FLEXIBLE AND ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION:
HEARING THE VOICES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Exploring the education experiences of young people from four flexible learning programs in Melbourne through qualitative, in-depth interviews.

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Flexible And Alternative Education:
Hearing The Voices Of Young People

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ABSTRACT

Currently over 70,000 young people are educated in flexible learning and alternative education programs across Australia. Despite this, the voices of these young people is largely missing, both from the discourse of education reform and from research. This study aims to amplify their voice regarding the impact of flexible learning programs on their experience of education. It explores the views of 13 young people from four different flexible learning settings in Melbourne, Australia through qualitative, in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis of these interviews reveals these young people have often struggled in mainstream schools, but key features of flexible learning programs have reengaged them and motivated them to learn again. Important features of successful flexible learning programs identified by this research include welcoming tone and ethos; respectful relationships; tailored curriculum and learning; and flexible structures and environment. These features sit within a wider story of the young person's journey through education. This study concludes that we have much to learn by listening more carefully to young people. It presents recommendations based on young peoples' views for improving flexible options in the context of policy, practice and further research. Key recommendations include valuing student voice; improving transitions from schools to flexible programs; prioritising funding to such settings; sharing good practice; and promoting understanding of 'caring teaching' practice. This study is part of a growing body of research on flexible learning programs in Australia and will contribute to future research on similar topics by putting the voices of young people at the centre of the conversation.

DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

The thesis comprises only my original work towards the Master of Adolescent Health and Wellbeing. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is 11,072 words in length, exclusive of tables, bibliographies and appendices.

Candidate's Signature:

Candidate's Name: Nicholas Johns

Date: 25/11/2014

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

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FIGURES

APPENDICES

TABLE OF ABBREVIATIONS

ABBREVIATION	TERM
ACARA	Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority
AE	Alternative Education
AEP	Alternative Education Program
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DEECD	Department of Education and Early Childhood Development
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Work Place Relations
FLP	Flexible Learning Program
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
VCAL	Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning
VCE	Victorian Certificate of Education
VET	Vocational Education and Training

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CHAPTER 1:   INTRODUCTION

It is weird but [at] this school it's like you're at home. You go to other schools and it's like you can't do this and you can't do that. You get that unwanted feeling but this school - even if you are not a student and you are just dropping in, then you feel like you are wanted.

Rachel, student

That's why I like the classroom. You get respect, you make new friends - what more could you really ask for. You enjoy coming to school. I hated coming to school, I was like I fucking hated it. I came here and I liked it every day. Even in the holidays me and [my friend] are like "Shit, we actually miss school."

Ben, student

Every day in Australia there are thousands of young people attending flexible and alternative education programs. As made clear by the above quotes, such settings play a significant role in their education journey. For a variety of reasons, mainstream school has not worked for them. For me, as a teacher, this raises a number of questions about our education system. Early in my career, I was fascinated that primary school students had already been labelled as the 'naughty kid' at such a young age. I wondered how they had got to this point so early in life. As my career progressed I became increasingly interested in the young people who end up at the fringes of, and excluded from, mainstream schooling. They made me examine my own practice and raised crucial questions. Why had they left mainstream school? What was going on for them at home? Had they ever enjoyed school? How did leaving make them feel? Ultimately as an educator I became interested in how school could be different to welcome back these young people who had been marginalised from education. My experience had taught me one thing – these young people wanted to learn, but somewhere along the way the wheels had fallen off their education journey.

For the last five years I have both taught and managed flexible learning programs with two Melbourne based not-for-profits. Anecdotally, I have seen flexible and alternative education options transform the lives of young people who are completely removed from the mainstream education system. Whilst I have observed personally the difference that these settings make, I wanted to dig a little deeper into what was happening. To do this I needed to research the topic in a more systematic and structured way. As both as a researcher and a practitioner in the field, I was interested in hearing from young people what their experience was. What worked well? What didn't? Why had they moved from mainstream schools? Having taught for over fifteen years in primary, secondary and post-secondary education in Australia and the UK, I have observed a wide range of models aimed at engaging young people in education. Some have worked better than others. All have one thing at the centre of them – the young person attending.

In this research, I explore the views of young people in flexible learning settings about the education journey they have gone through, wherever possible *using their words directly*. Figure 1 below displays the words young people chose to describe their experience in flexible learning in the frequency they used them. Bigger words were used more often. A compelling mix of words like community, home, love and respect jump off the page showing how often they were used. This choice to privilege the words of the young people is a deliberate choice and important characteristic of this research. The results and findings are articulated in the framework of relevant literature and the methodology used to carry out this research. Finally, I end this thesis by framing conclusions around implications for policy, practice and further research.

Figure 1: Describing Flexible Learning Programs

Research Questions & Definitions

This research aims to amplify the voice and document the views of young people regarding

the impact of flexible learning programs on their education. It also aims to make

recommendations based on this feedback so as to improve education options for young

people at risk of not completing schooling.

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Specifically it aims to answer the following questions:

A.   *How do flexible learning programs impact on young people's experience of education?*

B.   *What can we learn from the voices of young people in flexible learning programs?*

The language used to describe programs running outside of mainstream schooling and the young people who attend them is widely contested (see Te Riele, 2012; Mills & McGregor, 2010). There is no commonly accepted or understood definition of what alternative education is (Aron & Zweig, 2003). Programs may be referred to as alternative education, flexible learning, or re-engagement programs. Although not the focus of this research, it is worth noting last-chance, 'behaviour' schools or boot-camp style programs are also sometimes classified under the broad umbrella of 'alternative education' (Te Riele, 2014; Raywid, 1994). In contrast, 'mainstream' schools and schooling is a commonly accepted term. Young people that attend flexible programs are often referred to as disadvantaged, marginalised and disenfranchised. Terms that imply a more deficit approach include disengaged and at-risk. Recognising the limitations of any chosen terms, this research uses Flexible Learning Programs (FLPs) and disadvantaged young people.

Need for this research

Practice Context

A significant number of young Australians depend on this sector for their education success. Australia wide, there are currently over 70,000 young people studying in over 900 FLPs across the country (Te Riele, 2014). Young people who attend these settings often have complex barriers to education, such as experiences of homelessness, mental

health issues, early childhood trauma, juvenile justice involvement, drug and alcohol issues and experiences of violence at home. These issues often disrupt school attendance and engagement with schooling. On the other hand, some young people leave mainstream schooling due to bullying or just 'not fitting in'. Others actively choose to leave more rigid traditional school settings to look for flexible programs that suit their learning styles (Mills & McGregor, 2010; Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006).

Referrals into these programs are unlikely to drop, with figures showing every year in Victoria that almost 50,000 15-19 year olds are not engaged full time in education, training or employment (DEECD, 2014a). Additionally, over 10,000 young people in Years 9-11 leave school and training, with a further 6000 disengaging within 12 months of transferring to the Vocational Education and Training (VET) system (Cook, 2014). Practice across these 900+ programs is influenced by different curricula, funding models in each jurisdiction, various student populations and different ideologies for implementation. This research argues, notwithstanding local influences, that the views of the young people attending these programs should be a key driver for their practice.

Policy context

Internationally, key policies aimed at addressing school retention and social inclusion includes *No Child Left Behind* in the USA and *Every Child Matters* in the UK. In Australia, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) set targets for 90% of young people to complete Year 12 or equivalent by 2015 (up from 83.5% in 2009) (COAG, 2009, p.7). Legislation now states Australia wide that young people must complete schooling until Year 10 and participate in schooling, training or employment until aged 17 (DEEWR, 2011). These changes may well have driven 'demand' for FLPs (Dandolo Partners, 2014).

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At the same time there is significant national education reform, with the Australian Curriculum in early stages of implementation (ACARA, 2014), and a recent Senate report reigniting debate about proposed changes to Australian school funding models as recommended by the 'Gonski Report' (Senate Select Committee on School Funding, 2014).

Locally, between 2008 and 2010 the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) released a number of detailed Victorian policies and guidelines to increase access to "re-engagement programs" (DEECD, 2009; DEECD, 2010). Additionally KPMG carried out a review of provision for DEECD that examined education provision to young people at risk of disengaging/disengaged from school. Key recommendations included increasing access to flexible learning options both within schools and in separate or off-site settings (KPMG, 2009). A new state government in 2010 saw a change in policy focus towards greater autonomy for Victorian schools and an emphasis on discipline. Student engagement now sits within wider frameworks from DEECD, such as *The Compact: Roles and responsibilities in Victorian government school education* (DEECD, 2013). These are far leaner in their wording regarding the obligations of schools to students at-risk of suspension. Guidelines now give principals more freedom to suspend and expel students (Dixon, 2014). Suspensions increased from 11,500 in 2012 to 14,200 in 2013 at state primary and secondary schools (Hosking, 2014). Higher suspension and expulsions rates create the need for effective flexible learning options into the future.

Research context

Alternative education generally, and the voice of young people in mainstream settings are well covered in international and national literature; however there is minimal research into student voice specifically within FLPs (Phillip, 2011; Brooking & Gardiner, 2009; Morrissette, 2011). In Australia recent research delves into this area (see Te Riele 2014; Mills & McGregor, 2010) however it is still under represented. Significant numbers of young people with unmet needs continue to leave the mainstream system. It is critical for the education sector to learn from re-engaged young people in flexible settings, and to adapt policies and practice accordingly.

