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Educating on the margins: young people's insights into effective alternative education

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ABSTRACT

Like many countries, Australia has persistent rates of school exclusion, juvenile offending and recidivism. In response, there has been a growth of 'alternative education' provision – interventions that support young people to engage with learning opportunities outside the conventional education system. While alternative education programs educate more than 70,000 students each year across Australia, evidence of their effectiveness is lacking. There is a need to expand understandings of how alternative education provision works in practice, and what models best fit the complex needs of different groups of young people. This paper reports on *Out Teach Mobile Education* – an individualised alternative education program run by Save the Children, Tasmania. This unique program, operating out of a van, aims to engage young people, who have been involved with the criminal justice system, in further education and employment opportunities. In the paper, the young people involved identify how and why they believe the program works. The young people's perspectives provide valuable understandings of how 'meaningful education' in one specific program looks to the individuals involved. The article concludes by arguing that an authentic assessment of alternative education programs must include the voices of the young people whose lives these programs are aimed at improving.

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Introduction

Juvenile offending and recidivism remain critical issues in many countries (Tracey and Hanham 2017). In Australia, despite ongoing initiatives, young offenders face high chances of reconviction within six months of returning to their communities (Payne 2007). The correlation between disengagement from education and young people's contact with the criminal justice system has been well documented (Anders 2016; Mallett 2017; Wang, Blomberg, and Li 2005). For example, a recent Australian report found that more than 60% of young people in the youth justice system had previously been expelled or suspended from school (Youth Parole Board 2016). The correlation is also seen with adults involved in the criminal justice system: in 2011 only 6% of adults in prisons in Victoria, Australia, had completed secondary, trade or tertiary education

(Corrections Victoria 2011). Developing effective means of engaging young people in education and, if necessary, of supporting young people's transition back into the community continue to be priorities for justice, education and social welfare authorities (Anders 2016; Moore, McArthur, and Saunders 2013).

This paper provides an assessment of the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of a new approach to alternative education in Australia, namely, Save the Children's *Out Teach Mobile Education* program. *Out Teach* is an individualised educational initiative aimed at young people living in Tasmania, Australia, who have been involved with the criminal justice system. Our research focuses on the voices of the young people involved in the program, as well as other key stakeholders. Specific attention is paid to the professional and pedagogical relationships facilitated by the program and to what extent these have helped participants to reengage with educational and vocational programs. This paper presents the young people's views on how *Out Teach* supports their needs.

Literature review

Young people involved with the youth justice system face a range of well-documented barriers to successful re-entry into their communities (Mallett 2017; Payne 2007; Tracey and Hanham, 2017) including issues with mental health; substance addictions; unstable family and peer networks; inadequate accommodation and financial resources; as well as limited education and skills. All of these factors are likely to have impacted upon earlier educational experiences and to impede re-engagement with education and learning.

McGregor and Mills (2012) found that early school leavers, whether involved in the criminal justice system or not, left school due to complex personal circumstances – often related to social and economic factors – and/or to school-related issues such as clashes with school authorities. All students, however, regardless of their reason for disengaging, have the right to quality education. The aim should be to create an education system that has a variety of schools and facilities to cater for *all* students' needs. As Quinn et al. (2006) attest, 'When a child fails to learn and grow, the fault lies not solely with the child but instead lies mainly with the system and the adults responsible for it' (11). Thus, there is a need to attend to both individual circumstances *and* school-related factors when thinking through alternative approaches to education.

Raywid (2001) rightly points out that one size of education does not fit all students. It is increasingly acknowledged that any attempts to provide alternative education need to be flexible and responsive to the complexities and the 'highly mobile nature' of young people's lives (Smyth, McInerney, and Fish 2013, 301). Rather than replicating 'compliance' models of education that have not worked well previously, more inclusive and flexible alternative approaches are required (McGregor and Mills 2012; Mills and McGregor 2014; Raywid 2001; Te Riele et al. 2017).

One established means of intervention lies in 'alternative education' provision. This covers a disparate range of programs and initiatives which support young people to engage with learning opportunities outside the conventional educational system (Te Riele et al. 2017). Across Australia alternative education programs are reported to be educating more than 70,000 students each year (Te Riele 2014).

There is great diversity across the programs that fall under the umbrella of alternative education. Diverse students thrive in diverse settings and therefore schools need to be

‘genuinely different’ from one another (Raywid 2001, 582). Within that diversity, however, there are generally accepted best practices. Thomas et al. (2016) suggest the characteristics of good practice can be grouped into curriculum, pedagogical and structural approaches. The curriculum is to be relevant and personalised (Thomson and Pennacchia 2014) while also intellectually engaging (Mills et al. 2016). Pedagogically, educators need to build trusting relationships free from deficit models where students have voice and choice (Mills et al. 2016; Smyth, McInerney, and Fish 2013; Thomas et al. 2016; Thomson and Pennacchia 2014). Structurally, small, flexible classes are best to accommodate students with various life circumstances and commitments (Raywid 2001; Thomas et al. 2016). Crossing these three categories, Spielhofer et al. (2005) identified several characteristics as good practice in educational programs for disengaged young people, among them: (i) support tailored to the individual; (ii) meaningful, relevant and voluntary activities; (iii) learning environment that does not replicate school environments and (iv) staff skilled at teaching and relationship building.

