

# Gauging the Value of Education for Disenfranchised Youth

## Flexible Learning Options

Sue McGinty, Kimberley Wilson,  
Joseph Thomas and  
Brian Lewthwaite (Eds.)



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## **Gauging the Value of Education for Disenfranchised Youth**

## INNOVATIONS AND CONTROVERSIES: INTERROGATING EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

Volume 7

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- policy
- higher education
- curriculum, pedagogies and assessment
- methodology and theory
- creative industries

# Gauging the Value of Education for Disenfranchised Youth

*Flexible Learning Options*

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DALE MURRAY

## FOREWORD

### GAUGING THE VALUE OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING

Like many nations of the developed world, Australia continues to experience significant numbers of young people disenfranchised from education. The reasons for this exodus are a complex mix: a history of colonisation, persistent pockets of community poverty, on-going class struggle and the hegemonic forces of capitalism. Some years ago, a number of like-minded colleagues began conversations that reflected the growth in education service provision for this cohort of young people. In the main, these services identify collectively through their practice of relational, trauma-informed and enquiry-based pedagogy and curricula that share power with young people as a cornerstone to engagement. Comprising some 900 programs supporting 70,000 young people across the nation, these services provide excellent models of innovative educational engagement. In light of their growing scope, funding and compliance bodies are increasingly raising questions regarding the economic value of these services to community.

In 2012, I had been fortunate to visit Canada, the US and the UK on a Churchill Fellowship. Researching Flexible Learning Options (FLOs) in those countries, I discovered that many providers had completed social return on investment analyses, putting them in a position to evidence the value of these types of educational responses. To my knowledge, no such research had been undertaken nationally in Australia.

Thus began our journey to gauge the value of flexible learning options in Australia. Thanks go to Professor Sue McGinty for her insight and leadership when I first approached her with the idea for this research. Sue, as always, seized the challenge and began plotting the way forward. Thanks must also be offered to the excellent research team, Sue McGinty, Brian Lewthwaite, Kitty te Riele, Hurriyet Babacan, Riccardo Welters, George Myconos, Valda Wallace, Kimberley Wilson, Joseph Thomas, Luke Swain and Jyotirmoy Podder. Thanks as well to our partner organisations, Edmund Rice Education Australia—Youth+, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Catholic Education of Western Australia, Northern Territory Government, Victorian Government and Centacare North Queensland, who enthusiastically embraced the project. We also extend our appreciation to the Australian Research Council, who supported our application for this Linkage Project.

The result of this nationwide undertaking provides a deepening epistemology of flexible learning and its value to our community. Although likely significant,

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public financial returns to educational re-engagement are by no means the only measurement of positive outcomes of FLOs. There are also many so-called ‘soft’ values, including enhanced civic participation, deepening personal agency and community connection. These and other important benefits of FLOs are explored in depth throughout this text.

Finally, to all the young people who participated in the research, thank you. Thank you for re-engaging in education. Thank you for sharing your stories with us. Thank you for the insight you bring to our communities and thank you for fulfilling your potential.

*Dale Murray*  
*Director, Youth+ Institute*  
*Edmund Rice Education Australia*

SUE MCGINTY

## PREFACE

Around 2010, when the Youth+ Flexible Learning Centres were at the height of being established across Australia, I had a conversation with Dale Murray, Director of Edmund Rice Education Australia—Youth+. Dale recounted that a lack of empirical evidence concerning the value of flexible learning options (FLOs) compromised his efforts to convince governments, city councils and private benefactors of the returns on their investments. Such evidence would need to be both qualitative and quantitative. Thus, the seed was sown for our Australian Research Council Linkage Project (LP130100344), “The value of Flexible Learning Options for disenfranchised young people and the Australian community”. This book is among the results of that endeavour.

Engagement in schooling is a key factor in producing equitable social and employment outcomes for all Australian young people. Through the Melbourne Declaration, Australian state and territory governments have committed to greater equity and excellence in schooling with an emphasis on improving outcomes for disadvantaged young Australians, particularly Indigenous youth and those from low socioeconomic circumstances (MCEETYA, 2008). This was reinforced by *The National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions*, which included specific targets to increase young people’s educational participation and attainment (CoAG, 2009), as the consequences of disengagement from education are seen to be significant.

The current political and economic climate has seen growth in both the demand for and provision of FLOs. According to a report commissioned by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, at least 33,000 of Australia’s most severely disenfranchised young people are currently being catered for by FLOs (Te Riele, 2012). On-going research by te Riele suggests the true figure is likely to be at least twice as high. Catering to a diverse clientele across the nation, the flexible learning sector has developed as a broad kaleidoscope of programs concentrated in areas of recognised social, economic and geographical disadvantage. As the sector burgeons, an increasing amount of research has been directed at mapping the extent, nature and reach of flexible learning provision. What remains missing from the research literature is a reliable measure of the impact of flexible learning options in relation to lifetime outcomes for the most disadvantaged groups of young people in Australia.

The primary aim of this research, then, was to determine if the flexible learning intervention has a measurable, discernible impact on individual life trajectories in relation to economic and social outcomes (e.g., employment, welfare dependency, wellbeing, disconnection and disengagement).

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The research questions that drove this project were:

1. What life trajectories (and their associated individual and societal outcomes) do disengaged young people traverse in the Australian context?
2. What changes to these life trajectories (and associated changes to individual and societal outcomes) can be expected as a result of participation in Flexible Learning Options?
3. What mechanisms are at work in Flexible Learning Options that facilitate the reshaping of life trajectories of disengaged Australian young people?

There is high demand for quality FLOs to cater for the growing number of young people disengaging from the schooling system (Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011; Te Riele, 2012). Meeting this need is contingent upon government support, which is enhanced by sound evidence of the economic and social benefits of such educational interventions. Prior to this study, there was little empirical data to substantiate and quantify the value of this type of educational intervention for both the students who re-engage and the wider community. While it is a complex task to narrow down the economic and social benefits of student participation in FLOs, requisite financial and societal support of these programs requires evidence of how these programs benefit young people and strengthen Australia's social and economic fabric.

This study utilized a mixed-method approach, with three primary components:

1. A qualitative component examining the impact of FLOs on young people's life experiences (Chapters 3–6);
2. A quantitative component utilising a matching estimators technique (Chapter 7);
3. A social return on investment (SROI) analysis (not included in this volume).

With the support of our research partners—EREA Youth+, Catholic Education of Western Australia; Northern Territory Government; the Brotherhood of St Laurence; the Victorian Government; and Centacare North Queensland—we chose eight FLO sites as case studies according to the following criteria:

- The program supported the attainment of credentialed formal education;
- Attendance was by choice (that is, the FLO did not serve as a behaviour management centre);
- The program's core functions were to educate and support disenfranchised young people aged 12 to 20 years.

As part of the qualitative component, 157 teachers, parents, young people and other staff from the partner sites were interviewed. Of these, 61 were young people. This data formed the basis of the analysis conducted for Chapters 1 and 3–6. The data used for the quantitative analysis is outlined in Chapter 7.

This book is divided into three sections. Part One, comprising the first three chapters, explains the context in which FLOs operate in Australia. In Chapter 1, Kitty te Riele introduces the reader to the young people at the centre of our research. Although mainstream education has not worked for them, they are keen to learn with

*Table 1. FLO sites*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Status/governance</i>	<i>Years established</i>	<i>Enrolments (2015)*</i>
Blue Gum	Victoria, outer urban	non-government program	<5	<100
Waratah	Victoria, inner urban	government auspice	<5	<100
Bottle Brush	Victoria, inner urban	non-government school	>5	>300
Acacia	Queensland, regional	non-government	>5	>100
Grevillea	Western Australia, urban	non-government school	>5	<50
Wattle	Western Australia, urban	non-government school	>5	<200
Desert Rose	Northern Territory urban	Government auspice	<5	<50
Sturt Pea	Northern Territory, regional	non-government school	<5	<150

*\*According to data published on the My School website (2015)*

the assistance of wraparound support services. Many of these young people come from backgrounds of poverty and disenfranchisement. Te Riele then explores the context of Australian policy with regard to keeping young people engaged in schooling. In Chapter 2, Joseph Thomas delves into the neoliberal pushes and pulls driving educational policy in Australia, including a national and international emphasis on standardised assessment. Thomas recounts how these pressures have reinforced disparate educational outcomes, exacerbated socioeconomic divisions and pushed many of the country's most disadvantaged young people to seek refuge in FLOs. In Chapter 3, George Myconos enumerates the defining features of FLO programs, including: an inclusive ethos and corresponding approach to governance; tailored, flexible pedagogy and curriculum; and youth wellbeing and relationship building at the core of operations. Myconos emphasises the pivotal role played by wellbeing support in fostering the stability students require if they are to renew their education.

In Part Two, the authors of Chapters 4-6 analyse the interviews conducted across Australia to unpack the value of flexible learning from the perspectives of FLO participants and staff. In Chapter 4, Valda Wallace describes how Australian educational policy and practice have long disenfranchised Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Wallace demonstrates that education does not occur in a vacuum—sustenance, shelter and support are integral to a young person's wellbeing and ability to learn. Through the voices of Indigenous participants and staff, she

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advocates the holistic approach to schooling offered in FLOs as a way to foster improved educational access for Indigenous Australian young people. In Chapter 5, Sue McGinty, Suzanne Bursey and Hurriyet Babacan investigate what young people say they value in their educational experiences. Most young people interviewed emphasise having the right staff to work with them. That is, educators able to show them a future, take care of their current needs, and provide learning that meets their particular circumstances. The young people greatly appreciate such care in the context of gaining an education. In Chapter 6, Kimberley Wilson frames her reading of what FLO staff value about this type of education through the theoretical lens of Gert Biesta's work, namely, obtaining a qualification, socialisation (in particular, coming to feel as though one belongs), and subjectification (i.e., the process by which a young person develops a particular sense of self and social being). Although subjectification has received little attention in the research literature, Wilson's analysis of staff interviews shows the vital importance of this concept to the FLO experience.

Part Three comprises the quantitative aspect of our research. In Chapter 7, Joseph Thomas and Riccardo Welters use a matching estimators methodology to elucidate the impact of young people's educational experiences over a ten-year period. Using data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth (LSAY), they show that young people who experience a weak sense of belonging at school at age 15–16 tend to report lower levels of life-satisfaction and wellbeing as young adults. As pointed out, belonging is one of the cornerstone mechanisms at work in FLOs.

In Chapter 8, Brian Lewthwaite, Hurriyet Babacan, Kitty te Riele, Dale Murray and Joseph Thomas conclude our effort to gauge the value of FLOs by outlining the study's broader implications for policy and practice. The overwhelming evidence, supported both qualitatively and quantitatively, is that investment in flexible learning provides enormous value to the lives of disenfranchised young people and the wider Australian community.

It is with pride that I present to our partners and community this significant and necessary compendium of empirical evidence on the value of FLOs.

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KITTY TE RIELE

## 1. THE CONTEXT OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING OPTIONS

### ABSTRACT

This introductory chapter provides a context for the book from two perspectives: at the micro level, the previous lived experiences of young people in Flexible Learning Options (FLOs), and at the macro level, economic and policy pressures. The persistent impact of social background on educational experiences and achievement is widely recognised. For students in FLOs, mainstream schooling has not worked well due to one or more factors of social and educational disenfranchisement. FLOs respond to this with approaches underpinned by social justice.

Demand for FLOs has increased in recent decades. High levels of youth unemployment and under-employment mean that education is an alternative to entering a precarious labour market. Moreover, policy initiatives in Australia and elsewhere are aimed at increasing educational attainment. These conditions particularly impact on disenfranchised young people, and on the FLOs that aim to offer them an engaging, high-quality education.

### INTRODUCTION

In developed countries across the globe, completion of upper secondary education has become the norm over the past few decades. National and international policy directions have focused on raising educational attainment and reducing ‘drop out’ before school completion. At the same time, economic conditions have led to deterioration in the youth labour market. These dual policy and economic pressures to stay in school and gain upper secondary credentials have most impact on those young people, usually from disadvantaged backgrounds, for whom school does not work well.

One consequence has been an increased demand for alternative educational pathways that better enable these young people to engage with school-level learning. We call these initiatives ‘Flexible Learning Options’ or FLOs. Other scholarly and policy literature may refer to similar educational provision as alternative education, second chance education, re-engagement programs or flexible learning programs. Despite the different terminology, what these initiatives have in common is a commitment to enabling young people who have been rejected by mainstream high schools to gain positive experiences of learning as well as valuable educational credentials, which they otherwise would have been less likely to achieve.

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This introductory chapter begins by providing insight in the forms of disenfranchisement experienced by young people before they enrol in a FLO. This section draws on interviews conducted as part of the research project “Gauging the Value of Flexible Learning Options for Disenfranchised Youth and the Australian Community” (see Introduction), which forms the basis for the entire book. We then briefly outline the nature of FLOs before analysing the economic and policy contexts in which these FLOs have gained prominence as a sector of educational provision for some of the most disenfranchised young people in society.

## DISENFRANCHISEMENT

The impact of social background on educational experiences and achievement is widely recognised as a persistent problem (Smyth & Wrigley, 2013; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). In our research project title we refer to students in FLOs as ‘disenfranchised’. This disenfranchisement has several interconnected, social and educational elements. The first one we discuss, and perhaps the primary element, is poverty. This is not only about a lack of money, but also about insecure life circumstances. The Brotherhood of St Laurence (2016), in its work on measuring social exclusion, explains:

Understanding and measuring poverty and disadvantage has moved beyond a person’s income and assets, such as owning their home.

It now includes other essentials for their participation in society, such as access to education, health services and transport, and non-material aspects such as stigma and denial of rights.

The concept of social exclusion captures the many overlapping factors that may exclude a person from society, rather than income alone.

For young people in FLOs, the financial component of poverty impacts directly on their school experiences (McGregor et al., 2017). Although state schools are nominally free in Australia, the annual cost of full participation for a secondary school student has been estimated to add up to almost AUD\$4000 (Bond & Horn, 2009, p. 26). This covers a range of essential and ‘optional’ items, such as textbooks, transport, excursions, food, internet access, and extracurricular activities. Families with children at a FLO echo the impact of such costs from their lived experience:

More and more parents and families that we’re getting here are saying “we can’t afford to go to School A”, which is a state-run education school, “we can’t afford to go to School B because the uniform fees, we don’t get an ID card unless we pay your school uniform fees”. And I’m like, “you’re going to a state school, what do you mean you have to pay school fees?”, and all they’re saying, all said and told “it’s costing us about 1,000 dollars a year to go to state school and that’s including uniform, textbook allowance, ID cards

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and different excursion allowances” and all of that sort of stuff. Yes, they find it quite tough. (Nelson and Jill, staff, Acacia Flexi)

School uniform can be a particular focal point (Skattebol et al., 2012, p. 119). Although many mainstream schools have strategies such as cheaper second-hand uniforms or payment by instalments, the emphasis on ‘proper’ appearance impacts disproportionately on students living in poverty, who may not be able to replace a lost jumper or torn trousers (Myconos, 2011, p. 13). A student illustrated this:

My experiences were that the school focuses on mainly just on their appearance, how they look as a school, and not on the kid’s education whatsoever. You get in trouble for wearing the wrong-coloured socks. [...] you go to school and then you come in different-coloured socks and you get sat in the office all day. (focus group 3, Blue Gum Flexi)

Financial strain can thus lead to punitive discipline, which takes young people away from learning. It can also lead to emotional strain, as a staff member at another of the sites in our research explained:

Even though we prided ourselves on the wellbeing approach [at a mainstream school] that we had and that sort of thing, young people would come in, be given a uniform and then wouldn’t be able to come back two days later with that same uniform. There were things going on that young people just weren’t coming to us for no other reason other than probably just were overwhelmed by the demands of a mainstream school I guess and the small stuff like coming in and not having the right equipment and feeling a bit ashamed about that. (Wesley, staff, Sturt Pea Flexi)

Housing insecurity further contributes to social disenfranchisement, since poor families may be compelled to move house to chase work, or because their landlord ends their tenancy. Experiences of homelessness and placements in out-of-home care are also common among FLO students. Claudia recounted her experience of being ‘kicked out’ of home by her mother:

She got a new boyfriend but she was always quite mentally abusive anyway and so it was quite hard to live at home. And then, yeah, one day I don’t—I don’t know what really happened—she just told me to get out and not come back and so I did. [...] I couch-surfed for a year and a half. Like, in and out of different people’s houses and then I got sick and went into hospital and [...] they got me into crisis accommodation. (Claudia, student, Grevillea Flexi)

As a result of such housing insecurity, young people in FLOs talk of having been to numerous primary and secondary schools (Mills & McGregor, 2014). This impacts financial cost (such as new textbooks and school uniform), adjustment to different curriculum and pedagogy, and socio-emotional wellbeing. For example, Bella, an early school leaver who changed schools every year between Year 5 and Year 9 due

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to difficult family circumstances, “was worn down by continually having to break into social groups in new schools” (Skattebol et al., 2011, p. 126).

For some young people, a symptom of social disenfranchisement is involvement in crime. One staff member estimated that “maybe 75 per cent have had some issues with juvenile justice” (Tyler, staff, Desert Rose Flexi). Axel, a student at Waratah Flexi, said he had been “running amok, getting in trouble with the police” and almost as an afterthought commented: “I just didn’t have anything to look forward to really”. Staff in our research point to a range of causes for engagement in crime:

He has a really sad story in terms of the domestic violence that he’s witnessed as a young person. He’s only 13 years of age. He is now a perpetrator of domestic violence—mum has needed to take out a restraining order. (Molly, staff, Desert Rose Flexi)

His crimes were not violent: stealing, because he was homeless. (Alexis, staff, Bottle Brush Flexi)

He has ADHD and the only thing he can do to get rid of his energy—the only thing that sort of satisfies his cravings for adrenalin—stealing cars. (Catherine, staff, Bottle Brush Flexi)

Encounters with juvenile justice are also connected with educational exclusion, summed up by the metaphor of the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ (Wilson, 2014). An Australian study on an initiative aimed at re-connecting young people coming before a Children’s Court with education found that among their clients of compulsory school age (12 to 16 years old) almost 40 per cent were not enrolled in school (Te Riele & Rosauer, 2015, p. v).

The “dense and complex web of interrelated, interacting, multi-directional forces” (Batten & Russell, 1995, p. 50) of disenfranchisement that young people enrolled in FLOs experience is evident from the previous pages. Moreover, social disenfranchisement tends to be intergenerational. As Sophia (staff, Blue Gum Flexi) put it, “Many come from homes where it’s second or third generation welfare”. Brett argued that mainstream schools can exacerbate problems stemming from family experiences:

From a very early age, a lot of our kids here are disadvantaged because of the choices that the adults in their life have made and the cycle can sort of repeat itself. [...] their home life might be quite traumatic, so when they come to school it’s much easier to exist in trauma because that’s what they know, rather than a calm sort of climate. So, they bring that trauma with them and they unravel things that are—because they’re not used to that kind of stuff. So, that challenge for them, that thing just tends to snowball and then the school rings the parents and says, “We’re going to suspend your kid, keep your kid at home”, or, “You’re going to get expelled”. And then the parents start to think, “Oh, stuff it, I’ve got no faith in the education system. What’s wrong with my child? Why don’t they want them?” (Brett, staff, Waratah Flexi)

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In particular, Indigenous Australians continue to be shamefully over-represented in generational cycles of poverty (Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, 2014) and all too often, Indigenous parents have negative memories of their own schooling (Te Riele, 2008). Miles commented specifically that:

Many of the urban [Aboriginal] kids are stuck between a rock and a hard place, as we know. They've got a foot in both camps—their own culture and the white culture they are trying to survive in. So they seem to me to be the most disadvantaged. (Miles, staff, Wattle Flexi)

Perhaps as a result, FLOs (especially in regional and remote Australia) enrol relatively many Indigenous students (Shay & Heck, 2015).

Social and educational disenfranchisement are intertwined, for example when poverty means not being able to afford text books or internet, and therefore not being able to do well in school assignment tasks. In addition, students and staff in our research talked about schooling itself working in exclusionary ways, for example by a lack of learning support, negative relationships with teachers or peers, or curriculum that was not engaging.

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Alternative education has a long history in North America, Europe and Australasia. These initiatives were often related to progressive and humanist movements, and aimed at families able to make a choice for a different kind of school experience for their children. Examples include Steiner education, Summerhill in the UK and Big Picture schools in the US. Just like these schools, FLOs intend to 'do school differently' (Te Riele, 2009) from conventional schooling. Unlike these schools, however, FLOs are aimed at young people who (usually) have relatively little choice and have experienced some or many of the elements of social and educational disenfranchisement outlined above.

Importantly, the response of FLOs to these complex and inter-related features of disenfranchisement is based on notions of social justice. Drawing on the use by Mills et al. (2015) of Nancy Fraser's framework, these responses can be understood to relate to distribution, recognition and representation.

Distributive justice relates to addressing economic disenfranchisement, for example, by providing free breakfast and lunch, transport to and from school, and assistance for accessing housing services, health services, and income support (Mills & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2014). As a FLO staff member from another research project explained, "We do breakfasts and lunches and camps at no cost. We do not have student fees. We do everything to increase access and equity to education" (Te Riele, 2014, p. 67).

FLOs also work positively with cultural difference, for example, offering recognition of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning, and for young people who identify with particular youth subcultures. Finally, many FLOs take the political dimension of social justice seriously, offering opportunities for representation and

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young people's agency. This may involve community meetings (see Baroutsis et al., 2016) and genuine choice and input into curriculum (Te Riele, 2014).

Other chapters in this book provide further insight into the ways in which FLOs work to offer genuine educational and life opportunities to disenfranchised young people. The final two sections of this chapter discuss the economic and policy pressures that shape the environment in which FLOs operate.

### ECONOMIC PRESSURES

In the late 1940s and 1950s, severe labour shortages meant there was strong competition for teenage labour in Australia, and leaving school at age 15 was the norm. The youth labour market remained buoyant until the mid-1960s, when structural changes in the economy, such as technological change and internationalisation of product markets caused major upheaval. The decline in employment opportunities in the manufacturing industry and in skilled office work especially affected young people. Such trends in the labour market have continued to the present day, resulting in relatively bleak employment prospects for young people. In particular, young people were hard hit by the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) in 2008, leading to a spike in both unemployment and under-employment rates for 15–24-year-olds in Australia (ABS, 2015). Between early 2008 and mid-2009, the youth labour force under-utilisation rate (combining the numbers for unemployed and under-employed 15–24 year olds) jumped from about 19% to almost 27% (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014). Although Australia was not as badly affected by the GFC as other countries, youth employment has not bounced back (OECD, 2016). On the contrary, it was even worse by 2014, with more than 580,000 young Australians either under-employed or unemployed (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2014).

It is evident that many young people struggle to get a toehold in the jobs market. Continuing with education is not only an alternative to entering the precarious labour market, but also a prerequisite for many jobs—including low-level work. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2016, p. 19) points out that “low educational attainment is the most important driver of NEET [Not in Employment, Education or Training] status, in Australia as in other OECD countries”. Unsurprisingly, key OECD (2016) suggestions for policy responses focus heavily on addressing early school leaving and improving educational outcomes as solutions to unemployment and NEET status more generally. This follows the OECD's (2009a) earlier, somewhat cynical, advice to the Australian government to “capitalise on the propensity of youth to stay longer in education during economic slowdowns to raise educational attainment” (p. 6).

At the same time, the OECD exemplifies a broad policy consensus among developed nations that educational attainment at upper secondary and tertiary levels needs to be lifted to fill the need for more highly skilled people in the contemporary, knowledge-based economy and, therefore, educational attainment at upper secondary

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and tertiary levels needs to be lifted (OECD, 2009b). Within this discourse of the knowledge economy, NEET status is perceived as the result of a deficit in young people's qualifications: "many NEETs lack the basic cognitive and non-cognitive skills needed in the labour market" (OECD, 2016, p. 19).

As a result of these economic pressures and perceptions, governments around the world, including in Australia, have adopted initiatives aimed at increasing educational attainment.

### POLICY PRESSURES

Policies from the European Union (EU) serve to provide some international context. The EU agreed on five 'headline targets' for the whole EU, in relation to employment, innovation, climate change, poverty and education (European Commission, 2012). The education headline target is about raising attainment, specifically:

- reducing early school leaving (ESL) rates below 10%
- at least 40% of 30–34-year-olds completing tertiary-level education

Our interest here is in the first part of the education headline target. This target is linked both to economic and social inclusion purposes. In the current economic climate, young people are seen as especially vulnerable, due to rising youth unemployment as well as in the proportion of young people considered NEET. The European Commission (European Union, 2012) argues:

Against this backdrop, the Europe 2020 target to reduce the share of 18–24 year olds having left education and training prematurely to less than 10 % by 2020 becomes particularly critical. [...] However [...] Bringing the ESL rate down below 10 % is a difficult challenge. (pp. 10–11)

Specific advice is provided in the 2011 *Framework for comprehensive policies to reduce early school leaving* (European Union, 2011). The framework notes that "Early school leavers are a heterogeneous group" and that "Member States should select the detailed components of their strategies according to their own circumstances and contexts" (p. 4). With these provisos in mind, a combination of prevention, intervention and compensation policies is recommended. Prevention measures are intended to "optimise the provision of education and training in order to support better learning outcomes and to remove obstacles to educational success" (p. 4) and may include a greater variety of educational offerings and pathways. Intervention may take place at the level of the educational institution (e.g., early-warning systems for pupils at risk) and at the level of individual students (e.g., mentoring and financial support). Finally, compensation is about re-engaging early leavers with education through second chance education programs—in other words, through FLOs.

In Australia, a target was set to "achieve a national Year 12 or equivalent attainment rate of 90 per cent by 2015" (CoAG, 2009, p. 4). Year 12 is the final year of senior

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secondary education. This target is based on an agreement negotiated between the Australian federal, state and territory governments, the *National Partnership on Youth Attainment and Transitions*. The key justification for the target is that:

The Parties agree that, especially during the downturn, young people should be supported to attain qualifications in order to be competitive in the labour market both now and when the economy recovers. (CoAG, 2009, p. 7)

This argument is reinforced through the agreed communication strategy, which focuses on the benefits of attaining higher levels of qualifications in terms of higher lifetime earnings, reducing economic disadvantage and providing a more skilled workforce for industry (CoAG, 2009, p. 25). New requirements have made it compulsory for all young people to stay in school until completion of junior secondary education, i.e., Year 10 (or until they reach age 17), and upon completion of Year 10 to “participate full-time (defined as at least 25 hours per week) in education, training or employment, or a combination of these activities, until age 17” (CoAG, 2009, p. 6).

The implementation of this policy has a strong punitive component. Young people under age 17 are not eligible for unemployment benefits and access to welfare benefits has been restricted for young people under age 21, if they have not yet attained the target qualification (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010a). Like in the UK (Watt, 2013), this has led to the ‘learning or earning’ tag for these policies as well as further tightening of young people’s access to unemployment benefits (Parliament of Australia, 2017), aimed to “provide incentives for young unemployed people to obtain the relevant education and training to increase employability”. Missing from these policy discussions are considerations of structural labour market problems, i.e., a lack of appropriate jobs.

More constructive was the establishment as part of the CoAG (2009) agreement of Youth Connections, a service for “eligible young people who are at risk of disengaging, or already disengaged from education, and/or family and the community” (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010b, p. 11). Youth Connections providers were required to provide young people with “access to education or training through an alternative learning facility” (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2010b, p. 12). This approach resulted in increased

‘demand’ amongst students for alternative education pathways. This has prompted providers in public and private education markets to respond with the provision of flexible learning opportunities. (Dandolo Partners, 2014, p. 84)

While several of the FLOs in the research for this book pre-dated these policies, they were all affected by this increased demand and heightened profile of ‘alternative learning facilities’.

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A separate set of state-level (rather than national) policies reflects punitive approaches and is in part responsible for increased demand for FLOs. These policies are focused on improving discipline (behaviour management) by giving school leaders more power to suspend and expel students (Department of Education [NT], 2014; Dixon, 2014; Langbroek, 2013). In conjunction, there has been an “enhanced commitment to alternative learning centres that provide highly specialised support to students with the most complex needs” (Langbroek, 2013, n.p.). These policies have a detrimental effect on young people and intensified educational disenfranchisement (YACVic, 2016; also see earlier in this chapter). They have also counterproductively set FLOs up “as a ‘dumping ground’ for unwanted students” (Mills, Renshaw, & Zipin, 2013, p. 13).

Finally, educational policies relating to high-stakes testing also have an impact on FLOs. Such testing regimes have been critiqued in the USA (e.g., Nichols, Berliner, & Noddings, 2007) and elsewhere (e.g., Eggen & Stobart, 2014). In Australia, the most relevant tests are the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), which happens annually in Year 3 and 5 (primary education) and Year 7 and 9 (secondary education), and the end of senior secondary education (Year 12) exams and associated university entry rankings (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank or ‘ATAR’). A teacher in a FLO from another research project summed up his concerns about NAPLAN and the ATAR as follows:

I think things like the school ratings haven’t helped. I think things like NAPLAN are absolutely destructive to young people. And some schools do this better than others, but to instil a sense of identity and worth in the young people outside of what their ATAR was going to be, outside of what their NAPLAN results are, or what number they’re ranked in their school. I know it’s difficult for schools because that’s where the money comes from, but I think that’s something that young people are desperate for. And if they can’t achieve some kind of sense of identity through their academic performance in a mainstream school, well then where can they get that? There’s not really any other avenue for them to demonstrate who they are as people, and their worth to our community, outside of what their grades are, (Julian, cited in McGregor et al., 2017, p. 61)

The insidious effects of such tests extend from students to schools. NAPLAN results lead to rankings of schools on the ‘My School’ website and media outlets publish rankings of schools based on students’ ATAR every year. Gorur (2015, p. 41) refers to the performative politics of My School and argues that NAPLAN has become “a strong source of concern, a topic of discussion and bone of contention in schools”. The comparison of schools based on NAPLAN and ATAR results has put adverse pressure on school staff, making it harder to devote time and energy to the kind of supportive and caring work that drew many teachers into the profession in the first place (Kostogriz, 2012). Competition between schools to do well on academic league tables also has “provided less incentive for schools to support the engagement of students who appear to be at risk of achieving lower than average academic results”

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(YACVic, 2016, p. 21). The comment that “the more ‘aspirational’ neighbouring schools were unable or unwilling to educate” disadvantaged students is not unusual (YACVic, 2016, p. 21). Considered unwanted or redundant in mainstream schools, such young people may end up—if they are fortunate, as this book argues—attending FLOs (also see McGregor et al., 2017).

## CONCLUSION

The need for FLOs is embedded in the social and educational disenfranchisement of young people. It would be better if society were more socially equal (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). It would be better if, in the phrase of Fielding and Moss (2011), the ‘common school’ truly catered for all students, regardless of their background, experiences, and interests. But neither of these ideals are the case. The demand for FLOs has increased over the past decade or so, in the context of social inequality, a precarious youth labour market, and educational policy pressures. The next chapter uses the lens of neoliberalism to further explore the landscape within which FLOs operate, and to set the scene for the core focus of the book: the returns of investing in educational engagement through FLOs.

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## 2. FLEXIBLE LEARNING OPTIONS IN THE NEOLIBERAL EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE

### ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to locate FLOs within Australia's prevailing neoliberal political economy and shed light on their role as sites of resistance to contemporary market fundamentalism. It brings together critical scholarship on recent moves towards the centralisation, standardisation and marketisation of education in Australia. The chapter explores the resulting concentration of disadvantage in low SES area schools and pressures to 'exit' low performing students, increasingly into the flexible learning sector. Discussion also draws on research concerning the proliferation of high-stakes, competitive testing in Australia and the outsized influence of national and international assessment regimes on local educational policymaking and praxis. The standardised, quantitative assessment currently privileged by policymakers is contrasted with FLOs' holistic approach to the appraisal of educational outcomes. The chapter concludes with the growing call among critical scholars to resist the notion of education as human capital production and the reductive modes of thinking that go along with it.

### INTRODUCTION

To speak about neoliberalism in education is to speak about values. As Connell (2015) and others have repeatedly asserted, "the market agenda and the spread of educational markets raise questions about the nature of education itself, about the purpose of our work as educators" (p. 186).<sup>1</sup> Interrogating the purpose of education is especially pertinent at present, given that the neoliberal reforms remaking the global educational landscape tend to limit, rather than expand, democratic participation in education (Clarke, 2012). In Australia, this sweeping reconfiguration, often cast as inevitable and rational, has all but subsumed policy discourses concerning the desired ends of education. Yet this transformation is no monolith, unfolding in relation to particular local histories, social mores and power structures (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). Furthermore, educators throughout the world have contested their interpellation as the subjects of neoliberalism's highly cognizant discourses (see Althusser, 1971). Through an enduring dialectic, critical educational scholars and practitioners continue to challenge economic functionalism as the sole underlying purpose of schooling. As the neoliberal swell leaves behind an ever-growing number

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of marginalised young people, normative perceptions concerning the intersection of education and the market are yet resisted.

In Australia, such resistance is embodied in an expanding number of Flexible Learning Options (FLOs). In response to the failure of mainstream schools to provide adequate support for highly disadvantaged young people, flexible learning practitioners have reimagined their role as educators to reject notions of schooling solely in the service of individual economic advantage. FLOs empower young people to challenge not only their own socioeconomic marginalisation, but that of their communities as well (Thomas et al., 2017). Their commitment to re-inclusion and social equity thereby comprises a sharp riposte to the ‘atomisation’ of learning institutions as market agents (Clarke, 2012) and the role of educational disenfranchisement in the cyclical reproduction of poverty and disadvantage.

Whilst state and federal authorities have enhanced the provision of alternative education and training for disengaged young people, market-based reforms are simultaneously pushing students out of mainstream schools into this burgeoning sector. Hence in Australia’s modern educational marketplace, alternative education represents both converse and corollary (Vadeboncoeur, 2009). Although FLOs are critical of the educational disenfranchisement of young people, they may also be seen as a by-product of neoliberal educational policy.

A rich estimation of the value of flexible learning in Australia requires an appreciation of the macro-level socioeconomic and political contexts within which FLOs operate. This chapter aims to locate FLOs within Australia’s prevailing neoliberal political economy and shed light on their role as sites of resistance to contemporary market fundamentalism. Extending the discussion of local economic and policy pressures introduced by te Riele in Chapter 1, it brings together critical scholarship on the evolution of the country’s neoliberal zeitgeist, spanning recent moves towards the centralisation, standardisation and marketisation of education in Australia. The chapter explores the resulting concentration of disadvantage in low SES area schools and pressures to ‘exit’ low performing students, increasingly into the flexible learning sector. Discussion also draws on research concerning the proliferation of high-stakes, competitive testing in Australia and the outsized influence of national and international assessment regimes on local educational policymaking and praxis. The standardised, quantitative assessment currently privileged by policymakers is contrasted with FLOs’ holistic approach to the appraisal of educational outcomes. The chapter concludes with the growing call among critical scholars to resist the notion of education as human capital production and the reductive socio-cultural imaginaries that go along with it.

