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Learning from alternative schooling:mainstream schools can benefit greatly

By Stewart Riddle

Around the world today school systems in developed countries tend to produce a 'one size fits all' type of education. This mass schooling usually involves standardised testing, a national curriculum and increased measurement and accountability of teaching and teachers.

However there is much that mainstream, or mass-produced schooling can learn from alternative approaches used in marginalised schools. These schools seek to be more socially just and inclusive.

Research into alternative schooling is currently seeing a surge of activity, including work being done in the UK by scholars such as Pat Thomson, Deborah Youdell and Terry Wrigley, as well as here in Australia by Kitty te Riele, Martin Mills, Deb Hayes and Glenda McGregor, just to name a few. Some of these projects are presented in a recent *Routledge Research in Education Series* book called, *Researching Mainstreams, Margins and the Spaces In-Between: New Possibilities for Education Research*.

My colleague, David Cleaver, and I have been carrying out research at an alternative music school in Australia. We have found that there are three key lessons for mainstream schooling:

- 1) re-engaging students who have disconnected from schooling;
- 2) fostering a commitment to belonging to a community of learners that is based on an ethic of care, trust and respect;
- 3) and re-imagining education in more socially-just, equitable and alternative ways.

When the people involved in a school share their values and commitment to everyone being worthy of an equal chance it has the effect of binding the school community together. There is a kind of power to belonging to an alternative school that affects students and teachers, who live, learn and work in it.

Too-often alternative schools are pushed to the margins of our education systems. However research shows that they can do much to re-engage those young people who have dropped out or disengaged from their education.

The political construction of 'youth at risk' is both misrepresentative and problematic. The assumption that students who are disaffected and disengaged with mainstream schooling are somehow broken and need fixing comes from discourses of accountability and individual responsibility in education. The problem is that students who do not 'fit' the standard mass-produced model of education are often left behind and ignored.

Australia has seen a shift over the past few decades an educational landscape built on surveillance, competition, ranking and classification as the drivers of education reform and improvement. Market-measures, 'choice' and individual merit are paraded in policy and media treatments of schools and schooling. League-tables, high-stakes testing of literacy and numeracy both on the national and international level, work to legitimise this point of view.

Students can be labelled as failures when the individual is assumed to be in control of their own social, economic and educational futures. This agenda removes any responsibility by society because it assumes that society simply provides the opportunity, not a guarantee of success for all.

It is important to reject deficit constructions of young people as requiring 'fixing'. Instead we need to look more carefully at those alternative schools that work on the principles of social justice and an ethic of care. One approach is to look at how alternative schools work as possible sites for re-engaging marginalised, disaffected and disengaged young people.

We propose that schools should change to fit students. It not something that should be limited to alternative schools, but is necessary for even the largest of

mainstream schools. Otherwise the unequal distributions of human, social and economic capital that plague our society will continue to be exacerbated.

Young people thrive when presented with the opportunity to engage in meaningful and productive work; schooling is no different. As long as we try to treat mass schooling with a cookie-cutter approach, we are going to continue to see young people disengaging and becoming disaffected with schooling.

However, the re-engagement of young people in learning is only the first, albeit vitally important, step. It is just as necessary to foster a commitment by all members of the school – parents, staff, students – in a learning community. This requires a deep and abiding commitment to democratic principles of civic responsibility, alongside the development of an ethic of care, trust and respect that permeate every aspect of the relationships within the community. This is the bedrock of a commitment to social justice in schooling.



Dr Stewart Riddle lectures in literacies education at the University of Southern Queensland. His research includes looking at the links between music and literacy in the lives of young people, as well as alternative schooling and research methodologies. Stewart also plays bass guitar in a rock band called Drawn from Bees.

Stewart is a member of the English Teachers' Association of Queensland management committee and edits their journal, Words'Worth.

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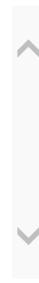
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