Of course, it is important to recognise the difficulty of achieving these ideals in practice. As such, there is a need to expand our understandings of how these forms of alternative education provision work in practice, and what models might best fit the complex needs of different groups of young people. The program we studied, *Out Teach*, is an innovative program offering individualised education within the environment of a mobile van. We sought to understand the benefits and challenges of the program through conversation with the young people who were using it. As such our study joins a growing body of literature seeking to identify effective components of diverse offerings of alternative education (Thomas et al. 2016).

Methodology

We set out to evaluate the *Out Teach* program guided by the following research questions:

- (1) In what ways does the program provide a learning environment that supports young people to increase their educational self-concept and capabilities?
- (2) How effective is the mobile classroom in delivering *Out Teach*?
- (3) How does *Out Teach* support young people to reengage with formal educational/vocational opportunities?

The research used data collected from the 21-month period in which the program had been in operation. Data were collected as part of an independent evaluation of the program conducted by the authors. Save the Children did not exercise any editorial control over the content of the evaluation, or this subsequent article. We adopted a qualitative case study approach, in which the ‘case’ was the *Out Teach* program. Data collection were, therefore, focused on developing ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1973) of *Out Teach* based upon qualitative data from young people and other stakeholders. Data collection included face-to-face interviews and creative timeline analysis (CTA) with young people; and face-to-face or phone interviews with key stakeholders. The researchers also examined quantitative data collected by Save the Children. An emphasis on triangulation in which more than one method or source of data was collected was used to verify the data.

Participants

There were two distinct groups of participants involved in the study: the young people (aged 11–22 years) who had participated in the *Out Teach* program (see Appendix A for list); and the stakeholders of the program, including teachers and school officials, youth workers, representatives from the youth justice system and the Department of Health and Human Services, and the Commissioner for Children and Young People (see Appendix B for list). The young people's only common identifying factor was that they had all been involved in the youth justice system. All participants had either left school or were excluded, except for the youngest participant, who was identified as 'at risk' of disengaging.

Ethical considerations

To gain informed consent the young people and stakeholders were identified through their association with the *Out Teach* program. Staff at Save the Children explained the purpose of the evaluation to participants. Consent forms were signed and returned to researchers. All of the young people participating in the evaluation were given a pseudonym to ensure their privacy.

Data collection

Face-to-face interviews and CTA with young people

We conducted individual face-to-face interviews (see Appendix C for questions) with 18 participating young people and phone interviews with two of the young people in order to hear about their experiences with *Out Teach*. Interviews lasted 10–40 minutes.

Interviews began with CTA in which young people were invited to map their life as a learner. The timelines represented their past, present and (potential) future experiences of education and provided a point of discussion for the one-on-one interviews. The young people were asked to identify key moments of change in their educational self-concept, with a specific focus on the elements (i.e. resources and significant others) that facilitated these changes. Participants who engaged in pre-interview drawing activities, such as CTA, have been found to refer to the drawings during interviews and offer greater observations, analyses, and/or reflective insights (Ellis et al. 2013). Interview questions extended from the visual representation, seeking clarification and analysis from the young people and were structured around the young people's experience of the program.

Face-to-face interviews with key stakeholders

Face-to-face and/or phone interviews (see Appendix D for questions) were conducted with key stakeholders to determine the effectiveness of the program from their perspective.

Data analysis

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed before being coded, using Nvivo qualitative coding software, according to categories emerging from the participants' responses as well as from the questions asked in the interviews.

Results

Program delivery and provision

The *Out Teach* program offers one-on-one tuition for young people in Southern Tasmania. The classes take place in the back of a van, which is fitted out with a whiteboard, computer and desk and table. At the time of data collection, the program had been in operation for 21 months and the program was predominately situated in and around the Hobart area. One educator is responsible for planning and delivering the program. The delivery of the program is on a needs basis. For example, if required, the educator will see the young person every day, but most participants would have classes once or twice a week.

The target community for the *Out Teach* program is young people who have been involved in the criminal justice system. They represent a significantly disadvantaged cohort. Many have had insecure and/or traumatic home lives. Most have a long history of conflict at school, influencing their feelings toward education and their thoughts about the future. *Out Teach* employs one teacher who receives referrals from two Save the Children Youth Programs – *Supporting Young People on Bail* and *Transition from Detention*. While support from youth workers in these programs has helped bring stability to the young people's lives, many are not yet ready or able to return to conventional education and/or employment. The main aim of the *Out Teach* program is to provide the young people with the necessary literacy and numeracy skills – and confidence – to enrol in a course or find employment. *Out Teach* has been primarily funded by the Tasmanian Community Fund, through a three-year grant, with additional funding provided by the financial company, IOOF.