#### THE NEOLIBERALISATION OF AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION

The neoliberal paradigm is founded foremost upon the economic theory of competition. According to this rationale, free competition between market actors—driven exclusively by financial self-interest—forces the exit of all but the most

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‘efficient’ firms. The resulting long-term equilibrium represents the optimal allocation of capital, thus maximising social welfare (i.e., consumer and producer ‘surplus’). In the realm of primary and secondary education, the market logic frames schools as firms, with students and their families in the role of the exacting ‘consumer’. Schools cater to the demands of these consumers, with those institutions unable to provide value on the dollar eventually forced from the marketplace. Facilitating competition by enabling greater ‘consumer choice’ (Buras & Apple, 2005) is thereby purported to drive school improvement, innovation and cost-cutting. In Australia, neoliberal educational reforms have been markedly successful in bringing about the marketisation of schooling and a broad reconceptualisation of schools as competitive firms (Bartlett et al., 2002; Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). As elsewhere, the marketisation of Australian education has entailed a ‘commodification’ of access to high quality education (Connell, 2013) and accelerated the privatisation of schooling and other educational services (Burch, 2006). The incorporation of high-stakes competitive testing (Hardy, 2015) has reinforced the technocratisation of educational policymaking in Australia (Gorur, 2011), aiding an unprecedented centralisation of policy over curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Lingard, 2010). Furthermore, standardisation has encouraged the deprofessionalisation and technicisation of teaching (Connell, 2009) and school-level educational assessment (Stevenson, 2007).

Savage’s (2011) synthesis of contemporary Australian educational policy discourses—which have produced the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) and the Victorian State Blueprint for Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD, 2008), among other nationally resonant documents—reveals an intentional framing of free market enterprise “as the prime mechanism through which the realms of social equity and economic prosperity can be managed” (p. 37). Australia’s particular interpretation of neoliberalism, characterised by Savage as a kind of ‘social capitalism’ in the tradition of British Third Way politics, extends the role of the state beyond facilitator of economic opportunity to arbiter of values. A type of benevolent, ‘neoliberalism-lite’, social capitalism diverges from free-market orthodoxy to recognise market failures not as self-correcting aberrations, but as systemic failures to recognise and promote the common good. Nonetheless, prescribed remedies remain firmly rooted in the logics of the free market. Increasing the skills of workers, for example, is seen as the most efficient means by which disadvantaged communities may be economically integrated. By extension, education is held up as the centrepiece of social capitalist reform—a catalyst of socioeconomic sustainability and inclusion in an essentially fair, if temporarily disequilibrium, society (Bennett, 1976).

Raewyn Connell, who has written extensively on the corrosive effects of neoliberal value systems and their reorganising effects on education, traces Australia’s path of neoliberal educational reform to its dramatic expansion of federal public funding for Catholic and private schools. The repositioning of schools as competitive firms, she notes, would not have been possible without the confluence of the public and

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private educational sectors enacted through the bipartisan school funding reforms of the 1960s and 1970s (Connell, 2013, p. 103).<sup>2</sup> Buras and Apple (2005) observe that public funding of the private school sector has exacerbated the stratification of Australian schools along the lines of race and socioeconomic status, as class-dependent mobilities and the liberalised collection of school fees leave those of limited means behind in ever-greater concentrations of disadvantage. This so-called ‘residualisation’ of socioeconomic disadvantage in low SES area schools further entrenches the privilege of young people whose families possess disproportionately greater means of self-actualisation in competitive markets (Ball et al., 1996; Bartlett et al., 2002; Savage, 2011).

### *Winning and Losing*

Lingard (2010) underscores the advent of the Labour government in 2007 as a major turning point with regard to educational policy in Australia. Under Rudd, the Commonwealth took concrete steps to wrest control over educational policy long held by the states. Changes introduced by the Rudd government included the creation of the Australian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (ACARA), tasked with establishing federal guidelines for an emerging national curriculum whose rationale conspicuously emphasised economic competitiveness. Principal among subsequent reforms has been the introduction of the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), a mandatory standardised testing regime for all students in years three, five, seven and nine. ACARA also hosts the My School website, an online clearinghouse of statistical data designed to enable comparison of schools on the basis of their socioeconomic makeup, spending and aggregated NAPLAN scores. Controversially, performance data made available through My School was swiftly employed by media outlets to construct ‘league tables’, enabling a public “‘naming’ and ‘shaming’ of poorly performing schools” (p. 130).

In a meta-synthesis of qualitative studies to determine the pedagogical impacts of high stakes testing in the United States, Au (2007) concluded that teachers often narrowed curricula to tested subjects at the expense of other potential foci, including young people’s psychosocial development. Researching teacher responses to standardised assessment in Queensland, Hardy (2015) found that teachers experienced significant pressure to improve student performance on NAPLAN. Schools were observed to reallocate significant teaching and other resources to test preparation activities. Not only were educators shown to emphasise test content, they frequently taught strategies for effective test-taking. NAPLAN informed curricular priorities in the classroom and came to be seen as a valued educational end in its own right (what Hardy referred to as a “test-centric logic of practice”) (p. 335). Regular displacement of staff caused disruption to teaching and learning, as teachers and students were required to continually readjust to the withdrawal of classroom resources only made available on a temporary basis to improve aggregated testing outcomes.

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Furthermore, Queensland's explicit policy goal of increasing the number of students with scores in the uppermost 'bands' was shown to draw schools' financial, technical and professional resources towards the needs of students currently in the middle range of performance (i.e., young people with the greatest immediate potential to move into the upper ranks) (Hardy, 2015). Such policy imperatives set students in direct competition with each another over classroom resources, potentially disenfranchising low performing students by reinforcing school-level incentives to redirect assets away from the students who need them most.

Inter-school competitive pressures to increase NAPLAN scores, year 12 completion rates and the transition of young people into tertiary education have likewise engendered perverse incentives to trim undesired students from school rosters. Neoliberal reforms in Australia have greatly enhanced schools' agency to exit young people likely to compromise performance targets (Te Riele, 2014). Informed by the rhetoric of autonomy and personal choice, school administrators have been empowered to (often aggressively) negotiate the withdrawal of poorly performing students, depositing them into alternative educational streams.<sup>3</sup>

Such developments, Connell (2013) argues, have enabled the commoditisation of access to quality education. Through competitive testing, among other mechanisms, schools may be differentiated and marketed to consumers in pursuit of individual advantage. "The creation of a system of winners and losers", Connell (2015) laments,

is fundamentally at odds with education. The exclusive rights needed to establish ownership of something, and therefore the possibility of buying and selling it, are antithetical to the inclusive character of educational relationships. (p. 16)

While advocates of My School purport greater parental involvement in school improvement processes (Grattan, 2010), Savage (2011), Mills (2015) and others observe that the website functions primarily to engender inter-school competition and stimulate family mobilities in the name of 'school choice'. Yet actualisation of choice in response to school performance is heavily skewed toward the socioeconomically advantaged. Indeed, the transactional rhetoric of consumption and choice favours an elite already privileged by the market economy (Bartlett et al., 2002). A significant amount of cultural and economic capital is required to assess schools' relative performance and affect in response the relocation of an entire household. The asymmetry of resulting mobilities is reinforced by deregulated selection into 'specialised' schools that promote tertiary educational trajectories (druthers closely correlated with wealth and class privilege) (Angus, 2003). Though branded as 'choice', there seems to be scant consideration among Australian policymakers of the narrowing range of options from which those of limited financial means may actually choose. Despite stated intentions, the marketisation of education has in practice served to preserve and strengthen traditional class privilege.

The foregrounding of middle-class cultural capital (for example, by My School)—and concomitant exodus of advantaged students from 'low-performing'

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schools—entrenches long-established socioeconomic hierarchies in a self-reinforcing cycle. Insofar as mainstream education embodies society's prevailing value system, "exposure to the educative effects of the cultural capital of dominant groups [...] is necessary for success at school" (Mills, 2015, p. 150). Indeed, the link between schools' socioeconomic status and individual academic achievement has been extensively documented. According to the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), young people attending high SES schools tend to outperform their counterparts in low SES schools, irrespective of the students' individual socioeconomic backgrounds (Thomson et al., 2017, p. 30; in Greenwell, 2017).

In light of these links, Australian policymakers have legislated enhanced provision of alternative educational pathways for young people excluded from education (via FLOs, for example).<sup>4</sup> The addition of 'release valves' has allowed the state to maintain fidelity to the market in line with its commitments concerning equity of opportunity. That the reshaping of schools as competitive firms has instigated a nationwide purge of disadvantaged young people from mainstream education is ostensibly irrelevant—the role of the social capitalist state—as facilitator of the market and guarantor of Australia's social contract—is to ensure that all are accounted for, none are ejected from the system (except by their individual volition) and that even society's most wayward may be eventually reincorporated as productive members of the economic fold.

The imperatives of competition have likewise reconfigured many of education's traditional socialisation functions. Commissioned in the production of human capital for an emerging 'knowledge economy', education in the neoliberal epoch entails imbuing individuals not only with particular professional skills and capacities, but also the requisite temperaments and dispositions of an enthusiastically engaged workforce (Rizvi & Lingard, 2009). Connell (2015) suggests that the inadequate pastoral care provided in mainstream Australian schools is not simply a by-product of insufficient school funding, but an intentional narrowing of the conception of education. Supporting students' physical, mental and emotional wellbeing increasingly falls outside the remit of teachers' official and resourced duties because such functions are practically unsupported as a matter of educational policy. The lack of funds for pastoral care is therefore not a neutral consequence of across-the-board tightening of school budgets, but a conscious reallocation of priorities that reflects a market-based outlook on the underlying purpose of education. Cynically, the principal function of education is thereby reduced to economic growth, the benefits of which are purportedly self-evident (Raworth, 2012).

#### DEPOLITICISING EDUCATION

It is commonly argued by critical scholars that a society tends to measure that which is relatively easy to measure (i.e., that we count that which we are able to count) (Biesta, 2010b). This sentiment implies two important corollaries: (1) by virtue of the relative ease of its collection, society tends to elevate enumerative forms

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of evidence in policymaking and (2) policymakers prioritise the management of activities that can be evaluated through such measurement (Gittins, 2013). Welch's (2015) criticism of the modern preoccupation with 'objective' statistical evidence goes further. Society, Welch argues, gives greater credence to enumerative forms of evidence in educational policymaking not simply because they are more readily come by and synthesised, but because these evidence forms service an ecumenical policy agenda to marketise education, including the commoditisation of its estimable outputs. Indeed, as anyone who has delved into the derivation of maximum likelihood estimates for the international comparison of latent constructs can attest, the quantitative assessment of schooling outcomes is often far from simple.

### *The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*

Every three years, 15-year-old young people representing some 72 nations undertake the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme of International Student Assessment (PISA) to compare the performance of educational systems on a truly global scale. Students are tested in the domains of literacy, numeracy and science, with each domain given greater depth of focus on a rotating basis. Aggregated results are purported to reflect participating states' future economic competitiveness, based on the intellectual capacities of each nation's developing workforce. In Australia, policymakers have imbued the country's test performance and rank with substantial weight; its middling triennial results are consistently framed in the policy sphere as a matter worthy of great national angst and consternation.

This massive enterprise depends, of course, upon an international consensus concerning the essential comparability of a narrow range of students' scholastic aptitudes irrespective of their diverse histories, languages and cultures. Such notions of 'universality' stand in stark contrast to Biesta's (2010a) characterisation of the educational process as open, recursive and semiotic—i.e., as inexorable from the social settings within which it unfolds, dynamically dependent upon the relationships and interactions between teacher and learner, and ultimately about the communication of symbolic meanings, rather than representations of reality.

In the academic literature, quantifiable student achievements (e.g., literacy, numeracy, retention, matriculation) are often granted the status of 'hard' outcomes, against the contextual, qualitative indications of schooling's so-called 'soft', psychosocial benefits (see, for example, Dewson et al., 2000; Zepke & Leach, 2010). Amplified by the media, quantitative performance data are provided greater exposure and credence, foregrounding market-based values in the public discourse. The standardised measurement of academic outcomes for inter-school and inter-system comparison is thereby not simply responsive to—but also constitutive of—social mores aligned with the free market economy.

Whilst the debate concerning the inter-personal comparability of latent and subjective constructs (e.g., cognitive ability and quality of life, respectively) remains

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pertinent to economics and other social sciences (Kristoffersen, 2010), a similar level of dubiety has not been levelled at prevailing quantitative methods for the interventional comparison of literacy, numeracy and science aptitude. In particular, high sample exclusion rates and estimation bias associated with the imputation of ‘missing data’ for multiple-matrix sampling (Rutkowski & Rutkowski, 2016) has failed to engender any noteworthy debate among Australian policymakers with regard to the reliability of population sub-group estimates or of national PISA rankings more generally.

In her illuminating, behind-the-scenes explication of PISA processes and outputs, Gorur (2011) exposes an artificial bifurcation of educational research and politics that renders the program’s knowledge products neither politically neutral nor scientifically objective. Quoting the recollections of a senior PISA official regarding the challenges of establishing international consensus on what to test, Gorur establishes that PISA has always “been about values as much as ‘facts’, politics as much as ‘Science’” (p. 82). Gorur details the heated disputes by which test items are included, articulated and omitted, revealing that PISA’s determination to assess reading, science and maths—but not civics or writing composition—reflects a perceived lack of universality concerning the meanings of these excised educational domains. Ironically, the very notion of universal standards promoted by PISA and its adherents belies the unique national histories, priorities and circumstances according to which the test itself is constructed (Gorur, 2011). With the inclusion of content strongly contested by participating states, PISA channels the input of a broad range of national representatives and professional stakeholders through a committee of a mere handful of assessment experts. The former communicate what they would and would not like the test to include, the latter determine what is technically feasible and most desirable given the framework the committee itself has previously laid out (Gorur, 2011). This filtering of nations’ input through committees effectively obscures the essentially political processes by which the end product is derived, as well as the disproportionate influence of particular national stakeholders (e.g., through representation on committees that determine these very processes).

Gorur notes that over time, the OECD has demonstrated ever-greater assuredness in the usefulness of PISA data to inform educational policy at the national level (Gorur, 2011, p. 80). As the program has risen to prominence over several iterations, caution over the interpretation of results has given way to advocacy—statistical correlations between socio-demographic background, school characteristics, the learning environment and students’ test scores are now upheld as the most scientifically valid evidence upon which states’ educational policy may be based.

As policy tools, PISA and other forms of standardised assessment have facilitated a ‘technocratisation’ of policymaking in Australia. “The trend towards a reliance on [statistical evidence]”, Welch (2015) posits,

...is part of a wider re-orientation of policy-making and policy makers, towards a more technocratic form, in which decisions tend to be implemented

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in the most efficient and economically lean manner, rather than systematically engaging with ethical principles. (Welch, 2015, p. 70)

With political inputs transformed into apolitical outputs, educational policy may be re-envisioned as a straightforward matter of redirecting capital to more efficient ends. The standardised test serves as a random sampling of the production line; relative aggregated proficiencies provide a benchmark against which national labor pools' absolute and comparative advantages may be assessed. Questions concerning the underlying purpose of education are largely swept aside.

### *Teaching and Learning*

In his critique of the Labour government's 'education revolution' (Rudd & Gillard, 2008), Clarke (2012) explicates some of the means by which Australia's education policy discourse has been depoliticised. Framed as inevitable and couched in unassuming notions of 'value-for-money', Australian policy proclamations literally assert and continually reiterate the challenging 'realities' of the global economic marketplace and the imperatives of educational reform in the service of international economic competitiveness.<sup>5</sup> Through constant repetition, Australia's educational policy discourse has been steered away from a critical response to this global upheaval in favour of technical adaptations and schooling reforms. Whether or not schools should be wholly impressed into the service of the national economy has not been a matter of substantive political debate.

According to Vickers (2015), in its rush to implement evidence-based policymaking, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) leveraged a select subset of research findings to support its extant preference for enumerative teacher accountability frameworks. The well-established influence of socio-demographic factors with regard to student academic achievement was downplayed in favour of less nuanced and more easily measured indicators of 'teacher quality'.<sup>6</sup>

Connell (2009) sees in Australia a virtual consensus regarding the perceived importance of teacher quality to student achievement, highlighting an implicit suggestion common to the public discourse that other, more dominant influences on divergent student outcomes—namely, socioeconomic disparity—are beyond the remit of public policy intervention. Yet rather than invest substantially in teacher education, Connell argues, Australia's policy response—typical elsewhere in the global north—has been to impose ever more stringent teacher accountability frameworks. According to Connell, these regimes of control are predicated upon a novel reliance on multivariate statistical analyses associating high academic achievement (assessed through standardised testing) with particular 'best practices' in the classroom. "The consequences for teacher education", she asserts,

are potentially very large. A list of auditable competencies can become the whole rationale of a teacher education programme. There is no need, in such a model, for any conception of Education as an intellectual discipline. There is

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no need for cultural critique, since the market, aggregating individual choices, decides what services are wanted and what are not. (Connell, 2009, p. 217)

Connell's assessment implies that new, streamlined standards for the accreditation of Australian teachers serve not only to guide teachers' practices, but also to mould the prevailing values of their profession. By weeding out dissenting voices concerning particular policies' stated intention and self-declared efficacy, a consensus may be consolidated around the value and purpose of education in accordance with prevailing political wisdom. She therefore challenges the neoliberal individuation of the teaching profession—from its insistence that the teacher foster her entrepreneurial self to the erosion of teachers' professional identity and occupational culture. Her insistence upon the collective agency of teachers is a call to restore teaching as a social undertaking and reassert community voice over the meaning and value of education.

Through their work on 'resistance' to neoliberal modes of subjectivity and performativity, Ball and Olmedo (2013) offer a useful lens through which scholars may critique the disempowering effects of standardised assessment on teachers. Not only does the homogenising, objectifying nature of the quantitative lexicon lend itself poorly to subjective interpretation and critical evaluation, the tools themselves are the province of a small group of (typically external) specialists. Furthermore, the aggregation of data for inter-school and inter-system comparison precludes meaningful consideration of the particular contexts and constraints within which education unfolds. Judgement of educators is swift, detached and without recourse—in a word, 'undemocratic'.

#### RESTORING THE POLITICAL TO EDUCATION

Hall and McGinity (2015) present a seemingly pessimistic take on the possibilities for resistance to neoliberal market reforms among teachers in the UK. Spaces for resistance in mainstream schools are rapidly diminishing, they argue, as the neoliberal tide sweeps old rationalities into retirement and relegates meaningful dissent to the margins of teachers' imaginaries. Notwithstanding the tension arising from some individuals' professional values and new modes of public management in schools, resistance is effectively shut down as teachers come to incorporate neoliberal modes not just as a matter of practical necessity and expediency, but within their professional identities.

Neoliberalism's theoretical appeal is inextricable from the foundational values of liberal democracies: namely, that markets maximise opportunity and that self-actualisation is ultimately an entrepreneurial enterprise. Proponents of the technocratisation of educational policy thus promote a 'common sense' outlook on educational outcomes that are generally considered intuitive. Indeed, its perceived obviousness is a hallmark of neoliberalism's global success (Harvey, 2005). Yet, as Biesta (2010b) asserts, matters of assessment cannot be separated from questions

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of the purpose of education. The technicisation of educational assessment through the proliferation of high stakes testing and standardised teacher accountability frameworks has not rendered these forms of educational research ‘value neutral’. On the contrary, assessment remains a fundamentally political act.

In Australia, contemporary educational standards and assessment are neoliberal in the sense that they have been derived overwhelmingly in accordance with market logics. By limiting the scope of outcomes that are validated in the public discourse, education’s social equity functions may be subordinated to its economic functionalism. Although often measured, education’s psychosocial benefits are given short shrift as priorities of educational policymaking. Furthermore, by commoditising access to quality education, responsibility for overcoming of socioeconomic barriers to prosperity has been laid squarely upon the individual. Thus many of Australia’s political commitments to equity may be laid bare as largely rhetorical.

In Australia, the proliferation of standardised assessment has exacerbated the gap between the stated intention and lived outcome of modern educational policy. Explicating the methodological implications of a ‘critical-realism’ approach to studies of educational evaluation, Reimann (2015) reminds the reader that assessment cannot be abstracted from the greater subjective whole of the schooling experience. Thus, a holistic understanding of the dynamic contexts within which teaching and learning unfold is critical to identifying the links between pedagogy and learning outcomes. The value positions inherent to high stakes testing must therefore be exposed and kept under the spotlight of a critical public discourse. According to Carr (2000),

However non-partisan some educational researchers believe their research to be, it always conveys an educational commitment even if this is unintended and even though it remains unacknowledged and undisclosed. (p. 440)

Extending Gouldner’s (1968) criticism of a purely ‘operational’ definition of research objectivity (in Carr, 2000), the supposed neutrality of standardised educational assessment may be challenged not only on procedural grounds, but also on the basis of its overt and implicit meanings. To the extent that high stakes testing in the service of student and school comparison is earnestly undertaken with the goal of spurring school improvement, proponents of these methods must reconcile the value positions from which these methods spring with their empirical outcomes. The perennial deployment of NAPLAN, among other recent reforms, has forwarded an observable marketisation of Australian education and residualisation of disadvantage in low SES schools; these developments cannot be dismissed as by-products of a benign intention (Mills et al., 2015). To maintain a policy in light of its known outcomes is to endorse those outcomes.

Stevenson’s (2007) work with teachers in the UK highlights the dynamic processes through which educational policy is formulated, implemented, contested and reshaped. As elsewhere, neoliberal educational reform in the UK consolidated simplistic conceptualisations of educational ‘best-practice’ and entailed a narrowing

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of teachers' opportunities to exercise their own professional judgement in the classroom. Importantly, reforms tended to diminish teachers' traditional role in the provision of pastoral care as part of a holistic educational practice. Yet Stevenson's analysis of union responses to market-induced tensions in the schooling sector underscores the individual and collective agency of educators in policymaking processes and of the potential for teachers to assert an alternative vision of the purpose of education and its professional—rather than technical—praxis. However overwhelming they loom, market-based educational reforms are neither linear nor inexorable. Policy without performance is moot (Ball et al., 2012), and educators the world over retain meaningful influence in their classrooms, schools and communities.

In the flexible learning space, such resistance is demonstrated in practitioners' articulation of a holistic range of educational goals and appraisal of outcomes on their own terms. Their insistence on the value of students' wellbeing as both a requisite of meaningful engagement and a worthwhile educational outcome in and of itself stands in stark contrast to the quantitative and comparative assessment practices that dominate mainstream education. FLO practitioners appraise educational outcomes not only with regard to individual improvements in literacy and numeracy, but through young peoples' acquired capacity to challenge their socioeconomic marginalisation and the structures that reproduce the impoverishment and exclusion of their communities. Such assessment is typically embedded in the appraisal of each student's 'distance travelled', i.e., the progress made by a young person in light of her unique circumstances. Described elsewhere by authors contributing to this volume as "cognisant, continuous and critical" (Thomas et al., 2017), evaluation of educational outcomes in FLOs is undertaken in light of the myriad structural impediments faced by disadvantaged young people. Critically, educational assessment in FLOs is never based on inter-personal comparison. Flexible learning practitioners' refusal to reduce young people to test scores—to abstract educational outcomes from the personal and social contexts in which learning unfolds—pushes back against contemporary trends toward standardised assessment and underscores the agency of educators to challenge the depoliticisation of education in Australia.

FLO practitioners' efforts in this regard may be viewed in light of a growing chorus among critical scholars for an alternative path forward. Lingard (2010) calls for "a rejection of high-stakes testing and a competitive schooling market as the way to better and more equitable student outcomes" (p. 133). To enhance equity in education, he argues, school curriculum and assessment regimes must formally incorporate a broader spectrum of valued educational outcomes, as well as methodologically appropriate means by which this more holistic set of outcomes may be validated. Mills (2015) calls for "empirical research that focuses upon delivering specific suggestions for responses to the mechanisms of symbolic violence and social reproduction" that reinforce class-based advantage in education (p. 156). And whilst neoliberalism serves to delimit educators' self-conceptualisation, it also "opens new

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spaces for struggle and resistance” (Ball & Olmedo, 2013, p. 88). “This re-imagining of power”, Ball and Olmedo argue,

involves bringing the teacher back into the sphere of the political, as an actor who takes up a position in relation to new discourses and truths and who looks critically at the meaning and enactment of policy. It implies an analysis of the structural conditions of the educational system alongside a critical scrutiny of our own practices and beliefs. (p. 92)

Connell (2015) suggests an alternative conception of schooling through which a society might harness the relationships embedded in radical educational practice to respond to the deprivations of the market logic. Rejecting the reductivist view of education as merely social reproduction, she asserts the central role of education in the realisation of social change, in particular its potential to actualise the promise of equity:

Bringing history more centrally into the frame, we arrive at an understanding of education as the social process in which we nurture and develop capacities for practice. [...] That may be done in a way that re-generates privilege and poverty; it may be done in a way that increases privilege and poverty; but it may be done in a way that trends towards equality. (p. 16)

Bringing this vision of equality to fruition requires a fundamental re-imagining of the value and purpose of education. FLOs engage in precisely this. Rooting practice in the commitment to equity, educational re-engagement through FLOs is framed not as entrepreneurialism, but as a means for actualising social change.

## CONCLUSION

As the chapters of the present volume attest, the contest over the purpose of education is far from conceded. The accounts brought together here illuminate FLOs’ capacity to re-insert the question of values into education—to put into practice a commitment to equity beyond the rhetorical. Insofar as they are ideologically constituted as places of critical democratic engagement—i.e., of education which engenders personal empowerment and social transformation guided by the principles of equity, social justice and inclusion (Armstrong & McMahon, 2002; in McMahon & Portelli, 2004, p. 72)—FLOs comprise important sites for the study of resistance. FLOs are vibrant laboratories of re-engagement and inclusion that bring into being the very social change envisioned in critical educational scholarship. Flexible learning practitioners’ efforts to re-engage disenfranchised young people is therefore an act of social and political upheaval. As educators, they actively challenge the segmentation, individuation and exclusion inherent to neoliberal educational reform. To enact their commitment to equity, FLOs intentionally restore to education the notions of context and community. By challenging the cyclical reproduction of disadvantage, their undertaking is an essentially political one—it is education as activism.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See also Ball (2009); Biesta (2010); Lingard (2009); Rizvi and Lingard (2009).
- <sup>2</sup> See also Angus, M. (2003). School choice policies and their impact on public education in Australia. In D. Plank & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Choosing choice: School choice in international perspective*. New York, NY: Teachers College.
- <sup>3</sup> See Savage (2011) for an empirical example of a Victorian government school that aggressively ‘negotiates’ the exit of under-performing students.
- <sup>4</sup> The COAG *Compact with Youth* (2009), for example, required Youth Connections provide ‘at-risk’ young people with “access to education or training through an alternative learning facility” (DEEWR, 2010, p. 12. In Te Riele, K. (2014). *Putting the jigsaw together: Flexible learning programs in Australia* (Final report). Melbourne: The Victoria Institute for Education, Diversity and Lifelong Learning).
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, Henry et al. (2012). *Australia in the Asian Century*. White Paper.
- <sup>6</sup> Research has demonstrated that teacher effects tend to be inconsistent (i.e., confounded by the socio-demographic makeup of classrooms) (Kane & Staiger, 2008) and unstable over time (i.e., previously observed teacher effects tend to diminish over subsequent intervals (Koedel & Betts, 2007) (both in Vickers, 2015).

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### **3. IDENTIFYING THE DEFINING FEATURES OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING OPTIONS**

#### ABSTRACT

In common with many ‘developed’ nations, Australia has a growing problem of disengagement from mainstream education by a significant minority of young people. We have witnessed in response to this issue the proliferation of ‘alternative’ educational programs or flexible learning options (FLOs), which attempt to re-engage such young people and provide them with meaningful educational experiences. Using data collected from phenomenologically aligned interviews of staff and students, defining features of these programs are identified: an unconditionally inclusive ethos and corresponding approach to governance, tailored and flexible pedagogy and curriculum, and the centrality of wellbeing and relationship building. Although all these features are clearly evident, the pivotal role played by wellbeing support for students is noted, providing the stability and peer and adult support that students require if they are to renew their education.

#### INTRODUCTION

As noted by te Riele in Chapter 1, disadvantaged young Australians face complex interrelated barriers to integration within mainstream schooling (Campbell, McGuire, & Stockley, 2012). These challenges include interrupted early schooling, low literacy, language and numeracy skills, learning difficulties, low self-esteem, anxiety or depression, addictions or substance abuse, financial pressures, family breakdown, homelessness, discrimination, conflict and violence. Many are in the care of the state or are themselves young parents and carers. Further, Indigenous Australian young people continue to experience lower levels of educational attainment and school completion than non-Indigenous students (Purdie & Buckley, 2010; COAG, 2013).

We see socioeconomically advantaged young people gravitating in ever-greater numbers to the nation’s heavily state-subsidized independent school sector. As a result, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds now represent nearly 60 per cent of government school enrolments (Productivity Commission, 2011). As government schools strive to improve student participation, retention and attainment, there is a growing inclination to remove under-achieving students.

‘Residualisation’ is a term now commonly used to describe the process by which disadvantaged students are concentrated in a public school system considered by

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many to be chronically underfunded. As a growing number of young people are ‘exited’ from mainstream schools, flexible learning options (FLOs)—alternative educational programs seeking to mitigate early school leaving (McGinty & Brader, 2005; Te Riele, 2014)—are playing a far more prominent role.

This study investigated the FLO approach to educational re-engagement of at-risk young people in Australia, relying upon staff and student participants’ accounts of their experiences to highlight commonality, as well as variance, in interpretation inherent in the operation of FLOs. While FLOs have evolved quite heterogeneously in Australia—responding to local needs primarily in areas of social, economic and geographical disadvantage—there are many commonalities across this kaleidoscope of programs (Te Riele, 2014; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011; Cole, 2004; McGregor & Mills, 2014). These commonalities constitute defining features of FLOs.

This chapter points to a dynamic in which wellbeing support assumes a fundamentally important, if not principal, place among these features. Such support is seen to fulfil a primary role of enabling a secure and safe setting—a precondition to engaging positively with the curriculum and the learning experience in general. Also identified is a symbiotic relationship between this feature and two additional foundational stones of FLOs: an egalitarian ethos with associated governance regimes, as well as pedagogy and curriculum tailored specifically for the needs of young people whose education was about to end prematurely.

## METHOD

This chapter draws on qualitative data from research into FLOs in four Australian states/territories seeking to understand and gauge the value of FLOs: that is, their value to individuals across the life course and to society in the form of the social return on investment. The sites chosen differed in a number of respects: location, longevity of operation, status/governance, and enrolments (see Table 1). Each of the selected sites offered credentialed formal education to young people between 12 and 20 years of age and, in all cases, attendance is voluntary.

For the purposes of this paper, the sites are re-named as follows:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with male and female, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and staff. Sixty-one FLO program students (58 present, 3 past) and 96 adults (predominantly teaching and support staff, along with program leaders and a small number of parents) took part in the semi-structured interviews, out of which emerged the findings.

### *Program Ethos and Governance*

It was immediately evident that the FLOs shared an inclusive program ethos, operationalized through governance frameworks designed to reconcile needs and demands not always associated with mainstream schooling. Fundamentally, they shared a purposeful vision that had at its core a commitment to providing

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*Table 1. FLO sites*

<i>Name</i>	<i>Region</i>	<i>Status/governance</i>	<i>Years established</i>	<i>Enrolments (2015)</i>
Blue Gum	Victoria, outer urban	non-government program	<5	<100
Waratah	Victoria, inner urban	government auspice	<5	<100
Bottle Brush	Victoria, inner urban	non-government school	>5	>300
Acacia	Queensland, regional	non-government	>5	>100
Grevillea	Western Australia, urban	non-government school	>5	<50
Wattle	Western Australia, urban	non-government school	>5	<200
Desert Rose	Northern Territory urban	Government auspice	<5	<50
Sturt Pea	Northern Territory, regional	non-government school	<5	<150

young people who have disengaged from mainstream with a ‘second chance’. Put differently, this can be seen as an ethos of unconditional acceptance, serving not only as the FLOs’ *raison d’être*, but as an ideal to which students themselves would commit. In championing inclusion through FLO principles and practices, students were encouraged to follow suit and imbue principles of tolerance and empathy in relations within and beyond the confines of the FLO environment.

Interviews reveal that this egalitarian ethos did indeed prompt many students to reflect on their role and commitment. As Brooke (staff, Waratah Flexi) notes,

Everyone is sort of on the same page... if you don’t buy into that philosophy here you can’t really work here.

How this is interpreted and experienced by students is illustrated by Connie (student, Acacia Flexi):

I think everyone knows this place is different and there are rules, like principles, and if you come, you got to live by those... Live by the principles. Everyone wants to be here because of that, like, it’s fair.

While this was a common refrain, less sanguine views were also expressed, with some objecting to what they felt was an increasingly intrusive and controlling approach to behaviour management. Conversely, others expressed frustration at the laxness of rules and the latitude given to students who were reluctant to contribute. Nonetheless, a commitment to attachment and acceptance was clearly evident.

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Such commitment presents an on-going, if unavoidable, challenge for staff, one requiring them to reconcile the obligation to provide a secure, ordered and well-managed setting with the need to provide a learning experience free of the rigidity, regimentation, control and other negative aspects these students associate with mainstream schooling. We are reminded of the perhaps counterintuitive yet vitally important role that rules on behaviour play in enabling the young person to mature, approach self-realization and exercise greater autonomy (Kraftl, 2015).

Compromise and flexibility are integral as staff consider a student's decision to attend (or not) in light of the myriad potential barriers at work in the young person's life. Invariably, the program accommodates the student's needs. Indeed, several teaching and administrative staff in the research sample remarked that such programs only work when students are ceded a large measure of control over their participation. One staff member noted that:

Students want to come to school and you hear that attitude from the students. Like, 'I used to hate school, it was so boring, but it's actually pretty good here. The students want to be here. No student is forced to be here'. (Andrea, staff, Waratah Flexi)

One aim of empowering young people with choice was to equip them with the social and personal skills needed to diffuse potential conflict. For many students—in particular, those with strained interpersonal relationships, a history of school-related disciplinary action, or antagonistic interactions with authority figures—the proactive amelioration of tension constituted a fundamental point of difference between the FLO and the mainstream schooling experience.

[In] mainstream [school] it's like—you feel so trapped [...] that was my problem. I didn't feel like I hadn't an inch of freedom at all [...] You feel like you're in a tiny box. Here, this place is small, and it feels like I have a whole fricking planet to run on by myself. So, this place is just—I mean, if schools were like this, I can guarantee you'd have kids going to Year 12 constantly and they wouldn't drop out unless they had a fair enough reason. (Alice, Bottle Brush)

Staff interviewees suggested that their FLOs represented more than retreats from the wider world, or 'learning bubbles' (Ferguson, 2007, p. 125). Indeed, they exist not only at the boundary lines of traditional, centralized education, but where mainstream schools, community-based education providers, public and private vocational training providers, and government and non-government support agencies and networks intersect (Myconos, 2014). Staff interviewees pointed to a cross-sector organizational orientation, and to how governance in their FLO entailed an outward looking disposition, as well as the ability to access and harness skills from a myriad of internal and external sources including: psychological and physical health support services, vocational training and industry sectors, mainstream education providers, and community support services.

