Suicide is now the leading cause of death for males aged 15-44 (ABS, 2013). With declining rates of adult support in the typical Australian household, mentoring programs are increasingly being seen as a way for young people to build

resilience. Research has tended to focus on the positive outcomes for the mentees or students. Anecdotal evidence from the intergenerational mentoring program at Toowoomba Flexi School indicates it can enhance students' confidence and feelings of self-worth (Postle, Burton and Danaher 2014). However, mentors can also gain personal satisfaction and feelings of accomplishment as they assist disenfranchised young people. Further research is warranted.

#### *2.4. Methodology: Storytelling*

Collecting and analysing the stories of people within the Toowoomba Flexi School community has strong potential to provide new insights regarding alternative education and community resilience and well-being. This paper draws from more extensive ethnographic research into the educational opportunities and career pathways for disenfranchised young people reconnected with learning via alternative educational models. Conducted in a regional Australian city, Toowoomba, the wider research project involves in situ observations and semi-structured interviews with Toowoomba Flexi School students, teachers, parents, older people in the community who mentor the students and other interested members of the Flexi School community. In this paper we draw on the narratives from the Toowoomba Flexi School students and mentors about the Flexi School model and the impact of the mentoring program for both mentor, mentee, and the broader community.

The youth whose stories we recount in this paper could be described as “disengaged” by the fact that they are no longer enrolled at mainstream high school. Prior to enrolling at Toowoomba Flexi School, they had poor attendance and participation records and struggled with the institutional norms of mainstream schooling. In various ways they had resisted the authority of formal schooling and had disengaged from learning. These young people share their stories of life at Toowoomba Flexi School, describing how Flexi School supported them to re-engage in learning and employment programs. They are stories of strength, hope and resilience that challenge the negative stereotypes and deficit views of so called “disadvantaged” or “at risk” youth. Similarly, the older men and women who mentor the Flexi School students became involved with the Flexi School as a way to “give back” to community. They were typically looking for activities that might satisfy their needs to be worthwhile contributors to society. The mentors' stories indicate how they have agency, a capacity to actively contribute as

citizens and a desire to contribute to society. They also speak with conviction about what makes for a good school and why the Flexi School model works for its students.

The interviewees for students were guided by a multi-faceted question: Tell us how you came to be at the Toowoomba Flexi School; how does Flexi School differ from your previous experiences of schooling; and how has being at Flexi affected your life? For the mentors, they were asked about their involvement with Toowoomba Flexi School, specifically their experiences with the intergenerational mentoring program. With the consent of participants, individual interviews of 30-45 min duration were audio-recorded. In the following short commentaries, the identity of the participants has been sealed to protect their identities. The students interviewed were in middle and senior years (10-12) studying towards senior high school certificates and certificates in vocational education. The older men whose interviews we recount below were all retired and volunteered as mentors at Toowoomba Flexi School.

According to Griffiths (2007), the story is a form now increasingly recognised as having the capacity to convey complex causes and ideas, clearly and forcefully. Three prominent themes emerged from our discussions with young people and mentors:

- Toowoomba Flexi School culture is built on trust and respect and demonstrated care by its teachers.
- Toowoomba Flexi School focuses on the potentials, strengths and capacities of individuals rather than their limits.
- Toowoomba Flexi School helps students to form respectful relationships and create greater meaning, connection and control in their lives.

## *2.5. Stories from Students and Mentors*

### *Theme 1:*

The first key theme that emerged from interviews with young people and mentors was that Flexi School is like a family. The comments below demonstrate how the Flexi School culture is built on the principles of trust and respect. The students feel that their teachers genuinely care about their well-being and invest time and energy into nurturing the student-teacher relationship.

It is evident from the students that the Toowoomba Flexi School is helping to make a real difference in the lives of its students. The Flexi School is a place where “every student matters” and every student is made to feel

part of the Flexi School family. Students are accepted for who they are and are free to express their individuality. They are given time and space by their teachers to grow as individuals and as learners. Importantly, they also learn to connect and establish relationships and look out for each other. This is evident from the student comment below:

The teachers come around and talk to you individually. In [mainstream] they just give you the work and you do it. Here they come around and ask you if you need help.