The *Out Teach* program is based on a dual worker model in which the program's teacher works with the young person's youth worker to provide holistic care and support for the young person. The dual worker model can be described as an approach, a process and a philosophy. It shares similarities with the 'wraparound' model of care adopted in youth mental health programs, where a 'dedicated care coordinator works together with the family and youth ... to identify the strengths, needs, and potentially effective strategies, culminating in a single, coordinated, individualized plan of care' (Bruns et al. 2010, 315). Studies in the United States (Pullman et al. 2006; Kamradt and Meyers 1999) have shown that wraparound approaches were particularly successful at reducing recidivism rates in juvenile justice cases involving young people with mental health issues. Like the wraparound model, we found that *Out Teach* offers a unified model of care in which formal services are balanced with interpersonal support and care is targeted to the specific needs of the young people.

We found the all-inclusive approach of the dual worker model provided constancy to many of the young people participating in the *Out Teach* program. Rather than one person coordinating the young person's support and care, the dual worker model involves ongoing collaboration between the teacher and youth worker to support the young people in the various challenges they face. While the presence of the dual workers provides a sense of dependability that has long been missing from the young people's lives, they also encourage the young person to be active in developing pathways for the future. Encouraging the young people to set their own educational goals is a key feature of the *Out Teach* program.

We also found the *Out Teach* program design and delivery to be appropriately flexible to the young people's needs. It is student-centred, trauma-informed and mobile. In the words of the teacher responsible for the program, the goal for the program is to 'replicate school without being at school'. This helps to create a positive learning environment, which is novel for many of the young people. As Caleb explains:

Instead of just sitting in the classroom you can drive wherever you want and do your schooling. You could park on the beach or a car park or somewhere nice and have lunch and do your work and stuff.

A notable feature of the *Out Teach* program is the way in which recreational activities and the outdoors are used to complement and augment the literacy and numeracy lessons. For example, the *Out Teach* teacher might build an understanding of the Pythagoras theorem on the football field or develop an understanding of the role of voice and style in writing through magazines based on topics that are of interest to the young people.

Relevance of program delivery: best of practice in alternative education

Young people spoke with the evaluation team about a range of significant and complex issues that they were facing either currently or in the recent past. These included homelessness; absent and/or ill parents; poverty; mental health issues; various addictions; and self-, peer- and/or adult-inflicted violence. The young people that *Out Teach* works with are, in the words of one adult stakeholder, 'too busy surviving' to worry about school; they are either disengaged from education or are at risk of disengaging. This was reflected in both the words of the young people and in their timelines (see Figure 1).

In contrast to conventional schooling models, alternative education models are designed to be inclusive, flexible and responsive to the young people's needs. We use Spielhofer et al.'s (2005) characteristics of good practice in alternative education to analyse our findings.

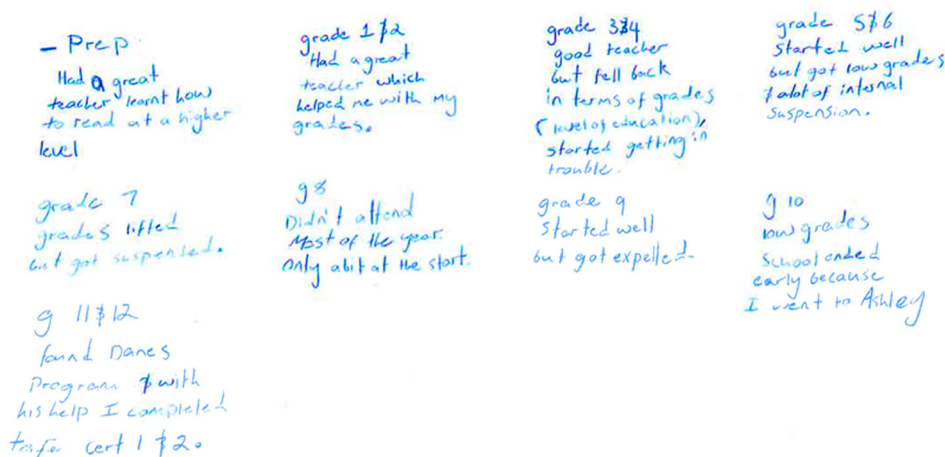


Figure 1. An example of the educational timeline drawn by one of the young people as part of the *Out Teach* evaluation.