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The greater the scope for flexible planning and coordination, the greater the capacity to anticipate and cater for a wide range of student and staff needs. This, in turn, enables the allocation of a broad range of intellectual and material resources. Indeed, material assistance featured prominently in discussion about program ethos and governance. Nelson (staff, Acacia Flexi) explained that

many students and families that came to Acacia Flexi report that they struggle to afford mainstream schooling because of school uniform fees [...] textbooks, ID cards and different excursions.

Such assistance becomes critically important, given that the FLOs studied here encounter a larger concentration of ‘high needs’ young people—e.g., challenged by low literacy, language and numeracy, experiences of severe hardship, physical and mental illness, and unstable circumstances at home—than is found in mainstream schooling. In order to address student needs, the FLOs necessarily enable collaboration between disparate professional groupings, including: trained teachers, vocational education trainers, youth support workers, careers advisors, administrative support workers, and program coordinators.

It is evident that operating at the abovementioned crossroads can be a complex and costly undertaking when the necessary staff recruitment and professional development is taken into account. The challenges facing those looking to realize an egalitarian ethos are captured here by Isabella (staff, Waratah Flexi) as she provides a snapshot of FLO staffing needs:

I think funding is the biggest challenge in any school anywhere, but especially for this because we need so many more staff to actually enact and enable the program to run. You need your assistants in every class. You need wellbeing welfare co-ordinators. You need people to debrief the staff, because we’re all dealing with rape, murder, incest, violence, drug abuse and addiction, aggression, and depressed and suicidal kids. We’re dealing with that everyday so we need debriefing. (Isabella, Waratah Flexi)

Adequate staffing is required also to maintain low student-teacher ratios, and for the provision and maintenance of aesthetically pleasing, welcoming and healthy environments for young people. The importance of the latter cannot be understated, with an enthusiasm for gardens, vegetable plots, chicken enclosures, basketball hoops, outdoor seating and other areas where students can congregate evident in most sites (Te Riele, 2014). Thus, the participants in the research point to the existence of a program ethos and attendant governance that utilized a wide array of skills and resources for the necessary preconditions for positive engagement.

### *Flexible, Tailored Pedagogy and Curriculum*

Staff across the FLO sites described intentional processes for individualising the learning experience, curricula and the pathways taken for young people. Nelson

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(staff) regarded Acacia Flexi as distinct from mainstream in light of “staff who are putting together a vision that’s looking to treat young people as individuals rather than numbers or items to be processed”.

For Nelson (staff), Acacia Flexi is always “looking at ways to meet kids at their own level”. This was common, with staff interviewees across the sites reporting that they aimed to be as flexible with each student as possible, with curricula and teaching materials designed and developed on site to meet the needs of their cohorts. As Caroline (staff, Waratah Flexi) explained, staff must “see it as our duty to adapt to a student... rather than the other way around”.

It was also evident that each FLO utilised a strengths-based approach whereby talk of deficits, shortcomings and barriers was largely muted in favour of interaction that emphasized and supported every young person’s individual aptitudes and potentialities. Hence, Anna (staff, Acacia Flexi) asserted “that every child has the ability to learn [...] just not in the same way”.

This entailed taking the time to get to know each student while demonstrating a genuine interest in their personal aspirations and learning preferences. Typically, staff members of these FLOs worked with young people to change, alter or follow up new lines of inquiry and learning as opportunities arose, some of which were beyond the confines of the program itself:

Audrey came up to me and she’s like, ‘Oh, what work are you interested in’? And I’m like, ‘a bit of land and conservation because I love the environment’ and she’s like, ‘oh, there’s a program going, maybe I could hook you up?’ She got straight onto it. Literally the next day I was ready for an interview. Like, ‘Jesus Audrey! How do you do it?’ (Riley, student, Blue Gum Flexi)

Individual learning plans were the media through which these aims were pursued, and interviewees noted that such plans were created and revised collaboratively in accordance with students’ evolving circumstances. Used in conjunction with integrated, hands-on and project-based pedagogies, these became the bridge between credentialed learning, remediation in literacy and numeracy, mentoring and pastoral care, and community-based co-curricular activities, which have all been shown to be essential elements in the process of re-engagement (Te Riele, 2012; Mills & McGregor, 2010).

Andrea (staff) noted that individualised learning plans at Waratah Flexi were effective because they ensured that “no student is excluded from the lesson because they don’t understand the content”.

Such experiences are in line with te Riele’s (2014) findings showing how these plans help to keep learning meaningful for each student, and help to better track and then identify completed units of learning for which the student may be credited. This is especially important for those young people who may have completed parts of their school year levels at previous schools, and who may otherwise be required to restart each year level if resuming in a mainstream setting.

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A key to the individualisation process was the FLOs' capacity to provide learning support that fostered two-way interaction without preferential treatment. In his previous (mainstream) school, Riley (student, Blue Gum Flexi) stated that

teachers... just ignore you... if you genuinely need help they won't help you... They just ignore you and go help someone else that's 'worthwhile'.

This provides a contrast to Axel's (student) FLO experience of learning support at Waratah Flexi:

They can't [provide support in mainstream schools] because they've got so many other students to teach [...] [Here] they have the time and they'll sit there and talk to every single one.

Although interviewees point to the use of curricular frameworks intended to enhance relevance, and that are tailored to the needs of individuals, it would be a mistake to assume that working in such settings is uncomplicated or trouble-free. Challenges for all staff necessarily include renegotiation of workloads, fluctuations in timetabling and attendance, and responding to unmet expectations as a result of differing student responses, circumstances or abilities.

Those consulted were attuned to the need to create a meaningful educational experience that contrasted with that found in the mainstream school settings. Aware of their students' negative experience of schooling prior to arrival, staff relied on content that was engaging and relevant. Kyle (student, Blue Gum Flexi), for example, had fallen behind in her previous school

not because I couldn't do the work [...] I just didn't agree with the work, and I had [just] been told everything up until then—[with] no freedom or independence.

Typically, the FLOs' educational frameworks were adaptations of existing state-regulated curricula, be they foundation level and/or vocationally based, Year 11 or 12 certificates, or derived from conventional middle years formats. As noted, staff across the sites progressed through the curriculum using a strengths-based inflection, affirming the importance, for example, of social and emotional wellbeing, resilience, and life-skills. Students at these sites were encouraged to help develop course content and to negotiate fundamental aspects of the curriculum:

As long as we're still covering the areas that we need to for numeracy and literacy and all that sort of stuff, we can kind of go with whatever unit topic the young people are interested in and fit everything in amongst that... like last term a lot of the young people were saying they wanted to do stuff about nature and science and those kinds of things [...] So you're identifying the things that maybe you're required to do but try to fit it in a way that's more meaningful for them. (Kristy, staff, Acacia Flexi)

Similarly, staff seemed keenly aware of the importance of using the curriculum in ways that paid due regard to the student's respective levels of development, as well

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as to their specific aptitudes. This entailed a heavy emphasis on basic ‘foundation skills’. Frequently, this meant engaging the content on a rudimentary level, and with more facilitation and assistance than would likely be the case in a mainstream setting. The rationale here was to first stabilize and then renew the young person’s regard for education through material that was of direct relevance to her or him. Thus, when Jill (staff, Acacia Flexi) implemented a unit on the brain, “it was really important to talk about effects of trauma, mental health stuff”.

In another FLO, a particular social and emotional learning framework was embedded throughout the entire curriculum:

It’s always got to be related back in some way to how you’re managing your emotions, or your self-awareness, your identity. Something has got to be linked to all those things in order for it to be meaningful and successful for our kids. (Jeremy, staff, Blue Gum Flexi)

It was apparent that the immediate and, indeed, principal, concern was with re-kindling interest in education—a vital, yet unquantifiable goal. This imperative places the FLO at a disadvantage in comparisons with mainstream schools. With the dearth of quantifiable and longitudinal data on the benefits of FLOs, questions are frequently posed about the academic rigour of such programs (KPMG, 2009; Zyngier, 2006; Bruin et al., 2013; Smyth, 2013). For FLO staff, these doubts manifest as unrealistic expectations and a sense that their efforts go unrecognized. Interviewees felt it was one thing to identify and respond to wellbeing needs, but another thing altogether to adequately map the distance travelled with regards to academic achievement.

Although staff acknowledged the importance of quantifying formal attainments, they objected to being judged according to indicators of progress that had limited purchase in a FLO setting. To be sure, attendance and completion rates sometimes made for unimpressive reading by those focusing solely on academic achievement. This tension occasionally manifested in conflicting priorities between: adherence to and steady progress through a prescribed curriculum for the purposes of attaining a certificate; and gradual, student-led progress—socially, emotionally and physically—determined largely by the learner’s context and rate of improvement.

### *Wellbeing and Relationship Building*

The issue of wellbeing support is approached with caution, given some concerns with a tendency towards ‘therapeutic education’, the ‘popularization of emotional vulnerability’, and the ways in which ‘social and emotional learning’ can be enlisted to buttress a human capital agenda that ultimately serves an instrumental function for business and the economy (Ecclestone et al., 2009). Nonetheless, interviews left little doubt as to the foundational role for wellbeing and relationship building in FLOs. Invariably, the young people consulted in this research gravitated towards FLOs in response to deep disillusionment with aspects of mainstream schooling,

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a condition that was often inextricably linked to difficult personal experiences and hardship beyond the school setting. They were in dire need of support.

In discussions with staff about the wellbeing and relationship-building aspect of FLOs, we learn of the hardship young people had faced beyond the school setting, as well the scale and complexity of these students' needs. Sophia (staff) reported on the barriers to learning experienced by Blue Gum Flexi students:

Many come from homes where it's second or third generation welfare. They have parents that have got drug or alcohol issues. Some of them have homelessness issues, so they're constantly in that state of being unstable in their home life.

Staff often must anticipate the students' poor state of health and respond, for example, by providing breakfast and the provision of other basic foodstuffs throughout the day. FLO staff opt for a variety of responses, often through access to external supports. Bryan noted that at Waratah Flexi:

A lot of them don't know how to access services, so at least if we have a wellbeing worker in each class they can say, 'Okay, we can connect you with housing service [...]. We can connect you with drug and alcohol workers, we can put you in detox' [...]. We can take them to Centrelink [for youth welfare payments].

Other examples of the support provided across the sites included transportation, referrals and support for dental and other physical health services, mental health services and legal help. Together, these represented a set of responses aimed firstly to ameliorate and then counter the effects of hardship through practical and accessible services. In one respect, this reaffirms and extends Ferguson and Seddon's (2007) image of FLOs located on the boundary between mainstream and alternative institutions. It also affirms Kraftl's (2015) view of these alternative education settings, whereby they represent a diverse and shifting patchwork of connections and disconnections with mainstream education, and incorporate non-education supports from across society. This again draws attention to the cross-sector orientation of FLOs.

To be sure, policies and protocols addressing students' needs are integral to most mainstream educational settings, with resourcing devoted to ameliorating the effects of hardship. However, for participants in this research, it is the centrality of wellbeing in FLOs that sets this mode of education apart from the mainstream. This is conveyed by Anna (staff, Acacia Flexi), who reflected on her FLO's capacity to enable positive change:

In a lot of mainstream schools the educational part will come first. That doesn't come first here. It's that the whole child will come first, because if that whole child's not comfortable and positive and or not feeling confidence, they're not going to be able to get through their schoolwork.

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This was echoed by Lucy from Blue Gum Flexi, who felt her program “differentiated [itself] from the mainstream because it focuses on a holistic approach to the students’ welfare and progression”.

In their interviews, students wasted little time contrasting their FLO experiences with their earlier experiences of mainstream settings, where they often felt unsupported by staff and threatened by peers. Maree (student, Acacia Flexi) described her previous school as “unfriendly”: “[...] you have to just stay with your friends. You have to watch your back”.

When asked to reflect on their circumstances prior to commencing in the FLO, and of their journey, students frequently reported that without the FLO, they would likely be living very unproductive lives. Some spoke of having led listless and sedentary lifestyles (e.g., sleeping throughout the day), while others spoke of the very real prospect of being embroiled in criminal behaviour, imprisonment, or even meeting a premature death. These views were reflected in this student’s response:

I wouldn’t be at school, that’s for sure. I wouldn’t have even started my Year 12. I’d be smoking drugs still, to be honest, and be probably doing nothing with my life. (Ashley, student, Blue Gum Flexi)

Here we return to the issue of outcomes. In the FLO settings studied, improved wellbeing was regarded as an outcome in itself—and as evidence of the ‘distance travelled’ by FLO students. The findings suggest that academic attainment was seldom considered the sole criteria for assessing success by the staff members of the FLO programs.

Staff were aware of the need to expand their conception of care to include measures that would help salvage a young person’s sense of self-worth, echoing research showing wellbeing to be the cornerstone of FLO programs (De Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Hargreaves, 2011; Lamb & Rice, 2008; Te Riele, 2014). Low confidence and self-esteem were often described by interviewees as being linked to the scarring effect of mainstream schooling. This resonates with the findings of Zyngier (2006) and Lange and Sletten (2002), with the latter claiming that school suspensions, missed classes and academic failure leave many disenfranchised young people “weary of the school experience and distrustful that the education system can be a tool for their success” (p. 11).

For staff at the FLO programs visited, addressing the myriad wellbeing issues of young people was a necessary pre-condition for educational engagement and progress. Above all, those interviewed noted the emphasis placed on building strong and supportive relationships between students and staff. Staff devoted much time to promoting trust, patience, understanding, and respect. As Grant (student, Acacia Flexi) explained, “The teachers here are more caring and more interesting into people’s problems [...] they’re just respectful [...] They’re just lovely and kind and caring”.

Staff reported on how they worked with and encouraged students to improve their peer relationships. This is noteworthy, not least because of students’ previous

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negative experiences with peers, which frequently triggered disengagement from education (Te Riele, 2014).

In contrast, within the FLO settings, we observe a palpable sense of safety, mutual support and belonging. Indeed, the notion of ‘family’ was a refrain heard in numerous interviews. This is best captured by Sarah (student) when describing Waratah Flexi:

It’s just like one big family. Any new kid is always welcome. We accept everyone. Who they are, where they come from... doesn’t really matter. We see them as a person... We don’t judge them by how they look or what they do. We judge them from the inside—from what they want to share [...]. After a while, you realise it’s a great family. I love being here. There’s all this love and warmth everywhere. (Sarah, student, Waratah Flexi)

In many instances, students had on arrival displayed a hyper-vigilance born of earlier experiences within mainstream settings characterised by fear, threats, risk and vulnerability. In response, the FLO programs sought to provide a positive culture promoting a sense of togetherness among students who, in a mainstream context, were often regarded as outsiders or eccentrics. It is within this context that the FLO assumes the status of a haven, and it was not surprising to hear evocations of family and the yearning for acceptance: a refrain in which the importance of belonging is central.

These findings affirm research (Noddings, 1992; Davies et al., 2011; Te Riele, 2012, 2014) showing how students can experience positive empowerment when they become a ‘subject of care’ in educational programs. A non-threatening environment was hence of vital importance to the students, where they responded to intimate and less crowded settings, both in regards to the classroom context of teaching and learning and the whole-school environment.

From all this it is apparent that—at least in the first instance—the experience of respite within a safe haven and a sense of belonging is at least as important as the capacity to act autonomously. The FLO enables recovery and re-orientation, which seems to be inextricably linked with group association. It may well be that after having been rejected by the mainstream, the capacity to exercise agency—if taken to mean the capacity to make independent decisions and to act purposefully—is slow to develop, and may itself require a transitional phase wherein the young person’s anxieties are allayed within stable, supportive settings. This ameliorative and stabilizing role, underpinned by tangible wellbeing support, emerges as a vital feature of the FLO undertaking.

## CONCLUSION

The defining features identified—an egalitarian ethos with associated governance regimes, tailored pedagogy and curriculum, and a foundational role for wellbeing support—all seem integral to achieving success for young people whose education was heading towards a premature end. While each feature represents a key

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ingredient in the FLO response to disengagement, effective re-engagement in a FLO is premised largely on a symbiotic relationship between all elements. Although a strong philosophical framework and governance structure is important, without attention to matching curriculum that suits a young person's abilities, strengths and aspirations, combined with emphasis on wellbeing and relationship building to address antecedents to learning difficulties, that philosophical framework is hollow. This symbiosis adds up to a distinct approach to the needs of often disaffected students, and an approach that those consulted in this research say stands in stark contrast to mainstream education.

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## **4. ABORIGINAL AND TORRES STRAIT ISLANDER YOUNG PEOPLE AND STAFF ‘TALK UP’ THE VALUE OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING OPTIONS**

### ABSTRACT

Since the early 1990’s, a number of government-driven initiatives have been implemented in a bid to improve educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—some with ambitious targets. More recently, closing the school completion gap has become a national challenge. Research has identified that good educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples may be minimal unless other aspects of socioeconomic disadvantage such as health, housing, employment and access to education are addressed. It is therefore paramount to understand how participation in Flexible Learning Options (FLOs) may open pathways to improved health, social wellbeing and employment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. This chapter focuses on the experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and staff who have participated in FLO programs. Findings should inform discussions around the value of FLOs’ holistic approach to education for improved life outcomes.

### INTRODUCTION

It is well documented that educational experiences and outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people nationally are poor (Malin & Maidment, 2003; Sarra, 2006, 2007; Kral, 2009; Hill, Lynch, & Dalley-Trim, 2012; SCRGSP, 2016; Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2016). Researchers have attributed the lack of successful educational outcomes to inadequate resourcing of schools, including both operational systems and suitably qualified teachers (Sarra, 2006, 2007; Kral, 2009), inadequate managerial diligence in holding principals and teachers accountable for poor outcomes (Sarra, 2006, 2007) and clashing world-views where the dominant society’s perception of normal is at odds with that of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Hill, Lynch, & Dalley-Trim, 2012). Conversely, teachers have presumed parents do not value education (Kral, 2009) or that the internalisation of low expectations and negative stereotyping by some parents and students has resulted in them believing they will never be successful (Sarra, 2006, 2007; Gorringer, Ross, & Fforde, 2011; Gooda,

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2011). All or any of these components may have contributed to poor educational outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people; however, rather than blame government policies, educational authorities or the victim (for not accessing opportunities that have been made available), this paper adopts a different perspective. It concentrates on the personal accounts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who attend a Flexible Learning Option (FLO) as an alternative to a mainstream school. Also highlighted are the experiences of the FLO staff who provide support to the young people to enhance life skills, social and emotional wellbeing, academic skills and employability.

## BACKGROUND

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have been subjected to various government policies since early settlement, some based on misguided good intentions, such as *The Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act, 1897*, while others, such as the policy of assimilation, were enacted in the early 1950s as a deliberate method of controlling the lives of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It was not until the 1960s that society and government started to change their views on the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, as Malin and Maidment (2003) suggest:

The turn of the decade from the 1960s to the 1970s brought a dramatic shift in thinking regarding Indigenous education, health and well-being away from the assimilationist views of the previous 20 years. Indigenous rights to self-determination regarding culture and identity and local community control and development featured on the government agenda for the first time. (p. 86)

An abundance of policies and programs targeting Indigenous education in particular have been developed and implemented over the past 50 years, and it would be fair to say that the continued focus on Indigenous education has been beneficial for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. *The Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators Report 2016*, which measures the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, identified improvement in the following outcomes (which include some Council of Australian Government (COAG) targets):

- Education improvements included increases in the proportion of 20–24 year olds completing year 12 or above (from 2008 to 2014–2015) and the proportion of 20–64 year olds with or working towards postschool qualifications (from 2002 to 2014–2015)
- The proportion of adults whose main income was from employment increased from 32 per cent in 2002 to 43 per cent in 2014–2015, with household income increasing over this period (SCRGSP, 2016, p. 2).

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The report goes on to point out that outcomes in some areas have worsened, such as an increase in the number of adults reporting “high levels of psychological distress”, “hospitalisations for selfharm”, “substance abuse” and “imprisonment rates” (SCRGSP, 2016, p. 2). However, the most recent reference to COAG targets noted in the *Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report 2016* accepts that it is necessary to view the ‘big picture’ regarding changing the scene of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and wellbeing. The report has established that,

Improvements in one area can positively impact another. For example, providing children with a healthy start to life will give them the best chance of academic success which will, in turn, have positive flow-on effects for employment opportunities. (p. 5)

The acknowledgement by government of the linkage between health and education is a step in the right direction to accepting that a holistic approach is necessary to provide opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to make appropriate choices in life and enable them to experience the reality of ‘living a good life’. Zubrick et al. (2014) state,

The three major facilitators of optimal wellbeing in children and young people are intellectual flexibility coupled with an outgoing, easy temperament; good language development; and emotional support, especially in the face of challenge. (p. 97)

The authors go on to point out that

The four main constraints on optimal wellbeing in children and young people are stress that accumulates and overwhelms, chaos, social exclusion (including racism), and social inequality. (p. 97)

### *Closing the Attainment Disparity*

Although there has been some advancement in the area of education as mentioned above, there is still room for further improvements. Multiple research papers and government-funded reviews have been composed over the years, identifying assorted schools of thoughts regarding the root causes of the attainment disparity between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. For example, in regards to the debate concerning low levels of literacy and numeracy, Kral (2009) suggests,

Public commentary commonly attributes blame to inadequate teaching, poor resourcing of remote schools or even lack of parental support for school attendance. (p. 1)

Kral proceeds to advise that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in remote areas have only recently transitioned from an oral culture to a literate culture in comparison to other literate cultures (p. 1). Hill, Lynch, and Dalley-Trim (2012) argue

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schools and policies do not effectively accommodate the mobility of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, which in turn results in the educational needs of these students not being met. The authors caution that,

This existing normalisation of a sedentary way of living is ‘at odds’ with the lived experiences of many Indigenous Australians, for whom mobility is an integral part of ‘being’ in the world. Indigenous mobility is not something to be ‘fixed’ by educators and systems. (p. 54)

Chris Sarra, on taking up the position of Cherbourg<sup>1</sup> State School’s first Aboriginal principal in 1998, opened the debate on the development, progression and impact of low educational expectations and the internalisation of negative stereotypes and the impact on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. Sarra (2006) reported,

I discovered a school in chaos. It was a school in which Aboriginal children thought they were reinforcing their sense of being Aboriginal by aspiring downwards. (p. 187)

He continues on to advise that his research had uncovered a “vicious negative attitude towards Aborigines” and that “[w]hite teachers and Aboriginal children both subscribed to and reinforced this negative and inaccurate perception of what it means to be Aboriginal” (pp. 187–188). Following on from Sarra’s work, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers have focussed more attention on the effects of internalising negative stereotypes that may emerge through avenues such as lateral violence, the media and government policies (Gorringe, Ross, & Fforde, 2011; Gooda, 2011).

From a research perspective, some of the more difficult subjects to tackle that negatively impact Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples include low expectations, negative stereotyping and, in particular, lateral violence. Lateral violence is a relatively new term being used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to describe the intra-racial conflict that has developed as a result of oppression experienced through colonisation. Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda (2011) advises:

Lateral violence, also known as horizontal violence or intra-racial conflict, is a product of a complex mix of historical, cultural and social dynamics that results in a spectrum of behaviours that include:

- gossiping
- jealousy
- bullying
- shaming
- social exclusion
- family feuding
- organisational conflict
- physical violence.

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Lateral violence is not just an individual's behaviour. It often occurs when a number of people work together to attack or undermine another individual or group. It can also be a sustained attack on individuals, families or groups. (p. 54)

The use of the term lateral violence can be confusing as it not only refers to physical violence, "but also social, emotional, psychological, economic and spiritual violence" (p. 54). Lateral violence undermines the social fabric of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society and can be the catalyst behind such issues as family violence, community conflict and friction in the workplace.

While it is necessary to acknowledge these issues and their effects, it can be difficult to broach such topics. Gorringe et al. (2011) suggest:

Issues surrounding identity and the ways in which negative stereotypes are used by Aboriginal people against other Aboriginal people are a matter of great sensitivity, with candid and rigorous debate stifled by valid fears of reprisal, which include being perceived as negating the presence of real disadvantage and exposing people and communities to further misrepresentation and outside attack. To the contrary, identifying these issues does not mean denying the real need of many Aboriginal people, nor the continuing racism which people experience, but provides mechanisms which may effect change in these areas. And if left undiscussed, issues of negative stereotypes within the Aboriginal community will continue to escalate. (p. 3)

This AIATSIS Research Discussion Paper authored by Gorringe et al. (2011) resulted from a workshop organised by AIATSIS in 2009 at the Ipswich Campus of the University of Queensland. Attended by 16 Aboriginal people from across Australia, the workshop created a culturally safe environment

[...] to discuss issues raised by perceptions of identity within the Aboriginal community and to chart a way forward [...] navigated by a strength-based approach. (p. 6)

The authors openly explored negative perceptions of identity and notions of authenticity and how it has become a challenge to disengage from a language of deficit. The workshop participants noted that a shroud of sensitivity has engulfed these topics and that breaking the silence requires courage. The participants went on to acknowledge that part of the problem was

[...] confronting (sometimes one or all) of self, friends, family and colleagues with the necessity of exposing and/or taking responsibility for behaviours rather than continuing to blame others. (p. 10)

Negative stereotypes impact the health and wellbeing of young people, who are often told that they are lazy, disrespectful and cheeky, that they under-achieve, and that their place of belonging is in that space called 'most disadvantaged and most marginalised'. Gooda (2011) suggests that

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These negative stereotypes are not just internalised on an individual basis, they can be applied to others in our families and communities as well. [...] Internalising these negative stereotypes not only affects our self-respect but also our respect for others. (p. 70)

All of the abovementioned elements inform this chapter's investigation of the complex underpinnings of educational disengagement among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, as well as their re-engagement through FLOs.

#### APPROACH

This paper forms part of a larger Australian Research Council (ARC) funded study, 'Gauging the Value of Flexible Learning Options for Disenfranchised Youth and the Australian Community'. Although 157 interviewees participated in this study, this paper focuses on the voices of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and non-Indigenous staff who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people to establish their views on attending and working in a FLO. The interview questions used to garner responses to the research questions were framed in a manner that allowed young people and staff to yarn about their experiences. The best method to use to engage Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in sharing their stories is paramount when wanting to understand the 'big picture'. Dean (2010) advises,

The strength of yarning is its flexibility and adaptation to the individual needs of Aboriginal research. It allows the participants, the intended beneficiaries, to become partners within the research process, not just individual contributors. (p. 7)

The author proceeds to establish that this method allows the participants to share their knowledge of the past, present and expectations for the future, which also asserts their voices as the authority.

The author of the present chapter identifies as a Gugu Badhun woman who also has ties to the Torres Strait Islander community through family, friends and former colleagues. She has worked with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples both as colleagues and in user groups, with work experience spanning over three decades in Queensland and the Northern Territory. These lived experiences were used to examine the data based on her knowledge of what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples value as important. As a researcher on this project, the author spent a week each in two of the sites and has local knowledge of the communities. The transcripts were read using both inductive and deductive readings. Through the inductive reading, themes emerged without predetermination of what might be found. These themes were categorised and initially divided into two sub-categories of information relevant to the study's research questions and information relevant to the value of FLOs from the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

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people. A third sub-category—the value of employing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff in FLOs—emerged as a prominent theme throughout the transcripts.

*Contemporary Issues Impacting Young People*

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff were open and honest throughout the interviews, showing empathy and compassion as they talked about current happenings and possible solutions. Interviewees shared their stories of working with young people caught up in a world of low expectations and negativity.

I think the challenge is getting them to understand the purpose of an education—what it can do for you. Because kids come to school day in, day out, but they don't necessarily learn or engage. The challenge is getting them to understand that there is a purpose, and once you get educated, that purpose then gives your life meaning. It allows you to open any door you want to open. So that's what I always try to pass on to the students, the benefits of getting not just the benefits, but the purpose. The purpose of getting an education, it gives meaning to your life. (Lucille, Indigenous staff member)

Yeah, and that sort of thing too, like being picked up. They don't want to get up and learn, well, then that's their own problem. That's a learned thing as well from generational parents not going to school and not seeing the importance of going to school. If you grow up in that environment then of course you're going to sort of follow those sets of ways of living. (Rohan, Indigenous staff member)

Some of the staff members raised the issue of welfare dependency, which for many years has been a focus of government policy resulting in miscellaneous programs being introduced as a means of assisting people to become skilled and able to move from welfare to work. However, Duffin et al. (2013) revealed that in one particular community where jobs are scarce, research participants

[...] reported feeling abandoned and discouraged from participating in future training opportunities for fear that this would not lead to paid work. Many participants reported only participating in training courses to avoid getting cut off from their Centrelink income. (p. 36)

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staff shared their feelings and thoughts in the following comments about working with young people who could be from families with a forlorn history of being welfare recipients.

Historically, a lot of these kids come from three generations of Centrelink and Centrelink as we know just been like a cancer to our people. It's destroying our people's spirit and soul, you don't have to be a rocket scientist, you don't have to be a doctor or a professor, whatever. Every job is there for a reason, and it doesn't matter, my mother started off as a cleaner. (Lucille, Indigenous staff member)

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They're learning that if you want something you've got to get up and actually work for it yourself rather than waiting for a handout or waiting for people to do things for you. That's a big challenge if you don't know that sort of stuff. That's hard for any teenager, let alone these teenagers that we're working with. But they're doing really well and they teach me along the way too. (Rohan, Indigenous staff member)

Sadly, a large number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people are negatively impacted by their immediate domain and the effects can continue to be observed in future generations.

### *Life Trajectories of Disengaged Indigenous Young People*

In attempting to identify how the young people felt about their current circumstances and establish a response to the question “What life trajectories (and their associated individual and societal outcomes) do disengaged young people traverse in the Australian context?”, young people were asked why they chose to attend the FLO. The responses to this question by many of the young people indicated that they wanted to ‘get away’ from problems that they had been subjected to in their homes and or community. Their responses included:

I just stopped and missed out a whole term [...] or two. Then I ended up getting in down here and it's been good ever since. (Asher, young person)

I don't know, just to get away from family and stuff—like things back at home—somewhere different. (Shayna, young person)

Get away from home. (Cora, young person)

[High school was] not good. It changed. Everyone acted up. I didn't like it. Some friends weren't friends any more. Lots of new people. I didn't like it and wanted to come to flexi with my brothers. (Connie, young person)

Some young people shared experiences of trauma in their lives, for example:

And then I went outside and I hit this one guy, [...] I split his head and I didn't know what I was doing and I just went outside and hit him on the head. I've seen a lot of violence, but like when I did that I felt [...] really bad for the guy who got hit on the head. (Corey, young person)

The young people were then asked what they would be doing if they were not attending a FLO. Most replies were negative in nature, for example:

I'd be wagging, smoking and stuff. (Shayna, young person)

I'd run away from school. (Cora, young person)

Well I'd just be at home all the time playing video games and maybe doing some other stuff. (Corey, young person)

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I would have been, just probably getting peer pressure and influenced by my other friends back there that are doing all bad stuff, yeah. (Julia, young person)

As previously mentioned, many of the young people come from homes and communities experiencing high levels of welfare dependency, negative stereotyping and lateral violence. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) of 11,178 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (ABS, 2016) also reported that issues impacting young people include physical violence, incarceration, homelessness, use of illicit substances, having to provide care for a family member and living in an unsafe environment.

*Influence of FLOs on Life Trajectories*

The young people were then asked a series of questions that allowed them to share their feelings and experiences of attending a FLO in response to research question two: “What changes to these life trajectories (and associated changes to individual and societal outcomes) can be expected as a result of participation in Flexible Learning Options?” The young people readily engaged in conversations about their life at the FLO, including being homesick and how staff and other young people offered support. All the interviewees reported positive experiences and spoke about the employment goals that they wished to achieve. Many also proudly identified that they had already commenced working towards their goals.

I enjoy it actually. Yeah, I get along with everyone and the teachers help whenever they can. (Asher, young person)

Yeah, I enjoy doing schoolwork here, it’s good. The school has got a lot of opportunities and it’s good. (Julia, young person)

Yeah, hopefully I want to graduate and get my licence first. (Julia, young person)

My plan is to go to uni’ and study nursing. (Lena, young person)

I just thought it would be a good school education wise. Back home it was alright, but it just wasn’t that good and it wasn’t really a good school, yeah. (Brandon, young person)

I work on Fridays. I do diesel mechanic but I’m not really sure if that’s what I want to do yet, until I finish school. (Brandon, young person)

I’ll just get a job, so after I’ve finished school. I also want to finish my certificate, what I’ve learned, what I did last year. When the other teacher was here, she helped us get our Certificate I. Got to get my Certificate II, that’s what I’m hoping to achieve. (Corey, young person)

I just like trying to do something, like I’ll be capable of doing this [...]. So I just like really doing this and that. It’s like when I try to do it, it’s like I did it

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here when I first came here, and I started to think, and then ended up cleaning the house; every afternoon, go back home, mop the floor, rake the backyard, front yard, clean the house up. (Curtis, young person)

I do civil mining and I drive trucks and do a lot of concreting. [...] I got my roller ticket with them, so I learn how to drive machines and all of that. And we get a Cert II probably in the next 2 weeks or something. (Byron, young person)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff supported the enthusiasm of the young people and pointed out that attendance and support at the FLOs helped to establish and achieve personal goals, enhance their academic skills and develop life skills. For example, a staff member shared this story:

He's got a job. He's buying a house and saving to travel. This young boy, I never thought he would do that, and he's done it. It's a really heart-warming story when they come back and they appreciate the things that they take away from here. I think he's learned all that from here. He's learned work ethics through the VET program. He learned to read and get his self-confidence up through the programs that are run [...] through our programs in the school. (Sharon, Indigenous staff member)

### *Mechanisms at Work in FLOs*

In an attempt to find what works and why young people report having positive outcomes from attending FLOs, the data was examined closely in seeking information relating to research question three: “What mechanisms are at work in Flexible Learning Options that facilitate the reshaping of life trajectories of disengaged Australian young people?” The key theme that emerged from the data was the abundance of support provided for young people. This appeared in many different forms, including assistance with improving academic skills, enhancing health and wellbeing, maintaining culture and identity and building confidence. The significant role played by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff emerged as essential in terms of support for young people, as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous staff. In delivering culturally responsive services and programs, Perso (2012) suggests we should move beyond a “‘head knowledge’ and checklist approach”, pointing out that

Cultural responsiveness results from cultural competence which respects and values the unique identity of each child. A cultural lens helps us to see each child and their relationships from the perspective of their own family and community rather than our own. This perspective ensures that cultural bias is not part of the response. (p. 17)

The merit of establishing a culturally safe environment for students was evident in the study with staff sharing their thoughts throughout the interviews. For example:

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I think the kids here are so happy to be themselves and they bring with them their own sense of culture and perspective on life, which is not something you find in other mainstream schools. I think what's unique about here is that the family is the dominant thing at this school. More than education, more than sport, the sense of family and family connection is what thrives in this school and keeps the kids here. (Gwyneth, non-Indigenous staff member)

We have kids banging on our doors to come in. Just recently we had a young girl who just harassed us, [...] she just got every single person that was helping her to contact us and it wasn't so much on our behalf, we had made our appointments with [department staff] and they hadn't been able to come due to other emergency cases or something. But we hear that the young people talk about this place, they really like it here, support of indigenous people. They have very passionate teachers. (Anne, Indigenous staff member)

Reporting on effective transition to school programs, Dockett, Mason, and Perry (2006) identified a link between schools who employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and how comfortable children, families and communities felt engaging with those schools. The authors refer to a study by Frigo and Adams (2002), who reported that families of Aboriginal children emphasised the importance of Aboriginal staff "such as teachers, aides, general staff, or members of school councils and committees" were necessary in schools to help the children feel they belonged in the school environment (p. 141). These are pertinent points, as regardless of age, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (like all students) do not leave their life experiences behind when they come to school and. Rather, they use their personal knowledge, worldview and cultural practices to help make sense of a new environment.