Teachers don't judge you, they treat you with respect and really go out of their way to support you.

Additionally, students learn to respect one another and to feel respected for who they are by members of the broader Flexi School community. Students learn to recognise their personal strengths and how they can find their passion in life and belong and positively contribute to society. The Flexi School encourages students to learn from mistakes and to show initiative. They take on board feedback from their peers, teachers and mentors within a collaborative learning environment that stimulates them to learn and grow as individuals. For example, one student commented: "We are just like one big family. We get along with everyone and work we together. If you need a hand you just go and ask someone – a friend or a teacher. It's pretty easy – just one big family".

The Flexi School students indicate a desire to learn and fulfil their potentials. They receive personal vocational support to work out the best pathway for them to move forward, be that further study or employment, to ensure they can achieve their goals for a positive future. For example, one student commented: "Teachers treat you with respect and talk to you individually and ask you if you need help so that you can achieve your goals".

These educational practices at Toowoomba Flexi School are important not only for citizenship education, but for school engagement more generally. They provide a means to make learning more engaged, realistic and stimulating for students, and create opportunities for personal and social development.

The following student statement reveals how the Flexi School culture fosters a sense of belonging and community for its students. The student comment below further demonstrates her capacity for self-reflection:

I think it's amazing how I can come to school and feel like I have this wonderful family. Even though I've only been here for a short time I wish I had come sooner, and now that it's ending I have to let go of the feeling I get when

I come here every morning. I think what's also amazing is the fact that in the few short months I've been here, you have made me feel as loved as all of you do, and that's pretty remarkable. I didn't expect to feel so loved and so much a part of things; whether it was talking ...or drinking coffee ..., it didn't matter because now I feel part of something much bigger, a family. And you're the most spectacular family anyone could ever ask for, and I hope none of you ever forget that, ever.

Mentors also feel part of the Flexi family. One mentor commented:

I feel part of the Flexi family... you build a relationship with the kids. The kids can learn to talk to old people, and more importantly, there are some old people who won't judge them for whatever they do or whatever they say. The kids see us as being part of the Flexi family. They know we're there if they need to talk about anything, just like the family I had when I was growing up.

*Theme 2:*

The second key theme that emerged from interviews with young people and mentors was that Flexi School is a strengths-based educational model that helps students to realise their full potentials. This flexible learning model has positive implications for citizenship and a sense of belonging in the broader community. For example, the Flexi School is founded on strong connections with the local community. There is not a heavy reliance on teachers for support; guidance and advice is readily available from other sources including fellow students and mentors. However, the students recognise that their teachers are committed to helping them achieve their personal goals. One student commented: "The teachers are more out there to help you get towards your goal – instead of like in mainstream it is more like you go get it and bring it to me we will sign it and off you go".

Additionally, the Flexi School learning environment encourages students to actively debate key issues of concern and where possible, learning involves students cooperating in groups and is linked with prior experience. For example, work placements in community and educational tasks such as producing digital media help to actively engage students in learning (Herdegen, 2001). A new learning and teaching initiative will involve students exploring opportunities to connect learning outcomes with the wider society and environment. According to Wrigley (2003), this pedagogical approach provides students with opportunities to test out new skills, knowledge and ideas in a safe learning space. For example, one student commented:

After struggling with my dislike for school for 11 years across 7 different schools I gave up, I wasn't going to complete grade twelve, I didn't see the point, I just wanted to start working and living my life. My carer offered me Flexi, saying that I could work and go to school and that it was a really laid back place. A year later I am finally finishing high school and if it wasn't for Flexi's extreme tolerance and acceptance of my not-so-great attitude I really don't believe that I would have completed year 12. So really, all I can say is thank you.

The intergenerational mentoring program at Flexi School also provides opportunities for the mentors to fulfil their contributive needs (McClusky, 1974). Mentors can "repay" society by volunteering their time at the School. The following comment from a mentor demonstrates how the mentoring program is helping to improve the welfare of older men and women by giving them agency and purpose:

The older men and women with their life experience and knowledge feel they are contributing. They enjoy talking to the kids; the kids enjoy talking to them. Those principles are still relevant today. It's a win-win relationship where they talk about what it's like to live in a community together... The kids were screaming out for someone to tell them how do I belong?... They want to belong to this community and learn how to become a useful member of society... The older people also learn how to mix with young people, that you are in the community and not marginalised, that you're part of the community. They feel valued and contributing to the community.