Best practice #1: support is tailored to the individual

The *Out Teach* teacher described the program as offering the young people ‘on-ramps’ into relevant education. One of these ‘on-ramps’ is the student-focused nature of the *Out Teach* provision. As the *Out Teach* teacher explained, the program activities are organised in negotiation with the young people, in order to build upon their individual strengths and interests and cater to their specific needs. To build Caleb’s literacy, for example, the *Out Teach* teacher provided him with a magazine on the topic of *his* interests – motor-bikes. This provided incentive for Caleb to start reading again: ‘[The teacher] would give me a motorbike magazine or a car magazine to read first and then that just gets my confidence up.’ The focus on individual interests and needs of the young people provides a basis upon which the young people can build and meet their educational goals. This individual focus, however, could also be a critique of the program. McGregor and Mills (2012) point out the importance of building a sense of community between students, as a crucial social activity. Since *Out Teach* worked with students one-on-one, such an experience of positive community was not possible.

Best practice #2: activities are meaningful, relevant and voluntary

Students create individual learning plans with the *Out Teach* teacher, focused on meeting their basic interests and needs. McGregor et al. (2015, 611) describe this as ‘meaningful education,’ referring to the degree to which programs are seen as connected to the lives of the young people using them. This approach ensures that learning becomes relevant to the young people; they understand why they are learning what they are learning. Literacy and numeracy skills, for example, are developed through engagement in everyday activities. As the *Out Teach* teacher explained,

These kids need to know how to apply for a house. They need to know how to sort out their Centrelink. They need to know how to negotiate the legal system. That’s the learning that needs to happen for these kids at this time.

Young people provided us with many examples of ‘real world’ outcomes that stemmed from their participation in the *Out Teach* program. These included learning how to write a resume, being supported in gaining vocational certification, setting up an email account, and studying to get a driver’s license. As one of the young people, Michael, said, such learning was about making ‘steps’ toward a ‘future that’s going to be good for me.’ Although Mills et al. (2016) remind us that learning in alternative education settings should never be ‘restricted to basic skills such as literacy, numeracy and ‘job readiness’ (108), such skills are crucial for meaningful engagement in society.

Best practice #3: the learning environment does not replicate school environments

Most of the young people participating in this evaluation found conventional education environments to be inflexible, impersonal and confining. Their negative experiences chimed with the findings of Smyth, McInerney, and Fish (2013, 302) that the ‘static container of the classroom’ is not appropriate for most disengaged young people.

In contrast to the static container of the school classroom, the fact that *Out Teach* operates out of a mobile van was highly valued by the young people. When asked what he liked about learning in a van, Jaxon stated quite simply: ‘not being in a classroom.’ There was an appreciation for how the *Out Teach* teacher would physically drive

to where the young people were located, as a symbol of valuing their time and their participation. Michael noted that ‘Most places you have to go there and, like, you know, wait ages just to do something. But [the *Out Teach* teacher] is, you know, straight in the school van and I’m done.’

Moving the learning outside of the conventional classroom removed some of the negative connotations that young people had with learning. As Lucas said, ‘As soon as you get in the van, it’s just easier to learn in there.’ Writing about disengaged young people, Smyth and Robinson (2015) suggest that rather than change the student to fit the school, teaching and learning need to be changed to fit the young person. The van was a significant way that *Out Teach* changed the teaching and learning.

Another benefit of the van as a learning environment was individualised attention from the teacher. Most young people made specific reference to the lack of social pressure within the van – as opposed to their classroom experiences. Young people also appreciated the luxury of having sufficient time to address educational material. This was noted as substantially different from other learning environments they had experienced. As Michael explains,

When I went to school, like, no one had any time for me. I just didn’t feel like teachers gave me the time, just because there were so many kids around where they had to help also. But with [the *Out Teach* teacher], you can just, like, understand and [he will] just talk to you about it. He doesn’t have to go to anyone else.

The flexibility of provision offered by the *Out Teach* program – both through the van and through the availability of the teacher – ensured that support was there when they needed it. To one of the young people, James, this meant ‘Just being there, really. Just always.’ The young people know they can always contact the teacher and do not require a set appointment to access assistance. This, again, was seen by the young people to be unique to this learning environment.

Best practice #4: staff employed are skilled at teaching and relationship building

Key to the success of the program was the *Out Teach* teacher himself, and the energy and enthusiasm he brings to the position. Over the course of the interviews we heard many reasons why the teacher’s approach was successful, including a genuine care, respect for, and belief in, the young people; patience; and an ability to make content understandable. To many of the young people it was important that the teacher treated them ‘like normal people.’ The pedagogical relationships that the teacher has formed with the young people clearly lie at the centre of what makes *Out Teach* work. As Oliver explained: ‘[The teacher] believes in his clients, so you can notice that. And he’ll even tell you he believes in you, that you can do this. He’s there if you need him, which I find very important.’