### *Structuring of FLOs*

Aligning with a theme of providing a culturally safe space, some FLOs have been structured to specifically cater for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. FLO staff are highly aware of the diversity of the young people attending the FLOs and services have been adapted to meet their individual needs:

We're co-ed, so we have students from Year 7 to 12. We are purely for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students. We are unique in that way [...]. There was a need for some of our students in the remote areas wanting to engage in an education here, but not feeling comfortable in mainstream schools and wanting to have a program that was based more on their cultural awareness of the Aboriginal people. So we actually have that built into our programs. (Renee, non-Indigenous staff member)

What's unique about the school is how we approach building relationships with young people and how we focus on that as a key rather than to be able to provide some learning for them. It's coming from a different angle and

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a different approach to working with these young people who are the most vulnerable young people in this town. Mainstream hasn't worked for them for a number of different reasons and I think what's unique about this place is that we are a Flexible Learning Centre and we operate in that way so we provide flexibility around their learning needs and their own personal needs. (Rohan, Indigenous staff member)

### *Systems at Play in FLOs*

Systems of guidance relating to appropriate behaviour have also been introduced. Similar to the 'old' values, customs, obligations and traditions that formed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander laws, FLOs use a process of negotiation based on respect. These systems vary, with some FLOs using a pastoral approach and others using a specific set of principles that guide the young people to reflect on their attitude and behaviour. Regrettably, time and the introduction of the Australian legal system has radically altered most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and their system of laws that provided guidance for all on how to behave in all aspects of their lives. Teaching this process of negotiation, FLOs provide young people with the opportunity to embody values they can use in their everyday lives. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff related instances of young people using the principles to negotiate their place in the community and family, often pointing out to others that 'respect' is a two-way street. Both staff and students reiterated the positive impact these values have on the lives of the young people.

You hear them talking, "You're following the principles". [...] They've made up games. They've got, like, marble games in the dirt and they're using the principles. You know, so it's instilled and it hasn't been imposed. It's been given to them to take. (Donna, Indigenous staff member)

We just talk it through. If we do wrong stuff here, they gather us around and do a morning circle and talk about the four principles and which one of those things we done wrong. (Anabel, young person)

Encouraging young people to own these values builds their capacity to take responsibility for their place in community and become role models for younger siblings.

### *The Value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Staff*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff taking part in the interviews were eager to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings. One of the themes that emerged identified that the building of relationships between staff and students, as well as between staff members, was paramount in ensuring the health and wellbeing of students and staff alike. Lucille, an Indigenous staff member, shared the following stories of her experiences working in 'mainstream' Indigenous education and in the FLO.

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Yeah, it's sink or swim most of the time in the mainstream schools. That's what I observed. But a lot more support here, wraparound services, and with the whole business being about that young person.

[...] staff wellbeing and the way they look after their staff, I've never been a part of that in any school that I've worked in. [FLO administrators] really make the effort and take the time to make sure that every staff member is okay, or if they're not, they're mindful of that and they'll make sure and look out for you and look after you. I've never worked in a place like that ever, so this is a first for me, and I just think it's fantastic. I think it should be standard practice everywhere. (Lucille, Indigenous staff member)

The essentiality of valuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff as colleagues and holders of both cultural and contemporary knowledge is reinforced by research conducted with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents and carers demonstrating that “the observation of protocols, celebrating special cultural events, cultural respect, community connection, cultural awareness and value of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff” is paramount in the provision of a culturally safe learning environment for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (Milgate & Giles-Browne, 2013, p. 3). Additionally, Karen Martin (2003) a Noonuccal woman with ancestral ties to Bidjara land, suggests:

Although our worlds are now historically, socially and politically imbued with features of western worldviews and constructs, we never relinquished, nor lost the essence of, our Ways of Knowing and Ways of Being, and this is reflected in our Ways of Doing. (p. 211)

*Links with Community*

While all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are Traditional Owners in their own right, some of the staff interviewees were from Traditional Owner groups from the areas where the FLOs existed. This is advantageous to the FLO, as these particular staff have local knowledge of families, protocols and the latest happenings in the community. For example, staff shared the following experiences:

You know, it's really important, because I can talk a bit of [the language] and that breaks down a lot of barriers in communication and in building relationships with young people, having the capacity to communicate on their level. So, that really works and then also I know the families and I guess you build your relationship a lot sooner than others when their family tell them, ‘That’s your aunty. You call her Aunty’. Or ‘That’s your Nanna. You call her Nanna’. And you work out your relationships and with the skin system and that makes it really easy to work with the young people then, to build that relationship with them. (Donna, Indigenous staff member)

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My mum comes from a very big family, and so does my dad, but my mum's from here so I think my whole life I've just been connected to the community. [...] So a lot of the young people that we have come in here, I've dealt with their great grandmas, to grandmas, to fathers to a lot of people. [...] It's just been so helpful to me that I feel safe enough that if anything—going out to talk with a family—that I have enough confidence to be able to do my job well without them getting cranky or angry or pointing fingers and blaming. (Anne, Indigenous staff member)

You know with a lot of the issues, social issues, all kinds of issues [...]. We know all the families, we know who's related to who, the connections. That kind of stuff is just critical when working with kids. Especially kids that are disenfranchised and that aren't accessing any sort of education really. (Lucille, Indigenous staff member)

Most of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff lived locally and had previously worked in the community prior to working at the FLO. Some were teachers at mainstream schools, while others worked elsewhere. The staff were happy to speak out about the current issues plaguing families such as poverty, welfare dependency, suicide and learned behaviours that can impact generations of families. Anne, an Aboriginal staff member and a member of the local community, shared these stories:

My father had actually done this work over 40 years ago. [...] Yep, he was the first Aboriginal liaison officer at a primary school, and his job was exactly what I do now. And 40 years later and they're the same issues. [...] He worked at one of the main Aboriginal schools and in those days he just had a pushbike and he'd get on his bike and he'd go and visit all these families [...] to see why their children weren't at school [...]. Some of it was due to not having any lunch, not having any shoes, and I was like, 'Well, it's pretty amazing, 40 years later and it's still the same'. [...] Look, I've worked with old people that might have been 70 or 80 and just sign with a cross. You need to be able to know how to write your name, which is all simple things. And I've worked with kids that can't even do that or have struggled. They feel shame to even write their name knowing that it might be at a level Year 2 or something. (Anne, Indigenous staff member)

### *Support to Make Better Life Choices*

From the themes that emerged from the interviews with staff, it was clear that processes existed to assist young people to develop life skills of resilience, leadership and being strong in the face of adversity. As previously mentioned, the availability of a system of support for each young person was identified as a crucial

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element in building the capacity of the young people to make good life choices. This is evident from the following accounts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members:

We have lots of people that are there to support the kids. It's about breaking cycles as well for our kids [...], cycles within our own family. [...] Whether it's domestic violence or alcohol—things that the kids come to school when they talk to [...] me or a social worker—helping those kids to try and break those cycles, to be positive community members when they leave and things like that. (Sharon, Indigenous staff member)

I think they all come along quite well. I mean I've seen so many kids that have come a long way. But what hurts the most is when they go back to their communities and whatever, and if they haven't grown strong enough in the mind, they relapse into the normal—what that community, or what the young people do in that community. [...] We've got to make sure they're the strongest they can be back in their community so they can say 'no'. It is very hard [...]. (Lara, Indigenous staff member)

And when we talk about education, a lot of people talk about reading, writing, maths and stuff. But the education we're doing here is like we said before about knowing who you are, learning about your strengths and weaknesses and who you are inside and out, and how to be a positive member of our society around this town and also in their family so that they've got those tools then to be able to make those choices, those good choices. (Rohan, Indigenous staff member)

*Non-Indigenous Staff Support*

The data collected in this study also shows that non-Indigenous staff working in the FLOs are genuinely interested in not only hearing the voices of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and staff, but also actively engaging with them to achieve positive outcomes. From an Indigenous perspective, this is an extremely important component of working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. While there is not a great deal of information relating to the '4Ms' (missionaries, mercenaries, misfits and madmen), the term is often used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples when describing negative encounters with non-Indigenous peoples. This nomenclature has also been used by humanitarian aid workers to describe their ways of working in countries of the developing world. However, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples use the '4Ms' as labels to describe non-Indigenous people who exhibit behaviour that would not be tolerated elsewhere or who take on employment in a remote area for personal financial gain rather than for the benefit of the community. For example, workers who may be

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identified as being a ‘missionary’ are labelled as such because of their tendency to stifle community progress by talking for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and making decisions on their behalf. Dr Chris Sarra (2013), a respected Aboriginal educationalist and researcher, experienced first-hand many of the issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students—first as a child in school, then as a teacher commencing work in the late 1990s. Based on his observations and experience, Sarra states that the saying “missionaries, mercenaries, misfits and madmen rang true” for him. Through his many visits to remote Aboriginal communities, Sarra was able to observe “what was really going on” in terms of how communities were operating with the employment of non-Indigenous professionals. He expressed concern about,

the quality of some of the teachers, principals, shopkeepers, council managers and gatekeepers, who had landed a job in a remote Aboriginal community, probably because they were unemployable in mainstream locations.

He then points out that, of course, this does not include all “white people” some of whom are “very decent, very authentic, who were deeply committed, deeply passionate, highly effective and extremely hard working” (pp. 265–266). This is certainly true of the non-Indigenous staff at the FLOs who were found to be sincere and non-judgemental, which is evident in the following examples from non-Indigenous staff:

Anyone working here has to be prepared that it’s a much more casual teaching approach and that’s what works. Trying to be formal and stiff you might achieve discipline, but you won’t develop a relationship with the kids and I don’t think the kids really will give their best if they don’t feel they have a relationship with you. (Gwyneth, non-Indigenous staff member)

Because our learning environment’s a bit on connection and rapport, which works really well with Aboriginal students—or at least we find that it does—you’ve really got to walk with your students. When you’re walking with your students you’re walking [...] with the highs and the lows. Lots of our kids’ lows are the lowest lows that a young person could have. So, the school’s often affected by suicide, death, drug use, alcoholism. [As I said], every teacher in the school has some connection with that student and, therefore, has to help the students with that. (Jacob, non-Indigenous staff member)

If the students can’t learn by the way you teach, then you have to teach by the way they learn. That’s the only way to go about it. (Renee, non-Indigenous staff member)

Given the responses of the non-Indigenous staff, it would be fair to say that their passion for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and staff is a genuine contributing factor to the success of their programs.

## DISCUSSION

The author commenced this paper by highlighting the changing scene of Indigenous education in Australia and the links between education, health and wellbeing. Zubrick et al. (2014) determined that a favourable set of circumstances needed to exist to optimise the likelihood of children and young people being able to enjoy a life free from trauma and racism and which provides an equitable access to social and economic resources and opportunities. NATSISS identified several issues with which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people must cope, including caring for a family member with a disability, being subjected to physical violence, incarceration and homelessness (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). This provides an insight into the reasons for young people stating they wanted to 'get away' from their community and or family when asked why they had chosen to attend a FLO during the collection of data for this study. These responses were in contrast to the feedback from young people who spoke openly about their positive experiences of attending the FLOs, many of whom had to overcome feeling home sick and lonely in order to complete their quest of for an education able to provide opportunities for a future of better life choices. The majority of young people interviewed reported that with the support and encouragement of FLO staff, they were working towards entering the workforce through a traineeship/apprenticeship or considering university education or training. Young people's achievements were reiterated by staff members, who described young people flourishing within the FLO, developing personal goals and becoming role models for their siblings and communities.

Both non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff assisted the young people to develop resilience to challenges and setbacks, building their confidence and equipping them with the academic and soft skills needed for employment, as well as enhanced personal, social and emotional wellbeing. The study revealed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff play a crucial role in FLOs. This is supported by Dockett et al. (2006) and Milgate and Giles-Browne (2013), who testify to the positive impact the presence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff have on students, parents and community. The same staff play a unique role in ensuring the FLO operates in a culturally sensitive manner. Their knowledge of community customs and young people's social behaviour is paramount to the provision of a culturally safe service that is supportive, effective and appropriate. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff members also spoke openly about contemporary challenges faced by the young people, their families and the community. These issues included the internalisation of negative stereotypes, welfare dependency and the need for positive role models. Gorringer et al. (2011) and Gooda (2011) acknowledge the difficulty of broaching the subject of a 'language of deficit', which for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has become the norm. The authors stress that negative stereotypes diminish

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self-respect and respect for others and advocate open conversations about these issues.

Recent government reports and the implementation of various strategies to assist young people to continue their education or seek employment indicate that many young people may not have successfully completed their education to a level required for successful transition into employment or higher education. The role of the FLO in equipping young people with the necessary academic, inter-personal and life skills to improve their prospects of employment is particularly important for young people residing outside of urban areas. As jobs in remote and rural areas are scarce, most young people returning to their community would have no choice but to become a recipient of welfare and this is not a favourable outcome. According to Whiteford (2016):

Data shows that roughly three in every 1,000 young people who ever received welfare benefits between 2001 and 2011 remained reliant on benefits for the whole period.

This predicament that young people may find themselves facing is further clarified by Senator the Hon Michaelia Cash (2016), who stated, “There is strong evidence that young people who disengage from education or the labour market are at risk of long term unemployment” (para. 3). For example, according to the Australian Government Department of Employment Employability Skills Training Consultation Paper (2016):

There were around 156,000 job seekers aged 15–24 on the jobactive caseload in August 2016. Of these young job seekers, around 8 per cent had not completed Year 10, around 15 per cent were of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin and 14 per cent had a disability. Around 35 per cent had trade, TAFE or university level qualifications. (p. 7)

It should be noted that this number of job seekers does not include those who are not eligible to register with a jobactive provider/service (Australian Government Department of Human Services, 2017). Based on this information, the outcome for young people seeking employment could be bleak especially for those who lack educational skills and experience. However, this study has identified that young people who have re-engaged with education through a FLO have heightened their chances of accessing employment either through further education, traineeships/apprenticeships or completing year 12.

This study demonstrates that Indigenous young people who attended a FLO were able to access the support necessary to overcome pervasive deficit framing and claim personal agency over their present and future lives. Most importantly, many of these young people, who had previously disengaged from mainstream schooling, were able to re-engage with a learning environment, acquire the appropriate knowledge and skills to become work-ready and pursue further training or education.

## CONCLUSION

The challenge of changing mind-sets and the debate focusing on the attainment discrepancy between non-Indigenous and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is on-going. However, the overall purpose of this component of the research is to provide a platform that allows Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and staff to share their stories. The young people spoke of the role that FLOs have played in developing their skills and knowledge to make better life choices and staff were able to voice their feelings and thoughts on the value of FLOs from an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspective. Staff reports and the young peoples' own descriptions affirm an educational experience that not only equips young people with academic skills and knowledge, but also enhances their social and emotional wellbeing. Taken together, these accounts are a testament to 'what works' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people in education. Similar to previous research by Dockett et al. (2006), the support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff as mentors for the young people, alongside their connection and knowledge of the community, was acknowledged as critical to the provision of a culturally safe environment in the FLOs.

Growing up in a world where academic under-achievement is expected (Sarra, 1998) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of all ages are bombarded with stereotypical images of being dysfunctional, disadvantaged and marginalised, internalised negative perceptions of identity can have a significant impact on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Gorringe et al., 2011; Gooda, 2011). This research has shown that FLOs furnish young people with skills to face the issues that plague Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Through support, positive role modelling and the expectation that young people will achieve their goals, young people acquire the skills to lead positive, healthy and productive lives.

## NOTE

- <sup>1</sup> Cherbourg is an Aboriginal community located north-west of Brisbane, Queensland.

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## 5. I JUST WANT AN EDUCATION! YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES

### ABSTRACT

Young people want an education but on terms that they feel meet their needs and aspirations. The dearth of studies that focus on what young people say about their education has been noted in the literature, particularly the voices of those who have been disenfranchised by their educational experiences. This chapter addresses that gap and examines what the sixty-one young people in this study had to say about what they value in their flexible learning option (FLO). The detailing of the methodology is important as is understanding the young persons' worldview. The young people talk about innovative education that addresses their current needs, as well as a focus on the future. They had little tolerance for their previous educational experiences and were in high praise of the teachers and staff at the FLOs whose specialised teaching and pastoral care they appreciated. The implications are stark; young people need to feel safe and respected so that they can engage in learning with teachers/staff who are prepared to teach/work differently.

### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

The melting pot of the historical imagination offered everyone the same opportunity to social mobility through education. Mobility was the reward promised to students who met its universal and uniform educational standards. (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012b)

With the growing number of young people in Australia opting out of school, something is not right with 'the melting pot of our historical imagination'. More than 25 per cent of young people in Australia leave school without completing Year 12 or its equivalent, the Australian standard of school completion (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015). But this statistic is masked by differences in socioeconomic status, ethnic or Indigenous status and regionality. There, the statistics are much harsher. Nationally, only 60 per cent of those from low socio-economic backgrounds complete Year 12. In the Northern Territory, the completion figure is 50 per cent and in Tasmania, it is 60 per cent. The figure for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students is 44 per cent. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have the lowest Year 12 completion rates of any other marginalised group in Australia. Lamb et al. (2015) also found that the gap between advantaged and disadvantaged young people is widening and

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that Australia is less equitable than many education systems in the Western world. Similar reports of the effect of socioeconomic status and location on dropout rates come from the US and the UK (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). While this is not news to educators, stemming the tide of non-completion of schooling has eluded government and educational systems for some time.

Multiple studies of dropouts reveal very similar findings: that young people do not relate to schooling, find their lives affirmed by the school, or see the purpose of schooling (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011; Te Riele, 2014; Lewthwaite, Wilson, Wallace, McGinty, & Swain, 2016). It is not a simple problem; multiple factors play a role in this alienation. Schools often have external indicators of success that do not match those of individuals; some families and young people who struggle with economic, health and/or social problems find it difficult to give schooling the priority educators believe it should have. Young people become disenfranchised by a system that currently values high educational performance as measured by standardised tests and other outcomes that fit the neoliberal agenda of having an educated workforce (Lewthwaite et al., 2016; Smyth & McInerney, 2012). When work is not available for young people, they see preparation for the workforce as irrelevant. The youth unemployment rate in Australia has averaged 13.48 per cent from 1978 through to 2016. In November 2016, the Australian youth unemployment rate was 13.57 per cent (Trading Economics, 2017). This is a lot of young people! Young people report all sorts of reasons for disengaging from schooling, many of which have to do with disenfranchisement. The system does not work for them.

What constitutes youth disenfranchisement is a complex problem. It is important to recognise that a combination of individual and structural factors contributes to youth disengagement. This means that solutions lie in broad sets of factors within the individual, family, community and social institutions.

There are a plethora of policies and programs to address youth disengagement. They range from anti-bullying programs, truant officer programs, parental engagement programs, disciplinary policies, and ‘naming and shaming’ underperforming schools (Smythe, 2015). Such ‘fix it’ programs are often siloed and not integrated into a holistic approach to the disenfranchised young person. They are often focussed on one issue, e.g., bullying or disengagement. Smythe is critical of the disjointed approach to addressing issues in the domain areas identified by Hancock and Zubrick (2015). He is not critical of them per se, but of the approach that systems of education take in attempting to regulate student behaviour.

What remains obscured in these accounts and their supposed solutions is the fact that they are simplistic or one-dimensional explanations for a complex multi-layered social problem. Glaringly absent from most of these accounts is any extensive explanation or worldview of the problem from the young people themselves, their families, or from their more thoughtful teachers. (Smythe, 2015)

It is that perspective—of the young people—that is presented in this chapter.

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### *The Context of Flexible Learning Options in Australia*

The number of flexible learning options (FLOs) for disenfranchised young people that are now springing up throughout Australia deserves some attention, as these programs overtly attempt to work from a holistic approach with young people. Both state and private educational providers of secondary education in Australia have sought to address the issues of dropping out by creating a variety of alternative education programs. While the programs are variously known as: alternative education programs, flexi schools/programs, CARE schools (in Western Australia), behaviour management programs, positive behaviour programs, and flexible learning centres. Our reference to 'FLOs' in this chapter is intended to cover all such programs that provide an alternative educational program for young people who have opted out of mainstream secondary schooling but who are continuing their education through these flexible options. Te Riele (2014) estimates there are 900 different FLOs in Australia, serving over 70,000 young people. Some of these are located within existing schools; others are separate school entities or non-school programs. About one-third offer accredited education.

FLOs are re-engagement programs for those who have not found success in mainstream systems or who have been excluded either by the school itself or by multiple factors (including a young person's own choice). It is a fact that many of these young people suffer trauma that may be the result of a prior one-off event, a series of events or on-going trauma. There can be a history of drug abuse, which is common among the families and the young people who attend these schools; many have living arrangements that are not conducive to positive learning environments. Some are homeless and do not have the basics of shelter or adequate nutrition. Student risk profiles on record reveal many young people have multiple and complex disorders: a number have diagnosed and/or undiagnosed mental health issues—*anxiety* being among the most prevalent. There may be considerable anxiety due to various forms of bullying, including that associated with issues of gender assignment. Many of these young people have found mainstream schooling unsuited to them. They talk of teachers who do not relate to them, boring classes and the lack of relevance of what is being taught in their lives (Te Riele, 2014).

In many cases, the systemic response to the issues raised above has been to manage the behaviour of students. There is little acknowledgement that young people may want to be different in the world or are negatively stereotyped by their race, gender orientation and backgrounds. Yet most disengaged young people still want an education (Mills & McGregor, 2014).

### *Methodology—Researching Young People*

As part of an Australian Research Council project, 157 young people, parents, teachers and other staff were interviewed across eight FLO sites around Australia. Of these, 61 were young people attending FLOs. It is these interviews that we use

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in this chapter to explore the worldviews of young people concerning the value of education and, in particular, their experience of FLO education.

The ontological premise of engaging young people in the conversation about the value of their education is to go to the source of where that knowledge might lay: the young people themselves (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). To address the lack of the young person's worldview in the literature on this topic, we needed to see how they viewed the problem as outlined in the beginning of this chapter. What is their reality? Through what lenses were they interpreting that experience? They are the ones who have lived this experience of disenfranchisement. It is their experience that we as researchers are tapping into and trying to make sense of.

Methodologically, this is tricky because communicating with young people, especially those who are vulnerable, requires skills and understandings that enable the young person to engage in such dialogue (Baker & Plows, 2015). At the core of the research was the quest to find out what participants valued in their FLO experience. Interviewing young people in their teenage years is problematic in general, but particularly among young people who have had multiple stressors in their lives. It was important to be immersed in the school setting in order to get to know the staff and young people, rather than 'come in cold' to conduct an interview without context for the young person. Sitting in on classes, joining the young people for breaks and lunches, participating in sports lessons, taking school bus runs and visits to outside events with the students and staff provided the chances to become familiar with the school and the young people. Engaging them in a reflection or discussion of their experiences of education took place both naturally and in formal interview settings. We also explained the reason for the research to them, as we did to the staff.

There were eight researchers involved in the qualitative component of the research. At each site, one to three researchers did the interviews and took field notes. At our research team meetings, we engaged in discussions about conducting this sort of qualitative research, enhanced one another's experiences and became familiar with the data across all sites. Team checking enabled us to build on insights gained across the sites, as well as note differences. From this experience, we were able to extract what was "the most valuable, the most truthful, the most beautiful [...]" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013, p. 37) and relevant to the topic at hand.

The analysis revealed that both the young people and the researchers often came with ideological markers that influenced how they saw the phenomena being described. For example, when some young people talked about the difficulty in getting a job, the politics of gender, race and class were often intertwined (McGinty, 1999). Neoliberal influences on young people's thinking sometimes showed in the desired outcomes of their education being located in getting a job and contributing to the economy. However, as with many young people, these opinions and positions could change relatively quickly, almost from day to day. Thus we were conscious that what we were hearing and interpreting was only a snapshot of the young person's experience on any one day. Together, however, the 61 interviews and journal notes

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across the eight sites gave us precisely that—a composite insight into how young people interpret their daily lives at a particular moment in the FLO context.

While different approaches to interviewing are found in various theoretical notions of the purpose of the interview, we chose a naturalistic inquiry method proposed by Lincoln and Guba (2013) because it incorporated the classic marker of good enquiry proven over time: placing the concerns of the interviewee about the topic at the heart of the research. While this may be a contested approach in some fields of research (Bendassolli, 2013), we believed it provided us with a flexible approach that suited the diversity of researchers and young people engaged in the project. We mostly chose to use a conversational, yarning style (Bessarab & Ng'andu, 2010) of interview rather than a series of pre-scripted questions, especially when interviewing Indigenous young people. However, for consistency, we devised a list of areas each researcher would cover in the conversations. These questions were drawn from our readings of the literature and our experiences working with young people in this context. In some sites, a teacher or other staff member sat in on the interview if requested by the young person, but in most places, the interviews were conducted one-on-one or in small groups of two-to-four young people. All young people and parent/guardian provided a signed, informed consent form. Ethics approval was gained from the university of the chief investigator and the school systems to which the sites belonged.

The prepared list of issues discussed with the young people were those related to the major project:

1. Tell me a bit about what school was like for you before you came to this school?
2. Why did you choose to come to this school?
3. What is school like for you now that you are here at this school?
4. In coming to this school what did you hope to achieve?
5. Previously you mentioned your goals in coming to this school, do you think that you are on the way to achieving these goals?
6. What happens (or does not happen) at this school that helps you to achieve these goals?
7. What is different between [your last school] and this school?
8. Do you think you have changed much during your time at this school?
9. What is it about this school that contributes to these changes?
10. What do you think you would be doing right now if you were not attending this school?
11. If a friend asked you about this school what would you tell them?

Each of these questions had a set of sub-issues or prompts (see Appendix A). Questions 1–2 seek out the young person's view of their previous schooling, getting them to explain why it did not work for them. Questions 3–6 delve into the FLO they are now attending, asking them what works for them in this context and how is it different from their previous experience of schooling. Question 7 is a summative question that explores the differences between educational settings. Question 8

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probes the value of the FLO for the young person, and Question 9 seeks to find out what it is about the FLO that contributes to that value. Questions 10–11 are summative questions that test the ‘trustworthiness’ of the other responses.

Interviews lasted between 20–40 minutes and were transcribed, de-identified (by giving pseudonyms to each person and site) and placed on a secure server to provide access to the team researchers. Where requested, transcripts were sent back to the interviewee for checking.

### *Analysis*

Kinsella (2006) calls the combined wisdom of the researcher and the participants, which is given new expression through dialogue in the search for new meanings, the ‘hermeneutic dialectic’. The researcher does not take an objective stance with the participant, but engages in a dialogue, sharing what they know about the topic. This joint sharing enables new ways of expression and understanding. This is not easy with young people, however, as in a school context, there is an automatic student/teacher relationship with adults. We had to build on the good relationships that the teachers or other staff had with the young people in order to engage this way. Sometimes this meant a staff member sat in on the interview and assisted by rephrasing the questions for the young person.

The analysis consisted of reading the transcripts inductively, seeking out what issues the young person was conveying. These were categorized into themes. Once these were listed, the transcripts were re-read deductively for further information about the categories that emerged from the first reading and seeking answers to our research questions (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This enabled the researchers to focus on defining thematic categories before undertaking a third, abductive reading. Abduction (i.e., using what is available to construct the most plausible explanation for a phenomenon) sometimes involves linking the category to literature, established theories or practitioner wisdom (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

Using this methodology, the findings below demonstrate the young people’s understanding of the value of flexible learning options for them.

## YOUNG PEOPLE’S PERSPECTIVES

### *The Life Trajectories of the Young People*

The life trajectories that these young people imagined for themselves were not portrayed in a positive light until they came to an FLO. Many spoke of experiences of homelessness, drug use, truancy, drinking, fighting, teasing, self-harm, suicide, stealing, violence, mental health issues, incarceration, and educational failure as overwhelming components of their lives. When asked what they would be doing if they were not at an FLO, the following responses were indicative of the young people’s positions:

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“I wouldn't be going to school at all”. (Reece, Blue Gum Flexi)

“I wouldn't probably be alive”. (Riley, Blue Gum Flexi)

“I'd be locked up”. (Calvin, Bottle Brush Flexi)

“I'd be in a psych-ward [...] or homeless”. (Madeleine, Bottle Brush Flexi)

“I'd be in trouble”. (Carla, Waratah Flexi)

“I'd just be at home doing nothing”. (Destiny, Grevillea Flexi)

“My life is a roller coaster”. (Sarah, Waratah Flexi)

“If I wasn't here I'd be couch surfing, playing Xbox”. (Timothy, Bottle Brush Flexi)

Bullying was a major factor in many of the participants' disengagement from school. Austin talked of fights and putting up with teasing, such as “You're fat!” He also said:

We've gone through shit together. [...] Well not really together but before, and so we know that, like, if we bully someone, we know the feeling of what's happening, so that's also what my mum thought was actually pretty good, because I know that I also came here for the reason because of bullying, and ever since I came here I've never got bullied. (Austin, Waratah Flexi)

One student had violent episodes and acknowledged that he had mental health problems for which he was seeing a psychologist. But despite that, he stated: “I want to go to school”. Along similar lines, Brayden from Bottle Brush Flexi said, “I was fighting with kids because they were teasing me. I just wanted to get back into school”.

However, while most young people said education was important to them, it seemed unattainable in mainstream schools due to systemic issues.

I'm a human being, you're a human being, everyone who is a human is a human being. No matter what career you take in, you're still a human being. So, if you're a teacher and if you treat me like a number and you expect me to respect you when you're just treating me like utterly horrible, you're dehumanising me and just adding my little number in your system. (Wayne, Blue Gum Flexi)

Much of the criticism was levelled at teachers who failed to relate to students or accept their differences. Interestingly, the same criticisms were not levelled at the FLO teachers. It was a different experience in the FLO, recounted Maree (Acacia Flexi), “The support makes you feel different about yourself”.

It would seem that mutual respect, trust and the important connection that teachers and students make with each other are as significant as any pedagogical techniques or methods in enabling some of the most disaffected students to reconnect with learning. (Black, Balatti, & Falk, 2010, p. 111)

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Further frustration at the young people's previous schooling experience was expressed in comments like: "It's not the sock colour that is important" (Diana, Blue Gum Flexi). In Australia, young people wear a uniform to school and deviations from the prescribed uniform are often a source of tension with authorities in schools. Alienation and a lack of a sense of belonging played a major role in most young people's disengagement from mainstream schooling. In fact, many young people had not been to school for some time and in some FLOs, this was a requirement for entry. "I haven't been to school for two years" (Trinity, Bottle Brush Flexi). Truancing happened for a variety of reasons, but the end result was that these young people were well behind in their studies and they knew it. "Yeah, well I find I was getting D's, E's and F's at [my previous school] and now I'm getting A's and B's. So, it's a big improvement" (Ashley, Blue Gum Flexi).

### *What Are the Changes from Going to an FLO?*

"I've grown up" was a common refrain among young people regarding changes that had occurred to them personally as a result of attendance at an FLO. Likewise, "learning to make good choices", "believing in yourself" and "having confidence in oneself" were phrases used by several young people. But these changes did not happen in a vacuum, as Austin (Bottle Brush Flexi) indicated: "You are not alone ... teachers care about you". This enabling of young people's perceived self-agency was a key finding in interviews and observations across all sites: "I got my goals back [...] I want to be here" (Carla, Waratah Flexi); "I've overcome fear" (Trinity, Bottle Brush Flexi). Fear of failure was an inhibiting factor for many young people in their previous educational experience.

I'm not going to run into a tree and choke myself. Like, I like feeling like they have a little bit of trust in me and think that I'm not an absolute fucking retard. (Sierra, Blue Gum Flexi)

Sierra's objection to being labelled a "retard" frames a common response by young people to their previous educational experiences, but also shows their changed perception of themselves after engaging in an FLO; "I'm better at learning now" (Reece, Blue Gum Flexi). The development of personal agency with regard to what the young people want out of education is clear in many of the interviews:

I just reckon I've grown up a little bit more. I'm not [...] I just don't go out to—well I don't really know how to put it—I don't just come to school to socialise and muck around anymore. It's more—I come to school to get what I need to do. (Heath, Blue Gum Flexi)

The notion of 'what I need to do' was reiterated several times in that young people talked of getting an education so that they could get jobs, for example, join the police force, do photography, play sports, etc.

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The confidence that the young people developed at Flexis enabled them to focus on their education while trying to sort out their personal lives: "Education helps me get what I want" (Trinity, Bottle Brush Flexi). Sometimes this was expressed as the attainment of a personal goal, such as "I've detoxed" (Ashley, Blue Gum Flexi), but overall, the phrases, "I'm more mature now" (Calvin, Bottle Brush Flexi) and "I believe in myself now" (Maree, Acacia Flexi) were repeated frequently. Nonetheless, the circumstances of young people's lives were not always of their own making and 'sorting themselves out' often meant making the best out of difficult situations that were beyond their control. Some young people had parents who were incarcerated and/or using drugs, which made their lives complex.

'Cause you know, everyone has their own problems and everyone deals with it differently, but I guess some people can only handle so much and some of these girls are like the nicest girls you will ever meet in your entire lifetime. But they've all had problems beyond what some people should ever have to deal with. Like, I've known some girls, from drug related things: smoking, abuse, depression—all these sort of things. (Destiny, Grevillea Flexi)

### *Agents of Change: Staff Qualities*

What were the mechanisms at work in FLOs that enabled the changes young people spoke about? The most commonly referenced agents of change were the teachers and other staff at the FLOs. They were different from the staff in their previous schools, who were described, at best, as unhelpful and incommunicative. The FLO teacher qualities that young people named included: "The teachers are calm" (Calvin, Bottle Brush Flexi), "Teachers care about you" (Trinity, Bottle Brush Flexi), "Teachers are approachable and they listen to you" (Axel, Waratah Flexi), "Staff are like one big family" (Sarah, Waratah Flexi), "They make you feel you are not alone" (Austin, Waratah Flexi). A number of young people talked of their teachers as "friends". The personal nature of these relationships is expressed in many schools' core set of values, namely that of respect for one's self and for others. The word 'respect' was mentioned over 200 times in the young people's interviews.