In summary there are a range of key drivers that create a need for this research. At a time when policy, curriculum and social factors described seem unlikely to decrease the number of young people disengaging from mainstream schools, research needs to ensure that their voice is heard and articulated. Their views about education should be central to decisions that will directly impact their pathways in life. This research aims to do just this.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Flexible and Alternative Education

History and Definitions

Alternative education has a long history. Alternative schools emerged in the USA in the 1960s and early 1970s and were connected with the progressive education movement (Kim, 2006). They are very different today to when they first began, however they continue to share similar themes of innovation, small size, informality and a departure from bureaucratic rules and procedures (Raywid, 1994). In Australia today, over 900 programs exist both within and outside of the traditional schooling system (Te Riele, 2014). In the US, estimates put somewhere between 100,000-200,000 students per year being educated beyond traditional public schools (Aron, 2006). Despite the numbers of young people educated in such settings, the voice of alternative schools themselves is still largely missing in discourse of curriculum reform (Kim, 2006).

Definitions vary as to what constitutes an alternative education or flexible learning program, with many versions in existence. These range from full-time, voluntary programs to short-term, discipline focused 'Last-Chance' programs (Raywid, 1994). For the purpose of this research I am focussing on and using the term flexible learning programs. This alludes to the flexibility with which such settings implement both curriculum delivery and programs structures and rules (Te Riele, 2014; Mills & McGregor, 2010).

Impact and outcomes

There is a significant body of national and international research on the impact of such settings on educational outcomes. The individualized environments of FLPs "serve to reconnect and re-engage out of school youth, providing them with an opportunity to achieve in a different setting using different and innovative learning methods" (Brown Ruzzi & Kraemer, 2006, p.2). In FLPs the type of learning programs offered is a key reason for attendance (Mills & McGregor, 2010). Research in New Zealand found that 100% of students interviewed enjoyed being in Alternative Education (AE) and 95% enjoyed learning again (Brooking & Gardiner, 2009). In Australia over 70,000 students are currently being educated in such settings, enabling these young Australians to attain educational credentials as well as confidence, knowledge and skills for work, life and further learning (Te Riele, 2014).

Health outcomes for young people are also a key focus. Many FLPs become a one-stop shop for a range of services for young people resembling 'full-service hubs' rather than 'merely' schools. A recent in depth case study of an Australian FLP highlights the key focus of such settings in providing strong welfare support around issues such as teenage parenting; housing; mental health; drug and alcohol and juvenile justice issues (Te Riele, 2014; Plows, Bottrell, & Te Riele, 2014).

Research has shown that investing in these programs has a financial benefit to society. In particular programs that help young people achieve Year 12 completion greatly improve participation and productivity in society (FYA, 2012). According to Deloitte Access Economics (2008), programs that decrease youth disengagement could potentially return

23.6 times the government's original investment and 7.6 times directly to government through higher taxation income. A UK study found that while student costs were 1.65 times higher for Alternative Education Programs (AEPs) than that of a mainstream school student, the cost of an excluded child to society was 11.5 times higher (based on costs to the education, health, justice and social services systems) (Brookes, Goodall & Heady, 2007).

Some research into alternative and flexible learning raises concerns about the outcomes achieved. This research argues education alternatives may not so much provide further options but rather continue a cycle of exclusion by perpetuating disconnection with mainstream options (Slee, 2011; Kim & Taylor, 2008). Others argue that such programs could be considered to be altruistic and caring, however "the larger question of 're-engagement to where?' for these young people" still remains unanswered (Smyth, Robinson & McInerney, 2014, p492).

Student Voice

Critical to this research is the concept of the 'agency' - young people's capacity to act independently and make own free choices. This is a significant within the flexible learning sector as in practical terms young people often 'vote with their feet' and leave the mainstream system by choice, preferring instead to learn in a more flexible setting (Mills & McGregor, 2010). School systems often overlook the agency, or 'voice' of the young person receiving the education (Beattie, 2012). The concept of *student voice* in education refers to students exercising their agency and being able to 'have their say'. It promotes that meaningful participation of students in schooling requires "validating and authorizing

them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge and experiences throughout education in order to improve our schools" (Fletcher, 2005, p5).

Improving student voice within a school can have a number of benefits. By increasing and incorporating student voice, schools can re-engage students due to an increased sense of ownership. Studies have shown when schools value students' views and input, their results improve (Beattie, 2012; Mitra, 2003; Mitra, 2004). Students have their own "fund of knowledge" based on their experiences – these can influence the way a class, school or sector operates and can inform changes in staff practice (Levin, 2000; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). Increasing student voice can contest traditional power structures within a school, however doing so can increase levels of communication and democratic participation, opening the doors to transformation and change (Beattie, 2012; Robinson & Taylor, 2012). Simply put, young people know what they want. When things have gone wrong in their education, young people are "often very well aware and able to express clearly what went wrong ... and what works for them" (Te Riele, 2014, p29).

There is currently minimal literature that recognises the importance of student voice in effective education practice for disadvantaged youth. Recent New Zealand based research noted there was "…no research in New Zealand that records [young people's] points of view about their education experiences" in alternative education settings (Brooking & Gardner, 2009, p. vii). As the number of FLP enrolments increase, it is important for educators to understand how new students adjust to and make sense of their experience (De La Ossa, 2005). Using student voice to determine what does and doesn't 'work' could be of great usefulness to FLP practitioners (Phillips, 2013).

Research itself could help to redress this situation. The process of interviewing young people in FLPs can in itself give "a voice to the voiceless" (Hutchinson, Wilson & Wilson, 1994, p.164). Often research into this field notes that young people are willing and happy to share their story (Morrissette, 2011; Brooking & Gardner, 2009). Indeed in my research I found this to be the case.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research is a qualitative, interpretive framework. A qualitative framework was chosen as it allowed me to hear the voices of those who were 'silenced and marginalised' - as it not only focuses on the "'what is it?', but more importantly, 'explain it to me – how, why, what's the process, what's the significance?'" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2005, p.28). Qualitative research allowed me to share young people's stories and decrease the power relationship between the researcher (myself) and the participants (the young people) (Liamputtong, 2009). This approach is useful for complex issues that can only be understood in greater depth by "talking directly with people, going to their homes or place of work" (or in this case schools) " …and allowing them to tell their stories unencumbered by what we expect to find or what we have read in the literature" (Creswell, 2007, p.40). An interpretive approach moves away from traditional notions of objectivity and acknowledges that understanding cannot be separated from context. It looks at how people experience life through "language, local and historical situations, and the intersubjective actions of the people involved" (Angen, 2000, p.386).

This research also draws on a strength-based perspective, focusing on the *strengths* in young people and their ability to, with the correct framework, be successful in learning. This concentrates on the *potential* of young people and takes an optimistic view of their "capability to envision and create the nation and world [and schools] in which they want to live and work [and study]" (FYA, 2013, p1). It steers away from a more traditional concept of 'at-risk' or 'disengaged' young people which has "expanded from one based on presumptions of deficit of the learner (a medical or psychological model) to encompass sensitivity to the educational, home and community environments of children's and youth's development (a sociological model)" (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2003, p.323). When applied to research, and teaching and learning, a strength-based collaborative style has been shown to increase concentration, attainment and achievement for students who have previously struggled (Callingham, 2013; Carrington, Bland & Brady, 2010). By privileging the voice of the young person, this research facilitates their strengths and abilities to be focused on – as it is they who describe their journey, rather than an 'at-risk youth' narrative being ascribed to them.

CHAPTER 3:   METHOD

Research Design

This research utilised a qualitative approach using semi-structured in-depth interviews to collect data. Thirteen young people were interviewed across four FLPs in Melbourne. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with data then analysed thematically. Along with a qualitative approach, phenomenology informed my research as it is concerned with the 'lived experience' of the research participant and could facilitate hearing students' understanding of flexible learning (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2005; Creswell, 2007). Both of these approaches enabled prioritising the voice of the young person. In-depth interviews allowed participants to tell their story in their own words in great detail. These approaches do not require a large number of participants but participants must have had the experience to tell – hence students needed to feel confident to 'tell their story' (Liamputtong, 2009).

A multiple case study method was also utilised as the research explored a bounded system (in this case FLPs) through detailed, in-depth data collection across multiple sites. This aimed to gain insight about the still larger collective of cases of flexible learning programs across Victoria (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 2008).

Participants

Four FLPs were selected based on the following criteria:

1. *Site*: Community School or Community VCAL non-school setting.

2. *Curriculum*: delivering curriculum equivalent to Year 11 and 12 (including

   Intermediate and Senior VCAL).

3. *Student numbers*: low overall student numbers (n=150 students or less).

Additionally all sites were within 15 km of the Melbourne CBD to increase feasibility.

Young people in these settings were invited to take part based on the following selection

criteria:

1. *Age*: 17 – 20 years.

2. *Length of enrolment*: at flexible learning setting for > 1 year.

3. *Stage of education*: last year at the setting or graduated in 2013.

Additionally, each young person needed to be identified by education staff as having:

4. *Verbal confidence*: to express opinions and speak openly.

5. *Capacity for reflection*: to reflect and give insight into their experiences.

There were three exceptions to the initial selection criteria: one student was 21 and two had

been at their school for less than a year. In each case, their experiences were relevant and

they were articulate, so their voice was included for analysis and findings. In total thirteen

students were interviewed. Basic demographic information was requested for students to

provide baseline data (see Appendix A). This showed that in the group interviewed there

was a balance of female and male participants (6 and 7); age was weighted towards the

younger end of the spectrum, with 10 students aged seventeen or eighteen; average length

of enrolment was 2-3 years; and most young people had experienced a gap of up to three months or more between their current and previous school.