Only once these trusting relationships are established can the young people engage in educational activities. As Zach illustrated, ‘I learned more through [the teacher] than I would in any classroom.’ Adult stakeholders also acknowledged the teacher’s ability to connect with the young people and encourage them in their development. While the young people might not have identified it as such, several stakeholders noted that there were clear intentions underpinning the teacher’s approach, as another Save the Children youth worker declared,

[The teacher] has this really great plan set out, whether it's written down or in his head, of where he wants the young person to end up, and what he needs to do to get them there. He does that just so smoothly and seamlessly, and it's great to see the outcome ...

From all accounts, ensuring the right person is employed for the job is essential to the program's success.

Evidence of effectiveness

Te Riele et al. (2017) have identified five broad sets of outcomes that can be used to assess the effectiveness of alternative education programs: students' engagement in education; traditional academic outcomes, such as literacy skills; employment or further study opportunities; personal and social skills; and community engagement. Despite this, there is also recognition that alternative education programs differ according to the young people they serve, programmatic goals, local contextual needs and modes of delivery (Myconos 2011). As such, the research team has examined the effectiveness of *Out Teach* by considering both Te Riele et al.'s (2017) five outcomes as well as its ability to respond to the specific complex needs of the young people it works with.

As a crucial first step, *Out Teach* has certainly been effective in assisting many of the young people in re-framing their perceptions of learning and themselves as learners. When discussing the educational timelines they drew prior to the interviews, young people relayed stories of failure, lack of confidence and inability. Based on negative school experiences, many of the young people had discounted their ability to achieve educationally and avoided potential pathways that involved learning. After meeting one-on-one with the *Out Teach* teacher and achieving some of his individual educational goals, Alex articulated a substantial shift in the way he saw himself: 'I actually see myself as more of a learner now. Before, I mainly saw myself as someone who's going nowhere, and wasn't going to do anything in life. But that's definitely changed'.

For most of the young people, improvements in educational self-concept resulted from small but meaningful experiences of success, recognised informally by the *Out Teach* teacher as well as documented formally by the program. The young people, in discussion with the *Out Teach* teacher, set their own educational goals and developed a plan to work toward those goals. Specific progress toward the goals was documented in monthly reports written by the *Out Teach* teacher. Examples of goals included completing vocational education courses, improving basic numeracy and maintaining regular attendance at a mainstream school. During the 21-month period covered by this study, across the 27 program participants, 70 educational goals had been set with 49 (70%) documented as achieved. Achieving success and being shown their own progress built confidence in the young people. Cooper explained his confidence, 'I know I can do it. I don't just feel like it, I know I can because I've done it before.'

A re-framing of educational self-concept has also meant an improvement in attitudes toward schoolwork. As Caleb described: 'I can do some of the maths. I still get frustrated but I won't get that frustrated where I just throw the book and walk off. I actually try and do my best to do it.' With more positive perceptions of their own learning capacity, young people spoke of feeling intrinsically motivated to learn:

I'm just more interested to learn. Like the other day I said to one of my workmates, 'I want to do a course.' And they're like, 'Why would you want to do that?' And I was like, 'So I can

learn a few more things about concreting.’ And that’s something I would never have said before. (Lucas)

By assisting the young people to develop realistic educational goals, supporting them to achieve these goals and recognising their successes, *Out Teach* is providing the young people with a sense of their individual progress.

One outcome of improved educational self-concept is the willingness to engage with educational opportunities. At a basic level, engagement in education can be evidenced through attendance rates (Te Riele et al. 2017). When describing their educational timelines, the young people mentioned sporadic attendance in the past, revealing their disengagement with school; some young people missed full years of school. Sofia described her typical day of non-attendance: ‘Sleep all day or go and get in trouble.’ A stakeholder from the Tasmanian Police also pointed to truancy as indicative of both disengagement and increased risk to be involved with the criminal justice system, stating that truancy is a ‘much bigger problem’ than the public appreciates.

Given their history of truancy and the link between truancy and criminal behaviour, the attendance rate of the young people in the *Out Teach* program – a voluntary program – is remarkable: 93% attendance over the 21-month period of the evaluation. As comparison, in a study of 400 ‘non-conventional schooling’ programs aimed at disengaged young people across Australia, Te Riele (2014) reported attendance rates to vary between 40% and 90%. Moreover, Max told us that attending *Out Teach* has had an impact on his subsequent attendance in mainstream school: ‘Yeah, in Grade 7 I think my attendance was about 20 per cent which was only one or two days a week. It’s now up to about 80 per cent.’