Well you are becoming a better person. [...] Here you are helped along that way. More like an adult which is like home. Be respectful and be respected. Just becoming a better person. (Greta, Acacia Flexi)

With the right person, I'm a genius. (Chad, Desert Rose Flexi)

Other young people praised the teaching styles of teachers at FLOs.

Well this school is more one-on-one with the teacher and that little bit of extra help. There's no due-by-dates. There's no push to finish things. Yeah, like the work here is more hands-on and if the teacher knows it's going to be a really tough task then, like, for example the other week I think we went to the Old

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Melbourne Gaol, and then from that—because we had a tour and the man said a lot of information and stuff—we, like, took notes, and from that we did like a paragraph to certain questions and stuff. So, like, even if they know the work is going to be hard then they make it more practical, more hands-on and stuff, and make it easier for us to remember things. (Madeleine, Bottle Brush Flexi)

Most young people we interviewed had a strong desire for education, getting certified, or developing a life focus or a career. This was expressed with reference to ‘relevant curriculum’, i.e., curriculum with clear purpose that they could relate to. It was noted that individualised education plans existed in most schools we visited.

Yeah, because here in my classroom we have different folders for our VCAL outcomes and like we can like pick what we know we can do. So, they’re not just forcing us to do something we can’t. (Trinity, Bottle Brush Flexi)

### *Real Life Experiences: Relevant Curriculum with a Future Focus*

Today’s Australian curriculum purports to prepare young people with skills for the future. Yet with the rapid changes in technology and in the workforce, many of these skills are unknown to us at the present. However, teaching young people to be resourceful, creative and effective in their relationships is at the core of the FLO curricula practiced in the sites we visited across Australia. The following examples discuss the type of curriculum that young people responded positively to.

In our field notes, we recorded:

During our visit [to Sturt Pea Flexi] it was noted that the young people were able to engage in learning about bush medicine and healing. Literacy and numeracy are incorporated in cultural activities such as the young women making diary entries and last year selling products they had made at a market stall.

At Bottle Brush Flexi, we noted:

Talking about what each genre of movie means, some students are quite good at explaining what each section is, and what each genre entails, but there is also more technical movie-related terminology. This is a very engaged classroom.

Like many young people who have re-engaged in education, those interviewed showed a focus on the future and the possibility of getting a job at the completion of schooling. This was particularly evident among the older students. In a number of cases, they sought out classes and work experiences that would enable them to become work-ready. Some were already in part-time employment.

Well, some days I do my driver’s ed. And like go on the internet and practice the tests and stuff. And other days I’m in ‘Work Ready’, so I’m going through the website looking for jobs and maybe applying for some; I’ve already finished my resume. (Chad, Wattle Flexi)

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Well, I want to, like, I'm doing Community Services and mentoring to be a youth worker, and like, just getting into art and stuff and they're helping me do all that. (Trinity, Bottle Brush Flexi)

This focus on preparation for work and life after school was likewise evinced in our field notes from Waratah Flexi:

In this class, students were introduced to both finance lending and financial saving in relation to buying a new car. Rather than just being a test or 'problems' without a real-world scenario to fit, this concept was very relevant to the young people in the class, who were either nearly old enough or old enough to have their licenses. During the class, the teacher notes that having your own car can be extremely beneficial for getting jobs, meeting appointments, and generally improves your social status. As many young people at the Waratah Flexi may not come from wealth, the idea of learning how to (and most importantly, *understanding how to*) borrow from the bank or setup a savings account and targets was very important. Comparisons of different borrowing amounts and payback amounts were also shared to demonstrate how these elements affect the overall amounts of money paid in each loan scenario.

Relevant curriculum can have both an immediate and future focus. The opportunity to return to school after having a baby is often limited for young women in mainstream schooling. At the FLOs, they were welcomed and given parenting support that enabled them to continue their education.

And then [...] yeah—they just help you like [...] if you're a brand new young mum and you don't know what you're doing, they'll be there. They can help you. They can teach you and they can show you what you should and shouldn't do—the best way to relax your baby or get your baby to sleep and stuff like that. (Sarah, Waratah Flexi)

Each of the above scenarios was typical of the FLOs we spent time in and reflects the type of learning made possible through productive activities in real-life situations.

### *Active Learners*

Many young people were in high praise of the agency given them in choosing content areas that mattered to them. This enabled active learners to engage in their education. Many opportunities were provided that had never been available to them before. The small class sizes and dedicated teachers enabled the curriculum to be tailored to the individual needs of the young person.

Well there kind of isn't a curriculum. Like, not in the way where we're not learning anything. We are definitely learning, but there's not like a set kind of 'do this and you'll pass' kind of thing. It's more, you know, kind of [...] they know what we have to do to kind of finish the VCAL [Victorian Certificate of

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Applied Learning] and the units and all that, but we choose kind of what we do for those things. (Braydon, Bottle Brush Flexi)

It is interesting that Braydon associated the word ‘curriculum’ with a lack of engagement, as something delivered where one did not learn anything! But real learning occurred when there was some agency in choosing what was to be learned. Braydon acknowledged that while VCAL had specific units to be completed, each young person had a choice as to how they were undertaken. Destiny, from Grevillea Flexi, also spoke of a similar experience and how that empowered her in her learning. Destiny recounted being able to choose the way she represented her knowledge in a classroom.

In this school, if you are struggling, they’ll change the work [...]. Like in our IT class, we have to do a video presentation on our country and we have to say why you would want to go there—some tourist attraction—and I really didn’t want to do that. So instead—‘cause I love music—Melissa let me write a song instead. I had to record it. But I enjoyed it much better. [...] So, they’ll change it around a little bit to suit the student instead of having to change the student to suit the work. (Destiny, Grevillea Flexi)

Agency was enabled in the young people by opening up new challenges and opportunities that were not available to them previously. Some young people in regional areas had not been outside their town or region.

Yeah, I’d just tell ‘em what it’s like. And you get the opportunity to do stuff like, for example, I went to Sydney from here for a work experience thing and I went to Brisbane for a leadership [course]. (Seth, Acacia Flexi)

Yeah, I did the leadership one that he did. I think it was last year. And that was like my first time ever being that far out of [my town], like being in the city—it was like whoa! (James, Acacia Flexi)

Having fewer young people in a class enabled them to participate at a level not experienced in mainstream schooling. Also characteristic of many FLOs was the use of volunteering as a way to encourage young people think about others,

Well we go, like, we do activities with the community. Do sort of like, ‘give back’ activities. So, it would be like donating blood. We do cooking classes and, yeah, a lot of sporting activities with other public and private schools. (Joseph, Wattle Flexi)

### *Future Focus*

Young people frequently reported that many things they wanted to do were beyond their reach. With assistance from FLO staff, however, such things were easily available to them, giving young people a taste for futures that were now possible. Braydon from Bottle Brush Flexi, said:

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I got a busking permit, which is right here. [...] This is kind of one of the things I like about the school. We kind of get to choose what we work on, which is nice. So, I, well, as my personal project, we decided I was going to go busking in the city, which I thought would be an awesome experience. [...] Did a few months of—a few weeks of—research, you know, about the costs, where to go, all that sort of stuff. And then we went to the kind of information session, I guess, where we actually got the permit, and it actually wasn't as hard as I thought it would be. So, yeah, and that day we actually went and did one or two songs. [...] And in like the first song we got five dollars.

With so many young people suffering depression and other mental health issues, it was a focus on possible futures that gave them some hope: a belief that the future actually held some possibility for them. Riley's perceptive comment hinted at the importance of showing pathways for the future:

Yeah. I'm more focused now. Like, at mainstream, they don't care about what you want to do later on, they just care about 'the here', we're here! [...] With mainstream, you're like always at school, if that makes sense. (Riley, Blue Gum Flexi)

## WHAT IS THE VALUE OF AN EDUCATION FOR A DISENFRANCHISED YOUNG PERSON?

Kalantzis and Cope (2012a), leaders in educational change, suggest various *moves* in the way schooling is done to meet the changing nature of education. They talk about ubiquitous learning environments, especially those brought about by innovations and changes in the way the world communicates and creates knowledge that differ from classic, top down, hierarchical knowledge transfer in the classroom. Contemporary young people create and consume knowledge in very different formats than in the past. The young people in this study addressed many of these *moves* with absolute clarity, likely without the knowledge that they were actually confirming what the experts predict for the future of education.

Kalantzis and Cope (2012c) suggest that some of the problem with education today may lie in the curriculum itself, through its lack of acknowledging diversity. They suggest that schooling needs a radical overhaul. Deep differences require a revolution in pedagogy on the part of schools. There was much criticism by the young people of traditional ways of learning that bored them. This criticism is echoed in research conducted with marginalised young people by Bridgeland, DiIulio, and Morison (2006), who found that most young people who dropped out of school believed they could have succeeded if schools had responded to their needs.

Students depicted their FLO experience as engagement in learning through exciting and different ways of teaching—especially through new technologies—which blur the traditional institutional boundaries of learning and bring their experiences and priorities to the learning space. The young people talked of becoming active learners,

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“discoverers, recorders, reporters and publishers of knowledge” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012a, n.p.). The shift in agency was particularly evident in the way the young people, who were disenfranchised from mainstream schooling, took responsibility for their learning and their relationships with others. This, of course, was mediated by the philosophical ethos of the FLOs and the positive disposition of the staff we interviewed.

Many FLOs operate under a set of principles. FLOs of Edmund Rice Education Australia’s Youth Plus, for example, emphasise ‘Respect’ for one another, ‘Giving it a go’ (i.e., participation), ‘Fair dinkum’ (i.e., honesty), and ‘Safe and legal’ comportment (Youth Plus, 2013). These principles, which comprise just one example of principles-based education, form the philosophical basis for staff and young people’s interactions. In addition to principles of practice, FLOs’ small teacher-student ratios enable learner differences to be put to use productively. Sarah (Waratah Flexi), for example, was able to bring her baby to school and get assistance in child rearing practices that would help her develop as a mother. Chad (Wattle Flexi) used his time at school to prepare his resume and apply for jobs. Destiny (Grevillea Flexi) was able to negotiate changes to an assessment so that she could write and perform a song rather than write about a country she would like to visit, demonstrating the broadened mix of modes through which students express their knowledge. Destiny’s example also shows the flexibility and intelligence of her teacher, who could see that the young person’s skills and capacity to share knowledge could be put to better use in an altered assessment.

However, none of these capabilities would have been developed without the respect and support of the teachers and other staff at the FLOs. This was mentioned many times by the 61 young people interviewed. The young people were challenged to think differently, act differently and believe in themselves. Whether these capabilities come before, during or after learning occurs is not the focus of this research, but our findings clearly show the intrinsic link between good relationships with staff and the learning process. Reengagement in education for marginalised young people needs outstanding teachers and support staff who are willing to develop sophisticated thinking in their students. This type of thinking went beyond previous educational experiences in which many students had all but closed down to schooling.

When asked to comment on whether there was anything negative about the FLO experience, Austin responded:

Well, it’s not really negative, but it’s like, yes, I would appreciate it [the opportunity to comment]! Like, next gen stuff. Like, better computers, better chairs, that sort of stuff, because, like, I’ve actually been hearing of, like, the government’s paying these people jack shit and it’s like, they’re doing their best! (Austin, Waratah Flexi)

This reference to staff not being paid enough for what they do indicated the high regard in which the staff are held by the young people. As many of these young people had to rebuild their confidence and belief in themselves upon entering an FLO, it was refreshing to see they valued their teachers and other staff for working with them on just this issue.

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The recognition and valuing of the diversity and productive potential of the young people in the FLOs was another strength of the environments in which these young people found themselves learning.

To do any of these things [create positive learning environments], we need to bring underlying dimensions of deep diversity into the analysis, by connecting directly with life narratives (experiences, networks and places of belonging), by negotiating varied personae (affinities, attachments, orientations, interests, stances, values, worldviews, dispositions and sensibilities) and by addressing divergent styles (epistemological, discursive, interpersonal and learning styles). (Kalantzis & Cope, 2012a, n.p.)

It seems that staff attention to the unique environments that the young people found themselves in was not used against the young person, but to enhance and celebrate their thinking and collaborative knowledge cultures. The sale of products made in class at the local markets at Sturt Pea Flexi is one example of this. Joseph (Wattle Flexi) talked his participation in the 'give back activities' enhancing his community. All of these are examples of using young people's life narratives and divergent styles of learning to create engaging and affirming learning experiences that are relevant for them. In sum, yes—young people valued their education, but on their own terms.

## CONCLUSION

HG Wells was not exaggerating when he said, in his *Outline of History*: 'human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe'. If we continue to leave vast sections of the people of the world outside the orbit of education, we make the world not only less just, but also less secure. (Sen, 2003)

Sen points a finger at Commonwealth countries such as the UK and Australia, in which the deprivation of literacy and numeracy is ruining the lives of a large number of people. What young people in this study say about their educational desires and experiences is stunningly clear: they *want* to be educated but on their terms; they are very critical of staff and systems that treat them as 'numbers' and not as 'people'; they value and deeply appreciate intelligent staff who collaborate with them in deep learning and knowledge production; and they are closely tuned into current modes of communication.

This study concludes that FLOs provide a holistic approach in addressing the objects and domains of engagement, providing encompassing education systems and schools, flexibly tailored content and curriculum in safe classroom settings. As education is a subjective experience, as well as a cognitive and objective one, and given the structural factors that shape the lives of young people, affective and emotional elements are fundamental in experiencing education. This research illustrates that addressing the affective element of learning is one of the main factors that young people appreciated in the FLOs. This has positive downstream impacts on attitudes toward education and behaviour during FLO attendance. A sense of

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belonging and feelings of being valued, respected and safe are affective elements of FLOs echoed by most of the young people in our research.

As demonstrated by this study, the disengagement and disenfranchisement of young people from education has several dimensions and this complexity needs to be considered in any future initiatives. There is clearly a reform agenda for education that involves greater dialogue with students, educators, policy makers and other stakeholders to address both the objects and domains of engagement. There is also an evident need for flexibility within education systems to enable connections with young people. As noted by Davis and McPartland (2012), schooling system reform needs to aim at academic elements such as ensuring positive reward and recognition, embedding intrinsic interest in more and diverse ways of learning, and strengthening relevance of curriculum. This requires equally, the authors caution, non-academic elements such as a positive interpersonal climate, alternative development that explores personal non-academic strengths and talents, and shared community engagement based on trust and fairness. These core principles and practices, already embraced by FLOs, are at the heart of their successful engagement of young people. The approaches employed by FLOs go to the heart of key personal and systemic issues voiced by young people about their disenfranchisement and disengagement from mainstream education, and why they thrive in FLOs.

Educational systems should not see the proliferation of FLOs as a direct challenge (or even threat) to their policies and practices; FLOs provide examples of extraordinary education and of forward-thinking in every pedagogical sense. The young people's voices in this research attest to that.

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## APPENDIX

### *Appendix 1. Interview Questions for Young People*

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*Tell me a bit about what school was like for you before you came to [name of FLO]?*

---

How did you get on with your school work?

What was your work like?

Did you go to school on a regular basis? Why/Why not?

How did you feel going to school?

Were you happy at school? Why/Why not?

Did you feel like part of the school community? Tell me more.

In what ways did/didn't you feel like part of the school community?

Did you have any plans for the future when you were at your old school?

If yes, what were they?/If not, why not?

---

*Why did you choose to come to [name of FLO]?*

---

Were there any other options?

If so, why did you choose [name of FLO] over the other choices?

What had you heard about the school?

Was [name of FLO] recommended?

Did anyone/anything (push-pull forces) in particular influence your choice to come to [name of FLO]?

Were there programs here that influence your choice?

---

*What is school like for you now that you are here at [name of FLO]?*

---

How do you get on with your school work now?

What is your work like?

Do you come to school on a regular basis? Why/Why not?

How do you feel going to school?

Are you happy coming to school? Why/Why not?

Do you have any plans for the future now that you are here at [name of FLO]?

If yes, what are they?/If not, why not?

What would you like to do after finishing school?

Is [name of FLO] helping you to achieve this?

Does [name of FLO] help you with other parts of your life?

Housing? Accommodation? Health?

---

I JUST WANT AN EDUCATION! YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES

---

*In coming to [name of FLO], what did you hope to achieve?*

---

Did you have any specific goals?

---

*Previously you mentioned your goals in coming to [name of FLO]. Do you think that you are on the way to achieving these goals?*

---

*What happens (or does not happen) at [name of FLO] that helps you to achieve these goals?*

---

*What is different between [your last school] and [name of FLO]?*

---

Curriculum, Teaching approaches, School community

Relationships and affiliation

Attention to diverse needs

Relevance of Curriculum

Connectedness

Content—especially numeracy and literacy

Personalisation

Flexibility

Role of students and role of teachers

Ethos of [name of FLO] ie. program principles

---

*Do you think you have changed much during your time at [name of FLO]?*

---

If so, in what ways?

Behaviour

Learning/Academic/Literacy and Numeracy/Other curriculum areas

Futures orientation

Attribution of success/failure

Coping mechanisms

Peers/Social connections/Friendship

---

(Italicised questions are essential)

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## 6. PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES

### ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on interview data collected across eight FLO case study sites in Australia in order to elucidate FLO staff's framing of value as it relates to notions of worthwhile education for diverse youth experiencing complex life circumstances. The analysis of this data is framed through Gert Biesta's (2010) conceptualisation of three dimensions of the functions of education, namely: qualification, socialisation and subjectification. The intent of using this framework has been to provide a more nuanced examination of staffs' reflections on 'what counts' as positive outcomes for disenfranchised youth. The findings of this paper have implications for understanding the nature and purpose of education in FLOs, and should inform wider discussions around how value might rightly be measured in FLO settings in order to best serve the interests of the young people who attend.

### INTRODUCTION

The intent of this chapter is to turn the lens towards practitioner perspectives of value in FLOs. While the practice of 'teaching in the margins' is increasingly being documented (Mills & McGregor, 2014), less attention has been directed towards examining how teaching and support staff conceptualise the value of the FLO experience for disenfranchised young people, and as to how this shapes an understanding of the purpose of education in these spaces. This chapter draws on interview data collected across the case study sites involved in the project in order to elucidate FLO staffs' conceptualization of what might count as 'good' education and worthwhile outcomes for diverse youth experiencing complex life circumstances.

'Good' education is a complex and contested term, likely to mean different things for different stakeholders—both internal and external—to schooling sites. Focusing on what might count as a 'good' education allows for examination of the purpose and function of schooling in a holistic sense, rather than reducing education to a set of easily measurable outputs or outcomes to suit an economically driven performativity agenda (for a more detailed explanation of the performativity agenda, see Chapter 2). The educational theorist Gert Biesta (2010) suggests that when we engage in discussions about what constitutes good education, we should acknowledge that it is a composite question, that is, there are multiple possible functions of schooling that must be considered. In order to guide such a discussion, Biesta provides a

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framework of three overlapping dimensions or ‘functions’ of education, which are diagrammatically represented and briefly described below:



Figure 1. Biesta’s dimensions of education

*Qualification*—The function of qualification is one that is most readily linked to schools—that is, schools are seen to provide students with a set of skills and qualifications that enable them to succeed in educational and workplace environments. However, Biesta’s conceptualization of qualification is broader than simply ‘preparation for work’ and includes attention to enabling dispositions and skills that are important to other areas of life (e.g., citizenship and life skills).

*Socialisation*—The socialization function of school is seen to be understood as the way schools inculcate students into particular ways of doing and being. Biesta further describes this as “the many ways in which, through education, we become part of particular social, cultural and political ‘orders’” (2010, p. 20). Socialisation, then, acts as an important mechanism of continuing culture and tradition, through both the overt and hidden aspects of the culture of schooling.

*Subjectification*—The idea of a subjectification function of schooling is the most complex of Biesta’s three dimensions, and draws from a Foucaultian perspective of subjectification as a process of ‘becoming’ (i.e. becoming a subject). Biesta explains subjectification as the opposite of socialization, that is, rather than being inserted into a particular social order, it refers to the process of the individual becoming more autonomous and independent in thinking and acting (2010).

The next section of this chapter will examine how these three dimensions of education might manifest in the context of FLOs, through presentation of staff interview data that speaks to the various dimensions in the context of broader discussions around outcomes of significance in FLOs.

#### QUALIFICATION—‘BEING EQUIPPED’

The dimension of qualification in the context of FLOs was seen by staff to manifest through an emphasis on assisting young people to develop functional skills and

capacities that would enable participation in education, work and the daily routines of life—in essence, ‘being equipped’. Analysis of interview data through the lens of this dimension gave rise to five sub-themes, each of which are individually explored below in order of relative emphasis.

### *Attendance and Participation*

Attendance was frequently mentioned by FLO staff as an outcome of critical importance in recognition of the challenges and barriers young people face in attending school regularly and the centrality of attendance in engaging young people in learning. Staff emphasized the relative nature of attendance in that, for some young people, attending even one or two days a week was a significant improvement on not attending school at all:

As far as I’m concerned, if you’ve got a kid who hasn’t been in school and you get them to being here for 60% of the time, it’s bloody heroic, especially given what else is going on in their lives. It’s not as though this is about just getting up and going to school. It’s just not about that at all really, that’s icing on the cake. (Veronica, Blue Gum Flexi)

Young people who, at the age of 13, have missed two years of school—to be attending every day, that’s huge. And I know attendance is only the first marker, but that’s a huge step for those young people to get back into that rhythm, to positive relationships with adults. That’s absolutely huge. (Catherine, Bottle Brush Flexi)

Attendance is my number one priority. To get them here, I think, on a regular basis so that if they are going to be on a pathway back into school, they’re going to be able to cope with the, you know, getting up, having breakfast and getting ready for school. (Tyler, Desert Rose Flexi)

As indicated in the quotes above, attendance was also understood as being about more than simply tracking numbers and absences, and was instead seen to have value across multiple domains including: preparing young people for everyday life (e.g., being able to get up and get self organized, locating transport options, etc.); indicating positive relationships and affect towards school (e.g., choosing to attend, particularly in light of histories of extended school absence/disengagement); and as evidence of commitment and connection to school.

### *Engagement and Motivation to Learn*

As noted in Chapter 3, enhancing student engagement and motivation to learn is fundamental to the work of FLOs, and is understood in a multi-faceted sense to incorporate energy, effort, attention and the development of lifelong dispositions towards learning. While engagement as a route to improved academic outcomes

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was noted by FLO staff as being important, engagement was seen additionally as valuable in itself, in terms of playing a vital role in forming a foundation for future success:

So, I guess on paper would be whether they're meeting their outcomes and getting their ticks for their [senior secondary] certificates. But then, if I was to rate a class I was teaching or to rate students, it would be about their engagement, so even if they aren't, you know, completing that outcome in the time that they're supposed to, as long as they're trying and they're giving it their all and they're engaged, then that's a success for me. You know, they all work and learn at different paces and that's part of the setting here. It's not like a normal school where you can say to a whole class of Year 10's 'make sure this is done by Friday, and if you don't, you get a detention'. Like that's [...] It doesn't work like that here, but it doesn't necessarily mean they're not achieving just because they're not doing it in the time limits. So, you know, student engagement in conversation, work ethic, how they're presenting in class are all those short-term goals that I would rate. (Paula, Waratah Flexi)

In the course of many discussions around engagement and motivation, staff spoke passionately about the need to work with young people to transform a sense of apathy about school to a 'hunger for learning', as indicated in the staff quotes below:

I reckon these Flexis are the beginning of their learning. That's what we'll create in them. They will feel so good about themselves and who they are and have this hunger to learn, to do all those things. (Donna, Desert Rose Flexi)

[...] if I could help them to find something that sets their heart on fire, something that they're passionate about... if we could achieve those things with young people, that would put them in really good stead to have success across their life. (Catherine, Blue Gum Flexi)

Engagement then, was seen to be an enabling disposition that might have value for young people beyond the school gate in relation to the development of a sustained positive affect for learning.

### *Employment and Work Readiness*

Preparing young people for the world of work was seen by FLO staff as an important step in supporting young people to be both 'job ready and life-ready'. The economic reality of needing paid employment in order to break the cycle of poverty and create the conditions of a 'good life' was roundly recognized by staff:

We don't want kids on the street. We want them employed. We want them to have a home of their own. We want them to have a community that supports them. (Simone, Waratah Flexi)

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For these kids, to get a job is just the ultimate! If they can get a job, they've got a start. I'd just love them to be able to find a bit of normality, have an income, have a goal for themselves in life. (Melissa, Grevillea Flexi)

I guess the great goal and I'm very much a realist, but I carry this with me every day that I come here, the great goal is that most of them come from a family of just generational poverty and disadvantage, as well as abuse and a lot of other things for many cases, and so the great goal in my mind is breaking that cycle. I firmly believe that whilst you need help with personal issues—anger or drugs or whatever—to actually break that cycle you need to get a good education because the reality is that you need money to survive and to do things. And so I guess here they have the opportunity to get a good education if they so choose, but they also have the opportunity to work on the issues that have probably run through their family for generations—whether it's abuse or poverty, we're here to help them work through finding a good job, or even a job, that just helps them get by. (Brad, Bottle Brush Flexi)

Along with a utilitarian orientation towards the value of work, a number of staff interpreted work in a broader sense, as meaning not only the world of formal employment, but also work in the wider community:

So I suppose for us whoever goes out of here into either... The pinnacle is if young people leave here, they're confident, they can interact with the wider community and they can go into a place of work or employment, or even if it's not employment, it's just working in a community group or a community centre or just being part of the wider community and having those skills to just be okay with all that. (Wesley, Desert Rose Flexi)

The quote above also demonstrates the cross-dimensionality of this particular category, with staff understanding work-readiness as being a vital element of qualification, in terms of 'being able to do something' (Biesta, 2010), but also being intrinsically linked to the dimensions of socialisation (i.e., developing the confidence and social skills to engage with the world of work), and subjectification, in terms of challenging themselves to seek a better life and 'put themselves out there' in their search for employment:

When they can feel confident enough to take those steps by themselves, I think that's when you feel like, yes, we've made a successful change for that young person because it is tough to put yourself out there—especially around finding work. You've got to be confident in yourself to sell yourself, to sell your skills, and if you can't do that, then you're going to struggle in this day and age with work and with anything really. (Rohan, Desert Rose Flexi)

Overall, employment and work readiness were seen as key to opening the door to wider opportunities in life, and as a vehicle for developing transferable skills that could enhance young people's capacity for independence and autonomy.

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### *School Completion and Formal Qualifications*

In terms of the purpose of education, secondary school completion is the most readily recognised goal within the qualification dimension. The status of gaining recognised formal qualifications was acknowledged by FLO staff, and was additionally seen to act as a ‘gatekeeper’ to further opportunities:

I want these kids to get an education first and foremost. I want them to be able to pass a Year 10 and a Year 11 and Year 12 because, unfortunately, our society operates in a way that you need that certificate to get certain jobs. [Vocational Educational Provider] want a Year 10 pass. To get into this course, you’ve got to have a Year 11 pass. You know, when you ring employers, they don’t care—they just want to take the kid that’s got the Year 12 pass. You know, that looks better than the kid that’s got the Year 10 pass. (Carissa, Blue Gum Flexi)

Staff also spoke of young people’s own desire to achieve recognised qualifications, and the associated experience of success:

That’s what we’re trying to do, because these students are saying that ‘We want to complete our [state-based senior secondary certificate]’. So I think we’re looking at giving them every opportunity to do that. (Donald, Desert Pea Flexi)

We’ll have 40 or 50 young people finish Certificate II Vocational Education courses this year, which is a huge success to them. (Alexis, Bottle Brush Flexi)

I think the success story sort of lies within the students who are completing these courses, especially the on-site courses. [...] You see the beam in their eyes when they leave. They feel like they’ve got a purpose. So I guess that in my eyes is success there. (Spencer, Waratah Flexi)

However, for some staff, the idea of formal qualifications or certificates being unconditionally equated with greater value than ‘less official’ outcomes was problematic:

The official outcomes are pieces of paper legitimising you toward a music industry career, but the real outcomes are popular cultural products [...] rather than a certificate. What they’ve got on their Sound Cloud page is authentic in the real world and they’re proud of it. And the certificate? I don’t think they’re not proud, I think they get some pride from the certificate but the certificate is only ever... The only thing that will happen with the certificate is they’ll tell an employer or they’ll put it on a CV to get another thing. Whereas, the value of—I’ve seen the value of seeing kids 10 years later still playing the YouTube clip that we made and saying this is up to two hundred thousand hits. That type of stuff for me is an outcome that far surpasses anything that we do here and it’s just a shame it doesn’t get measured because it’s really powerful. (Adrian, Bottle Brush Flexi)

Staff members also questioned the relative importance of formal qualifications as compared to other outcomes that might be considered more valuable in light of the individual needs of young people:

So yes, [state-based senior secondary certificate] is important if that's what the young person is working towards. Having a vocational education certificate is fantastic, because it gives them a skill that they can use in the workforce. But some of that is very middle class. That's my, 'Oh, I finished Year 12 and I went to university'. Sometimes you have to be mindful of your own biases. Sometimes our young people, they've got no interest in completing [state-based senior secondary certificate] and it has no practical purpose in their life, because that's not what they're working towards. But perhaps they're working towards cutting down their drug or alcohol use and they do that, or they start to think about doing that. So our version of success and outcome is very different. It's really lovely, the celebration that the staff group has once they shift—once people's thinking shifts away from getting a Year 12 [as] the only outcome. (Alexis, Bottle Brush Flexi)

For FLO staff, then, there is a noticeable tension between appreciating the value of formal qualifications and school completion in terms of providing positive experiences of success and positioning young people for further study and training, juxtaposed against questioning whether this type of qualification is the most appropriate measure of 'success'.

### *Functional Basic Academic and Life Skills*

While most FLOs offer a broad range of curriculum (as outlined in Chapter 1), in terms of learning most likely to improve future pathways and trajectories, the development of functional literacy and numeracy was considered by FLO staff to be essential. Such skills were seen to enable young people to 'get by' in terms of dealing with everyday tasks:

One of the things that I really emphasise is writing tasks, like how to fill out a form. That's a basic skill that everybody will need to have to do at some point. They're like, 'Oh I can't do this. This is doing my head in'. Then you say, 'You need this as a skill. Can you think of some situations where you might need to do this? Centrelink, for example, or a housing application or you need to open a bank account'. (Andrea, Waratah Flexi)

Such skills were also seen as a means of improving young people's individual agency or sense of control over their own life, as the remainder of Andrea's preceding quote attests:

They're like, 'I don't need to do any of that. My workers will do that'. They start with the helplessness in that sense and acknowledging that they don't

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actually have to do anything for themselves. I guess it's almost like a victim mentality being wholly reliant on the system and not having any—what's the word I'm looking for—agency. Any personal agency. Then they come out of that and they do. They give it a go and they get to highlight all the parts of the form that they don't know yet or they need to get a document later or something like that. (Andrea, Waratah Flexi)

Basic skill development then was seen to have purposes related to both qualification and subjectification:

This is the most important thing—it hopefully means that young people leave being able to read, being functionally literate, and with a certificate like a real marker of success. (Alexis, Bottle Brush Flexi)

I think it's about putting kids on a different trajectory... 'I can learn how to spell and I can learn how to read and I can learn how to write and even if I don't get to where I want to be by the time I'm too old to be at school, I know where I can find further education opportunities or work opportunities...' Just the kids generally know they have a pathway and that a pathway is possible. (Andrea, Waratah Flexi)

It's getting out there, getting their life skills, becoming a decent young person, and having confidence in yourself and knowing that you can do it. I hope we give them enough resilience to know that you can do it. (Michelle, Desert Rose Flexi)

In sum, while FLO programs are often critiqued for over-emphasizing basic skill development at the cost of a wider range of curriculum offerings (Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011), understanding the different layers of value staff attribute to such development, including not only assisting young people to 'get by' but also supporting the development of confidence and personal autonomy, provides an alternative frame for understanding why basic academic and life skill programs matter in FLO contexts.

#### *Qualification—Over-Arching Theme: Being Able to Live and Thrive in the World*

The preceding section has examined which outcomes FLO staff consider as being of value within the Qualification element of Biesta's framework for understanding the purpose of education. The five sub-themes of Attendance, Engagement and Motivation to Learn, Employment and Work Readiness, and Functional Basic Academic and Life Skills, can be seen to be united through the central idea of 'being equipped'—that is, providing young people with a broad range of skills and capabilities in order to provide them with a toolkit to positively navigate their way in the world post-Flexi. Recognising the inter-dimensionality of Biesta's framework, a superordinate theme of 'Being Able to Live and Thrive in the World', as taken

directly from the FLO staff member quote below, captures the idea that Qualification in the FLO context is about more than simply obtaining a particular set of ‘outcomes on paper’, but is rather orientated towards a long term goal of positioning young people in an agentic capacity:

To give them life skills, to equip them with life skills so that somewhere down the track, they may re-engage with learning, they may be a more positive, happy member of society if they’re not currently, and that we allow them to live and thrive in a world, rather than just survive or be at odds with, say, the legal system, for example, or with other groups, and then, finally, to give them an education in a different sort of way—a formal education—and to help them to move further into whatever educational or vocational pathway that they feel that they want to. (Nelson, Acacia Flexi)

#### SOCIALISATION—‘BELONGING’

The dimension of socialization in flexible learning contexts, or ‘ways of being in FLOs’, is probably the best understood in terms of the extant literature (see, for example, Mills & McGregor, 2014), and is undergirded by a philosophical intent to create a safe and welcoming space for all young people—most critically, a sense of ‘belonging’. The process of socialization differs between FLO sites but commonly involves induction into an ‘ethics of care’ (Noddings, 2005) in regards to being cared for, and caring for others. The three main sub-themes that arose through exploration of this dimension within staff interview data are described below.

##### *Ways of Being in Flexi—Democratic, Safe and Inclusive*

As previously discussed (Chapter 3–5), the practice of FLOs is understood as being framed within a relational model of working with young people. In order for this to work effectively, both staff and young people are inducted into a particular way of being within FLOs that involves a commitment to maintaining a learning environment that is democratic, safe and inclusive (Morgan, 2012). For some FLO sites, this is actualized through an operation by principles model, where four key principles—Respect, Participation, Safety and Honesty—are used as a basis for negotiation and dialogue in relation to resolving conflict and tensions, deciding upon courses of action, and upholding the rights of all to a safe and harmonious learning environment. This, in turn, provides a model for dealing with the social aspects of ordinary life, as indicated in Wesley’s quote below:

I think there’s probably two sides; there’s like the social/emotional side of things of just being part of the community and learning some of those skills like around the principles that we have for the safe and legal and honesty and respect, student participation. So just work around those skills. If nothing else young people are here for a year and they do a lot of work on those skills and

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that's just a really good platform we feel for how to be in the world and how to be with people. So if nothing else, at least they can go out and be in a position later on where they can work respectfully with others and participate in society potentially. (Wesley, Sturt Pea Flexi)

A commitment to both the physical and emotional safety of others is a key expectation of both staff and young people in terms of how to be in these spaces:

The overall aim for me is that young people feel safe and that they feel part of a community. If that is gone—if safety is gone—then there's a huge chink in our armour and there's a huge gap in the ability to create community. So I want every young person and adult to come here and feel safe and authentically be safe, because then we can start to work on things together. (Alexis, Bottle Brush Flexi)

Participation in the community of FLOs additionally requires the development of skills to operate within a democratic model of schooling, which at times requires staff and young people to adjust to ways of operating that might be quite different to the 'power-over' model of mainstream schools:

If I can get the students by the end of the year, being able to go and sit at the community meeting. That would be a huge achievement, and that's one of my goals. (Lucille, Sturt Pea Flexi)

The significance of developing these skills is partly understood in terms of developing leadership capabilities that young people may choose to take back to their own communities post-FLO:

From here, that they can take some leadership qualities back to their communities as they go back to their communities, or that they've had some experience of leadership in the senior years, at least, because we have lots of opportunities for that with our leadership groups and the responsibilities that we expect from those groups. (Renee, Wattle Flexi)

Overall, FLOs have a clearly articulated 'way of being' that is premised on a democratic and inclusive model of schooling, and includes certain expectations of behaviour from both staff and young people in order to facilitate this goal. Socialisation into this particular way of being is seen to have advantages outside the FLO space in relation to assisting young people to develop expertise in navigating the challenges of everyday life.

