

# Which Literacy Practices and Pedagogies Engage and Empower At-Risk Adolescent Students?

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## Abstract

This paper reports on preliminary findings from an ongoing one year doctoral study of literacy programs provided at four alternative education settings in Queensland, Australia, and a comparative site in Texas, USA. The research question being: "What are the literacy practices utilised for at risk adolescents across several alternative education sites?"

## Keywords

Disengaged, adolescents, alternative education, literacy

## Introduction

In the developing world the concern is for delivering basic literacy education programs to large at risk segments of the population. In Australia, although these segments of the population are smaller, there nevertheless is some concern that in spite of nearly 200 years of mass education significant numbers of the population, approximately ten per cent, have failed to attain basic literacy levels (Wickert 1989). Of particular interest to legislators and educators are the number of at risk adolescents who have disconnected from school and community life, and are at risk of failing to attain basic literacy skills needed to function in the current knowledge based society (Belanger et al. 1992; Falk 2001). In an effort to reconnect these adolescents a multiplicity of alternative education settings has emerged.

However, finding a space where at risk adolescents can successfully engage in literacy education can prove difficult for both the students and teachers alike. Problems that caused at risk adolescents to disengage from their education in mainstream high schools can also cause disengagement in the alternative setting. This paper examines how the five alternative education sites meet the challenge of grappling with these difficulties; how and whether students maintain their engagement and increase their literacy levels; and whether these young people are being empowered with the literacy skills that enable them to look forward to a better future.

## Two analytical lenses

Specifically this paper is presenting emerging findings through two analytical lenses. The first lens is the subjective perceptions of a total of 17 students and 19 staff who were interviewed using two interview proformas (Appendix 1, *Embedded Case Study — Student Interview*; Appendix 2, *Interview Program Coordinator*). This is a wide angle view of the literacy learning experiences at all alternative education sites — what staff and students perceived as keeping students successfully engaged in literacy learning and what prevented their engagement.

The second lens focuses more narrowly on two of the main case study sites, and involves the perceptions of four students and four teachers/coordinators about specific issues that arose at those two sites. These were issues that impacted both the engagement and the literacy attainment of the four students. The issues were also chosen because of uniqueness and possible applicability to at risk students at other sites.

The students and sites coming under the lens were framed within a qualitative case study design. These are a total of five participating alternative education case study sites (Table 1): *a pilot study site* at a regional Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college in Queensland; *three main Queensland sites* — a rural Flexi school, a city suburban TAFE and an Education Queensland trial Alternative Education Centre; and finally *a comparative site in Texas*. The Queensland sites were chosen firstly, because each site represents a unique form of alternative education setting extant in the state. Secondly, each site conducts an educational program which is either unique or representative of programs available for at risk adolescents, and thirdly, each site is representative of the demographic areas of Queensland. The comparative site in Texas is housed in a former derelict church building where disengaged youth are prepared for a year 12 equivalent test, the General Educational Development (GED) exam. This site was chosen to help situate the study in a global framework, comparing education provision for disengaged youth in Australia with provision in another nation belonging to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Additionally several students from each site are participating *as embedded case studies* (Yin 1994).

### **Theoretical foundation and methodology**

With a theoretical basis of critical ethnography, the study is also following a structured ethnographic methodology prescribed by Carspecken's (1996b) *Five Stages for Critical Qualitative Research* (Table2). The full descriptions generated by ethnography suit the research subject, because comprehensive descriptions of the cultural settings of all participants — at risk students, their teachers, and administrators — are needed to illuminate their knowledge construction, and the power relations which impact on that knowledge construction. The illumination of these power relations is the "critical" part of the methodology. This is underpinned by an ontology of critical realism (Bhaskar 1979) allied with an epistemology of critical symbolic interactionism as defined by Carspecken who said:

"The symbolic representations of events is never just a matter of symbols corresponding to objective reality, because social relations involving forms of power are always entailed in any representation" (Carspecken 1996, p. 9).