Data Collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used in order to "…elicit rich information from the perspective of a particular individual and on a selected topic under investigation" (Liamputtong, 2009, p.43). Interviews were conducted face-to-face to help build rapport, facilitate free expression and create data from the young person's point of view (Johnson, 2002). Interviews were carried out at each site in a quiet space and were allowed to follow the conversational flow in order to preserve the students' voice. This included ordering questions and following up on interesting points according to the natural flow of the interview.

All interviews were conducted individually with the exception of two group interviews. This was to accommodate five participants who identified that they would be more comfortable being interviewed in a group rather than on their own. The interview questions were designed so as to capture information required whilst still being flexible (Appendix B & J). Questions were piloted with two students from a similar setting and cohort. Feedback from the piloting lead to rephrasing some questions to be more open and the insertion of supporting prompts to help clarify questions (Brooking & Gardiner, 2009).

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Data Analysis

Interviews were digitally audio-recorded. Hand-written notes were also taken during each interview. Following each interview, reflections were written to summarise my initial impressions and each audio file was listened back to in its entirety. Interviews were transcribed in full – during this process significant key words or concepts were noted (see Liamputtong, 2009, p.281). Transcripts were then coded manually and using the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. Initial coding produced 207 codes, ranging from very specific words (such as 'uniforms') to very broad themes (such as 'relationships'). Thematic Analysis, a 'method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) with the data' (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79), was then applied using the following steps:

1. Reading through individual transcripts afresh to make some sense of the data.

2. Examining transcripts together to examine what was being said by some or all participants as a group.

3. Examining codes and clustering them around potential themes. Themes were then peer-reviewed by research supervisor and external advisor.

4. Summarising each participant's overall experience.

5. Reflecting on themes that connected across all participants.

6. Finalising broad themes and assigning codes to these themes (Liamputtong, 2009).

The final overall themes that emerged from this process were 'My Journey - Then and Now', 'Welcoming Tone and Ethos', 'Respectful Relationships', 'Tailored Curriculum and Learning' and 'Flexible Structures and Environment'. These will be explored in detail in Chapter 4.

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Quality

Ethics, Consent and Information

Ethics applications were submitted to the University of Melbourne and DEECD Ethics Department. The University of Melbourne Health Sciences Human Ethics Sub-Committee granted approval in May 2014, with DEECD Ethics approval coming in June 2014 (Appendix C & D). Informed and voluntary consent required particular consideration in relation to participants' age. Young people aged 17+ in FLPs could arguably give informed consent themselves. Most participants met the National Statement criterion of "young people who are mature enough to understand and consent, and are not vulnerable through immaturity in ways that warrant additional consent from a parent or guardian" (NHMRC, 2014, p. 50). However DEECD Ethics approval required all school attendees under 18 to have consent forms signed by a parent or guardian.

Regarding process around participant recruitment, FLPs were initially invited to take part in the research (Appendix E). If the principal agreed, potential participants were then approached by a site staff member and given an introductory flyer (Appendix F). Informed consent was sought by explaining in person the nature of the research and associated forms (Appendix G, H & I). At each stage of the recruitment process the voluntary nature was heavily emphasized both for ethical considerations and to preserve the integrity of the young person's voice. Students were asked to create their own pseudonym for confidentiality (Brooking & Gardiner, 2009). Most were enthusiastic about this and created a pseudonym or were assisted by myself. To mitigate unexpected negative student reaction to the questions, I flagged potential risks before the interviews and arranged debriefing opportunities with appropriate professionals at each site. Additionally the

information sheet included contact details of relevant support agencies such as Kids Helpline (see Appendix H). If required young people could nominate to skip questions or take a break if needed. Ultimately no concerns were expressed – rather all young people were happy to have their story heard and were keen to give their account of their education experience.

Insider Research and Dependant Relationships

As an employee of one of the organisations researched and a former employee of another, I had to be aware of the impact of being an 'insider researcher'. I was aware of the need to put aside any preconceived views - to assume I knew nothing of the phenomenon being studied (Asselin, 2003). Whilst being an insider arguably enhances breadth and depth of understanding, it also raises questions of objectivity, reflexivity and authenticity of the research (Kanuha, 2000).

To manage this, three strategies were employed:

1. 'Bracketing', or putting aside my personal experience and hunches that could influence how data was viewed, was utilised. So as to see data freshly, I tried to put those hunches in "brackets" and "shelve" them during research to the extent possible (Fischer, 2009).

2. No students interviewed were based at the site that I worked at. As such, none of the young people interviewed were in a direct dependant relationship with me.

3. Other staff carried out recruitment and the initial approach to potential participants at my workplace. At each stage students were informed that taking part was entirely voluntary and their decision to participate or not did not impact on other services provided in any way by the site they attended.

Validity and Trustworthiness

Data or source triangulation was used to increase validity. This involved data collection from multiple participants across multiple sites. Further multiple quotes are used in this report to illustrate themes and findings (Carpenter & Suto, 2008). Within the timeframe available, I also engaged in drawn out fieldwork. Meeting the young people in person and discussing with them the research in detail prior to interviews helped to establish relationships, thereby hopefully reducing bias (Padgett, 2008). Reflexivity was used – that is, making explicit my experiences and personal history so as to acknowledge that I, as the researcher, play a key role in shaping and analysing data (Angen, 2000).

As mentioned, bracketing was a strategy employed to put aside this personal history however this could also be viewed as a 'resource rather than a source of error or bias' (Sim & Wright, 2000, p.134). My supervisor and an external advisor both took part in peer review of my coding. They also advised regarding where they felt certain codes sat in relation to broad themes and whether themes were correctly named and identified. Finally wherever possible, to attempt to preserve the integrity of the voice of the participants, I have used direct quotes from the young people to present themes and support conclusions (Callingham, 2013).

CHAPTER 4:   RESULTS

Introduction

The analysis of student interviews led to two sets of themes. Firstly, two themes relate to the students' journey, with students expressing a comparison between 'then' (in mainstream schools) and 'now' (in the FLP). This is represented in Figure 2 by the arrow of 'My Journey'. Secondly, four themes relate to key features that made flexible learning a more successful experience for the students. These are shown in Figure 2 by the four boxes through which the 'Journey' arrow travels. Where possible, to preserve the integrity of the voice of the young people, direct quotes are used to present themes and support conclusions in this chapter.
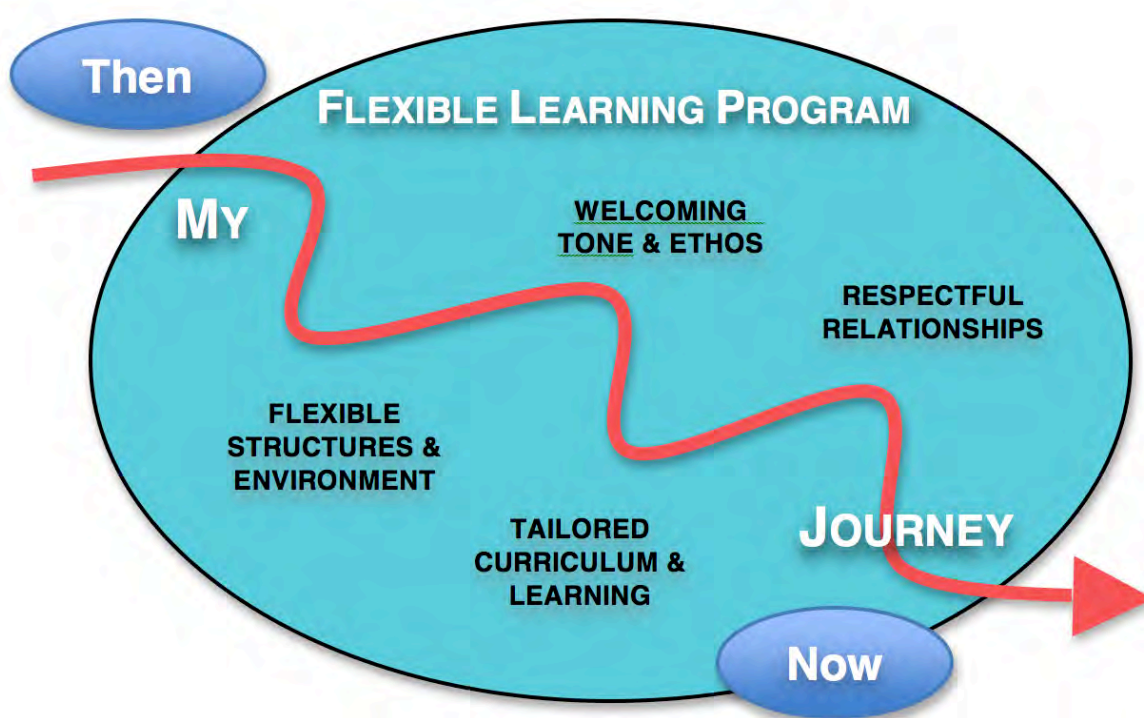

Figure 2: Visual Representation of Themes

Theme 1 – My Journey (Then)

Students talked about their journey, referring to then and now. Their opinions about what

had worked and what hadn't were grounded in their own experiences. Previous education

had been difficult and usually had not ended well, but their new setting was different.