### *Theme 3:*

The third key theme that emerged from interviews with young people and mentors was that the Flexi School model is based on the key principle of respect. Alternative educational programs like Toowoomba Flexi School enable students to establish respectful relationships and self-determine their futures. The flexible learning environment at Flexi School supports students to remain in high school and develop the skills and confidence necessary for life, work and future learning (see Te Riele, 2014). The mentoring program provides a safe 'enabling space' (Wyn et al., 2014) where students can develop a sense of purpose and strengthen their connections with the local community. One student commented:

The people who work at Flexi are very kind, friendly and accepting people. Thanks to my time at Flexi I have learnt a lot more than just Maths and English. I have had a lot of life experiences that I believe have changed me as a person for the better. While I have been enrolled at Flexi I have completely changed my style of life and I feel as if I wouldn't have turned my life around if it wasn't

for this school. Earlier this year I had the opportunity to do work experience ... which I really enjoyed. I have intentions of getting a job ... With the feedback I got from my work experience I feel as if I will be able to get a job ... with ease as soon as a position is vacant.

Another student commented how the Flexi School had helped him to become more responsible:

Through my high school years I have had to push myself every day to avoid a lot of the temptations that have been thrown my way. When I was in my early teens I couldn't always resist temptation and used to skip school to hang out with friends. But after transferring to The Flexi School they helped me stay in school and to be more responsible for my actions.

The intergenerational mentoring experience suggests that a significant outcome of the Flexi School model is to do with the development of respectful relationships, particularly in terms of the positive socialisation experiences that emanate from such relationships. Most of the Flexi School students have not had grandparents present in their upbringing, some have not had access to adult role models which can assist them to understand social character, or those characteristics and values which are shared by the members of a community. Many of these students have also experienced difficulty in dealing with inconsistencies and contradictions reflected in a social character and have no one close by to help them work through these inconsistencies.

The mentoring program enables the students and mentors to develop respectful relationships which are mutually beneficial. The students are relishing an introduction to understanding of social character with its inconsistencies and contradictions – the older men and women have practical knowledge, experience and wisdom they are eager to share with these young people. The older men feel valued and experience a sense of contributing to the community. This is demonstrated by the following mentor's comment:

With the mentoring program you ask the kids what they get out of talking to older people and nine times out of 10 they say these people listen nonjudgmentally... half the time they want people to listen and they want to know what they have to do to belong to the community. The flexi model allows that individual attention where people care and the kids know that people care. That's not to say there are no expectations. ... the students begin to realise that feeling good about yourself is doing something for yourself. So there are expectations. If you feel sorry for the kids all the time, you'll create a dependency and there's

no need to try. And they'll learn to play that role. But if you have expectations as other schools do, and give opportunities to fit in, the kids will grow.

### 1.5. *Discussion*

Flexi School's focus on inclusive education involves changing the lives of its students, breaking the "at risk" cycle and providing opportunities for students to re-engage in learning. The curriculum also includes a focus on career and involves a student-centred environment where teachers, students and community members work together, share ideas and build meaningful relationships. Toowoomba Flexi School provides a caring and welcoming environment of community, curriculum and relationships.

The Toowoomba Flexi School also acknowledges that the community is a rich source of resources. A critical element of the intergenerational mentoring program's success is the school's close relationship with its community. Over the 14 years of Flexi School's existence in the Toowoomba region, one of the guiding principles has been the involvement of authentic community partnerships. The Toowoomba Flexi School experience shows that solutions to community issues involving youth require involvement from all parts of society – public, volunteer and private sectors. Growing together as a community depends on the establishment of mutually beneficial partnerships that involve a range of expertise and experience. Many local organisations, such as Rotary, TOMNET, the local council, the University of Southern Queensland and Centenary Heights State High School, have figured prominently in the success of Flexi School. Capacity building through the support of such organisations has laid the foundations for its sustainability as a key intervention strategy for youth issues in the region.