Bhaskar, the "father" of critical realism, made this comment about the role of language in his ontology:

"... the *conceptual* aspect of the subject matter of the social sciences circumscribes the possibility of measurement in an even more fundamental way. For meanings cannot be measured, only *understood*. Hypotheses about them must be expressed in language, and confirmed in dialogue. Language here stands to the conceptual aspect of social science as geometry stands to physics

(Bhaskar 1979, p. 59).

**Table 1. Alternative education site characteristics**

Alternative Education Sites	Organisation Curriculum Materials	Staff	Assessment	Performance Indicators	Program sponsored by
PILOT STUDY SITE: Regional TAFE, Qld <i>Language, Literacy &amp; Numeracy Program</i> , [large coastal region]	TAFE – Teacher developed workbooks and worksheets	Coordinator, Teachers, Volunteer Tutors	Teacher marked workbooks, Voc Ed outcome test sheets, NRS test sheets and oral presentations	1) TAFE Certificate 1 Vocational Access outcomes 2) NRS outcomes required by Centrelink 3) TAFE Curriculum outcomes	National — Australia wide Site specific
Rural Flexi School, Qld [small mountain town]	Brisbane School of Distance Education workbooks /online learning and TAFE course materials	Previous Coordinator, Acting Coordinator, Teacher, Para Teacher	Workbooks, assignments & assessment sheets sent to & marked by Brisbane School of Distance Education or TAFE	Outcome based leading to Year 10 Certificate / Yr 12 Post Compulsory Certificate	State – Education Queensland
Suburban TAFE, Qld <i>Certificate I Vocational Access for Youth at Risk</i> , [state capital, Brisbane]	TAFE – Teacher developed materials	Coordinator, Acting Coordinator, Teachers, Tutors & Volunteer Tutors	Teacher marked workbooks, assignments and oral presentations	1) TAFE Certificate 1 Vocational Access outcomes 2) NRS Level 3 outcomes	Site specific, National — Australia wide
Rural City Alternative Education Centre, Qld [rural city]	Teacher developed material based on individual student needs	Coordinators/ Teachers (a husband and wife team), TAs, teachers, volunteer tutors	Teacher marked work	Outcomes based – vocational and personal goals achieved	State – Education Queensland [one of 5 trial alternative schools]
COMPARATIVE SITE: GED Program, Texas [rural city]	Packets of worksheets photocopied from GED textbooks	Education director, 4 teachers, 2 volunteer tutors, 2 part time admin personnel	GED Exam – external exam, marked externally by certified high school teachers	GED diploma, a Yr 12 equivalent diploma – covering 5 subject areas.	National – US Federal government initiative

**Table 2. Methodology, Carspecken’s Five Stages for Critical Qualitative Research (adapted from Carspecken 1996, pp. 40-3)**

Stage 1	Compiling the primary record through the collection of monological data
Stage 2	Preliminary/ongoing reconstructive analysis
Stage 3	Dialogical data generation
Stage 4	Discovering system relations
Stage 5	System relations as explanations of findings

Thus the foundational ontology and epistemology both view language as central in conveying participating actors' meanings about their social realities; realities which are composed of empirical experiences, events/phenomena, and underlying social structures or mechanisms whose innate powers/liabilities impact on actors' agency to participate in generating these events (Bhaskar 1979; Collier 1994; Danermark et al. 2002; Hetland 2002).

Consequently what Carspecken termed "the dialogical generation" of data took a central role in the research methodology. Also Carspecken's emphasis on the hermeneutic principle in research was utilised in the data collection and analysis process. For although the *Five Stages for Critical Qualitative Research* are set out as five distinct stages (Table 1), in his elaboration Carspecken (1996) explains, rather than being hierarchical, these five stages take place more as a circular or hermeneutic form of analysis. Stages 1 and 3, the collection of monological and dialogical data are an ongoing process, with Stage 2, reconstructive analysis informing further collection of data. Therefore, with this hermeneutic process in mind the author planned a series of four "Visits" over the space of one year to the three main case study sites in Queensland: Visit 1, August to September 2004; Visit 2, November to December 2004; Visit 3, April 2005; Visit 4, July 2005.