Besides improving attendance rates, *Out Teach* results in other tangible educational outcomes. Most young people highlighted the development of their literacy and numeracy skills as evidence of their achievement in the *Out Teach* program. This is particularly pertinent in Tasmania, where the literacy and numeracy rate remain at around 50% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). During the evaluation period, the *Out Teach* teacher used the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) in order to assess the young people’s literacy and numeracy skills. Over the time period of this study, 12 out of 15 (80%) of the students past compulsory school age achieved the Level 2 benchmark, a standard expected of students entering pre-employment courses in vocational education. Complementing these figures, the young people provided concrete examples of what such an achievement looked and felt like. Lucas described not being able to spell his own name before the program. Similarly, Zach ‘couldn’t read anything’ when he first started the program explaining that if asked to read something he ‘wouldn’t even bother because [he] couldn’t do it.’ Noah claimed that ‘I never used to be able to do maths and ever since I’ve been working with [*Out Teach*] I do maths every day. I enjoy it now; I used to hate it.’ In terms of the young people’s self-assessment and the teacher’s ACSF assessment, the young people’s numeracy and literacy levels were clearly improving.

It was notable that achievement of entry-level skills was then facilitating engagement with other opportunities. In the interviews, young people named various ways *Out Teach* supported them to reengage or engage with formal educational opportunities. Many spoke of being encouraged by the *Out Teach* teacher to undertake vocational tertiary education courses. The teacher supported them to understand important concepts and complete required tasks. Alex declared: ‘There’s no way I would have started a [course]

just by myself, I would have been way too stressed out, would not handle it. Not understanding some of the wording, which thankfully [the *Out Teach* teacher] does.’ These anecdotal reports confirmed Save the Children’s 2016 internal reporting that over the life of the program, 19 (73%) of the young people had engaged or re-engaged with formal educational programs, such as vocational, alternative or mainstream education.

Alongside supporting young people to reengage with education, *Out Teach* is also focused on improving engagement with employment opportunities. Yet, as stakeholders pointed out, simply having opportunities is not enough: it is the ‘precursors’ to employment that need to be addressed. For the young people, these key *precursors* to employment were identified as receiving a driver’s license, writing a resume and talking in a sociable way with other adults. These were all activities that were reported to be facilitated through engagement with *Out Teach*. For example, Oliver attributed his full-time work as a plasterer to lessons learned from *Out Teach*:

Probably 80 per cent of going through the program helped me get the job that I’ve got today. Just by learning geometry and knowing how to interact around a job site, how to do maths properly ... how to come across as welcoming.

A 2016 Save the Children Progress Report identified seven (27%) participating young people as having successfully secured employment. In addition, eight (31%) had completed work experience and eight (31%) had been supported with job readiness training such as interview skills. This proportion corresponded with the personal stories of the young people we interviewed. Importantly, *Out Teach* was impacting on current jobs as well future employment aspirations. For example, two of the young people mentioned plans to study youth work, indicating a desire to help young people in similar situations.

Although *Out Teach* focuses on improving young people’s educational and employment endeavours, any program that works within the complex realities of young people’s lives cannot be measured by educational and employment outcomes alone (Anders 2016; Smyth, McInerney, and Fish 2013). Given the experience of the young people involved, other indicators of effectiveness relate to remaining out of the criminal justice system. The young people themselves recognised the role that *Out Teach* played in keeping ‘heaps of people out of trouble’ (Zach). Caleb saw *Out Teach* as providing him with choice, which he did not feel he had previously:

Because I couldn’t do any maths or reading and writing English, I just thought I might as well be a criminal. But once I got out and I met [the teacher] it become a lot easier and clearer, that there’s more to life than being a criminal.

Over the 21-month evaluation period, four young people (15%) returned to detention. While disappointing, this is markedly lower than the general statistic of 30% of Tasmanian young people returning to Youth Justice supervision within 12 months (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2016). A police stakeholder interviewee concurred with the notable reduction in offending of *Out Teach* participants, citing the young people going through the program as ‘really dropping off our radar.’

Despite the lower rate of recidivism amongst the young people participating in the *Out Teach* program, a 15% return to detention suggests there is still work to be done in improving the program. In analysing those who did return to detention, drug addiction was a factor. While the *Out Teach* educator is already working with several sectors,

there may be benefit in working more closely with the health system to support the clients with drug addiction.

Beyond staying out of the justice system, the *Out Teach* teacher also saw the program preparing young people for adult life. He found participants wanting to discuss taxes, religions, cultural and social issues. This preparation also included providing the young people with a 'diversity of experience' such as taking them to new places, trying new things, eating different foods, even developing different sleep routines. Some of the young people we spoke with were highly enthusiastic about these chances to experience different ways of life:

We were hitting up surfing at, like, 6 o'clock in the morning. Like, it was just beautiful. It was unbelievable. Like, the way [the *Out Teach* teacher and the Youth Worker] run their lives at the moment, you know, just for themselves is brilliant. Like, that's how I wanted my life to be.
(Ben)

Our interviews highlighted a sense of enjoyment when the young people relayed their experience in the education program – feelings that appeared to be less prevalent in many other parts of their lives. The program went beyond education for many young people. Participants spoke of *Out Teach* turning their lives around (Sofia and Lucas); changing who they are (Kai); inspiring their futures (Alex) and opening them up to life (Ben). Concluding his interview, Michael shared quietly, 'It's real hard to say it, but [the teacher's] been like a father figure, just pushing me forward, because I've never had anyone like that.' Providing young people with positive experiences that are otherwise lacking in their life is also a key measure of the effectiveness of a program such as *Out Teach*.