> *Before I was always hiding in the shadows of schools and even be faking sick to*
> *stay home. Now I actually want to go to school - I won't allow myself to get sick!*

> Rebecca

Previous negative experiences at school had left their mark. When learning was difficult

for the young person and not supported, behaviour would often deteriorate. For Rachel,

these became interrelated:

> *The teacher would be like "Why do you need help? Don't you get it?" and she*
> *would start yelling. I know I'm not stupid but I think it is the way she told me to do*
> *things and expected me to do it that I couldn't do it. It made me feel like I was*
> *dumber.*
> *[…]*
> *At that stage I really couldn't keep up with the work so I started failing, got more*
> *detentions and finally got a suspension. It went downhill from there. Teachers*
> *treated me like I was one of 'the rebellious kids' - a lot of the teachers weren't nice*
> *to me after that.*

> Rachel

Transitions from mainstream had been difficult, involving significant effort and

commitment both from relatives and from young people themselves. Students were

grateful for family support and recognised that the FLP represented, as Max put it, "one of

my last chances".

> *When I got kicked out, for a good three months me and my mum tried nearly every*
> *single school. No mainstream school let me in. Three schools in [my area] said*
> *they can't take me. I felt like shit. Straight up. I thought I was never going to get*
> *into another school.*

> Sarah

> *Eventually I [thought] I've got to stop this shit and pull up me socks, get a job*
> *eventually, there's only one way to do that – I need my Year 10. Now I'm doing my*
> *Year 12.*

> Matt

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Theme 2 – Welcoming Tone and Ethos

The first feature of successful flexible learning is the tone and ethos of the program. This was evident in students frequently using terms such as 'comfortable', 'flexible', 'friendly', 'inclusive', 'inviting', 'lenient', 'optimistic', 'positive', 'relaxed', 'safe', 'supportive', 'kind' and 'welcoming', as shown in Figure 1. Together these words paint an evocative picture of what it *feels* like to attend such a program, rather than, in Max's words, "a place to be anxious [or] scared of".

> *It's more than just school [or] a learning environment; for a lot of us, it's like a home away from home. Some of us have trouble at home, but can come to school and actually have their own place where they can do their own things, talk to friends and talk to staff. It's that whole community feel.*
>
> Max

> *Being at the school for two years I would have to say it feels like one big family.*
>
> Daisy

Being welcomed and accepted by whole community at the setting is important. This also allowed young people, in Katie's words, to "have a chance to be who you are and not [be] judged for it". Feeling accepted created stronger connections for the young person, leading to better engagement.

> *What I love the most is I feel really welcomed all the time by the teachers. I've been coming for almost two years now and they make you feel so welcome. They are always here to help you. They show you nothing but love and respect. [...] We're not judgmental in the classroom – everyone's got their own story, everyone's got their own opinions, own beliefs - you have to respect that.*
>
> Ben

The ability for students to express themselves was significant, including not having to wear uniforms. Being able to wear what they wanted was a symbol for them that their personality was integrated *into* their schooling, rather than a barrier to it.

> *Yeah I really like this school because they're more focused on our education than what we wear. You get to show who you are as a person and be an individual.*
>
> Katie

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Theme 3 – Respectful Relationships

Relationships with Staff

Positive relationships with staff are a key factor for a good experience at school. The way teachers related, described as 'cool', 'supportive', 'like parents', 'understanding' and 'friendly', increased connection with the setting and improved the learning experience.

> *The teachers here - we call them by their first name. You really get to know them. There's not a wall between the teachers [and us] - they're here to help us.*
>
> John

> *When I have a teacher that I don't get along well with I don't do my work and I won't bother going to school. But as soon as there is a teacher I like I'll be there and I'll do all my work.*
>
> Daisy

Teachers were often described as caring and able to give more attention. This contrasted sharply with teachers at their old school, who were described as 'angry', 'mean', 'rude', 'too busy', 'easily frustrated', 'impatient' and in Max's words, "more in it because it's their job".

> *Here you notice that they actually do care and they want what's best for you as a student. No matter where you are or what you're doing, if you put your hand up they're there in a second.*
>
> Sarah

> *The teachers here are really caring - they put you before themselves compared to other schools.*
>
> Craig

Welfare support staff had a 'friendly', 'approachable' and 'caring' style that helped students when they were having difficulties. This was important, as about half of the students identified barriers to successful progress that were beyond the remit of classroom teachers, including housing and mental health issues.

> *They're really important. If she sees me having an off day she'll pull me aside and say "Is there something wrong at home or is there something is going on?"*
>
> John

It means a lot to me to be in a place where I can be understood and have my problems looked at.

<div align="right">Daisy</div>

Relationships with Students

Whilst identified as important, interestingly many students said relationships with other students were not as important as staff relationships.

To be honest getting along with students doesn't bother me at all. I'm here for myself not for anyone else.

<div align="right">Sarah</div>

Students chose to get along to help the program run smoothly. This sense of loyalty to the program was beyond what would normally be seen in mainstream schooling.

So it's good to get along with the people in the class. Even if you don't really like them, just to get along with them for the classrooms sake.

<div align="right">Matt</div>

In mainstream schools people separate into their own groups. Everyone here has their own interests, there are a lot of things we don't have in common. We all have a common in interest in the school, of making our community - that's where we can cooperate.

<div align="right">Max</div>

Close friendships were able to form, due to the smallness and the respectful tone of the setting.

When you come here everyone just respects you – you give them the same amount of respect and then you just become really close friends.

<div align="right">Ben</div>

Having friends inside the classroom influences you and motivates you a lot while you're actually in there.

<div align="right">Matt</div>

As with all schools negative students behaviours still exist, including stealing, violence, and bullying. However several students identified that often those students don't last.

One big thing was I realised a lot of those people that were being complete assholes - they never made it through the school year.

<div align="right">Max</div>

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Theme 4 – Tailored Curriculum & Learning

Curriculum needs to be flexible and take into account the needs of the young people.

Being fun and achievable is also important, as this leads to higher engagement for young

people who have often struggled with traditional learning.

> *Sometimes we will sit around the couch reading together. At mainstream schools they would say, "Read that, do that". [Here] they'll help you, guide you through it, change the context of it, make it a bit easier.*
>
> Jack

> *We're sitting in class right now talking about Mental Illness – something that's really important to me. I'd rather sit down and write a 1000 word essay on that than 1000 word essay on Hitler.*
>
> Daisy

The hands-on nature of VCAL as a curriculum works well as it creates opportunities for

interaction that would be difficult to achieve under VCE.

> *The way they teach is great! It's not just put the work on the board and just "Do your work". You're actually all involved together to get it done. It's more life skills because it's VCAL that I'm doing over VCE.*
>
> John

The *way* lessons were taught was very different, noted as being individualised and more

democratic. Students explained that the supported teaching style helped with

understanding.

> *They understand how I learn. I'm dyslexic so that means spelling, reading, writing - that's my weakest area. I know the teachers are always there to give me help if I need it.*
>
> Rebecca

> *It is a diverse way of teaching because they can teach things you need to know and things you want to know. They teach you at a level that you understand instead of the level that they expect you to learn at.*
>
> Rachel

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Several students identified that the schoolwork itself was negotiable and would be adapted to student interests.

> *[If] they think it's not how we're going to like it then they'll talk to us if there's any ways they can change it and make it more interesting.*
>
> Sarah

Making learning applied in nature and linked to pathways increased student motivation to learn. Utilising electives meant that students could learn things they were interested in, such as music, cooking, and sport. Daisy summed this up when talking about involvement in a "Barista competition where I've always wanted to work ... as soon as I [tried it] I loved it!"

> *Ever since I've been doing music here they've pushed me – that's been so good for me. I'm getting places I never thought I'd be.*
>
> Ben

Assessment and reporting was done in such a way that they are both accessible and strengths based.

> *I read them - the reports here, I don't just want to just tear them up and put them in the bin.*
>
> Rebecca

In summary, there was a sense that curriculum delivery was done together as a negotiation between the learner and the teacher. This more democratic approach appealed to all young people interviewed and is summed up well by Rachel:

> *They try to teach you instead of telling you. It makes it a lot easier to learn for me. If they just tell me I am going to shut down and I am not going to listen but if they want to teach me I am all ears - I will listen, I will learn.*
>
> Rachel

Theme 5 – Flexible Structures & Environment

Successful programs had clear but 'achievable' structure that was implemented around the needs of the young person. Several students noted it was OK for them to 'chill out' and take a break when they needed. This allowed them to come back into class in a better frame of mind, more ready to learn. Rules were put into practice with leniency and second chances. When conflicts arise, students talk through problems rather than more traditional disciplinary consequences.

> *One big thing is second chances. Not necessarily saying "If you fuck up every time we're just going to say keep coming back" but having a bit more of a lenient way.*
>
> Max

> *They have Restorative Justice where if someone has a problem they talk it out. They'll get them together in a room and everyone will get to show their side of the story like mediation - which is good.*
>
> John

Program structures such as timing of the day and class size were adapted around the students, aimed at improving the ability to get to school on time and be focussed for the day.

> *They're a bit more lenient on when we start and when we finish.*
>
> Katie

> *Small classes mean I can concentrate and I don't get left behind. In mainstream, I'd just be in the corner, sitting in the shadows, not really doing my work so I fell behind. When I started coming here, I was on top of everything.*
>
> Rebecca

Holistic care was mentioned, including lunches being provided and young mums being catered to. Interestingly students were well aware that funding was often an issue and respected their program for providing financial support for resources and school excursions.

It's hard for young mums to get someone to take care of the baby. Here they can bring the baby in and they have all the utensils and toys. It's such a good idea and a good program.

Jack

You don't have to pay for books or pens or anything like that – you can literally bring nothing and they will give you everything. It's good that no one has to be excluded.

Chloe

On the other hand, some students wished for improvements in facilities and equipment and were aware that mainstream schools had opportunities that they missed out on in smaller settings.

I guess there's a lot of stuff that can be improved facilities wise but that's all funding.

John

Better equipment [is needed] because their equipment here is pretty old and it is getting worn out.