### *Forming Positive Attachments and Relationships*

As noted in Chapter 3, many young people attending FLOs have experienced complex educational and life circumstances, regularly characterized by negative relationships with both peers and adults. A fundamental purpose of an FLO education

then, as verbalized by staff across FLO sites, is assisting young people to develop positive relationships and attachments in both their schooling and personal lives:

Again it just comes back to for most of these young people from the profiling that we've done across those personal and social capabilities and across the risk needs stuff, it's really evident that people's ability to form attachments, form meaningful supportive relationships is really compromised. So having a place where they feel safe, where they can form those attachments and then if there's any scope for some sort of visioning or skill development that then becomes [...] but underneath, first and foremost, is that place of safety and that capacity to be able to form an attachment. I think that then enables all of the other possibilities that happen after that. (Molly, Desert Rose Flexi)

The very best that we give these girls is being a very strong and solid cog in a bigger wheel. And the bigger we can make the wheel and the more wheels we can get turning together for them, the better they are able to achieve I suppose what most people want to achieve, which is strength and resilience and that sort of thing. And I hope that their experience of the relationship they share with me is something that resonates and echoes at different times if it's needed. And I hope that I model something for them that gives them something that they might want to achieve in themselves or aspire to, or have in its own right, a model of behaviour. (Eve, Grevillea Flexi)

The idea of role modelling different modes of relationship as mentioned in the latter part of Eve's quote above, is picked up by Miles in discussing the need to re-orientate relationships across cultural divides:

When I set up youth work programs in the suburbs and I was training my youth workers, I used to say to them, 'the number one thing that you need to be to these kids is a white person that they can approach and feel comfortable with, because the only white people that they ever come into contact with are police who want to arrest them, social workers who want to mess around with their families and upset them, shopkeepers who are staring at them waiting for them to steal something and teachers who can't stand them in class. So every white person they come into contact with, there's an immediate resistance, so the important thing is to develop rapport'. So from a social side, if they can be exposed to white teaching staff who are genuinely and passionately interested in helping them, and demonstrate that in numbers of different ways, to me that has a huge social effect. (Miles, Wattle Flexi)

The work of assisting young people to form secure and meaningful attachments to significant others is a highly recurrent theme in staff interview data and has only been briefly touched on here having been covered comprehensively in earlier chapters. However, it is important to note that the development of positive relationships is often seen by staff as the precursor to other forms of outcomes (including qualification

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outcomes), and that there is a deliberate and focused attention on relationship development, rather than an expectation that relationships will develop as a matter of course.

### *Social Skills*

Helping young people to develop appropriate social skills was closely linked to staff discussion around both general life skills (Qualification dimension) and developing positive relationships (sub-theme above). Staff highlighted that for some young people attending FLOs (particularly those with past experiences of trauma), there were often significant gaps in what might be considered basic social skills:

Some of the stuff that we're aiming for here is quite basic and you'd think kids would already have these skills. But if they don't, and at least this is another opportunity for them to get those basic skills about emotional regulation and containment and just being able to be amongst people and not, you know, lose your temper or withdraw because you're so frightened. (Fiona, Grevillea Flexi)

If they first presented completely dis-regulated, easily heightened, very disruptive, then your goal there would be working with them on I guess appropriate behaviour when you're out socially, you know, as well as appropriate behaviour in a learning environment and being respectful of others that want to learn even if you aren't in the right mood to. (Brad, Bottle Brush Flexi)

For instance we've got one little girl who is almost—well last year I think she was an elective mute, barely spoke. So it's really been a goal for us to get her to talk, to ask for some help or to be able to at least greet staff. (Mary, Grevillea Flexi)

Frustration at a lack of understanding of the significance of social skill outcomes for FLO young people was indicated by some staff, including Alexis and Catherine below:

We know all these amazing outcomes. We know there are kids out there saying, 'Thank you' and 'goodbye', when they've never done that before with an adult, who are smiling, who are getting fed. We know all of that. How do you say that to government? (Alexis, Bottle Brush Flexi)

Huge markers in terms of social skills, I think. So, I think of one young woman who started with us at the beginning of this year and was in the group that I worked with, and at the drop of a hat her emotions could escalate from normal to extreme and that would be shown through screaming, swearing, threatening violence to staff and other young people, really—never actually acting on that—but really extreme. And over the year, as she's developed relationships with staff, young people and we've had those conversations about—as I say, 'When you say things like, "I'm going to punch your head in", other people

might think that you're going to punch their head in. They don't know that you're joking', and you have all that social skills development stuff. And now to see her be able to react to something really annoying or infuriating in a calm way and just to articulate, 'That really annoys me', and then she walks off. So, you see a lot in the social and emotional development side of things. We just can't—I mean it's harder to capture than saying, 'Here's a [vocational education] certificate, here's a [senior secondary] certificate'. But it can't be underestimated in terms of how significant that will be for that young person over the course of their life because you can't threaten violence in a workplace, but if something annoys you in a workplace and you say, 'That's frustrating', and take five minutes out, that's much more appropriate. So, learning those skills potentially would help that young person sustain employment, so that's a really great thing as well. (Catherine, Grevillea Flexi)

Thus, while many schools attend to some form of social skill development with their students, it can be seen that the need for attention to these skills is heightened within FLOs and perhaps devalued by outsiders as an outcome of significance. There appears to be a need for a greater understanding of where young people are starting from in relation to their ability to function in social situations, and a way of measuring 'distance travelled' in terms of developing a full repertoire of interactional capabilities.

*Socialisation—Over-Arching Theme: Being Able to Walk and Talk in the World*

The key themes of socialization—Ways of Being in Flexi, Forming Positive Relationships and Attachments, and Social Skills—form the core of practice in FLOs and have been iterated in earlier chapters. However, in examining these themes through the lens of Biesta, it is important to recognize that FLOs move beyond simply inculcating young people into the dominant social order. Instead, they operate within a premise of democratic and inclusive education, and in doing so, present an alternative form of social relations. FLOs are also seen to direct much more explicit focus to positive socialization as an important function of educative environments and to realise the significance of socialization outcomes in relation to outcomes beyond school. Socialisation outcomes are thus seen to enable young people to stand tall and 'Walk and Talk in the World', as described in Anne's quote below:

To be able to have our young people to live in the two worlds, to have a balance in their life. We've all had to grow up—in whatever company I'm in, if I'm with my family and English might be second or third language, I will just change my whole way of thinking or my whole way of how I might speak. Or if you're sitting down with government people, then you'll change the way that you think. And I think just for our young people we've given them that opportunity to be able to walk and talk in the world. A lot of our kids have grown up with culture, they know it inside out, back to front, but also how do

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you work with them to be able to not feel shame when they go into the shops or anything like that. (Anne, Sturt Pea Flexi)

However, staff noted the inherent tension between the qualification and socialisation dimensions, in terms of what might be considered more highly prioritised:

That feeling of belonging is really important for us, so if a young person comes here and they leave with [a senior secondary certificate], that's fantastic. If they leave with some further training, that's fantastic. And we really want them to get that, but not at the expense of feeling welcomed, feeling loved, feeling like they belong to a place. (Nelson & Jill, Acacia Flexi)

#### SUBJECTIFICATION—‘BECOMING’

The dimension of subjectification provides a unique frame in FLO contexts for capturing those outcomes of significance recounted by staff that relate to assisting young people to confidently make their own way in the world. Across FLO sites, supporting young people to develop a strong sense of themselves—i.e., ‘becoming’—was seen as integral to laying the foundation for young people to grow into autonomous and independent adults. The four main sub-themes that arose in the interview data associated with this dimension are explored below.

##### *Self-Worth and Self-Confidence*

Staff across sites recognized the very real need to assist disenfranchised young people to develop a more positive view of themselves, and to overcome pessimistic assumptions about their own abilities that were a common by-product of negative feedback in their personal and schooling lives:

I've stayed in town for a while and they've got this very bad image and negative thing about Aboriginal people—that they're useless and they're very not really bright and they can't read and write and they can't really achieve anything in life. A lot of young people believe that's the way they are which is really sad. One of my goals here is to change that, is to tell them that you can be anything you want—you just have to believe in yourself and put that effort in that work and you can be really all good. (Wade, Sturt Pea Flexi)

I think the biggest part of my job here, in this environment this year, would be to encourage kids to feel confident in themselves. [...] A lot of them come in with such broken and damaged egos and self-esteem, so it's my job to keep building them up I feel. (Jeremy, Blue Gum Flexi)

Staff also highlighted the importance of self-worth in reinforcing young people's sense of their own deservedness of an educational effort:

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I suppose it's setting that bar high so the students to say you're worth—you as an individual—you're worth striving to obtain your [senior secondary certificate]. But to get there, you need to attend school, you need to study and you need to do this. So to get the girls to acknowledge that they're worth it, that they're worth us putting these measures in place. (Mary, Grevillea Flexi)

It's almost just to get them engaged and to keep them engaged and make them feel like they're worth being here. I think that's a struggle a lot of the time. (Wendy, Blue Gum Flexi)

More broadly, improving individual self-belief was seen as vital in laying the conditions for young people to achieve success or a 'good life' on their own terms:

I think if we can encourage them to have a better self-image and self-worth in terms of achieving their own goals—whether they be educational or social or medical—that we can help them and equip them and give them the support to be the best people that they can possibly be on whatever level that is—whether that be as a young parent, whether that be as a young person, a family member, whether that be as a student, whether it be as a healthy person. (Nelson, Acacia Flexi)

Overall, improving young people's self-concept through helping them to recognize their own value and potential was seen as foundational in encouraging young people to invest in themselves through participating in education, and in creating a vision of their best selves. Achieving this goal was understood to be challenging, however, in light of young people's histories of negative reinforcement and entrenched perceptions of themselves as somehow lacking the vital requirements for success in life and learning.

### *Independence and Autonomy*

Increasing young people's sense of autonomy, along with their ability to be independent, was a highly prized outcome by FLO staff. In the same way that a parent might wish for a child to transition well into adulthood, many staff spoke of their hopes for young people to leave the FLO with the capacity to stand on their own two feet in the real world:

One of my main goals that I do want to achieve is, 10 years down the track when I bump into one of them, I'd like to see that they've actually broken the cycle and have gotten a degree or, not even have a university degree, but have made something of themselves. And they can stand up on their own two feet and be, 'I'm independent and I don't need to rely on aunts or uncles' or you know, Centrelink or anything like that. They're just relying on themselves and, I think I would just like to hear that we've—I don't care even if it's just one student—that we've made that difference and broken the cycle. That would be a big achievement if that could happen. (Abigail, Grevillea Flexi)

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I think the ultimate goal for myself or for any other staff is to actually work us ourselves out of a job so that we're not needed anymore. The young people don't need us. They've got the tools themselves. (Rohan, Sturt Pea Flexi)

Staff also recognized the pragmatic need to prepare young people for life post-FLO, often in circumstances with limited support and a high need for individual self-reliance:

So, for them, it's about equipping them with the right kind of skills, I think, to be able to survive. So, 'Yes, we're here but at some point we're going to have to make sure that you're ready to move on into the next phase of your life'. And there's a bit of responsibility that comes with that because you can't—you don't want to leave that young person without the skills that are necessary to be able to survive on their own, or access the sort of resources and stuff that they need. (Brett, Waratah Flexi)

Ultimately, staff hoped that young people would regain a sense of control over their own lives, and in steering their own destiny:

Yeah, trying to allow them to grow into a person that can say, 'Yep, you know what? I can determine my life, I've got control over it, I'm... I can be happy with certain things, I can be unhappy with certain things, you know, but I can control certain aspects of my life, I can look further than just the next couple of hours'—those kind of things. (Nelson & Jill, Acacia Flexi)

Building young people's perceptions of themselves as 'authors of their own lives' (Brooks & Goldstein, 2004) was thus seen to be a key element of enhancing independence and autonomy, and a necessary element of supporting young people along a sometimes rushed pathway to adulthood as a result of the individual circumstances of their lives.

### *Personal Wellbeing—Wholeness and Happiness*

Hoping for young people to be happy and 'whole'—as compared to unhappy and 'broken'—was a common refrain within staff accounts. Not engendering some form of happiness in young people was seen as a potential failure on behalf of FLOs to provide a different form of experience to that in mainstream schools:

I think the very least is we're giving them some happiness. In their chaotic lives and their sad lives, even for months, or a year, or years, if that's all we've done, then we've been a success. Society doesn't and outside groups wouldn't be able to quantify that, so that's a difficult thing. But I think if we're not doing that, then we're failing. We're just the same as mainstream but slightly different so what's the point? (Nelson, Acacia Flexi)

Measuring happiness might be a difficult task, as noted by Nelson above, however, its vitality was reflected in the connection made by staff between happiness and hope:

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All of the students you teach, you want them to be successful and whole people and happy and being able to self-manage. You want that for everybody. But I think perhaps we focus more on that here because so many of the girls we see are disempowered in some way. (Selena, Grevillea Flexi)

They don't really envision this happy, content future where they're comfortable or anything like that. Whereas once they come here and they sort of realise, 'you know, I am a valuable person, people do appreciate me, and I do have strengths and I do have these skills and there's lots of great stuff about me'. Sometimes they walk away afterwards sort of thinking, you know, maybe the future that they've envisioned down the pathway has changed a little bit. Maybe it's a bit brighter. There's more possibility. (Trina & Deana, Acacia Flexi)

Happiness, then, was understood not only as a desirable state of being, but also as a potentially transformative aspect of moving young people towards a more positive future life. Happiness might therefore be seen as an enabling disposition that warrants further exploration in terms of how such an attribute might be measured and 'counted' in FLO settings.

### *Personal Growth—Self-Control and Self-Regulation*

FLO staff identified a final important element of moving young people towards functional adulthood, which was the development of self-control, or the ability to regulate one's own behaviour. Developing self-control was seen to be essential in allowing young people to "live a more effective and efficient daily life, break bad habits and acquire new ones, accomplish difficult tasks, and achieve personal goals" (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2013, p. 583), as reflected in Caroline and Spencer's quotes below:

We want to see a student reducing in the amount of risk factors that they may present to us with, as well as general sort of wellbeing. So other indicators of wellbeing being reached and attained in terms of personal safety, or being able to manage difficult feelings or strong emotions or negative behaviours. So we're wanting kids to progress in that domain. (Caroline, Waratah Flexi)

Well I would like to think that if they had drug and alcohol issues, mental health issues, that they will walk out of here maybe not—I wouldn't use the word cured—but knowing themselves a little better and knowing how to regulate themselves and knowing where to go to get support and not turning to drugs and alcohol or violence. (Spencer, Waratah Flexi)

As with other wellbeing improvement factors, staff noted the challenges in capturing these types of more anecdotal outcomes:

I can think of a couple of young kids that we had a terrible time with initially—not terrible for us, per se, but terrible for them in terms of them not buying into

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what we were about and testing us out, the real difficulty was in getting them engaged into the school—who now come and trust us and, with that trust, they are able to make choices that result in them making improvements in their educational outcomes, being able to regulate their behaviour a bit more, that kind of stuff. That's hard to—there's no test that I know of, necessarily, at the moment, that's going to say to a 13-year-old boy, 'Are you able to regulate yourself more than what you used to?'—they won't be able to remember that kind of stuff. But I would see that as success, but one that's hard to measure. That's quite anecdotal, that kind of stuff. (Brett, Waratah Flexi)

Thus the ability to self-manage, while noted as difficult to measure, was seen as essential for young people to be able to make wise decisions in their lives and potentially circumvent negative outcomes that might result from impulsive or reckless actions. Behavioural changes as a result of better self-regulation were thus hoped to be enduring post-FLO.

*Subjectification—Over-Arching Theme: A Grown-up Way of Being in the World*

In discussing the concept of subjectification in education, Biesta (2015) notes the importance of acknowledging the role of schools in forming the child and young person towards subjectness—either positively or negatively. The key themes highlighted by FLO staff in this domain—Self-Worth and Self-Confidence, Independence and Autonomy, Personal Wellbeing and Personal Growth—provide a clear picture of the qualities of personhood deliberately focused on by FLOs, and are united within an overall orientation to support young people towards a 'Grown Up Way of Being in the World'. FLO staff see their role as being more than simply enabling young people to deal with life within school, but also take responsibility for forming adults who are self-aware of their own strengths and vulnerabilities, can speak up for themselves and others, can seek happiness and fulfilment on their own terms, and are able to manage their own behaviour with maturity. 'Grown-upness' in this setting is thus understood not as an age-related developmental process, but rather as 'distance travelled' in terms of how young people move forward in their ability to express their own uniqueness:

For me, seeing a young person grow, you know, to come out of their shell, to grow in confidence, to be able to express themselves articulately or to be able to, well, just to be able to express themselves, whether it's articulately or not, that to me is a measure of success. You know, there's that sort of distance travelled idea. You know, like you get them at one point and then they get to this point and, you know, is there a line where they've exponentially grown or have they stayed the same? (Tyler, Desert Rose Flexi)

'Grown-upness' is also linked to the ability to live well with others, as is reflected in Donna's quote below:

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I think, just to finish off, I think that the Flexible Learning Centres, well here at [Sturt Pea Flexi] anyway, I think that, I honestly believe that all education should be following this philosophy, to tell you the truth. And I believe that we're going to churn out some good, honest people that they're going to be able to participate in society. They're going to be able to function and that's what we want. You know, that's what we want for them, to be able to function in this dysfunctional society. (Donna, Sturt Pea Flexi)

It can thus be seen that success in FLO settings is interpreted quite differently, and on a much broader scale than might be experienced in mainstream school settings. While FLO staff are aware that outcomes within subjectification receive less attention than those in the qualification and socialization domains, they are steadfast in their belief that these outcomes are equally significant.

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As noted in the Preface to this volume, FLOs find themselves under increasing pressure to be accountable for the outcomes of young people who choose this educational option as a result of disenfranchisement with the mainstream system. FLOs are under increasing critique (Te Riele, 2012), particularly in relation to popular perceptions that a presumed focus on 'soft outcomes' makes little real difference in the lifetime trajectories of disenfranchised youth. Some critiques have gone so far as to imply that FLOs are little more than 'babysitters' for troubled youth. The findings of this chapter show that FLO staff do in fact value outcomes related to the more traditionally recognised domain of 'qualifications', however, understanding of qualifications in the FLO context more closely relates to Biesta's (2010) expanded notion of this concept that incorporates attention to the development of life skills and positive dispositions towards learning. The temporal nature of these characteristics of qualification, and the difficulty in measuring such aspects, does not negate their value, but instead calls for a more holistic understanding of what it means to be able to prepare students to 'do something' meaningful in the pursuit of a good life.

Biesta's domain of socialization allows for a greater emphasis on essential elements of FLO practice that they can be seen to do very well—that is, preparing young people to participate in a democratic society and to act as caring and responsible adults. The findings of this chapter indicate that while FLO staff see the value of such outcomes very clearly, it can be difficult to convey such to external stakeholders. There also appears to be a lack of understanding of the depth and complexity of needs of young people in terms of recovering from experiences of trauma and being able to move into a place where they are able to positively function both in school and in society. Greater appreciation of the work that FLOs do in terms of guiding youth through a process of positive socialization in order to enable successful transitions into work, training and community life would undoubtedly be gratefully received by FLO staff.

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Biesta's domain of subjectification, while somewhat challenging in translation, is perhaps the most significant in relation to recognizing the value of the work of FLOs in terms of creating the conditions for disenfranchised youth to develop into autonomous, confident and agentic adults. It is at this point that the purpose of education in FLOs differs most markedly from mainstream schools. Education is not seen to end at the point of achieving a senior secondary certificate and exiting school. Instead, FLO staff see assisting young people to become fully realised human beings as incumbent to their role. Exploring the domain of subjectification allows for a much greater understanding of the complexity of the work in FLOs, particularly in relation to outcomes which are understood, but more difficult to communicate and measure. Biesta notes that subjectification is the most under-emphasized function of education in mainstream settings (even though it must and does occur in schooling sites), and it is in this space that FLOs may be able to lead the way in articulating the role of schools in forming qualities of personhood.

#### CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented an alternative frame for understanding how FLO practitioners' talk about outcomes of value and sheds light on what might be conceived as the purpose of education within FLOs. Biesta's three dimensions of Qualification, Socialisation and Subjectification provide a means for interpreting what should count in FLOs, as articulated by the leadership, teaching and support staff who dedicate themselves to improving the outcomes of disenfranchised youth in these spaces. This has ramifications for FLOs in terms of clarifying their educational purpose to a wider audience, an item of particular import within a context of external pressure to meet a narrow set of qualification-related outcomes. This chapter additionally draws attention to the significance of subjectification as a vital function of education. The overt empowerment agenda of many FLOs provides a unique opportunity to explore how an educational focus on subjectification may manifest in practice, and to consider how this might have implications for 'good education' in other places.

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JOSEPH THOMAS AND RICCARDO WELTERS

## 7. THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING

*The Impact of Young People's Sense of Belonging at School  
on Their Quality of Life as Young Adults*

### ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the effects of students' sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 on their life satisfaction and mental and emotional wellbeing as young adults. The study utilises data from the 2003 cohort of the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), which follows more than 3,000 students over a ten-year period. Using a propensity score matching methodology to elucidate causal (rather than correlative) relationships, we find that a weak sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 manifests in statistically significant lower levels of self-reported mental and emotional wellbeing one decade onwards. Our findings suggest that policies that increase young people's sense of belonging as students entail important psychosocial benefits that extend well beyond their time at school.

### INTRODUCTION

Alternative education literature has identified flexible learning options' (FLOs) strong emphasis on the unconditional inclusion and acceptance of disengaged young people (Myconos et al., 2016). Educational re-engagement in FLOs is predicated on the creation of an environment within which young people experience affirming inter-personal relationships and a restorative sense of social belonging (Evans et al., 2009; Mills & McGregor, 2014; Te Riele, 2014). FLO practitioners point to young people's enhanced sense of belonging within the learning environment as a requisite of meaningful educational engagement, as well as a worthwhile outcome in and of itself (Thomas et al., 2017).

Whilst considerable research has explored the importance of young people's sense of belonging to their learning engagement and other educational outcomes, less is known about the long-term impacts of students' sense of belonging at school with regard to their quality of life as young adults.

### *The Importance of Belonging—A Brief Review of the Literature*

The need to feel a sense of belonging has been identified as a “fundamental human motivation” (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497) and an essential determinant of the

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socioeconomic integration and long-term life outcomes of individuals. Synthesising a wide body of extant research, Baumeister and Leary (1995) rooted a modern theorisation of belongingness in empirical evidence, providing an encompassing framework for the application of the sense of belonging to the study of motivation, learning, behaviour, satisfaction and wellbeing (p. 497). Research has demonstrated links between individuals' lack of social belonging and anxiety and depression (Barden et al., 1985); mental illness (Bhatti et al., 1989); and suicide (Trout, 1980), suggesting a powerful causal role for belongingness in the social, cultural and economic organisation of human beings.

Research has also underscored the formative role of young people's sense of belonging at school in their educational engagement (Willms, 2003) and concurrent life satisfaction more broadly (Huebner et al., 2000). Youths' sense of belonging at school has been shown to impact their physical and mental wellbeing, affective and behavioural engagement (see also Christenson et al., 2012), and school completion. In a longitudinal study of youth health risk behaviours, McNeely and Falci (2004) found that young people who report positive inter-personal relationships with teachers are less likely to initiate cigarette smoking, drug and alcohol misuse, suicidal ideation or attempt, first sexual intercourse and violence with a weapon (p. 290). Bond et al. (2007) investigated the links between students' sense of social and school connectedness and subsequent substance misuse, mental health and school completion. This short-term longitudinal study revealed correlations between a positive sense of belonging and better life outcomes. Elmore and Huebner (2010) employed hierarchical multiple linear regression analysis to demonstrate the independent role of sense of belonging at school on students' affective and behavioural engagement in learning.

Beyond the socio-demographic and behavioural correlates of young people's sense of belonging at school, several researchers have utilised structural equation modelling (SEM) to investigate the mechanisms by which various academic experiences and other life outcomes are mediated by students' sense of belonging. Flaspohler et al. (2009) highlighted the mediating role of peer and teacher support on the impact of bullying, underscoring the importance of positive relationships in the school setting to the promotion of young people's self-reported quality of life. Similarly, Danielsen et al. (2009) demonstrated the mediational impact of school-related social support on students' satisfaction with school and academic achievement. Utilising SEM to examine the effects of multiple school characteristics on educational engagement, Kotok et al. (2016) showed that a stronger sense of school belonging reduced the likelihood of early school withdrawal, independent of individuals' background characteristics.

In a rare example, Walton and Cohen (2011) explored the importance of young people's sense of belonging at school through a randomised controlled trial among first year African-American university students. The authors demonstrated that a brief psychosocial intervention to enhance traditionally marginalised students' sense

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of belonging dramatically improved their academic and health outcomes while at university.

### *Limitations of the Existing Literature*

Notwithstanding this broad body of evidence underscoring the importance of students' sense of attachment to school to their academic success, wellbeing and overall quality of life, some limitations are apparent. First, the bulk of studies feature either cross-sectional or short-term (i.e., less than five years) longitudinal analyses. As a result, extant research has generally focused on the immediate—rather than long-term—impacts of young people's sense of belonging at school. Furthermore, though researchers' use of SEM has added significant depth of understanding not possible with traditional forms of linear regression analysis, neither analytical framework is useful in the exposition of causality. As these methods elucidate correlations, but not direct cause-and-effect relationships, they may have limited ability to clarify the extent to which young people's weak attachment to school may lead to educational disengagement, early school leaving and other outcomes. While randomised controlled trials are the preferred research standard in the determination of causal relationships, they are often not practical or ethically feasible in the context of young people at-risk of educational disengagement. As a result, empirical analyses of young people's sense of belonging at school tend to be limited to observational studies.

### *Our Response*

The present observational study endeavours to estimate the causal effect of young people's sense of belonging at school on their adult quality of life. We investigate the long-term influence of weak attachment to school upon respondents' subsequent happiness with their professional horizons, social life and economic status, as well as their likelihood of experiencing psychological distress. To do this, we utilise propensity score matching analysis to estimate the impact of improving marginalised students' sense of belonging at school on their future life outcomes, controlling for other factors shown to jointly determine individuals' weak attachment to school and their future life satisfaction and mental and emotional wellbeing. Spanning ten years, the time frame of the longitudinal data employed substantively exceeds that of other thematically similar studies.

The requirement to control for joint determinants of students' sense of belonging and subsequent life outcomes is indispensable to establishing causality. Relative to studies that explore associations between students' various outcomes and their sense of belonging at school, controlling for joint determination adds a layer of complexity to the statistical analysis. Without compromising the study's requisite methodological fidelity, the authors have attempted to unpack some of that complexity in lay terms for the benefit of educators.

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While this study aims to complement research regarding the benefits of inclusive educational practices common to FLOs, the young people who comprise the sample for this study were originally drawn from a nationally representative sample of Australian students. Their life trajectories are therefore likely to differ systematically from those of students who attend FLOs. Nonetheless, our findings suggest that engendering a strong sense of belonging while at school—a fundamental component of FLOs’ pedagogy and praxis—bears significant, long-term psychosocial benefits for socially marginalised young people.

Specifically, we find that social alienation at school at age 15/16 adversely affects individuals’ life satisfaction and mental and emotional wellbeing a decade later. The benefits to young people of enhanced social inclusion at school, therefore, are shown to extend well beyond the initial experience.

## METHODS AND DATA

### *Causality as Opposed to Association*

This study extends previous research concerning students’ sense of belonging at school by investigating the causal effect of belonging (or lack thereof) on respondents’ happiness and wellbeing later in life. Utilising students’ self-reported sense of belonging at school at age 15/16, we estimate the impact of feeling socially marginalised at school on respondents’ life satisfaction at age 23/24 and 25/26, and wellbeing at age 25/26. In order to establish the impact of weak (or otherwise) sense of belonging at school on subsequent quality of life, we must ensure that the established link is not (1) confounded by other variables associated with both weak sense of belonging in youth and adult wellbeing, nor (2) a result of reverse causality (i.e., we must ensure that adult wellbeing is not a determinant of weak sense of belonging at school). A longitudinal analysis enables us to rule out the latter, as sense of belonging at age 15/16 precedes life satisfaction and wellbeing ten years later. The former condition, on the other hand, cannot be ruled out *a priori*. Variables that jointly influence weak sense of belonging and subsequent quality of life must be accounted for, lest they bias estimation of the relationship of interest. To address this so-called ‘joint determination’ problem, we employ a propensity score matching (PSM) technique.

### *Our Method: Propensity Score Matching*

Rosenbaum and Rubin (1983) defined the propensity score as the conditional probability of assignment to treatment given an observed set of characteristics. Our PSM analysis consists of two stages. The first stage serves to identify the determinants of weak sense of belonging at school at age 15/16. Students’ sense of belonging are regressed on the identified determinants to estimate the likelihood (i.e., the ‘propensity’) that a respondent will experience a weak sense of belonging at

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school at age 15/16; this likelihood is the respondents' propensity score. Importantly, the propensity score itself is statistically independent of each respondent's sense of belonging as a young person.

Students' self-reported sense of belonging may be used to classify respondents into two principal groups: those who experienced weak sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 (i.e., the 'treatment' group) and a group of respondents who did not (i.e., the 'control' group). In the second stage of the analysis, each respondent in the treatment group is matched to a respondent in the control group with a similar propensity score. If the model is fully specified, matching on the propensity score serves to balance the values of potentially confounding covariates between the treatment and control groups. Hence variables that jointly determine weak sense of belonging at age 15/16 and quality of life at age 23/24, 25/26 will not bias estimation of this relationship. As would be possible with a randomised control trial, the average estimated differences in adults' self-reported life-satisfaction and wellbeing between the treatment and control groups may be attributed to respondents' 'treatment' status. In our case, the absolute value of the estimated treatment effect is the impact on marginalised students' subsequent quality of life had they experienced strong, rather than weak, sense of belonging at age 15/16.

The terms 'treated', 'control' and 'treatment effect' may sound a bit bloodless in the context of a study of belonging, as if the researcher has 'injected' a weak sense of belonging at school into a random segment of the sample to monitor whether the inoculated present different outcomes than their counterparts. Even though the observational methods employed here are far removed from such an experiment, we nonetheless maintain this vernacular to (a) remain consistent with the broader PSM literature and (b) emphasise the goal of PSM analysis, which is to estimate the outcome of a hypothetical experiment using observational data. The reader may interchange 'those who experienced weak sense of belonging at school' for 'treated' and 'those who experienced moderate-to-strong sense of belonging at school' for 'control'. The 'treatment effect', then, can be interpreted as the remedial impact of enhancing a socially marginalised young person's sense of belonging at school, expressed in terms of their self-reported quality of life as adults.

### *LSAY Data*

Addressing our research aim requires a longitudinal record of young people as they transition from secondary schooling into young adulthood. Data must reflect respondents' schooling experiences at the age of 15/16, as well as their subjective wellbeing ten years later. The first interview must indicate respondents' sense of belonging at school and be rich on information that may explain feelings of marginalisation from the learning environment. The latter interview must provide indications of respondents' life satisfaction and wellbeing as adults.

This study exploits the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY). The LSAY focus on young Australians as they transition from lower secondary school

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to further education, training and employment. To achieve this, the LSAY follow a nationally representative sample of approximately 10,000 young Australians from their mid-teens until their mid-twenties. Researchers conduct annual follow-up interviews to update respondents' progress. The initial interview—conducted since 2003 in concert with the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), an OECD research program to compare student performance across member states—is rich on demographic and school characteristics, the environment in which respondents grow up, academic achievement and students' qualitative perceptions about their educational experiences. Subsequent interviews focus on respondents' career pathways, employment destinations and quality of life. The first cohort of young Australians was interviewed in 1995; subsequent cohort studies were initiated in 1998, 2003, 2006, 2009 and 2015. We use information from the 2003 cohort, as that is the most recent cohort for which eleven waves of data are available. The annual attrition rate is between seven and 14 per cent. Therefore, of the 10,370 young Australians that started the survey in 2003 (aged 15/16), 3,741 completed the 11th wave in 2013 (aged 25/26). Of the latter group, 3,219 answered all questions relevant to the analysis; these respondents comprise our research sample.

### *Defining Treatment*

For the purpose of our analysis, we split the survey respondents of our sample into treatment and control groups (i.e., those who experienced weak sense of belonging at age 15/16 and those who did not, respectively). Our treatment variable is derived from the PISA index of sense of belonging at school, which is computed through a confirmatory factor analysis of six self-response questions. Using a four-point, Likert-type scale ranging from (0) 'strongly agree' to (3) 'strongly disagree', students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: 'School is a place where:' (a) 'I feel like an outsider', (b) 'I make friends easily', (c) 'I feel like I belong', (d) 'I feel awkward and out of place', (e) 'other students seem to like me', and (f) 'I feel lonely' (items b and c are inverted for scaling). Students who report identical answers to the six questions have the same index of sense of belonging score.