Discussion

The *Out Teach* program is clearly an innovative model that has impacted significantly on the lives (and life-chances) of the young people it has served. According to the young people, the program's success derives from numerous factors. These include the team of staff that has been employed, the reputation and independence of Save the Children as a coordinating organisation and the various relationships that have been developed between the young people, program team and stakeholders. The *Out Teach* program benefits from being well-resourced and well-staffed, and these efforts are clearly paying dividends. This is a commendable program that merits continuation and expansion. This praise notwithstanding, it is important to note that the program – individualised education in a mobile van – is distinctive from other forms of alternative education. While the *Out Teach* program does provide a number of insights into what might work in similar circumstances and contexts, it should not be taken as a ready-made 'blue-print' to be applied elsewhere.

While many of the identifiable outcomes from the program appeared relatively small-scale, they marked considerable progress for the individuals concerned. As highlighted in the study, recidivism rates have decreased across the cohort and many were back in education or employment. Despite this, it is important to acknowledge that many of the most significant outcomes are unlikely to be apparent for some time (Thomson and Pennacchia 2014). In particular, the benefits of fostering a pro-social attitude in participants is difficult

to quantify, yet has numerous lasting benefits to the young people and society. Thus as Myconos (2011, 42) contends, ‘any judgements on program effectiveness should, therefore, be tempered by a reminder of the scale and difficulty of the undertaking.’

The program’s success in (re)engaging young people with learning and improving their educational self-concept is associated closely with its focus on also supporting a range of non-academic outcomes. Rather than being perceived as a specifically ‘educational’ program, young people felt supported in terms of developing their personal and social well-being, engagement with social services, accommodation and developing pathways into employment and independent living. As such, taking a holistic approach to a young person’s re-engagement into their community is key to the success of the educational program.

As with many alternative education programs, much of the immediate success of the *Out Teach* program is linked to the efforts and skills of the individual staff members. In particular, the *Out Teach* teacher was roundly identified as driving the day-to-day success of the program. The effectiveness of his work can be linked to a number of factors. First, the program design allows him sufficient time and resources to develop lasting and trusting bonds with each young person in the program. These were relationships that were ‘hopeful, optimistic, and support interdependence’ (Moore, McArthur, and Saunders 2013, 338). Key here is the flexibility of the program allowing for the organic development of relationships through shared experiences and activities. The lack of prescribed activities and minimisation of program bureaucracy seems an important enabler for this work to take place. Additionally, the *Out Teach* teacher’s educational and professional background gives him extensive working knowledge of the educational opportunities available for each young person, alongside existing relationships and credibility with various stakeholders in the education sector. These factors result in a provision that is not perceived by the young people as a formulaic ‘program’ *per se*. Instead, interactions with the *Out Teach* teacher are experienced as a personal and trusted process. This reflects the recognised advantage that non-government organisations, such as Save the Children, have in supporting change in areas such as education, where there might be a suspicion of ‘state-centred’ agendas (Nash and Bell 2007).

Conclusion

The young people provided this evaluation with valuable understandings of how ‘meaningful education’ can be defined within one specific program. Although the current internal monitoring conducted by *Out Teach* does capture important data such as attendance and literacy rates, much of what is happening in *Out Teach* is difficult – and yet crucial – to evidence. As such, it is important to continue to include the voice of young people both in evaluating alternative education programs and also in designing future evaluation exercises. The present evaluation, while examining the effectiveness, efficiency and relevance of *Out Teach*, also allowed the young people involved in *Out Teach* to pause and consider the vast distance they have travelled with the assistance of the *Out Teach* teacher. For a unique program such as *Out Teach*, as well as other programs focused on the needs of young people, it is crucial that indicators of success are co-constructed with the young people they serve, thus embracing the fact that unique models require unique indicators.