Craig

Theme 6 – My Journey (Now)

Tying all their experiences together, students spoke about where they are at now after being part of their program. This included increased ability to participate, to have their voice heard and a positive impact on their health. The sense of ownership over the space was very powerful for students and helped them to feel connected to their community.

> *It's not just my school - it's our school and everyone has a part in it. At mainstream school the principal will assume and make changes, but here, if the principal wants to make changes, we'll have the Monday morning meeting and we'll all talk about it.*

Max

> *Our teachers are always open to our feedback. To know someone's listening to you and taking consideration of your opinions - it makes you actually want to come to school.*

Katie

Students were also excited about the opportunity to express themselves and their personality.

> *I used to hate school. I wouldn't go. Now I'm here 10 minutes early. I'm here every day – coz you're free to be yourself. In a mainstream school you have to be the way they want you to be.*

Sarah

When asked where they would be now if not for this school, students expressed that their pathway would have been far more negative.

> *Yeah if it wasn't for [here] I'd still be the same old me - sitting at home, smoking chuff, doing nothing.*

Matt

> *I wouldn't be at school. I would have got myself into some dumb shit and probably be dead - I'm being straight up!*

Sarah

Students spoke about how the school had helped them to mature and grow, including how their family was proud of their progress.

> *[My dad's] very proud of what I have accomplished at this school, coz he gets my reports. Especially when I got up at the end of year concert [and] played guitar – the old me definitely wouldn't have got up on stage.*
>
> Rebecca

> *I've progressed enough to know I have. I've lifted up myself and everyone's telling me – me mum, me mum's boyfriend, my family, friends, teachers.*
>
> Matt

Lastly students spoke about their pathway and how the school had helped them to achieve their goals. Students were clear that mainstream school is not for everyone and that having alternatives was crucial for young people. The last word for this chapter goes to two students who sum this up.

> *Well at the start I wasn't really looking for an education– I was just bumming around but now it has really shown me that I do need to finish school to get a job. I know the school would let me come back if I didn't finish my Year 12 but I don't think I want to come back. I need to get it done so I can get a job and get on with my life.*
>
> Rachel

> *Mainstream schools don't work for everybody. I think they really need to give everyone an opportunity to do something with their lives. It [flexible education] really does give you so many more opportunities.*
>
> Chloe

CHAPTER 5:   DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In this chapter I will discuss and interpret the findings as they relate to my research questions. In answering Research Question 1, I will examine the impact of these settings and how they achieve this. In answering Research Question 2, I will argue why we should listen to the voices of young people and give recommendations for improved flexible learning options. I will then comment on what I have learnt from listening to these young people. Finally I will present limitations of this study.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1: How do flexible learning programs impact on young people's experience of school?

What is the impact?

For the majority of young people interviewed, previously schooling had been very negative. Traditional methods of discipline and teaching had not served them well. Young people described experiences that had left them pessimistic about themselves and their academic future. Contrastingly, they were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences in FLPs. What was clear is that these programs do something unique - not only re-engaging students but also moving them to a place of hope and optimism about their education. As demonstrated by Figure 1, these young people now *felt* good about 'going to school' and became strongly connected with their new learning community, setting them on a positive pathway for their future. This turnaround is nothing short of an academic miracle when contrasted with the vehemence that some students spoke of mainstream education experiences.

This supports others' findings regarding the impact of attending a FLP. Mills and McGregor (2010) found that students were committed to travelling very long distances to attend FLPs, as students perceived that workers really cared about them not just their academic results. Similarly, Brooking and Gardiner (2009) found at five FLPs in New Zealand that all 41 students interviewed enjoyed being in alternative education, with 95% enjoying learning again. Despite complex home lives involving violence, gangs and drugs and alcohol, staff who treated them as people first and learners second had reconnected them to schooling.

Mainstream school is not made for everyone. Slee (1998, p.108) contends that education marginalisation occurs "for those [for] who schools were never really intended to include". Retention from Year 7/8 to Year 12 has increased from 35% in 1980 to 81.6% in 2012 in Australian schools (ABS, 2013). Young people who would have probably left school at Year 9 and pursued an apprenticeship 20 years ago are now expected to stay in an academic model of schooling that simply doesn't suit their learning style or their life circumstances. A resulting lack of motivation inevitably leads to them not fitting with the image of a 'good student' (Fine, 1991; McLaren, 1994). Rather than then blaming the young person for not fitting this image, schools need to examine existing structures and take a strengths based approach to these young people. Flexible learning programs seem able to do just this.

How do they achieve this?

My research uncovered a wide range of features that FLPs exhibit to achieve this shift in attitude towards learning. The first feature identified was creating a positive and welcoming tone. This wider school culture helped students to re-engage with education, and then to stay on to learn. It was achieved in a myriad of ways, from friendly interactions to modelling equality. Lamb and Rice (2008) argue "Interventions and strategies addressing need do not exist in a vacuum, and the quality of school culture plays a critical part in engaging and retaining students" (p.15). Whilst their analysis was of mainstream schools, they show culture is important no matter what the setting. Mills and McGregor (2010) discuss school *environment*, and refer to FLPs "being more relaxed than those found in traditional mainstream schools" (p.27).

The second feature identified was staff relating to students in a respectful manner and taking into account the whole person. Rather than just focussing on delivery of curriculum, teachers notably took the time to get to know their students. This resonates with Noddings' (2003) argument that teaching is a 'relational practice', asserting, "it matters to students whether or not they like and are liked by their teachers" (p.244). Young people interviewed evidently felt liked by teachers, increasing their respect for them. Mills and McGregor (2010) found that the teacher/student relationship and the teaching style that flowed from it were critical for success in similar settings. These relationships are enabled by smaller classes, which also support better quality teaching and learning outcomes (Lamb & Rice, 2008; Pritchard, 1999).

The third feature identified was the curriculum being tailored to the individual and taking into account the needs of the young person, not just the requirements of the qualification. When lessons were practical and relevant but still academically challenging, young people started learning again. This supported working towards a qualification that will help them on their pathway. Brooking and Gardiner (2009) found that 93% of young people interviewed in FLPs enjoyed learning again when relevant curriculum and one-to-one help was part of the teaching style.

Finally, implementing school-wide systems and processes around the needs of the young person was critical. This included a non-confrontational approach around discipline such as Restorative Justice. If schools can create systems that embrace flexibility and student input, they will be better received by young people. These processes also acknowledge the maturity of young people in such settings who have often had to grow up very quickly due to experiences of trauma in childhood. This reflects findings by Te Riele (2006), with students reporting that even-handed discipline approaches were actually evidence of a caring approach. Similarly, Brooking and Gardiner (2009) found that when teachers in flexible settings apply clear rules in a reasonable manner, students view these as fair and not too strict.

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RESEARCH QUESTION 2: What can we learn from the voices of young people in flexible learning programs?

Why listen to the voice of young people in FLPs?

In this research, all young people interviewed had a powerful capacity to reflect on and articulate their experience, describing what worked and what didn't. They demonstrated cognisance of complex issues such as funding and the influence of leadership styles on school culture. They knew when they were being 'treated like a kid' by staff and conversely were able to show real respect for those who respected them. When empowered they took control of their learning journey and were capable of working in partnership with education staff to steer their future pathways – as a collaborative team member rather than just a passive recipient of learning.

As discussed in Chapter 2, student views can be a valuable resource to schools (Phillips, 2013). If schools can break free of traditional thinking patterns around structures in educational relationships and institutions, they can amplify student voices (Beattie, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2002). Enabling student views to be heard can increase students' attendance and engagement with school. Further it can inform school change (Levin, 2000; Mitra, 2004). Arguably it is even more critical to draw out the voice of young people who attend FLPs given mainstream schooling has often marginalised these young people, resulting in them feeling pushed out, excluded and rejected (Phillips, 2013; Brooking & Gardiner, 2009).

What do young people tell us?

There were key lessons offered by young people interviewed, both for the flexible learning sector and the wider education sector. The first lesson is that the way teachers treat their students plays a huge role in how well students learn from them. If there was one clear dichotomy between their current and previous setting, this was it – that they perceived that teachers in their current setting *cared* for them. Again existing research mirrors these findings. Nodding (2012, p.777) contends that an education "climate in which caring relations can flourish … can best meet individual needs, impart knowledge, and encourage the development of moral people". Students interviewed by Mills and McGregor (2010) stated that a more personal approach to teaching had helped them learn. Te Riele (2006) also states "The friendly attitude of teachers was not a minor benefit for students but made a genuine difference to their education" (p.64). Teachers face many pressures in the classroom including limited time, large student numbers, and increasing demands for schools to perform due to national testing and reporting to MySchools. Regardless, establishing successful student/teacher relationships needs to be a priority.

The second lesson is better funding creates more opportunities. What was surprising was just how aware young people were of funding. Young people wanted the same access to resources that mainstream school students have, such as good quality facilities and equipment and increased options within the school such as more VET subjects. In summing up data from over 400 programs nationally, Te Riele (2012) states that funding is reported to be insufficient due to higher costs for such programs (relating to staff-student ratios, provision of additional services, small size of such programs and student turnover). Further, funding cycles don't reflect student movement, in that students will often start at

such settings after a key census date, at which program funding is allocated. The high needs of students who attend such settings inevitably means higher levels of staffing (Owen, 2004) and as stated above, this program feature is arguably their greatest strength. Finally Mills and McGregor (2010, p.11) conclude "Current models of funding do not seem to align with the flexible ethos of alternative schooling sites and the specific needs of their students." This is critical for the government to review for the success of flexible settings to be assured.