This paper is the result of data generated during Visit 1 and 2, when each centre was visited for approximately two weeks, twice a week. Also included in the paper are data gathered from the initial three week pilot study at a fourth Queensland site, as well as data from a one week visit to the alternative site in Texas [Note: for reasons of confidentiality all students and staff chose aliases, by which they will be referred to in the following section].

### **Data analysis: First lens**

#### ***Collective participant perceptions of the learning engagement at all sites***

After taping and transcribing student and staff interviews, following Carspecken's methodology, a reconstructive analysis was made of the dialogical data. First frequently occurring key words or codes were identified, the codes grouped, and meaning fields assigned to the grouped codes. These *meaning fields* represented participants' perceptions, and were foregrounded or backgrounded in a hierarchy of importance according to the levels of frequency. The resultant hierarchy of participants' perceptions of their literacy learning experience is detailed in Table 3.

**Table 3. Lens 1: Participants’ perceptions grouped into meaning fields regarding the learning engagement at alternative sites**

<p>Positive meaning fields that have emerged, graded in level of frequency, are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1. How the literacy learning experience differs from high school</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Students all commented on small class sizes — individual attention/sitting next to instead of teaching from the front of the class</li> <li>b. Teachers all commented on the importance of building a supportive teacher–student relationship and empowerment of students through increased confidence.</li> </ol> </li> <li><b>2. Patterns of attendance</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Students — claimed they were not truanting as they did at school</li> <li>b. Staff — all listed flexibility as crucial — flexible...days per week/hours per day, for individuals and groups; flexible intakes and exits.</li> </ol> </li> <li><b>3. At-risk students supportive of each other’s learning — because of...</b></li> <li><b>4. Direct teaching/modeling social skills — resulting in:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Students — no longer judgmental of others, and learning to take on board others’ opinions, influence each other to attend.</li> </ol> </li> <li><b>5. Nature of the literacy event</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Students listed specifics — improved spelling, grammar, paragraph writing, greater confidence to read and make oral presentations</li> <li>b. Staff listed the following as enabling engagement: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- literacy programs centred on: verbal literacy; students’ interests and needs; choice and attentional lead</li> <li>- literacy students are individually assessed and placed into a graded program matching their skills level</li> <li>- literacy classes given choices on structuring and content matter within a set curriculum framework</li> <li>- literacy lessons taking place in a real life context.</li> </ul> </li> </ol> </li> </ol> <p><b>The Negative Meaning Fields, negatively affecting literacy attainment and engagement, are:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teachers’ burden of increasing administrative requirements</li> <li>2. Students’ continuing lack of motivation</li> <li>3. Students too young; below 14</li> <li>4. Students with too much ‘chaos in their personal lives’.</li> </ol>
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**Table 4. Keywords (or raw codes) used by the students and staff alike, describing the learning experience at alternative sites**

<p>‘Small class’, ‘different’, ‘more relaxed’, ‘friendly’, ‘flexible’, ‘negotiate’, ‘understanding’, ‘second chance’, ‘self-discipline’, ‘easy...easy going...easier work’, ‘building bridges’, ‘building relationships’, building ‘self-esteem’, ‘confidence’ to ‘have a go’, ‘empowerment’, ‘love and belonging’, a teacher who ‘sits down with’, ‘they teach you’, ‘individual programs’, programs that offer ‘choices’, target ‘student needs’, ‘student interests’ and have ‘immediacy of application’.</p>
<p><b>Terms for high school were:</b></p> <p>‘don’t talk’, ‘just listen’, ‘look at it, read it, do it’, ‘wouldn’t help’, ‘didn’t fit in’, ‘judgmental’, ‘set programs/curriculum’.</p>

*Meaning field 1a: student perspectives: individual attention / small classes*

To summarise the highlights from this reconstructive analysis, the most frequently commented on area or meaning field was *How the literacy learning experience differed from high school* (Tables 3 and 4). All students across all sites said what made a difference to their learning was *individual attention and small class sizes*, where the teacher instead of standing out the front of the class to

teach, would come around, sit with and explain the learning task until the students understood. This comment was made by all students both in Australia and Texas. In the larger mainstream class, they all for various reasons expressed the feeling that the teacher either ignored their questions, got angry when they didn't understand, expected them to understand after only one explanation, or just did not have the time to help them learn.