For education systems to deliver positive outcomes for students, they must integrate education, health and community, drawing on input from all stakeholders (Noam, Warner and Van Dyken 2001). Importantly, multi-level partnerships require infrastructure support through data based monitoring and evaluation to succeed (Leaf, Keys, Barrett and McKenna 2007). The Flexi School is clearly doing this. The challenge lies in making this systemic integration more purposeful in mainstream schools, creating an entire school system with flexibility and alternatives by design. The Toowoomba Flexi School, with its linkages to a mainstream school, may offer a model to help realise this systemic change.

Peer pressure remains a powerful force in the lives of young people, especially in a world which more and more promotes "external expressions"

of self-worth. Many students at Flexi School are dissatisfied with what they look like and succumb to depression and self harm. Many young people find it difficult to survive in school systems that value efficiency over effectiveness. “The market” has permeated the very fabric of schools where words such as “throughput”, “performance indicators” and “quality audits” have replaced the importance of interpersonal relationships, community and belongingness.

Loss of identity affects not just the young. The aged, particularly older men, find it increasingly difficult to cope with retirement in a changing community. The extended family is no longer there to share life’s stories or to provide role models for the young. The “society as market” places little value on those who have “run their race” and are no longer productive in the economic sense.

The focus on “society as market” also impacts how we respond to these social issues. Governments have tended to “treat the effects” rather than seeking ways to stop social problems developing. The answers to youth problems are then found in introducing harsher penalties for wrongdoings and misdemeanours. In the private sector, retirement centre managers often have the profit motive uppermost in mind, along with the view of coping with the aged as “out of sight, out of mind”. This places the control of what are essentially community service programs and processes in the hands of those who are more concerned with means than ends.

Bertrand Russell provides a valuable insight into the thinking behind those who value means over ends:

... people do not always remember that politics, economics, and social organisations generally, belong in the realm of means, not ends. Our political and social thinking is prone to what may be called the “administrator’s fallacy”, by which I mean the habit of looking upon a society as a systematic whole, of a sort that is thought good if it is pleasant to contemplate as a model of order, a planned organism with parts neatly dovetailed into each other. But a society does not, or at least should not, exist to satisfy an external survey, but to bring a good life to the individuals who compose it. It is in the individuals, not in the whole, that ultimate value is to be sought. A good society is a means to a good life for those who compose it, not something having a separate excellence on its own account (Russell 1949: 86-87).

This is a difficult time to be disadvantaged. Whatever its merits, the dominance of the prevailing neo-liberal economic system in many countries with its emphasis on financial rectitude, profit-making privatisation of services and welfare cuts certainly sets a challenge to those whose concern

is with the poor, the under-privileged, and the dysfunctional. Increasing immigration, cultural tensions, and the burgeoning ranks of the old and retired compound the problem. The search is on for creative solutions to an age-old dilemma.

The challenge is to break the cycle of deprivation and to establish the sort of society that values compassion and helps the excluded into the mainstream. Every local authority in the developed world has a statutory duty to develop social inclusion policies. There is a common awareness of the roots of exclusion, and there are many strategies to alleviate them. Yet it may be worthwhile to explore whether all the human, intellectual, community and external resources within a community are being used effectively, and to seek innovative solutions from other places.

### *2.6. Conclusion*

In this paper we described the inappropriate application of the neoliberal ideology to education policy, and moved to scope out a different alternative. We need to consider what this might look like practically speaking by drawing from the storylines of young people and older people who have felt the full effects of the neo-liberal policy agenda applied to their lives and schooling, and who have taken the opportunity to embrace a very different policy agenda – one in which they have much more agency. The Toowoomba Flexi School is a community-based initiative that has focussed on mobilising local resources and establishing strong connections between community groups. It is evident that marginalised youth should not be seen as a hopeless cause. Educational program that connects the youth to membership and belonging in a community recognise the complexities that surround disengaged youth (Hancock and Zubrick 2015). It is time for a transformation towards a more “socially just alternative” education program (Smyth and McInerney 2012) that enables young people to establish genuine connections with the broader community.

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