The third lesson is that second chances are important. Put another way, alternative education is better than the alternative. When asked where they would be without this program, young people interviewed gave a grim prediction of their future. Students said that they'd have dropped out, be unable to get a job or even be dead now. These responses reflect what research tells us. In the UK, a report for Barnados found that young people aged 16-18 in the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) category were often portrayed by media as 'idle' and 'feckless' but, despite considerable challenges, "almost all were motivated by having a second chance to gain some qualifications and improve their employment prospects" (Evans, Meyer, Pinney, & Robinson, 2009, p.29). Ross and Gray (2005) argue that with up to one in three dropping out before completing Year 12 in Australia, the need for a "second chance" is important given that "re-entry into second chance education is a personal act of agency through which young people struggle to reclaim successful personal and educational identities" (p.103). This focuses on the strengths of the young person and the part they can play in their future. Young people need to be given a second (or third or fourth or fifth) chance to move them towards a positive future.

The last lesson is that mainstream school is not for everyone. Several students said exactly this. They advocated 'getting the message out there' so that other young people could know about these options that had been so transformative for their education. This raises the question of how to increase the accessibility and profile of FLPs. The problem of finding a suitable program underpinned the development of the Flexible Choices database on the Dusseldorp Forum website (see Te Riele, 2014, p.34). Currently DEECD policy puts the responsibility on the student's school to coordinate transition to a suitable school/program (DEECD, 2014b), however this seemed not to be working. Students spoke of family spending months to track down and confirm these options or a friend helping them to enrol, rather than a process that was driven by their old schools. These referrals felt somewhat haphazard. FLPs need to be better understood as a viable alternative for students with different learning needs, rather than for students who have 'failed' at mainstream.

What can we learn from these young people?

For me, what I have learnt from the young people I interviewed is that they have extraordinary resilience and, given the right circumstances and support, will succeed. Most knew what they wanted and had a sense of how they learn best but didn't feel good about themselves 'as a learner' until exposed to a more flexible and nurturing education delivery style. Once they were introduced to this, they grabbed it with both hands. They have shown that if schools can partner with them rather than 'do to them' in their learning journey, they will rise to the challenge. With the current structures in mainstream schools, young people who don't fit are being robbed of their educational future by a system that is catering to the many and forgetting about the few. Even worse, they are being told both implicitly and explicitly that this is their fault. Whilst some fault undoubtedly lies with

each individual, surely a sector that receives such a lion's share of government funding can find ways to change, to accommodate these young people who are now legislated to stay engaged in their services?

Scope & Limitations

The scope of this research was fairly small for feasibility, due to a relatively short time frame in which to carry out the research. Regarding contexts, this research was carried out across four different settings – two DEECD Community Schools and two FLPs run by different Melbourne based not-for-profits. These two contexts share some similarities but in other ways are very different, notably around governance and staffing structures. Given the different geographical areas and program structures, there was extraordinary consistency in the responses of the young people interviewed across key themes. This was compelling, given that small schools or programs usually have a very particular culture, and increased the validity of the research.

There is a question of bias or influence as I was known as a staff member in one setting and had previously been a staff member in another setting. To account for this I designed recruitment processes that distanced myself from potential participants until they agreed to take part. Finally, a limitation of this research is arguably that data is only from the perspective of the students, rather than being triangulated through staff and community perspectives. However, as the key focus of this study was on amplifying the voices of the young people involved, this is justifiable. Further, there is arguably little that triangulation would have added to this study given the focus on the viewpoint of young people involved.

CHAPTER 6:   CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter offers conclusions around five key issues identified by this research:

1. Valuing student voice

2. Improving transitions

3. Securing funding

4. Sharing good practice

5. Understanding 'caring teaching' practice

Implications for practice, policy and further research are then discussed.

Valuing Student Voice

As demonstrated by this research, listening to and empowering student voice can empower and motivate young people. Further, it can provide valuable feedback for staff and management of such settings. Increasing the status of student voice may challenge the status quo in schools, however the benefits can be great, particularly around valuing individuals and helping them to feel a part of the system, rather than at the mercy of it.

Improving Transitions

The current system of DEECD schools liaising with new settings for excluded students hadn't worked for students interviewed. Further, a number of students talked about the need to 'get the message out there', indicating that before starting at their current setting they had little knowledge of FLPs. The majority of students also had a gap between schools. Improving transitions between schools and FLPs will serve all parties better, as a

more seamless transition helps keep the education provision 'flowing' from one setting to another.

Prioritising Funding

Secure funding streams will both increase the stability of FLPs and increase the availability of programs. Young people should not be excluded from opportunities purely because they have different learning needs. If anything, the reverse should be true – these students should be prioritised and funded well, as expenditure now will potentially reduce government spending across social services, health and welfare benefits. Funding for FLPs researched was a key issue for students interviewed, despite young people attending needing higher levels of staffing and welfare intervention to be successful.

Sharing Good Practice

The flexible learning programs researched understood how to re-engage young people, keep them attending and motivated to learn. Rather than 'just putting up' with these young people, FLPs researched were instrumental in turning around attitudes to learning and moving students towards a positive pathway. Mainstream schools have something to learn from these programs – and vice versa. Too often these sectors don't speak to each other, except when a student moves from one to the other. Further cross-pollination of ideas between these areas should be encouraged and supported.

Understanding 'Caring Teaching' Practice

A key factor for all young people's successful journey at their FLP was a caring teaching style, where teachers displayed both mastery of curriculum delivery and the ability to care

holistically for the student. As discussed in Chapter 5, this was the biggest contrast identified by young people interviewed between current and previous settings. Teachers need to understand that approaching students with a caring attitude will improve their learning and be supported in learning the skills needed to form positive relationships in a classroom context. Getting this right could arguably make the biggest difference to participation and engagement strategies and minimise students dropping out of mainstream school.

Implications for Practice

For Flexible Learning Programs

- To establish student voice feedback mechanisms to whole school.

- To work with mainstream schools to assist with student transitions.

- To articulate true costs of programming to government.

- To actively engage and share practice with mainstream schools.

- To promote caring teaching expertise with other settings.

For Other Settings (e.g. mainstream schools, youth welfare agencies)

- To actively encourage student voice mechanisms, particularly for marginalised students.

- To support transitions to FLPs, including increasing staff familiarity with and knowledge of such settings.

- To work together with FLPs to ensure financial viability, particularly where students from the school move on to those settings.

- To actively engage and share practice with local FLPs.

- To focus PD opportunities for staff on caring teaching practice.

Implications for Policy

- To actively support student voice in schools through support documentation.

- To revise guidelines aimed at improving transitions from mainstream to flexible settings.

- To increase sustainability of such settings through prioritised funding.

- To encourage networking of mainstream schools and FLPs.

- To facilitate professional development around caring teaching practices for teachers.

Implications for Further Research

- To engage young people in research methods that encourages their voice to be heard.

- To explore barriers to successful transitions to FLPs.

- To investigate how funding can be appropriately prioritised for marginalised young people, including potential loadings for particular disadvantaged groups.

- To explore models for FLPs to share good practice and increase networks.

- To research existing successful school based strategies for 'caring teaching'.

Final Thoughts

The significance of this research is that it authentically represents the voice of young people in flexible learning programs. Young people in general rarely have their views brought to the fore of conversations, even about factors that so deeply affect them, such as schooling. Those young people who find themselves at the fringe of the mainstream are even more silenced. This research prioritised that voice, finding a strong, consistent message that was emphatic regarding the value of flexible learning settings to these young people's education journey.

I started this research wanting to hear directly from young people in flexible settings, as I had personally witnessed in my practice many remarkable turnarounds. During this research, I was surprised by the consistency of this message across a range of settings. For me this confirmed that certain key features of these settings, including small size, relational focus, positive tone, flexible structures and student-centred curriculum practices, play a massive role in reengaging young people who had given up on school.

This research will influence my practice and reminds me that young people do know what they want. If we can listen to them and be more attuned to their message, perhaps we can not only have programs that re-engage them but also have more flexible and welcoming mainstream schooling, leading to less disengagement in the first place.

Aristotle has been quoted as saying "You can judge a nation by the way they treat their most vulnerable citizens". I believe you can judge an education system by the way it treats its most marginalised students. Our education system effectively holds the keys to a successful future for all young people. It is the responsibility of this system to ensure that it meets the needs of the most marginalised and disadvantaged young people. Given the setbacks these young people have often already faced, society cannot fail them again.