*The reality of the learning event was that all sites did have small class sizes, which varied from five to fifteen. At the GED site in Texas, twelve was their maximum number. At the pilot study site, the regional TAFE teaching literacy and numeracy to unemployed adults and adolescents, the class sizes varied from fifteen down to four, as students could enter at any time in the year, and exit once attaining the required literacy level. At the Alternative Education Centre, because of the very high needs, younger cohort of adolescents they only have about twenty students enrolled and eight staff. Ten students attend four days a week, with only six extremely high needs students attending on Mondays. At the Flexi school, although the enrolment is approximately 30 there are only an average of ten to twelve students in the flexi school room throughout the day. This is because students use distance education booklets and are allowed a flexible attendance pattern, working both from home and at the centre. The final centre, the suburban TAFE conducting a specially designed Certificate I, Workplace Access program for Youth at Risk, had five classes. These classes ran over the course of a calendar year. In 2004 they began the year with about 16 students. At the time of Visit 1 in September there were approximately ten students per class. By Visit 2 in December that number dropped to six to eight per class. Regarding the need for individual support and smaller class sizes at this centre, the acting coordinator expressed the following view:*

We are also looking at having more tutors in the classes, when we have those big classes ... because like 15 doesn't sound many kids, but when they're all disengaged youth it is ... it is horrendous. And they're all at their own different levels. So in that way, we are looking at ways to improve.

*Meaning field 1b: staff perspectives: supportive staff /student relationships and staff flexibility*

Two other important factors in preventing at risk youth from disengaging mentioned by almost all teaching staff were *building a supportive student / teacher relationships* and *flexibility*. For many teachers these two factors went hand in hand. Having a flexible, non demanding teaching environment allowed students to have a more relaxed relationship with their teachers, where teachers often played a dual role of mentor or counselor as well as teacher. Many teachers said they didn't like having to be "authoritarians" and enjoyed the mentoring role much more. In fact when asked the question:

"For other sites who may wish to initiate such a program what advice would you give? Identify any features of the program that you regard as essential to successful delivery?" (Appendix 1, Interview — Program Coordinator, Question 22),

all staff replied that it was essential to get "the right staff", and in all but three cases identified "the right staff" as those with a more relaxed attitude to disengaged adolescents. It was this relaxed

attitude that the majority felt helped the adolescents re-engage. Several teachers and coordinators pointed out the fact that the staff at their sites were all over 40, and that older more experienced staff were better equipped to deal with disengaged youth. However those advocating an older staff also acknowledge some younger tutors and teachers did have that special personality: patient, understanding and flexible enough to succeed with this difficult cohort of young people. Two examples of younger staff members were the volunteer tutor who read and cooked with younger students at the Alternative Education Site. Of this young tutor her supervisors said, "She is just so good with Matt and Jody, we are lucky to have her". The second example was the Education Director at the GED program in Texas. This young graduate was only 23 when she took on her present role, after only four months teaching in the GED program. That was back in 2001. All the staff and students interviewed spoke highly of this energetic young woman, that she was the main reason for the success of the program. Students named her as the staff member they would most talk to if they were having personal difficulties. Consequently, it is apparent younger staff can be successful with at risk youth, as the teacher at the Flexi school said:

"It really depends on the person. I think there's certainly room for younger teachers, but they've got to be the right personality. They've got to be able to relax a bit and not stress too much ... but the right sort of young person, I'm sure they'd do really well."

How these overall student and staff held perceptions related to four individual at risk students is examined under the next lens.

#### **Data analysis: second lens**

##### ***Separate case study profiles of engagement and literacy acquisition at two case study sites focussing on two students per site***

This second lens is used to observe Carspecken's "Stage 4: Discovering System Relations" (Table 2). The System Relations that are being discovered are at the micro level: the social settings within two sites; and at the macro level: social settings held in common across these two and other alternate education sites. Carspecken describes social settings as "tacit understandings reached between actors concerning the type of interaction they will engage in" (Carspecken 1996a, p. 37). The tacit understandings this section focuses on involves two students at the two sites, their continued engagement in learning and their literacy acquisition. The understandings also include the expectations and negotiations of students and staff regarding this engagement and literacy acquisition.