The resultant index of sense of belonging at school is a continuous variable. To operationalise this index as a binary treatment variable as required by the propensity score model, we delineate respondents who experienced a weak sense of belonging at school. We present the deciles of students' sense of belonging at school in Table 1. Deciles are compiled from the lowest to highest index of sense of belonging scores, with identical values at decile boundaries allocated to the lower corresponding decile. As shown in Table 1, deciles three and five do not have any observations, indicating a large number of observations with identical index scores have been allocated to the second and fourth deciles, respectively.<sup>1</sup>

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*Table 1. Sample distribution of sense of belonging at school (age 15/16)*

<i>Variable</i>	<i>Frequency*</i>	<i>Per cent</i>
<i>Sense of belonging at school</i>		
1st decile (bottom)	298	9.26
2nd decile	979	30.41
3rd decile	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
4th decile	350	10.87
5th decile	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>
6th decile	344	10.69
7th decile	541	16.81
8th decile	243	7.55
9th decile	213	6.62
10th decile (top)	251	7.80
<i>Total</i>	<i>3,219</i>	<i>100.0</i>

*\* Frequency and per cent prevalence reflect attrition through wave 11.*

As the cut-off point of the distinction between weak and strong sense of belonging at school is somewhat arbitrary, we check the sensitivity of our findings to our definition by employing two (i.e., stringent and less stringent) definitions of weak sense of belonging. The stringent definition of ‘very weak’ sense of belonging encompasses respondents whose index of sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 is in the first (i.e., bottom) decile of the range (henceforth, ‘very weak’ sense of belonging); the less stringent definition of ‘weak’ sense of belonging encompasses respondents whose index of sense of belonging is in the second through fifth decile of the range (henceforth, ‘weak’ sense of belonging).<sup>2</sup> For the purpose of comparison with student engagement literature using PISA, our delineation of ‘weak’ sense of belonging yields a larger (wave 1) prevalence rate than Willms’ “low sense of belonging” (41% vs. 25%, respectively) (2003, p. 19). However, our more stringent definition of ‘very weak’ sense of belonging produces a (wave 1) prevalence considerably smaller than Willms’ alternative specification (10% vs. 16.4%, respectively).<sup>3</sup> Our control group consists of respondents whose index of sense of belonging is in the sixth or higher decile of the range (from here on, ‘moderate-to-strong’ sense of belonging). Thus respondents with ‘very weak’ and ‘weak’ sense of belonging are compared against a common control group of respondents who experienced a ‘moderate-to-strong’ sense of belonging at school. Since we apply the same control group throughout, the treatment for the group experiencing ‘very weak’ sense of belonging may be considered stronger than that of those experiencing ‘weak’ sense of belonging (see Figure 1). This research design allows us to explore whether observed effects on respondents’ adult quality of life increase with the strength of the treatment (i.e., to test the robustness of our treatment definition).

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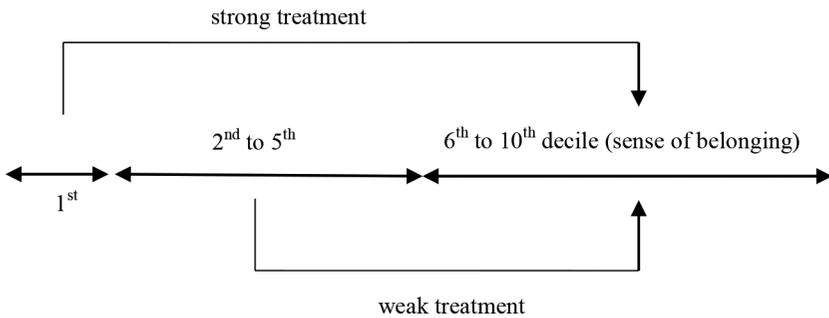


Figure 1. Schematic overview of hypothesised treatment effects

### Outcome Variables

We use two measures to gauge the impact of (very) weak sense of belonging at school on respondents' quality of life as adults. The first measure pertains to respondents' life satisfaction in three distinct domains: (a) professional horizons, (b) social life and (c) economic status. Using a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) 'very happy' to (4) 'very unhappy', respondents were asked to evaluate their level of happiness about (1) '[their] future', (2) 'the work [they] do at study, at home or in a job', (3) 'how [they] get on with people in general', (4) 'the money [they] get each week', (5) '[their] social life', (6) '[their] career prospects', (7) '[their] standard of living', and (8) 'where [they] live'. A polychoric factor and parallel analysis (Hayton et al., 2004) of the eight items yielded three distinct factors. Higher factor scores indicate lower overall satisfaction with each scale item. Cronbach's alpha (Cronbach, 1951) scores indicated satisfactory internal consistency of retained factors (professional horizons: .77; social life: .67; economic status: .64).<sup>4</sup> To test the robustness of treatment effects, we monitor life satisfaction at age 23/24 (wave nine) and at age 25/26 (wave 11).

In addition to these life satisfaction measures, we gauge respondents' self-reported sense of mental and emotional wellbeing using an abridged version of the ten-item Kessler psychological distress scale (Kessler et al., 2002). We use six items of the original scale to assess latent anxiety and depression at age 25/26.<sup>5</sup> Using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) 'all of the time' to (5) 'none of the time', respondents indicated how often in the past four weeks they felt: (a) 'nervous', (b) 'hopeless', (c) 'restless or fidgety', (d) 'that everything was an effort', (e) 'so sad that nothing would cheer them up', and (f) 'worthless'. We applied a confirmatory polychoric factor analysis to produce our second outcome variable (mental and emotional wellbeing); higher scores on this scale variable indicate decreased probability of anxiety and depression. A Cronbach's alpha value of the retained

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factor of .84 indicates a very high level of internal consistency of the purported construct.

Table 2 presents descriptive statistics of the two quality-of-life measures by deciles of index of sense of belonging at school. We observe that young Australians reporting ‘moderate-to-high’ sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 report statistically significant higher levels of satisfaction in all three life satisfaction domains at age 23/24 and at age 25/26 than young Australians who report ‘very weak’ sense of belonging at school. Although not tested, we also observe that young Australians experiencing ‘very weak’ sense of belonging at age 15/16 generally reported lower life satisfaction at age 23/24 and 25/26 than those who reported ‘weak’ sense of belonging.

Table 2. Mean values of the outcome variables ‘life satisfaction’ and ‘mental and emotional wellbeing’ by treatment status

<i>Outcomes</i>	<i>Sense of belonging at school</i>	<i>(1) very weak (1st decile)</i>	<i>(2) weak (2nd–5th decile)</i>	<i>(3) moderate-to-high (6th–10th decile)</i>
One sided t-tests		(1) vs. (3)	(2) vs. (3)	
Number of observations		1,890	2,921	
<i>Life satisfaction (age 23/24)</i>				
Professional horizons		1.52***	1.41***	1.35
Social life		1.12***	1.04***	0.92
Economic status		1.12***	1.12***	1.05
<i>Life satisfaction (age 25/26)</i>				
Professional horizons		1.58***	1.48***	1.42
Social life		1.18***	1.08***	0.97
Economic status		1.19***	1.17***	1.08
<i>Mental and emotional wellbeing (age 25/26)</i>				
Kessler psychological distress		4.70***	4.95***	5.06

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\* $p < 0.05$ , \* $p < 0.10$  on one-sided t-tests, as our hypotheses are formulated in one direction.

The same pattern can be observed for psychological distress. Young Australians who experienced ‘moderate-to-high’ sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 report a statistically significant lower likelihood of anxiety and depression at age 25/26 than young Australians who experienced ‘very weak’ or ‘weak’ sense of belonging at age 15/16. Though not tested here, the impact of students’ sense of belonging at school on their subsequent mental and emotional wellbeing also appears to increase with strength of treatment.

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*Determinants of Treatment*

A comprehensive list of determinants of compromised sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 is important to the success of the PSM analysis. Determinants included in the first stage regression (i.e., estimation of students’ propensity to experience ‘very weak’ and ‘weak’ sense of belonging) can be classified into four areas: socio-demographic background, educational engagement and academic performance, learning environment characteristics and academic aspirations. All are measured at age 15/16. We include three dummy variables related to socio-demographic background: gender, indigenous status and whether English was spoken at home. Descriptive statistics in Table 3 indicate that female respondents are less and Indigenous Australians slightly more likely to have experienced a ‘very weak’ sense of belonging at school. We observe no statistically significant differences concerning English as the primary language spoken at home by treatment status. We also include two environmental characteristics: PISA’s index of economic, social and cultural status (ESCS) and place of residence. PISA’s ESCS index is based on three questions in the survey: highest parental education, highest parental occupation, and number and type of possessions (including books) in the home (proxy variables for household income). A higher index value implies higher economic, social and cultural status. We observe a negative relationship between ESCS and sense of belonging at school at age 15/16. In terms of place of residence, we distinguish capital cities (i.e., Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Darwin, Hobart, Melbourne, Perth and Sydney),

*Table 3. Descriptive statistics: determinants of treatment by treatment status*

<i>Sense of belonging at school</i>	<i>(1) very weak (1st decile)</i>	<i>(2) weak (2nd–5th decile)</i>	<i>(3) moderate-to-high (6th–10th decile)</i>
<i>Determinants</i>			
Two sided t-tests	(1) vs. (3)	(2) vs. (3)	
Number of observations	1,890	2,921	
<i>Socio-demographic background</i>			
Gender (1 if female)	0.45***	0.49***	0.54
Indigenous (1 if yes)	0.04*	0.03	0.03
English at home (1 if yes)	0.92	0.92	0.93
Economic, social and cultural status (ESCS)	0.35***	0.42***	0.53
<i>Place of residence</i>			
Capital city	0.49***	0.53***	0.58
Non-capital city (> 100,000)	0.22***	0.18*	0.16
Non-capital city (> 25,000)	0.13	0.13	0.13
Rural/remote area	0.16	0.16**	0.13

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Table 3. (Continued)

<i>Determinants</i>	<i>Sense of belonging at school</i>	<i>(1) very weak (1st decile)</i>	<i>(2) weak (2nd–5th decile)</i>	<i>(3) moderate-to-high (6th–10th decile)</i>
<i>Educational engagement &amp; academic achievement</i>				
<i>Numeracy</i>				
Above average	0.49**	0.54	0.56	
Average	0.33	0.36	0.34	
Below average	0.18***	0.11	0.10	
<i>Overall scholastic performance</i>				
Above average	0.55***	0.62***	0.69	
Average	0.42***	0.38***	0.30	
Below average	0.04***	0.01	0.01	
Affective engagement	2.34***	2.02***	1.80	
Cognitive engagement	1.65***	1.57***	1.50	
<i>Learning environment characteristics</i>				
Peer attitudes towards school	2.64***	2.43***	2.32	
Own attitudes towards school	-0.23***	0.17***	0.78	
Teacher support in classroom	0.04***	0.26***	0.47	
Student-teacher relationships	0.02***	0.20***	0.62	
Disciplinary climate	-0.19***	0.06***	0.26	
<i>Academic aspirations</i>				
Expect to complete lower secondary (1 if yes)	0.70	0.70	0.67	
<i>Weight</i>				
Sampling & wave 1 attrition weight	0.91*	0.98	0.99	

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$  on two-sided  $t$ -tests.

large non-capital cities (i.e., more than 100,000 residents), small non-capital cities (i.e., between 25,000 and 100,000 residents) and localities with fewer than 25,000 residents. We observe that sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 tends to be higher in capital cities and lower in large non-capital cities and in localities with less than 25,000 residents.

We include two variables concerning academic achievement: self-assessed relative numeracy and overall scholastic ability. We consolidate LSAY's original five-point Likert-type scales into three broad categories: above average, average and below average academic performance. We also include two variables pertaining to students' educational engagement (see also Christenson et al., 2012). These variables are

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derived from a polychoric factor and parallel analysis of 11 survey items. Using a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) 'strongly agree' to (4) 'strongly disagree', respondents were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements: 'Your school is a place where:' (a) 'the things you learn are important to you', (b) 'you feel happy', (c) 'the work you do is good preparation for your future' (d) 'you like learning', (e) 'you have gained skills that will be of use to you when you leave school', (f) 'you get enjoyment from being there', (g) 'the things you learn will help you in your adult life', (h) 'you really like to go each day', (i) 'you find that learning is a lot of fun', (j) 'the things you are taught are worthwhile', and (k) 'you feel safe'. Retained factors (b, d, f, h, i, k and a, c, e, g, j) correspond closely with the constructs of psychological (i.e., 'affective') and cognitive engagement, respectively, identified by Appleton et al. (2006), among others. Higher values of these indices imply lower levels of engagement. Cronbach's alpha values of .82 (affective engagement) and .79 (cognitive engagement) indicate high internal consistency of consolidated scale items.

Descriptive statistics in Table 3 indicate that respondents who report lower academic achievement and/or lower educational engagement are also more likely to report (very) weak sense of belonging at school.

We include five variables related to the learning environment: peer attitudes toward schooling, own attitudes toward schooling, teacher support in the classroom, student-teacher relationships and disciplinary climate. A single scale item of peer attitudes toward schooling was derived from a polychoric factor analysis of students' responses to four statements using a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) 'strongly agree' to (4) 'strongly disagree': (a) 'students are eager to learn', (b) 'students make good progress', (c) 'students work hard', and (d) 'students are well behaved'. An increase in the value of this scale item implies a less favourable perception of peer attitudes toward schooling. A Cronbach's alpha value of .76 indicates strong internal consistency of the retained factor.

We utilise PISA's index of students' own attitudes toward schooling. Using a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) 'strongly agree' to (4) 'strongly disagree', students were asked to rank their level of agreement with the following statements: (a) 'school has done little to prepare me for adult life when I leave school', (b) 'school has been a waste of time', (c) 'school helped give me confidence to make decisions', and (d) 'school has taught me things which could be useful in a job'. Negatively worded items are inverted for scaling; positive scale values correspond to positive attitudes toward schooling.

We use PISA's index of teacher support to indicate student perceptions of classroom-level individualised learning support provided by teachers in mathematics. Using a four-point scale—(0) 'every lesson', (1) 'most lessons', (2) 'some lessons', and (3) 'never or hardly ever'—students were asked to rate the following five statements: (a) 'the teacher shows an interest in every student's learning', (b) 'the teacher gives extra help when students need it', (c) 'the teacher helps students with their learning', (d) 'the teacher continues teaching until the students understand',

and (e) ‘the teacher gives students an opportunity to express opinions’. Positive scale values correspond to higher perceived levels of classroom-level individualised learning support.

PISA’s index of student-teacher relations provides an indication of students’ perceptions of the quality of their inter-personal relationships with teachers. Using a four-point Likert-type scale ranging from (1) ‘strongly agree’ to (4) ‘strongly disagree’, students were asked to rank their level of agreement with the following five statements: (a) ‘students get along well with most teachers’, (b) ‘most teachers are interested in students’ well-being’, (c) ‘most of my teachers really listen to what I have to say’, (d) ‘if I need extra help, I will receive it from my teachers’, and (e) ‘most of my teachers treat me fairly’. Higher scale values correspond to more positive perceptions among students of their relationships with teachers.

We use PISA’s index of school disciplinary climate in mathematics lessons to indicate students’ perceptions of their peers’ general level of behavioural engagement in school. Using a four-point scale—(0) ‘every lesson’, (1) ‘most lessons’, (2) ‘some lessons’, and (3) ‘never or hardly at all’, young people were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: (a) ‘students don’t listen to what the teacher says’, (b) ‘there is noise and disorder’, (c) ‘the teacher has to wait a long time for students to quiet down’, (d) ‘students cannot work well’, and (e) ‘students don’t start working for a long time after the lesson begins’. Positive scores on this scale correspond to positive perceptions of the classroom disciplinary climate.

The descriptive analysis in Table 3 demonstrates that respondents who experienced ‘very weak’ or ‘weak’ sense of belonging at school rate the learning environment less favourably than respondents who experience ‘moderate-to-strong’ sense of belonging. This picture emerges across all five elements of the learning environment: peer and own attitudes towards school, teacher support, student-teacher relationships and disciplinary climate.

We include a dummy variable denoting students’ expectation to complete lower secondary school as an indication of their academic trajectory. Descriptive analysis did not reveal statistically significant differences concerning students’ expectations to complete lower secondary education by level of sense of belonging at school.

Finally, emerging research has provided novel mathematical rationale for the inclusion of complex survey design and attrition weights in propensity score analysis (Austin et al., 2016). Dugoff et al. (2014) recommend the inclusion of such weights as they are likely to contain prognostically important information (i.e., socio-demographic characteristics that impact both treatment selection and the outcome of interest) that might not otherwise be available to the researcher. Ridgeway et al. (2015) demonstrate that inclusion of complex sampling design weights improves matching on the propensity score and, as they may account for systematic selection into treatment, are necessary to the unbiased estimation of treatment effects. We include LSAY’s final sampling and first stage attrition weight as a covariate in the estimation of the propensity score. However, this weight is ascribed in wave

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1 and thus does not account for non-random survey attrition between wave 1 and wave 11. We do not weight the outcome model to account for observed non-random survey attrition as there does not yet seem to be a consensus in the literature concerning variance estimation for a non-binary outcome that takes into account that the propensity score is estimated (as derived by Abadie and Imbens (2016)). Our outcome models therefore reflect the average treatment effect of the treated (ATET) within the sample only and cannot be directly extrapolated to the general population (DuGoff et al., 2014; Ridgeway et al., 2015).

Consequently, ascribing treatment status serves to divide respondents into ‘treated’ and ‘control’ groups that exhibit significant differences with regards to a range of characteristics identified in the literature as associated with weak (or otherwise) sense of belonging to school. These characteristics include socio-demographic background (e.g., economic, social and cultural status), educational engagement, academic achievement and learning environment characteristics.

## ANALYSIS

### *Propensity Score Estimation*

Stage one of the PSM analysis reveals the key determinants of weak sense of belonging at school at age 15/16. Results of the probit regressions are presented in Table 4.<sup>6</sup> We note that being male, Indigenous and from a non-English speaking background, as well as living in a non-capital city or rural/remote localities, appear to increase the probability of having a ‘very weak’ or ‘weak’ weak sense of belonging at school at age 15/16. However only the relationships between gender and ‘very weak’ sense

*Table 4. Propensity score estimates (first-stage probit regression)*

	<i>Sense of belonging at school</i>	<i>Very weak</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Determinants</i>			
<i>Socio-demographic background</i>			
Gender (1 if female)		-0.17 (0.08) **	-0.04 (0.05)
Indigenous (1 if yes)		0.23 (0.24)	0.12 (0.15)
English at home (1 if yes)		-0.18 (0.15)	-0.09 (0.10)
Economic, social and cultural status		-0.01 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.03)
<i>Place of residence</i>			
Capital city		reference	reference
Non-capital city (>100,000)		0.17 (0.11)	0.11 (0.07)
Non-capital city (> 25,000)		0.05 (0.13)	0.06 (0.08)
Rural/remote area		0.17 (0.12)	0.14 (0.07) **

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Table 4. (Continued)

	<i>Sense of belonging at school</i>	<i>Very weak</i>	<i>Weak</i>
<i>Determinants</i>			
<i>Educational engagement &amp; academic achievement</i>			
Numeracy			
Above average		reference	reference
Average		-0.11 (0.09)	-0.08 (0.06)
Below average		-0.05 (0.13)	-0.19 (0.09) **
Scholastics in general			
Above average		reference	reference
Average		0.05 (0.09)	0.07 (0.06)
Below average		-0.15 (0.29)	-0.72 (0.27) ***
Affective engagement		0.89 (.10) ***	0.42 (0.06) ***
Cognitive engagement		0.05 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.06)
<i>Learning environment characteristics</i>			
Peer attitudes toward school		0.25 (0.10) **	0.01 (0.06)
Own attitudes towards school		-0.35 (0.05) ***	-0.28 (0.03) ***
Teacher support in classroom		-0.05 (0.04)	-0.00 (0.03)
Student-teacher relationships		0.01 (0.05)	-0.17 (0.03) ***
Disciplinary climate		-0.07 (0.04) *	-0.02 (0.03)
<i>Academic aspirations</i>			
Expect to complete lower secondary		-0.15 (0.09) *	-0.11 (0.05) **
<i>Weight</i>			
Sampling & wave 1 attrition weight		-0.05 (0.05)	0.02 (0.04)
Number of observations		1,890	2,921
Pseudo r-squared		0.2437	0.0988
Log pseudolikelihood		-622.91	-1,813.99

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ . Standard error in parentheses; regression before imposition of calipers.

of belonging and rural/remote locality and ‘weak’ sense of belonging are statistically significant. ESCS does not have a clear relationship with sense of belonging at school in our analysis. Self-assessment of academic performance and educational engagement do, with statistically significant relationships evident between students’ self-perceptions of below average numeracy and overall academic performance at school and ‘very weak’ sense of belonging at school, as well as between respondents’

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self-reported affective engagement and their likelihood of experiencing either ‘very weak’ or ‘weak’ sense of belonging. In general, a more favourable perception of the learning environment tends to reduce the probability of experiencing ‘very weak’ or ‘weak’ belonging at school, with statistically significant relationships between ‘very weak’ sense of belonging and peer and own attitudes toward schooling, disciplinary climate and affective engagement, as well as between ‘weak’ sense of belonging and student-teacher relationships, own attitudes toward schooling and affective engagement. Students who expect to complete lower secondary education demonstrate a statistically significant lower likelihood of experiencing a ‘very weak’ or ‘weak’ sense of belonging at school.

### *Treatment Effects*

Stage two of the PSM analysis estimates the average treatment effect for young people who experienced ‘very weak’ and ‘weak’ sense of belonging at school. We utilised one-to-one nearest neighbour matching (using the *STATA 14* statistical package, ‘*teffects psmatch*’ routine), shown by Austin (2010) to minimise the mean squared error of the estimated treatment effect. *Following Austin (2011), we set a caliper (i.e., maximum absolute difference between potential matches) of .2 times the standard deviation of the (pooled) propensity score. Imposition of the caliper excluded 12 outlier observations from ATET estimation under the strong treatment specification (none were excluded under the weak treatment specification).* Table 5 summarises the ATET for both levels of treatment. We find widespread statistical support for our hypothesis that increasing young people’s sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 (i.e., from ‘very weak’ to ‘moderate-to-high’ (strong treatment) and from ‘weak’ to ‘moderate-to-high’ (weak treatment) improves their life satisfaction outcomes in all three domains. These findings firm up as respondents progress through life (from age 23/24 to age 25/26). We observe the same pattern for psychological distress. Improvements in sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 reduce respondents’ likelihood of psychological distress as adults, with statistically significant effects increasing with the level of treatment.

### *Post-Estimation Balance Diagnostics*

Rosenbaum and Rubin (1983) showed that the propensity score is in fact a balancing score. That is, matching on the true propensity score allows for the balanced distribution of covariates between treated and control groups. To validate the estimated ATET, it is therefore critical to assess that the propensity score model has been properly specified and that as a result, covariates have been adequately balanced between the matched groups. Several procedures enable qualitative and quantitative assessment of the quality of matching, including appraisal of common support, covariate distributions in treated and control groups, and variance ratios of matched observations.

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Table 5. Matching estimates (nearest neighbour procedure)

	Treatment effect†	Se	n-treated	n-control
<i>'Very weak' sense of belonging at school (age 15/16)</i>				
<i>Life satisfaction (age 23/24)</i>				
Professional horizons	0.16 ***	0.05	298	1,592
Social life	0.15 ***	0.04	298	1,592
Economic status	0.01	0.04	298	1,592
<i>Life satisfaction (age 25/26)</i>				
Professional horizons	0.14 ***	0.05	298	1,592
Social life	0.17 ***	0.04	298	1,592
Economic status	0.09 **	0.04	298	1,592
<i>Wellbeing (age 25/26)</i>				
Kessler psychological distress	-0.35 ***	0.07	298	1,592
<i>'Weak' sense of belonging at school (age 15/16)</i>				
<i>Life satisfaction (age 23/24)</i>				
Professional horizons	0.03	0.03	1,329	1,592
Social life	0.09 ***	0.02	1,329	1,592
Economic status	0.06 ***	0.02	1,329	1,592
<i>Life satisfaction (age 25/26)</i>				
Professional horizons	0.03	0.03	1,329	1,592
Social life	0.07 ***	0.02	1,329	1,592
Economic status	0.03	0.02	1,329	1,592
<i>Wellbeing (age 25/26)</i>				
Kessler psychological distress	-0.03	0.04	1,329	1,592

Note: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ .

†Average treatment effect of the treated (ATET); Se is standard error; n-treated, n-control before imposition of calipers.

*Common support.* There must be sufficient overlap between the propensity scores of observations in the treated and control groups to ensure that matched observations are sufficiently alike with regards to their observed characteristics. For example, a satisfactory level of common support prevents individuals with dissimilar propensity scores (and, by extension, substantively different covariate values) from being matched to one another simply by virtue of their propensity scores being closer in value than the next nearest alternative. Calipers may be used to ensure matched observations are not overly dissimilar. Figure 2 provides graphical illustration that

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matching on the propensity score has been undertaken with common support under both the ‘very weak’ and ‘weak’ treatment level specifications.

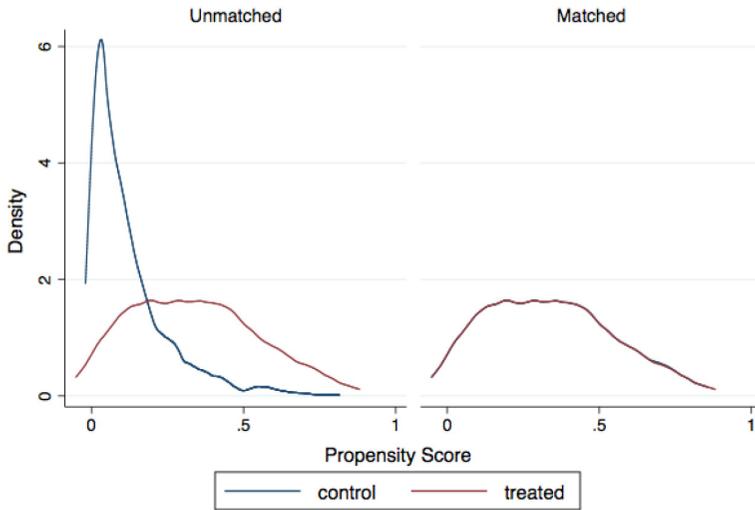


Figure 2a. Density plot: common support before and after matching—‘Very weak’ sense of belonging at school (age 15/16)

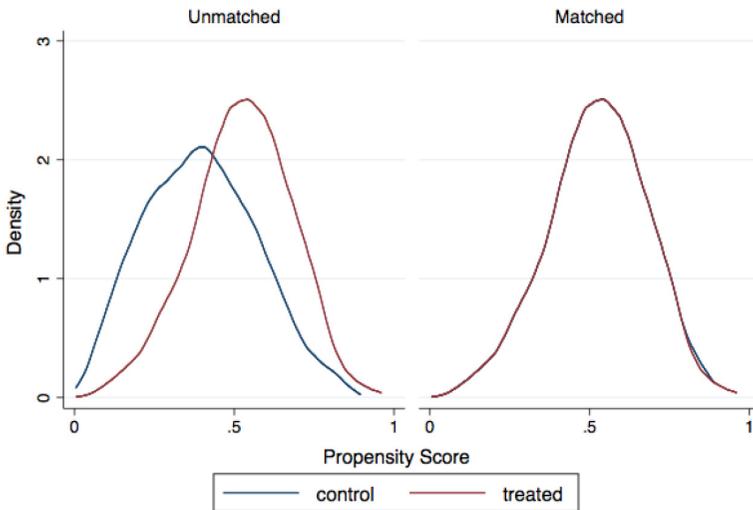


Figure 2b. Density plot: common support before and after matching—‘Weak’ sense of belonging at school (age 15/16)

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*Distributions of covariate means and prevalences in treated and control groups.* Matching on the propensity score should balance the means and prevalences of covariates between treated and control groups. To indicate a plausible range of differences in covariate means and prevalences within a correctly specified propensity score model, we follow Austin (2009) to derive the 95% confidence intervals of the empirical sampling distributions of the standardised differences of covariate means and prevalences. While matching on the true propensity score should eliminate bias, Austin (2009) demonstrates that as with a randomised control trial, balance when matching on the estimated propensity is a large sample property. Hence some deviation from zero difference in small samples does not necessarily indicate that the propensity score model has been misspecified. Figure 3 shows that (1) matching on the propensity score has substantially reduced most of the mean and prevalence differences in baseline covariates between treated and control groups and that (2) remaining differences provide no statistically significant evidence that our propensity score model has been misspecified.

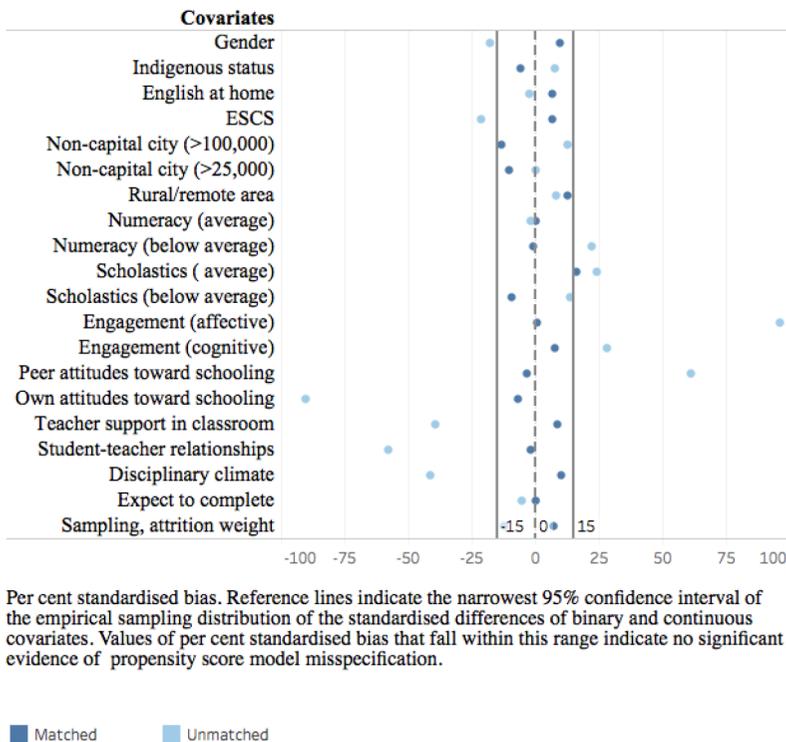


Figure 3. Standardised bias of covariates before and after matching—'Very weak' sense of belonging at school (age 15/16)

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*Variance ratios.* Matching on the propensity score should also balance the distributions of covariates between treated and control groups. Imai et al. (2008) recommend a comparison of between-group estimated variances to provide a more comprehensive assessment of covariate balance. Variance ratios (i.e., variance of treated observations as a proportion of the variance of control observations) approaching parity suggest similar distributions of the underlying baseline covariates and, by extension, that young people who experienced ‘very weak’ and ‘weak’ sense of belonging at school have been matched with otherwise similar young people who did not. Table 6 compares the variance ratios of prognostically important continuous covariates in the matched and unmatched samples. Most of these ratios fall within the 95% confidence interval of the F-distribution with  $n-1$  and  $n-1$  degrees of freedom for both levels of treatment, which may be used to benchmark the paired variances under the assumption of equality (Rosner, 1995). The variance ratios of ‘affective engagement’ and ‘student-teacher relationships’ exceed the 97.5th percentile under the strong treatment assumption (i.e., ‘very weak’ sense of belonging at school). The variance ratio of ‘teacher support in the classroom’ is below the cut-off for the 2.5th percentile under the weak treatment assumption (i.e., ‘weak’ sense of belonging). These results are broadly consistent with the supposition that the models have been properly specified.

Table 6. Variance ratios of select continuous covariates

Covariates	Variance ratio ( $V_t/V_c$ )*	very weak	weak
<i>Educational engagement</i>			
Affective engagement		1.46 (1.43)**	1.02 (0.96)
Cognitive engagement		1.19 (1.33)	0.95 (1.04)
<i>Learning environment characteristics</i>			
Peer attitudes toward school		1.01 (1.10)	0.94 (0.92)
Teacher support in classroom		0.91 (1.04)	0.79 (0.82)**
Student-teacher relationships		1.30 (1.11)**	0.92 (0.62)
Own attitudes towards school		1.17 (0.95)	1.03 (0.73)
Disciplinary climate		0.89 (0.87)	1.00 (0.87)

\*The ratio ( $V_t/V_c$ ) represents the variance of treated observations as a proportion of the variance of control observations for each listed covariate. Unmatched variance ratios are in parentheses.

\*\*Denotes the variance ratio of the matched sample falls outside the 95% confidence interval of the F-distribution with  $n-1$  and  $n-1$  degrees of freedom.

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### DISCUSSION

The analysis presented here provides significant evidence that young people's sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 has strong, independent impacts on their quality of life as adults. Consistent with our hypothesised treatment effect, these impacts are greater under the strong treatment assumption: with the exception of satisfaction with economic status (age 23/24),<sup>7</sup> the negative impacts of social marginalisation were stronger for young people who experienced 'very weak' sense of belonging than for those who experienced 'weak' sense of belonging. Though not tested here, respondents' happiness with their professional horizons and social life appear to change in similar proportions for treated and control groups between age 23/24 and 25/26, suggesting that observed treatment effects on these outcomes are stable over this time frame. Results indicate that having experienced social marginalisation at school tended to reduce respondents' subsequent satisfaction with their professional horizons. For the purpose of this study, this latent construct is comprised of respondents' self-reported attitudes concerning their happiness with their future, the work they do and their career prospects. Lower levels of satisfaction with these items may reflect lower levels of personal empowerment stemming from social marginalisation experienced while at school. In this sense, 'empowerment' may be understood to reflect, *inter alia*, individuals' socially supported sense of personal control, resilience and dispositional optimism (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Young people who do not experience a strong sense of connection and solidarity with their peers at school may feel they lack the personal and social resources to actively shape their own environment. As a corollary, young people who experienced (very) weak sense of belonging subsequently reported lower levels of happiness with their inter-personal relationships and social life more generally. Unsurprisingly, young people's experience of social marginalisation at school does not appear to be isolated from their sense of social inclusion later in life—individuals who do not experience fulfilling relationships and a strong sense of belonging while at school are less likely to report strong feelings of belonging as adults.

Results indicate that respondents' who experienced 'very weak' sense of belonging became less satisfied on average with their economic status over time. Their increasingly negative outlook—from 0.01 (age 23/24) to 0.09 (age 25/26)—may indicate that the consequences of social alienation in youth tend to worsen over time with regard to individuals' happiness about their economic status as adults. We posit that this may reflect the contribution of young people's sense of belonging in school to their subsequent socioeconomic integration. As young people transition from schooling into young adulthood, they commonly experience periodic episodes of being not in education, employment and training (NEET) (OECD, 2016). Accumulated social capital may play an important role in helping young adults to overcome short-term, transitional economic marginalisation (Verhaeghe et al., 2015). Individuals' who experience extensive social alienation as youths may have

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fewer resources to do so, locking them into longer and more frequent durations of economic inactivity and the cyclical damaging effects associated with being long-term NEET (Carcillo et al., 2015). Economic status may also grow in importance over this age range as young adults seek out greater levels of independence. A relative lack of financial resources among respondents who experienced a (very) weak sense of belonging at school may exacerbate between-group differences in satisfaction with their economic status. Further research is needed to distinguish socioeconomic characteristics of young adults that may help account for observed differences.

Perhaps most striking is the observed impact of social marginalisation on young people's future mental and emotional health. On average, respondents who reported 'very weak' sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 experienced levels of anxiety and depression as adults 35% higher than their contemporaries. This is compelling evidence in support of Baumeister and Leary's (1995) thesis that sense of belongingness is a fundamental human motivation. Further, our result demonstrates that the negative impacts of social alienation at school persist beyond the initial experience, with negative consequences for individuals' mental and emotional wellbeing extending well into adulthood.