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Appendices

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Appendix A: Participant Demographic Information

Demographic	Category	Number
Gender	Female	6
	Male	7
Age	17	5
	18	5
	19	1
	20	1
	21	1
Length of current enrolment	½ - 1 year	2
	1-2 years	3
	2-3 years	4
	3-4 years	2
	4-5 years	2
Length of time between current and previous school	No gap	2
	Less than 3 months	7
	3-6 months	1
	7-12 months	1
	2-3 years	1
	3-4 years	1

Appendix B: Overview of Interview Themes and Questions

Aims of questions/themes	Questions	Prompts/follow up questions
Broad questions aimed to generate discussion on: • Experience at current setting • History of the young person • Pathway to enrolment in setting	1. Can you please describe your experience at this school and what it means to you?	• *Tell me more* • *Can you expand on that* • *That's interesting* • *Could you clarify/give an example*
	2. Can tell me a bit about how you started attending this school?	• *Take young people back through their life, asking questions which contributed to them being here.* • *Family? Friends? Academic? Health? Bullying?*
Aimed to draw out specific things that young person likes and dislikes about current setting.	3. Can you please describe for me some things that you like about this school?	• *How is being here different to other schools?*
	4. Can you please suggest some things that could be improved?	• *Is there anything you wish was different?*

Specific rating aimed to dig deeper into views on: 1. Teaching style 2. Setting layout/buildings 3. Relationship with staff 4. Relationship with students 5. Participation 6. Welfare support	5. I'd like you to rate a few aspects of the school on a scale from 1-10 to say how important they are for you in regards to your education (1 means it is not at all important and 10 means very important): ▪ The way they do their teaching here ▪ The "space" here (eg. The buildings, the grounds etc) ▪ How you get on with the staff ▪ How you get on with students ▪ Your opportunities to participate in this school ▪ Welfare support in this school	▪ *For each aspect ask:* ➤ *Why do you give that rating?* ➤ *Why is this important/not so important for you?* ➤ *What is best thing about this aspect?* ➤ *Is there anything that could be improved about this aspect?*
Summary question to draw out key points around perceived strengths and improvements needed.	6. In summary what would you describe as the greatest strength and the key improvement needed at this school?	▪ *Tell me more* ▪ *Can you expand on that* ▪ *That's interesting* ▪ *Could you clarify/give an example*
Exploring the counterfactual – what if this had not been available?	7. How do you feel your education would have been different if not for <insert name of school/setting>?	▪ *How might things be different if you had stayed at your old school?*

Emphasising expertise of young person and seeking advice and recommendations.	8. You're a bit of an expert now. Can you give me your advice and tips around how alternative education programs should run to improve education options for young people?	▪ *Tell me more* ▪ *Can you expand on that* ▪ *That's interesting* ▪ *Could you clarify/give an example*

Appendix C: University of Melbourne Ethics Approval

19 May 2014

Ms A Krelle
Paediatrics Royal Children's Hospital
The University of Melbourne

Dear Ms Krelle

I am pleased to advise that the Health Sciences Human Ethics Sub Committee approved the following Project:

Project title: **ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: Hearing the Voices of Young People**
Researchers: **Ms A Krelle, A/Prof K Te Riele, N Johns**
Ethics ID: **1441410**

The Project has been approved for the period: **19-May-2014 to 31-Dec-2014**

It is your responsibility to ensure that all people associated with the Project are made aware of what has actually been approved.

Research projects are normally approved to 31 December of the year of approval. Projects may be renewed yearly for up to a total of five years upon receipt of a satisfactory annual report. If a project is to continue beyond five years a new application will normally need to be submitted.

Please note that the following conditions apply to your approval. Failure to abide by these conditions may result in suspension or discontinuation of approval and/or disciplinary action.

(a) **Limit of Approval:** Approval is limited strictly to the research as submitted in your Project application.

(b) **Variation to Project:** Any subsequent variations or modifications you might wish to make to the Project must be notified formally to the Human Ethics Sub-Committee for further consideration and approval. If the Sub-Committee considers that the proposed changes are significant, you may be required to submit a new application for approval of the revised Project.

(c) **Incidents or adverse effects:** Researchers must report immediately to the Sub-Committee anything which might affect the ethical acceptance of the protocol including adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the Project. Failure to do so may result in suspension or cancellation of approval.

(d) **Monitoring:** All projects are subject to monitoring at any time by the Human Research Ethics Committee.

(e) **Annual Report:** Please be aware that the Human Research Ethics Committee requires that researchers submit an annual report on each of their projects at the end of the year, or at the conclusion of a project if it continues for less than this time. Failure to submit an annual report will mean that ethics approval will lapse.

(f) **Auditing:** All projects may be subject to audit by members of the Sub-Committee.

If you have any queries on these matters, or require additional information, please contact me using the details below.

Please quote the ethics registration number and the title of the Project in any future correspondence.

On behalf of the Sub-Committee I wish you well in your research.

Yours sincerely

Ms Jennifer Hassell - Secretary
Health Sciences HESC
Phone: 90353341, Email: hassell@unimelb.edu.au

cc: HEAG Chair - Paediatrics

The Office for Research Ethics and Integrity
The University of Melbourne, Level 1, 780 Elizabeth St, Melbourne Victoria 3010 Australia
T: +61 3 9035 2057
W: www.orei.unimelb.edu.au

Appendix D: DEECD Ethics Approval (2 pages)

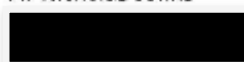## Department of Education and Early Childhood Development

Strategy and Review Group

2 Treasury Place
East Melbourne, Victoria 3002
Telephone +61 3 9637 2000
DX 210083
GPO Box 4367
Melbourne, Victoria 3001

2014_002308

Mr Nicholas Johns

██████████

Dear Mr Johns

Thank you for your application of 4 March 2014 in which you request permission to conduct research in Victorian government schools and/or early childhood settings titled *ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: Hearing the Voices of Young People.*

I am pleased to advise that on the basis of the information you have provided your research proposal is approved in principle subject to the conditions detailed below.

1. The research is conducted in accordance with the final documentation you provided to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

2. Separate approval for the research needs to be sought from school principals and/or centre directors. This is to be supported by the DEECD approved documentation and, if applicable, the letter of approval from a relevant and formally constituted Human Research Ethics Committee.

3. The project is commenced within 12 months of this approval letter and any extensions or variations to your study, including those requested by an ethics committee must be submitted to the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development for its consideration before you proceed.

4. As a matter of courtesy, you advise the relevant Regional Director of the schools or governing body of the early childhood settings that you intend to approach. An outline of your research and a copy of this letter should be provided to the Regional Director or governing body.

5. You acknowledge the support of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in any publications arising from the research.

6. The Research Agreement conditions, which include the reporting requirements at the conclusion of your study, are upheld. A reminder will be sent for reports not submitted by the study's indicative completion date.

7. If DEECD has commissioned you to undertake this research, the responsible Branch/Division will need to approve any material you provide for publication on the Department's Research Register.

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I wish you well with your research study. Should you have further enquiries on this matter, please contact Youla Michaels, Project Support Officer, Research, Evaluation and Analytics Branch, by telephone on (03) 9637 2707 or by email at michaels.youla.y@edumail.vic.gov.au.

Yours sincerely

Joyce Cleary
Director
Research, Evaluation and Analytics Branch

04/06/2014

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Appendix E: Request for Assistance Letter (2 pages)

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Request - Permission to Undertake Research

Project: "ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: Hearing the Voices of Young People"

Mrs Andrea Krelle (Supervisor)
Manager Practice & Learning, Centre for Adolescent Health,
Royal Children's Hospital.
ph: +61 3 9345 6676

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Mr Nicholas Johns (Masters student)
Masters of Adolescent Health and Welfare
ph. 0408 126 344

Dear Principal/Manager,

My name is Nicholas Johns. I am currently undertaking a research project with the University of Melbourne and the Centre for Adolescent Health at the Royal Children's Hospital. The research project aims to hear the voice of young people regarding the impact that alternative education settings have had on their education; and to make recommendations based on this feedback for alternative education practice, so as to improve education options for young people at risk of not completing schooling.

Participants in this study will be invited to take part in an interview. The interview will go for between 30-45 minutes. Questions will focus on the young persons experiences in alternative education and what they feel is important regarding teaching, environment, relationships and participation in these settings.

I have attached Permission to Undertake Research Project form below. I have also attached the Flyer, Information Sheet, Consent Form and Letter to Parent/Guardians that would be given to potential participants. If you are happy for this research to be carried out at your school/setting please fill this in and return it.

Please contact Nick Johns or Andrea Krelle if you have any questions or if would like more information about the project on below contacts:
- Nick Johns.   E: ngjohns@student.unimelb.edu.au
                 Ph: 0408 126 344
- Andrea Krelle. E: andrea.krelle@mcri.edu.au
                 Ph: 9345 6676

Yours Sincerely,

Nick Johns
HREC: 1441410   Date: 13/11/14;   Version: 3

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PERMISSION TO UNDERTAKE RESEARCH PROJECT

Research Project Title:	ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: Hearing the Voices of Young People
Principal Researcher:	Andrea Krelle - Manager Practice & Learning, Centre for Adolescent Health, Royal Children's Hospital.
HREC Project Number:	1441410

I have read and understood the information regarding the above research project and give permission for your request to recruit participants from this education setting.

Please list details of any stipulations/clauses the School may have about recruitment of students (if applicable):

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

School/Education Setting Name: _____

Principal/Manager Name: _____

Principal/Manager Signature: _____

Date: _____

Please return this completed permission form to Nick Johns via email at ngjohns@student.unimelb.edu.au.

HREC: 1441410	**Date:** 13/11/14;	**Version:** 3

Appendix F: Introductory Flyer

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION:
Hearing the Voices of Young People

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Hi, my name is Nick Johns.

I am a research student from the University of Melbourne. I am trying to find out what young people think about alternative education programs and how they think those programs can be improved.

I will be at <insert school name> on <insert dates> to carry out interviews with young people to hear their opinions about alternative education.

Would you like to be interviewed for this research?

I would love to hear your views on alternative education. If you would like to be interviewed you can let a teacher or youth worker know. They will then give you a longer information sheet. You can ask any questions you have about the research before taking part. This is entirely voluntary so it's up to you if you want to be interviewed or not!

What will the questions be about?

The questions will focus on your experience in an alternative education program – what helps you learn, what you like and what you think could be improved to help other young people.

What will happen to the interviews?

I will write a short summary as well as a bigger report based on all the interviews. I will send a copy of the summary to your school and will visit <insert school name> to explain the outcomes once the report is done.