Disclosure statement

In accordance with Taylor & Francis policy and our ethical obligations as researchers, we are reporting that this article draws on data collected as part of an independent evaluation of Save the Children's *Out Teach Mobile Education* program. We have disclosed those interests fully to Taylor & Francis.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Young people interviewed

Pseudonym	Age	Details
Caleb	20 years old	Expelled in year 4; Sporadic attendance at another school until dropping out in year 7; Arrested in year 7 for first of three times; Currently meeting with <i>Out Teach</i> and has completed TAFE certificates.
Ben	20 years old	Year 7 was arrested and dropped out of school; Worked with <i>Out Teach</i> for a year on literacy and numeracy; Currently working full time.
Oliver	22 years old	Arrested in year 9; Worked for 2 years with <i>Out Teach</i> doing year 10, 11 and 12 school work; Completed TAFE certificates; Currently working full time.
Michael	21 years old	Arrested in year 8; Expelled in year 9; With <i>Out Teach</i> support for one year, completed several TAFE certificates; Currently working full time.
James	20 years old	Struggled in school but did complete college; With <i>Out Teach</i> support for half a year, completed TAFE certificate. Working sporadically.
Alex	21 years old	First suspension in year 3; Expelled in year 9; Arrested in year 10; with <i>Out Teach</i> support, finished year 11 and completed TAFE certificates.
Zach	19 years old	Left school in year 9; Has been with <i>Out Teach</i> off and on for 2 years; Could not read before <i>Out Teach</i> and currently working on resume.
Lucas	18 years old	Left school in year 8; Currently attending <i>Out Teach</i> and working full time.
Cooper	18 years old	First arrested in year 7; Dropped out of school year 9; Working with <i>Out Teach</i> for 2 years; Currently looking for work.
Max	14 years old	First arrested in year 5; Attended <i>Out Teach</i> for past 2 years; Currently attending high school part-time.
Sofia	17 years old	Dropped out of school in early high school; Currently with <i>Out Teach</i> and attending college.
Kai	19 years old	Arrested early high school; Completed TAFE course with <i>Out Teach</i> support; currently working part-time.
Riley	17 years old	Suspended in year 7; Connected to Save the Children for 5 years and <i>Out Teach</i> since the beginning; Currently attending college; Wants to be a youth worker
Ethan	11 years old	Identified as 'at-risk' of disengaging and supported full-time by <i>Out Teach</i> .
Lachlan	20 years old	Suspended in year 1; Dropped out of school year 5; Supported by <i>Out Teach</i> to complete high school classes.
Spencer	17 years old	Suspended in primary school; With <i>Out Teach</i> for 2 years; Currently back in detention.
Harley	17 years old	First suspended in year 3; Left school in year 5; Has been with <i>Out Teach</i> for 2 years; Finished year 11; Currently working part-time.
Eamon	18 years old	Active with <i>Out Teach</i> for 2 years; currently enrolled in an additional educational support program.

Appendix B. Stakeholders interviewed

Stakeholders
Youth Justice Services Representative
Primary School Principal #1
Primary School Principal #2
Secondary School Staff Member
Department of Health and Human Services Representative
Tasmanian Police Department Representative
Tasmanian Commissioner for Children and Young People
Tasmanian Commissioner for Children and Young People Staff Member

Appendix C. Interview questions – young people

1. We'd love to hear more about the timeline you've created. Tell us about what you've written.
2. Tell us about your experiences in school. What did you like about school? What didn't you like about school?
3. How did you hear about or get into the *Out Teach* program? How often do you participate in the program?

4. How do you feel about the van as a place to learn? How is it different to school and other learning spaces?
5. Do you feel well supported by the *Out Teach* program and having the tutor and your youth worker working together?
6. What do you think about your time with the *Out Teach* teacher? How is it different from other teachers you've had?
7. If it wasn't this teacher, if they hired a new teacher, what would that new teacher need to be like for it to work?
8. Do you feel like your literacy and numeracy skills have improved through the program? If so, in what way? Is there anything you can do now that you couldn't do before completing the program?
9. Have there been new opportunities for you since completing the *Out Teach* program?
10. Which organisations, institutions or workplaces in the community have you had contact with since doing the program?
11. How has the *Out Teach* program helped you to think about your future?
12. Has the way you see yourself as a learner changed from doing the program?
13. Do you have any future goals for work or study? Has the *Out Teach* program helped you to achieve these goals?
14. If you were to succeed with the *Out Teach* program, what would that look like?

Appendix D. Interview questions – stakeholders

1. How did you hear about the *Out Teach* program? How much contact do you have with the program?
2. Do you think the young people feel well supported by the *Out Teach* program and having the tutor and youth worker working together?
3. Do you think the young people's literacy and numeracy skills have improved through the program? Do these skills translate effectively to the real world?
4. Do you think the *Out Teach* program has helped improve these young people's engagement with the community?
5. Have you seen a change in the young people and their opportunities for the future since their participation in the *Out Teach* program?
6. Has it been easy to contact and work with Save the Children and those specifically involved in the *Out Teach* program?
7. Do you see the *Out Teach* program as flexible to the needs of the young people?
8. Will you continue to support the *Out Teach* program?
9. Do you have any advice or suggestions to improve the program?
10. What would you see as indicators of the *Out Teach* program's success?
11. Anything else you think we should know?