## CONCLUSIONS

Interpretation of the estimated treatment effects presented here requires prudence. Even if one accepts that subjective indications of quality of life (such as life satisfaction and mental and emotional wellbeing) can be adequately quantified for purposes of inter-personal comparison, it would be illogical to quantify individuals' self-reported levels of these latent constructs as proportions. In other words, it would be the height of folly to report that individuals experience a particular percentage of the total happiness and wellbeing purportedly available to them. Nonetheless, quantification of self-reported quality of life indicators may facilitate analysis of the importance of belonging at school in terms of relative—if not absolute—magnitude. In our sample, having experienced social alienation at school at age 15/16 resulted in demonstrably lower levels of life satisfaction and mental and emotional wellbeing in adulthood. These relationships have been shown to be significant, stable and causal.

If society's contemporary understanding of the purpose of education is to be extended to include health and happiness as worthwhile ends in and of themselves, then we must elucidate the barriers to realising such outcomes and empower educators to bring about necessary change. As shown elsewhere in this volume, the educational re-inclusion of disenfranchised young people mandates enhanced technical and professional resources, institutional planning, responsive pedagogies and other supports required by diverse young people who have been pushed to the margins. Failure to do so bears long-term consequences for the wellbeing and life satisfaction of young people as they transition into young adulthood.

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### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The allocation of observations to deciles used data from the first interview (10,370 respondents). Subsequent attrition of some respondents also contributed to deciles of more or less than ten per cent. In addition, the uneven distribution of index values among respondents that have continued through wave 11 suggests a correlation between survey attrition and respondents' sense of belonging at school.
- <sup>2</sup> Rather than allow the 2nd decile alone to indicate the less restrictive definition of treatment, 'weak' sense of belonging at school is comprised of scores in the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th deciles together. This broader treatment definition prevents model estimates from being arbitrarily skewed by non-uniform allocations at affected decile boundaries.
- <sup>3</sup> Willms' study of student engagement used data gathered through the 2000 PISA student cohort, rather than the 2003 cohort used here. However, the questions and scaling used to derive the index of students' sense of belonging to school are the same in both surveys.
- <sup>4</sup> There is considerable debate among quantitative researchers regarding 'acceptable' values of alpha for internal consistency of latent construct scale items. Streiner (2003) concurs with Nunnally (1967) that alpha values of .50 to .60 are appropriate for early stage research, with values of .80 more appropriate for basic research tools (in Austin, 2009). Our reported values may therefore be slightly lower than is conventionally recommended. However, retained factors are not being employed here in a clinical capacity, thus estimation of internal consistency may be employed to triangulate the validity of constructs identified through exploratory factor and parallel analysis.
- <sup>5</sup> Questions pertaining to the Kessler psychological distress construct were only asked in the final wave (wave 11), hence we cannot show comparable results for age 23/24.
- <sup>6</sup> The first regression uses very weak sense of belonging at school at age 15/16 as the dependent variable; the second regression uses weak sense of belonging as the dependent variable. The set of independent variables are the same in both regressions.
- <sup>7</sup> The estimated treatment effect of 'very weak' sense of belonging at school on life satisfaction with economic status (age 23/24) (0.01) was not statistically significant at the 90% confidence level. This result is plausibly an outcome of our limited sample size, rather than an indication that hypothesised strength of treatment effects is inconsistent (see Figure 1).

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## 8. OVERVIEW, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### ABSTRACT

This final chapter provides an overview of our volume with attention to the central premise of the underlying Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage project: the value of young peoples' participation in Flexible Learning Options. The preceding chapters examine the social, economic and political contexts in which FLOs operate, their philosophies of education and praxis, and their qualitative and quantitative impacts. To conclude, we consider the ramifications of these research findings in the domains of educational practice and policy in Australia.

### INTRODUCTION

To begin, it is useful to remind the reader of the researchers' diverse professional backgrounds, as well as the original catalyst for this collaboration. The purposeful aggregation of our team ensured a variety of epistemological research perspectives in qualifying and quantifying the 'value' of FLO participation. As is our wont, academics purposefully problematise the concept of 'value', especially in light of the neoliberal pressures impinging on the function of education today. In fact, we are troubled by the term 'value'; as researchers, teachers, practitioners, advisors and—in some cases—previous FLO participants, we query the FLO experience through a subjective, qualitative lens, elucidating value foremost at the first-hand, inter-personal level. Complementing this perspective, we also recognise that value may be estimated in relative terms from an econometric perspective. In this sense, value may be quantified through an analysis of correlates and long-term outcomes. Further, as we seek to inform the debate concerning the future of FLOs (and mainstream education more broadly), we must consider the potential ramifications of our research at the levels of both policy and practice.

All of these perspectives are essential. As Nash (2005) asserts, understanding social phenomena such as the disengagement of young people from mainstream schooling and their re-engagement through FLOs is best served through a 'numbers and narratives' approach. As represented by Thomas and Welters in Chapter Seven, the 'value' of FLO participation can indeed be quantified. Nonetheless, for many, such quantification fails to capture the essence of the human experience at the heart of FLO participation. Prior to this Australian Research Council (ARC) investigation,

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little research had been undertaken regarding the long-term life trajectories of FLO participants. Most importantly, the research literature lacked a cohesive measure of the social, economic and educational value of FLOs for strongly disadvantaged young people in Australia. In response to these gaps, the primary aim of our research—as well as the present volume, which emanates from our findings—has been to provide a comprehensive overview of the FLO sector, including its context, intent and principles of operation. Ultimately, we sought to discern a measurable impact of FLOs in participants' lives in relation to their long-term economic and social outcomes.

We begin this final chapter by revisiting our various preceding articulations of the value of FLO participation and summarising the key issues raised by each author. Building on this range of perspectives, we then consider the implications of our findings in regards to educational practice and policy. To conclude, we envision the future of flexible learning provision in Australia, recognising the pivotal role these programs have played in enabling young people to re-evaluate their own sense of value.

#### CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

In Chapter One, Te Riele provides an overview of the contextual background in which FLOs are located. She posits that the increased attention to upper secondary school completion, coupled with a deterioration in the youth labour market, has impacted considerably on those youth for whom 'schooling' does not work. She begins by placing at the forefront young peoples' lived experience, communicated through their commentaries on life, mainstream schooling and FLO participation. Foregrounding young people at the outset of this book is important to us as researchers, as any policy recommendations stemming from this undertaking must, above all, remain grounded in the experiences of those served by FLOs. The reflections of young people and staff in FLOs draw immediate attention to the impact of social background—poverty, in particular—on educational experience and achievement. Their accounts indicate that young people—often viewed as disengaged—may be more accurately characterised as disenfranchised, primarily by socioeconomic circumstances. FLO participants and staff illustrate poignantly a “dense and complex web of interrelated, interacting and multi-dimensional forces” (Batten & Russell, 1995, p. 50). Specifically, they show that social and educational disenfranchisement are intertwined; young people's broader experience of social exclusion manifests clearly in their experiences of mainstream schooling.

Te Riele further elaborates the contextual background of FLOs by unpacking recent macro-economic and policy pressures impacting Australian youth. She draws attention to increasing underemployment and unemployment in the youth sector, and the call by the OECD (2006) for policy responses to address early school leaving and the improvement of educational outcomes as potential solutions to the issue of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) more generally. Te Riele

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draws attention to educational policy pressures such as ‘learning or earning’ that tighten young people’s access to employment. In addition, she identifies Australia’s recent introduction of the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), as having further narrowed the work of educators, complicating their ability to devote time and energy to the kind of pastoral care that drew many of them into the teaching profession in the first place (Kostogriz, 2012).

In Chapter Two, Thomas extends to Riele’s analysis of prevailing social inequality, a precarious youth labour market, and educational policy pressures through an examination of neoliberalism’s insidious influence on Australia’s educational landscape. The release of the Australian Government’s *Quality Education: The Case for an Education Revolution in our Schools* (2007), in particular, comprises explicit evidence of an emerging ideological shift at the macro-system level concerning the perceived function of education in Australia. Under the leadership of then Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Deputy-Prime Minister Julia Gillard, the Labour government’s *Quality Education* manifesto gave undeniable subscription to a neoliberal paradigm (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010) that casts Australian students in the role of ‘human capital’ (Apple, 2007).

Contemporary educational policy reform has reshaped teaching and learning in Australia in a number of ways. Recent years have seen the establishment of the Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (a national regulatory body for teacher evaluation and registration), as well as the mainstreaming of standardised student assessment through NAPLAN and the online publication of school-level performance data. Developments in Australia closely mirror international trends concerning educational policy discourses increasingly centred around issues of performativity, teacher quality and student achievement. Common to these discourses is the positioning of young people as competitive agents in an ever-more globalised economy. Marginalised from Australia’s populist discourse—and central to this book—is any pronounced attention to the student ‘disengagement’ crisis evidenced in the increasing proportion of disadvantaged young people leaving school early, or of the efforts of FLOs to re-engage them in education. Whilst a great deal of academic literature in Australia and internationally has been dedicated to student disengagement—which typically emphasises individual student deficit (as critiqued by Mills & McGregor, 2014)—young people’s journeys of re-engagement have not been sufficiently explored in light of the country’s sweeping performance-focused educational reforms.

Having described the local and international contexts of Australia’s educational landscape and FLOs’ responses to prevailing institutional pressures, the book’s subsequent chapters provide an alternative discourse—the value of FLO participation—currently displaced from the national stage. In Chapter Three, Myconos examines the identifying features of FLOs. Drawing from phenomenological interviews with staff and young people (Lewthwaite, Wilson, Wallace, McGinty, & Swain, 2017), Myconos identifies three defining features of FLOs: an unconditionally

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inclusive ethos and corresponding approach to governance; tailored and flexible pedagogy and curriculum; and the centrality of well-being and relationship building. With reference to the politically and economically aggravated contextual background in which FLOs operate, Myconos highlights the impact of the ‘residualisation’ of social disadvantage in the nation’s state schools. The corresponding inability and—as voiced by some participants—unwillingness of mainstream schools to adjust to this changing profile of need testifies to the complex, interrelated barriers contributing to student disengagement from mainstream schools. FLOs seek to mitigate early school leaving by attending to this complexity. Further evident in the commentaries, analysis and discussion are the pivotal roles played by trained teachers, vocational trainers, youth support workers, careers advisors and physical and mental health professionals. In combination, these various contributions provide an experience of respite that enables recovery, re-orientation, re-evaluation and re-valuing, all of which are characteristic of the function of FLOs.

Drawing from the underpinning ethos and operative mechanisms defining FLOs, Chapters Four, Five and Six provide qualitative insights into the experiences of FLOs’ diverse youth participants and staff. In Chapter Four, Wallace draws from the accounts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth and staff to explore their appraisal of the flexible learning experience. The perspectives of Indigenous young people and staff are important, especially in light of the disproportionate number of Indigenous students experiencing disenfranchisement and disengaging from mainstream schools. Further, these perspectives give voice to a population underserved in mainstream schools. For these reasons alone, the chapter is imperative. Yet Wallace also considers the national policy landscape and constant attention given to the ‘situation’ of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Wallace asserts that the normalisation of this deficit-centred discourse at both the macro-system and school levels had exacerbated the widespread internalisation of negative self-concept among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. She renders visible the internalised language of deficit manifest in Indigenous young people’s reflections upon their mainstream schooling experiences—a phenomenon with major implications for educational policy and practice. In contrast, youth commentaries on their experiences within FLOs provide evidence of a reframing of self. Drawing on the attributes of FLOs outlined by Myconos in Chapter Three, Wallace corroborates evidence of FLOs’ attention to wellbeing and the cultural competence of staff in guiding Indigenous young people through highs and extreme lows to enable such reframing. Wallace, like Myconos, refers to the ‘systems of support’ that permeate both the formal and frequently informal interactions between staff and young people in FLOs. She refers to the interpersonal skills imparted by teachers—many of whom are ‘unqualified’—who through close attention to relationships, contribute to this reformation. Noteworthy is her reference to the development of resilience, grounded in a positive sense of self. Critically, Wallace demonstrates that for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, a positive self-concept is not restored, but only first realised through FLO

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participation. The commentaries indicate this novel realisation only comes about as result of working ‘with’ and ‘for’ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people as they gain new agency to make positive decisions for themselves and achieve outcomes likely to improve their long-term quality of life.

In Chapter Five, McGinty, Bursey and Babacan investigate the experiences of young people engaged in flexible learning with a focus on conceptualising how young people come to view education as a result of their experiences with it. The authors start by alerting us to the growing number of young people opting out of school and comment candidly on the inability of governments and educational systems worldwide to stem the tide of student disengagement. The authors contribute to a growing body of research attempting to understand the phenomenon of educational disengagement from the perspectives of young people and draw attention to the importance of young peoples’ insight and worldviews regarding this problem. Hence, McGinty, Bursey and Babacan emphasise the young peoples’ own accounts of their educational goals and experiences in mainstream schools and FLOs. As reflected in the testimonies of Indigenous young people in Chapter Four, respondents comment openly on the complexity of their lives and the inability and unwillingness of mainstream schools to work with and for students of difference. Despite young people’s determination to obtain an education, this ‘indifference to difference’ ultimately manifests in their disengagement from mainstream schools in which they viewed education as important but ultimately unattainable. Likewise, FLOs’ principles of operation—brought to light by Myconos in Chapter Three and evidenced in the accounts of young Indigenous people in Chapter Four—are again given voice by young people in Chapter Five. Significant in these commentaries is participants’ deep dissatisfaction with the kind of educational experiences they encountered in mainstream schools and their inability—stemming primarily from the perception of deficit rooted in difference—to alter this situation. Young people seeking education voice frustration with being seen as problems, which thwarts their access to education and the fulfilment and opportunity it provides. Extending discussion of the principles of flexible learning practice outlined in Chapter Three, the authors demonstrate that FLOs contribute to young peoples’ reconstructed sense of self-worth by framing divergent learning styles and life experiences as assets upon which to base engaging, affirming learning experiences.

In Chapter Six, Wilson draws upon the perspectives of flexible learning practitioners to probe the varied ways in which teaching and support staff conceptualise the value of FLO participation. These voices are important, as many educators have worked in both mainstream schools and FLOs, providing them a comprehensive understanding of the role of flexible learning in young people’s broader educational experience. She notes that the determination of ‘value’ is a complex and contested space among different stakeholders, and that popular econometric approaches to valuation risk reducing education’s perceived value to a subset of outputs and outcomes that are more easily measured. For this reason, Wilson draws on educational theorist Gert Biesta’s (2010) framework of three

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overlapping dimensions to analyse practitioner commentaries on the ‘function’ of schooling and the overarching purpose (and value) of education. These three dimensions include: (1) qualification—i.e., the provision of skills, knowledge and dispositions that enable preparation for life, including work; (2) socialisation—i.e., the way in which schools overtly and implicitly inculcate students into particular ways of doing and being; and (3) subjectification—i.e., the process of nurturing the self-development of the individual with attention to fostering autonomy and independence in thinking and acting. Wilson’s analysis provides insight into flexible learning practitioners’ perceptions of a broad and significant value of FLO participation. For example, in the dimension of qualification, Wilson highlights the multiple aspects of qualification fostered through FLO participation that go beyond the often criticised ‘curriculum of basic skill development’. For this reason, the commentary is vital. The application of Bietsa’s framework allows for a broader conceptualisation of the experience and value of FLO participation. Most significantly, Biesta’s three dimensions, especially in the overlap, provide a cogent reminder of what an overall education should be as an experience and provide as an outcome for all young people. Practitioners working with young people in the flexible learning space demonstrate such multidimensional awareness and commitment—something they desire stakeholders beyond FLOs to understand. They voice a critical awareness of the mainstream educational system, as well as of policymakers who fail to see the manifest purpose of the FLO experience for disenfranchised youth and the families and communities these young people represent. Finally, they advocate that the broad learning experience offered in FLOs challenge limited representations of the function of education in mainstream schools. For many young people, schooling has been narrow, exclusive and punitive, drawing into question whether its purported function has been distorted.

Having explored through qualitative methods the value of FLO the experience in Chapters Four through Six, Chapter Seven triangulates the value of FLO participation through a quantitative approach. Utilising the Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), Thomas and Welters investigate the long-term impacts of students’ sense of belonging at school on their subsequent quality of life as young adults. The authors use propensity score matching analysis to estimate the causal effect of marginalised young people’s improved sense of belonging at school on their future life outcomes, controlling for other factors shown to jointly determine individuals’ sense of belonging and future life satisfaction and mental and emotional wellbeing. Thomas and Welters attend to a variety of variables available through the LSAY data, including students’ place of residence, primary language, self-reported academic achievement, attitudes toward schooling, quality of student-teacher interactions, and economic, social and cultural status. The analysis provides significant evidence that young people’s sense of belonging at school has strong, independent impacts on their quality of life as adults. Results indicate that having experienced social marginalisation at school tends to be associated with a negative outlook on respondents’ subsequent social and economic prospects. Further, the impacts of social alienation in youth are shown to persist

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beyond the initial experience, with negative consequences for individuals' mental and emotional wellbeing extending well into adulthood. The authors thereby draw attention to the importance of FLOs' emphasis on so-called 'soft outcomes' for disengaged youth. They reiterate the qualitative accounts of Chapters Four through Six, which emphasise the value of FLOs with regards to participants' ability to redefine their concept of self through an enhanced sense of belonging. The accounts also indicate participants' altered view of the future, strengthened dispositional optimism and expectations of positive outcomes. Chapter Seven complements the preceding qualitative testimonies with a statistical indication of the value of re-engagement enabled through attention to participants' sense of belonging.

## SUMMARY OF THE KEY ISSUES

The intent of this book has been to provide a comprehensive overview of our ARC Linkage project investigating the 'value' of FLO participation. In light of Australia's ongoing school disengagement crisis (Te Riele et al., 2013), demand for education outside of mainstream school settings has grown substantially, leading to a proliferation of FLOs across the nation. Despite growing evidence of their successes, there is a lack of knowledge about their impact on the lifetime social and economic outcomes for the young Australians they serve. By extension, the broader role of FLOs within Australia's educational sector has likewise received increased attention of late. In particular, significant commentary concerns determining the benefits of FLO participation in light of these programs' substantial costs. The overall intent of our study has thus been to determine the nature and 'value' of FLOs' various contributions to the re-engagement of disenfranchised young people. We sought to do so at the personal and community levels in qualitative terms, but also at the national level through an explication of prevailing policy pressures and an econometric analysis of the importance of youth belonging.

In line with this focus, the qualitative accounts of young people graphically portray the candidness and detail with which young people speak about the complexity of their lives and the inability and unavailability of schools—indeed, often of teachers—to accommodate this diversity. Their constructed experience, collectively, is of being of little worth, primarily because they do not fit what is perceived to be a resource of value within mainstream schooling or to society in general. They are not seen as assets; instead, they are framed in terms of enduring deficit (Joyner, 1998). As a consequence, students of difference are actively filtered from mainstream schooling. In contrast, these young people describe their experiences of FLOs with overt reference to being valued, seen as worthwhile, and receiving a holistic and accommodating educational experience. This alternative narrative dominates the commentary of the young people we interviewed. As a result of the commitment and reconstruction they experience within the FLO environment, young people re-evaluate and reassess their notions of self-worth. Young people demonstrate a keen awareness of the broader social forces that shaped their pre-FLO

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experience, especially in regards to the exclusion of young people of difference from formal education. In particular, young people demonstrate cognizance of the failure of mainstream education to be responsive, equitable and accessible to students of diverse needs. Respondents frequently identified rigid curricula and pedagogy, a lack of individualised learning support and insufficient provision of mental and emotional wellbeing support in their previous schools.

In Chapter Seven, Thomas and Welters underscore the statistical significance of an ethic of care evidenced in respectful, caring interactions, coupled with tangible actions to ensure learning inclusivity. Teachers who embody a highly developed ethic of care for students are more likely to seek appropriate means to assist students in their learning and to manage risks that contribute to school disaffection and other negative outcomes (Perso & Hayward, 2015). The students in our sample embody social and demographic ‘difference’ in comparison to the wider Australian population. These young people’s reflections on mainstream schooling evidence a systemic ‘indifference to difference’, which prevents marginalised students from accessing much of what mainstream education offers (Lingard, 2006).

The qualitative accounts of the young people in our study uniformly draw negative attention to their mainstream learning experiences with regard to a lack of appropriate learning assistance, feeling devalued and disrespected as a learner, and program inflexibility. Despite the call for schools to deliver curriculum for *all*, the accounts presented here suggest that young people from FLOs across the nation perceive that mainstream schooling is intended for only *some*. FLOs—through their principles of operation and practice—seek to rectify these sociological phenomena of filtering and exclusion. Participants’ experiences of mainstream schools suggest inequity concerning schools’ acknowledgement and treatment of difference, and recognition of systemic marginalisation of disadvantaged students (McGregor & Mills, 2011). The critical challenge for educators—especially at the teacher-student interface—is to reflect upon how they illustrate who matters (and who does not), and how this is operationalised in the principles and practices by which classrooms and schools operate. In order to provide an equitable education for all, schools and their teachers must critically examine their practices to identify the subtle mechanisms by which some young people come to believe that schooling is not ‘for’ or ‘about’ them.

In light of the significant financial costs of such programs, continued and expanded investments in FLOs are likely to be subject to the appraisal of their estimated net economic benefits. While the long-term social and economic benefits fostered by FLOs likely comprise significant public cost savings and help strengthen Australia’s social fabric (Broadbent, 2009), the distances travelled by FLO participants may not immediately manifest in quantifiable terms. Furthermore, re-engaged learners demonstrate complex, non-linear trajectories of success that are often not limited to academic achievement alone. Furthermore, financial support for such programs is frequently limited to the short term or constrained by narrowly defined eligibility criteria. Hence flexible learning outcomes may often be difficult to substantiate. In order to demonstrate the success of FLOs and secure sustainable resources for the

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long term, there is a strong need for FLOs to capture consistent data concerning student outcomes—both academic and non-academic—over the long term.

### IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

We now briefly return to the issue of educational policy development and the various resulting influences on teachers and students, with attention to how these pressures currently manifest in the Australian context. We then give consideration to potential ramifications of our findings on local educational policy and practice. The chapter concludes with a re-thinking of the role and responsibilities of FLOs in the broader context of schooling in Australia and the potential of FLOs to reshape this educational landscape for the benefit of disenfranchised young people.

#### *Policy, Programs and Teaching Practice*

A key outcome of our research has been to make explicit the necessity of transforming education to better serve young people of difference and disadvantage. A forward-looking approach thus commences with critical enquiry—an exploration of prevailing hierarchies of influence and the systems that re-produce and sustain them. The policy implications of what we have learned from the key stakeholders in FLOs (young people and staff) can be organised around two axes:

1. Improving intervention, i.e., strengthening FLOs to enhance their contributions to young people and the community;
2. Improving prevention, i.e. strengthening engagement in mainstream schooling so that young people do not fall through the cracks.

Starting with the second axis, there is much mainstream schools can learn from FLOs' approaches to working with young people marginalised by and disaffected with their previous schools. This is not to blame teachers and leaders in mainstream schools, who are often over-worked and under pressure by external accountabilities, and many of whom lament having their time and attention taken away from students (Blackmore, 2004; Kostogriz, 2012). By highlighting the benefits of a balanced and holistic approach to the engagement and education of disenfranchised young people, flexible learning practitioners can be allies of educators in mainstream schools.

This starts with the fundamental question: what are schools for? With each generation charged to answer this question anew (Young, 2008), critical scholars continue to query the underlying purpose of schooling (Fielding & Moss, 2011). As sites of critical democratic engagement (McMahon & Portelli, 2004), FLOs bear a constructively disruptive potential to redefine common conceptions of the intent and value of education. In stark contrast to the populist framing of education as human capital production, young people and practitioners interviewed for this research frequently echoed a broad vision of education that encapsulates a whole-of-life approach. As voiced by UNESCO:

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Education is at the heart of personal and community development, its mission is to enable each of us, without exception, to develop all talents to the full and realize our creative potential, including responsibility for our own lives and the achievement of personal aims. (Delors, 1996, p. 1)

In Australia, all state, territory and federal governments agreed to the *Melbourne declaration on educational goals for young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008). Framed within a context of global social, economic, environmental and technological change, the agreement emphasises the aspirations that (1) Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence and (2) all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7).

On the whole, FLO staff and students would be happy to sign up to such aims. What their narratives highlight, however, is a gap between these avowed national goals and the actual experiences of a great many young people in Australian schools. Staff and students in mainstream schools may find their everyday experiences governed by performance targets for standardised tests and an ambition to garner higher social status through superficial—though highly visible—markers such as a neat school uniform. Such counterproductive measures of accountability and achievement undermine the laudable ideals set forth by UNESCO and MCEETYA.

By underscoring the value of equity, excellence, inclusivity and holistic educational engagement—and highlighting extant barriers to their actualisation—the voices of FLO participants and staff can bolster efforts by their peers in mainstream schools to likewise reassess the purpose of schooling and, by extension, the best course of action to ensure such goals are met.

Our research draws attention to two specific aspects of FLO practice that, if adopted more widely in mainstream schools, would have the potential to ameliorate educational disenfranchisement. First, there is compelling evidence that young people's sense of belonging at school has strong, enduring impacts on their quality of life as adults. The importance schooling's emotional and relational elements has, of course, long been recognised in educational scholarship (e.g., Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004; Noddings, 1992). FLOs can model how to actualise this sense of belonging, in particular among young people most in need.

Second, FLOs demonstrate ways of valuing, recognising and responding to difference that go well beyond the usual understandings of differentiated practice. FLOs contribute to young peoples' reconstructed sense of self-worth by framing divergent learning styles and life experiences as assets upon which to base engaging, affirming learning experiences. Of particular importance, beyond the basic need to get to know students personally, is the commitment to listen to young people and take their input seriously. Young people in FLOs have proved themselves highly capable of reflecting on their personal learning goals and how best to achieve them. Again, advocating the benefits of genuine student participation for the improvement and reform of schooling is not new (see, for example, Mitra & Gross, 2009; Mockler &

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Groundwater-Smith, 2014; Rudduck, 2007). However, as Fielding (2004) points out, attempts to put such ideas into practice often collide with schools' 'recalcitrant realities'. FLOs provide countless successful examples of how to meaningfully involve and constructively engage with students of difference.

We turn now to the other axis—enhancing the value of the flexible learning 'intervention' to young people and the community. A key implication of our research is the pivotal role played by FLO staff. As te Riele (2014) put it, staff are 'the most valuable asset' of FLOs. There are several elements to this, foremost the diversity of staff, including qualified teachers, vocational trainers, youth support workers, careers advisors, Indigenous education workers, and physical and mental health professionals. This breadth of expertise and professional cross-pollination it fosters are pivotal to success in the flexible learning space. Second, staff capacities for creativity and innovation, bolstered by deep commitment to the success of young people, are essential. There are real risks, however, of staff feeling devalued and 'burning-out', not least with regard to tiered remuneration. The policy implication here is to adequately recognise all staff, for example through enhanced working conditions, access to appropriate professional learning, and respect for individuals' professional judgement. In particular, longer-term and more secure funding for FLOs would directly enhance practitioners' capacities to plan for their personal and professional futures and focus on improving the learning and wellbeing of their students.

Despite their relatively small size, FLOs cater to significant number of young people to provide substantial individual and community benefits. And while they feature significant organisational diversity, they share in common core approaches to the reengagement of disenfranchised young people. Hence as a (sub)sector of the Australian educational system, FLOs warrant structural recognition with regards to secure funding, as well as coherent and appropriate policy. Guidelines developed for mainstream schools, for example, could be usefully adjusted to suit the unique cohorts and contexts of FLOs would be effective. For example, a census of enrolments once or twice a year offers a reasonably accurate basis for 'per capita' funding in mainstream schools, but is a poor indicator in FLOs which tend to offer continuous enrolment throughout the year.

Our research has clearly demonstrated the value of FLOs for both young people and society. It is in the interest of the whole of Australia to ensure that our educational policy empowers FLOs to achieve these benefits.

### *The Future of Flexible Learning Options in Australia*

In locating flexible learning models of practice within a highly regulated, government-funded school system, FLOs on the one hand walk the challenging path of organisational compliance, audit and review, and on the other, of innovation and advocacy. Amidst a prevailing narrative of slipping standards and declining outcomes of an educational system in crisis, the implementation of school improvement and compliance legislation, increasingly centralised curricular control, and growing

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number of high-stakes testing regimes, audit and accountability technologies have heightened demands on schools in terms of governance and financial accountability.

Like all endeavours on the frontier, political advocacy that challenges the dominant paradigm of a Eurocentric, colonized education system is sure to encounter resistance by state authorities. In addition to long-established requirements to report attendance and engagement, FLOs—particularly as they continue to grow at the invitation of communities—are facing increased demand for evidence of young people’s academic gains and transition to further education, training and employment. While these are not unreasonable demands of publically funded education services, the narrow lens developed for ‘mainstream’ educational assessment fails to capture many of the educational, social, cultural, psychological and emotional gains young people make in alternative learning environments.

The question perhaps most often asked of FLOs is, “How do you measure success?” (Johns & Parker, 2017). Most obviously, the vast majority of young people attending FLOs were not otherwise attending any school. These young people, as previously discussed, felt ‘pushed’ from schools that failed to meet their needs. As educational programs, FLOs emphasise a range of such ‘traditional’ outcomes, including engagement with learning and the development of new, meaningful knowledge and skills. Yet FLOs also recognise that when young people choose to attend—to face the overwhelming challenges of their lives: homelessness, substance addiction, poverty, fear of ‘shame’ in formal educational settings, low literacy, parenting responsibilities, juvenile justice processes and more—they make a significant choice to enter into a relationship of trust with adults to enhance their future through learning. In essence, they attach. Beyond the fundamental significance of attachment to the learning environment, FLOs recognise myriad other measures of wellbeing, including the overcoming of anxiety and fear of community, breaking the cycle of recidivism, minimising the harms of substance use, becoming competent parents, engaging positively with peers, life satisfaction, and happiness.

As a (relatively) young sector, flexible learning is still in the early stages of developing sustainable approaches to regulatory compliance (Mills & McGregor, 2014) and emerging labour demands. To the former, responses include modification and reinterpretation of standardised school improvement measures, as well as collection of data that moves beyond traditional academic measurements to acknowledge enhanced wellbeing, civic engagement and relational capacity. The Fidelity Factor School Improvement Tool currently under development by Youth+, for example, will offer FLO providers new methods to substantiate a range of non-academic outcomes, including enhanced cultural and relational capitals (Murray, 2017, personal communication). Likewise, wellness assessment rubrics are increasingly being employed (Te Riele et al., 2017) in the development of individual learning plans for young people and will, in time, form the basis for public reporting of psychosocial outcomes related to individuals’ ‘distanced travelled’. These data may also inform flexible learning communities’ program cycle management and other improvement processes. Finally, FLOs have fostered relationships with local communities through

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the collaborative development and publication of working agreements that guide and reiterate negotiated community expectations (Murray, 2017, personal communication).

The expansion of flexible learning also warrants an earnest assessment of employment and workplace conditions. State-based independent education unions, on behalf of their members, have opened up dialogue on working conditions within FLOs. According to Dale Murray, Director of Edmund Rice Education Australia's Youth+ Institute, it will be important that industrial negotiations do not attempt to transpose traditional labour enterprise bargains. Murray maintains that dialogue will need to remain cognisant of the differences in an educational practice that caters for the rights of all community stakeholders and that responses to the legitimate needs of this expanding workforce embody flexible learning's holistic vision of education (Murray, 2017, personal communication).

The complex question of appropriate curriculum development in FLOs warrants a chapter in its own right. Nonetheless, we table some fundamental challenges that present to all educators working in this space. First, young people bring a vast diversity of cultural, educational, social and historical capitals to the learning environment; FLOs must foster the ability to positively recognise the value of these capitals. As mentor educators, flexible learning practitioners are tasked to understand each young person's unique starting point and then to build upon this in partnership with the learner. This requires deep understanding of the young person's histories of learning and literacy development. Many young people that engage with flexible learning present with gaps in their academic development due to long periods of absence (Te Riele, 2012). The findings of this research repeatedly emphasise literacy as the key ingredient in the development of young people's cultural, economic, political and social agency. Without adequate literacy, young people often become trapped in the cycle of disenfranchisement. 'Catching up' with the fundamentals of literacy, then, must be recognised as a complex process that requires time, resources and a deep commitment from educators to support this developmental process.

Second, the re-engagement of disenfranchised learners requires meaningful, engaging curriculum of high interest to young people with experiences of being 'turned off' by schooling. This remains a key challenge, especially in light of national and state-based curricular frameworks that assume young Australians have progressed through year levels uninterrupted and with all the requisite skills. The complexity arises in scaffolding literacy development with high interest in ways that do not further marginalise young people. Creative opportunities to engage young people in the fundamentals of language and literacy acquisition may be found, *inter alia*, in the digital spaces of youth culture, music culture, and in enquiry-based projects that afford young people greater ownership of the learning space.

Finally, there is the challenge of community. FLOs are often initiated at the invitation of communities seeking to provide young people with a suite of educational options. Many communities, as evidenced by the growth of FLOs in Australia, share a deep desire to ensure all their young people find pathways to positive futures. Yet the refrain, 'Not in my back yard' remains a common feature of the developmental

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phase of newly established FLOs. These sites frequently experience pushback on the installation of new infrastructure to support disenfranchised young people. Where stakeholder resistance is organised vis-à-vis local councils, development applications face substantial hurdles. Committed political and community support is therefore pivotal throughout the process.

Despite the country's expansive geography, the majority of Australians cluster around the coastal fringe (primarily the east coast). This demographic distribution creates complex staffing issues for FLOs; attracting qualified staff remains an acute challenge in regional and remote areas (see Kelly & Fogarty, 2015), where staff commitments are frequently short-term. This puts FLOs in regional and remote areas at particular risk of high staff turnover, with the associated higher costs of new staff induction and training. Importantly, this churn can damage trust hard-earned with young people already experiencing a lack of positive attachments. More work to retain staff in regional and remote areas, and to strengthen young people's resilience through change will need to be undertaken as flexible learning continues to expand nationally.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

The research detailed in this volume makes evident the benefits of FLO participation and the significant role FLOs play in the lives of disenfranchised Australian youth. The data, both qualitative and quantitative, facilitate a reconsideration of the prevailing neoliberal conceptualisation of the role of schooling. The narratives of young people and staff highlight how contemporary policy directives continue to usurp the promise of an equitable educational experience for vulnerable students within mainstream schools. Australian schools require a broadened vision of education, as well as practical adjustment to practice in schools and classrooms. A re-evaluation of what is valued is called for, with a more holistic attention to notions of student success. As sites of critical democratic engagement, FLOs embody a crucial resistance to the framing of education solely in the service of human capital production. In their active re-examination of the purpose and pedagogy of Australian mainstream schools, they reveal that re-engaging disenfranchised young people requires not only additional resources, but a comprehensive reimagining of the role of teachers in mainstream schools.

In his foreword to Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull asserts,

Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world. (Freire, 2005, p. 34)

In this age of rapid transformation, continued leadership, research and advocacy is called for such that all young people—no matter their background—may actualise

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the right to equity in education. At the forefront of that effort, FLOs are forging new ground in practice and pedagogy for the benefit of all young people.

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