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Appendix G: Consent Form

Centre for Adolescent Health, Royal Children's Hospital

Consent Form

PROJECT TITLE: ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: Hearing the Voices of Young People

Name of participant [**write your name**]:

Name of investigator(s): Nick Johns and Andrea Krelle

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of the interview which have been explained to me. I have been provided with a written plain language statement to keep.

2. I understand that after I sign and return this consent form the researcher will keep it.

3. I understand that my participation will involve an *interview* and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

4. I acknowledge that:

    (a) the possible effects of participating in the *interview* have been explained to my satisfaction;

    (b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without explanation or prejudice and to withdraw any information I have provided;

    (c) the project is for the purpose of research;

    (d) I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements;

    (e) I have been informed that with my consent the *interview will be digitally taped and I understand that digital files* will be stored and then destroyed five years after publication;

    (f) my name will be referred to by a pseudonym (a fake name) in any publications arising from the research;

    (g) I have been informed that a copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I agree to this.

	Please tick
I consent to this *interview* being digitally taped	☐ yes ☐ no
I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings	☐ yes ☐ no

Participant signature: _____ Date: _____

Parent/Guardian signature (Under 18): _____ Date: _____

HREC: 1441410   Date: 13/11/14;   Version: 1

Appendix H: Information Sheet (3 pages)

INFORMATION SHEET

Mrs Andrea Krelle (Supervisor)
Manager Practice & Learning, Centre for Adolescent Health,
Royal Children's Hospital.
ph: +61 3 9345 6676

Mr Nicholas Johns (Masters student)
Masters of Adolescent Health and Welfare
ph. 0408 126 344

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Project: "ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: Hearing the Voices of Young People"

Introduction

- My name is Nick Johns. I am a student researcher at the University of Melbourne. My supervisor from the Centre for Adolescent Health (Andrea Krelle) and I are trying to find out what young people think about alternative education programs and how they can be improved.
- As a student at [*name of school to be inserted*], we would like to invite you to take part in our research project.
- Someone from your school has said you might be interested in taking part. *It's entirely up to you if you want to take part* – you don't have to participate, and you can change your mind at any time. It won't affect your enrolment or your school results.

If I take part what is involved?

- You will be invited to take part in an interview at [name of school to be inserted], at a time that suits you.
- The interview will take between 30 and 45 minutes, and is made up of six to eight questions. You don't have to answer every question and can pass if you like.
- With your permission, the interview will be recorded so that we can have an accurate record of what you say. If you would prefer the researcher can take notes instead.
- Altogether it won't take longer than 60 minutes (including signing a form and the interview).

How will my confidentiality be protected?

- We intend to protect your privacy and the confidentiality of your responses to the fullest possible extent, within the limits of the law.
- Any information you give will be kept in a password-protected computer file. In the final report, you will be referred to by a pseudonym (or a 'fake name').
- We will remove any personal information, however, you should note that as the number of people we will interview is very small, it is possible that someone may still be able to identify you.
- The information will be kept securely for five years from the date of publication, before being destroyed.

How will I get any feedback?

- At the end of the research your school will be sent a summary of what we have learned from all the interviews.
- If you wish, this summary will also be sent to you.

HREC: 1441410   Date: 01/06/14   Version: 4

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- Verbal feedback on the research will be offered to yourself and the teachers at your school.
- Lastly the results may be presented at some conferences.

Do I have to take part?

- **No! Taking part in this research is entirely voluntary.**
- You can pull out of the research at any stage, or withdraw any information you have supplied, without any consequences.
- Your decision to participate or not, or to withdraw, will not affect any education you may receive now or in the future from [*name of school to be inserted*].

Are there any risks to you?

We really value hearing from you about your experiences in alternative education. However, it is important to understand that:

A. A question could upset you if it reminds you of any difficult past experiences you have had.
   - To minimise this you don't have to answer any question that concerns you. You can also ask for a break from the interview if you feel you may get upset.
   - If you get upset because of the interview, you can talk to a teacher or youth worker at your school.
   - For further support ideas please see below.

B. Although your name will not be used in any report or publication, someone might guess that the information is about you because of the things you say.
   - To minimise this risk you don't have to answer any questions you're not comfortable with. You can also ask the researcher not to use the information given in any answer if you think it might identify you.

How do I agree to participate?

- Speak with <*insert name of site based staff member here*> to indicate your interest in taking part. They will then contact Nick (the student researcher). He will then make a time to meet with you to explain the Information Sheet and the Consent Form in person before you sign. At this stage you can either withdraw or go on with the interview.

Where can I get further information?

- Please contact Nick Johns or Andrea Krelle if you have any questions or if would like more information about the project on below contacts:
   - Nick Johns.   E: ngjohns@student.unimelb.edu.au
                    Ph: 0408 126 344
   - Andrea Krelle. E: andrea.krelle@mcri.edu.au
                    Ph: 9345 6676
- The Human Research Ethics Committee has approved this research.
- If you have any concerns about the conduct of the project which you do not wish to discuss with the research team please contact:
   - Executive Officer, Human Research Ethics, The University of Melbourne: Ph: 8344 2073; fax 9347 6739.

HREC: 1441410   Date: 01/06/14   Version: 4

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Who can I speak to if I'm feeling distressed or worried?

It is possible that speaking about your schooling experiences may cause you distress or bring up difficult memories that you may wish to get further support on. If this happens there are a number of people you can talk to including the following:

At my school/setting
At your school or setting you can talk to the following support staff:
<List the names of relevant counselors/staff as recommended by school/setting>

Lifeline
Lifeline is a 24 hour counseling service that helps with crisis support.
Call **13 11 14**

headspace
headspace is the national youth mental health foundation. They help young people who are going through a tough time.
Call **1800 650 890**
headspace Elsternwick - **03 9526 1600**
headspace Hawthorn - **03 9006 6500**
headspace Collingwood - **03 9417 0150**
www.headspace.org.au
www.eheadspace.org.au

beyondblue
provides information on depression, anxiety and related disorders, effective treatments and where to get help.
Call **1300 22 4636**
www.beyondblue.org.au
www.youthbeyondblue.com

Reach Out
ReachOut.com is Australia's leading online youth mental health service, where you can get the help you need, where and when you need it.
www.reachout.com

Kids Helpline
Kids Helpline is Australia's only free, private and confidential, telephone and online counseling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25.
Call **1800 55 1800**

HREC: 1441410   Date: 01/06/14   Version: 4

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Appendix I: Letter to Parents/Guardians

Mrs Andrea Krelle (Supervisor)
Manager Practice & Learning, Centre for Adolescent
Health, Royal Children's Hospital.
ph: +61 3 9345 6676

Mr Nicholas Johns (Masters student)
Masters of Adolescent Health and Welfare
ph. 0408 126 344

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Project: "ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: Hearing the Voices of Young People"

Dear Parent/Guardian,

I am writing to let you know about a new research project that is taking place at [*name of school to be inserted*] in which your child may be interested in participating.

I am sending you this information because your child may be suitable to take part in the research. To ensure your family's privacy, I am sending you an information statement and consent form on behalf of the research team.

The information statement and consent form explains the research in detail, including:

- What the research aims to find out
- What is involved if your child takes part
- What the risks and benefits of participation are
- What happens to information collected and how confidentiality of information is protected

It would be appreciated if you could take some time to read the information statement and consider if you are happy for your child taking part. If you are happy for them to take part and your child is under 18 please sign and return the attached consent form to [*name of staff member at school at name of school to be inserted*].

Please contact Nick Johns or Andrea Krelle if you have any questions or if would like more information about the project on below contacts:
Nick Johns   E: ngjohns@student.unimelb.edu.au
                     Ph: 0408 126 344
Andrea Krelle E: andrea.krelle@mcri.edu.au
                     Ph: 9345 6676

Your decision for your child to take part in this research or not will not affect any education they may receive now or in the future from [*name of school to be inserted*].

Kind regards,

Nick Johns
Student Researcher
University of Melbourne

HREC: 1441410   Date: 13/11/14;   Version: 1

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Appendix J: Interview Questions (Before and After)

NAME: LOCATION: DATE:

Mrs Andrea Krelle (Supervisor)
Manager Practice & Learning, Centre for Adolescent Health,
Royal Children's Hospital.
ph: +61 3 9345 6676

Mr Nicholas Johns (Masters student)
Masters of Adolescent Health and Welfare
ph. 0408 126 344

THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

LIST OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Project: "ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: Hearing the Voices of Young People"

Discuss before interview

- Explain the **aims** of the project.

- Explain **opportunity for debrief** after project is finished.

- Explain **key question** that I'm researching —

  "How do young people describe the role that alternative education settings have played in their education experience?"

- Discuss **digital audio taping** of interview & what will be done with mp3 files

- **Discuss risks – Read following text from Plain Language Statement:**
  We really value hearing from you about your experiences in alternative education. However, it is important to understand that:
  A. *Although your name will not be used in any report or publication, someone might guess that the information is about you because of the things you say.*
     - *To minimise this risk you don't have to answer any questions you're not comfortable with. You can also ask the researcher not to use the information given in any answer if you think it might identify you.*
  B. *A question could upset you if it reminds you of any difficult past experiences you have had.*
     - *To minimise this you don't have to answer any question that concerns you. You can also ask for a break from the interview if you feel you may get upset.*
     - *If you get upset because of the interview, you can talk to a teacher or youth worker at your school.*
- Discuss access to support if needed; including signposting appropriate staff at site.

At end of interview

- ➢ Remind young person of access to someone to talk to at their setting if they feel the need

- ➢ Explain what will be done with information including availability of plainly worded summary of findings at the end of the project.

HREC: 1441410   Date: 13/11/14;   Version: 7

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