The method used to discover the systems relations is one of first describing a series of reported events, reported by both students and staff. Also monological data is included in this description, the monological data being work samples, assessments items, as well as entrance and exit statements collected from the two sites. Secondly connections can be tentatively made between similar patterns of events as experiences by the actors, and the causal social structures that underlie these events.

### **Case study 1: Suburban TAFE Certificate I Vocational Access for Youth at Risk, Queensland**

As mentioned above, of the Australian sites, the suburban Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college initially had the largest number of at risk adolescents attending their centre. In 2004 their initial intake was approximately 16 students per class. Most classes completed the year with 8 students, except for one class that completed with only 4 students. I have chosen to focus on two students from this last depleted class as *these two students represent the successes and failures of the program*. Also this last class *represents a unique situation* that arose at this centre, which the acting coordinator / teacher said she had hitherto never experienced “in nine years of being associated with this program”.

The at risk adolescents attending this site were aged 15 to 18, with a couple of 14-year-olds in attendance. On a scale of one to ten, *the program was targeting at risk students at the three lowest levels of disengaged youth*. As the acting coordinator put it:

“They’re not bad kids at school, but they disengage from their actual high school learning and we try to reengagement them here through different activities as to what they do at school. ... [They have ] disengaged in a passive way. They’re sitting up back of the room not doing the work. They come here and they actually engage in the work.”

The program was *also targeting adolescents with low literacy levels*. The literacy levels assigned were based on the *International Adult Literacy Survey* criteria (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997) which have been incorporated into *Australia’s National Reporting Standards* (NRS), a continuum of literacy proficiencies, ranging from 1 at the lowest level to 5 at the highest level (Coates, et al. 1996). The NRS is the generic system of defining and assessing literacy performance at TAFEs across Australia. Students admitted into the Youth At Risk program had to achieve a very high NRS 1 or a NRS level 2, that is they were able to use reasonable spelling, write a basic sentence with a capital letter and a full stop, and use simple joining words such as “and, but, so, because”. Their assessment was based on a numeracy assessment piece. Those scoring above 10 out of 18 were placed in a higher ability classes.

The two students we are focussing on were both placed in a higher level class. In fact they were in the same class. Of the two vocational strands available they chose the hospitality/office/retail strand. The other strand was the engineering/ horticulture/ construction strand. On the successful completion of their strand, they would receive a Certificate I, Vocational Access in Hospitality. To receive this certificate they had to successfully complete each component of their strand, complete 200 hours of work experience, and participate in a Skills for the Future course, which is a personal development course. As part of their Certificate I, all students also had to attend Literacy and Numeracy classes and exit with a NRS level 3.

When they began the course, both the male student, who chose the name “John”, and the female student, who chose “Shaniah”, were 16 turning 17 later that year. *Shaniah had not attended school for one year. John had only attended intermittently* during the past year, wagging school nearly every day. John said, “I used to be a problem kid like everybody else here. I had a bit of a problem with

authority. I had to try everything myself and got in with a bad crowd.” He also said that only recently he had been diagnosed with ADHD, but he thought it was “a kind of an excuse my parents have for me being bad” because his behaviour at TAFE was now all right. Both students said their mothers had found out about the Youth at Risk program and had rung the TAFE to get more information. Shaniah said she had been receiving a federal government allowance, the Youth Allowance (Centrelink, Sept. 2002) which had now changed to a “study allowance” and said she “had to come”. [Receipt of the allowance was dependent on her participating in training.] She also said she “wanted to come as well”. John said although it was his parents’ suggestion, he was coming because he wanted to. His parents were not forcing him. He was not dependant on the Youth Allowance but lived at home. Shaniah, however had been homeless for over a year, and was dependent on the government allowance for financial support. She had only just moved in with her boyfriend, and was classed by Centrelink [the Australian federal social security department] as an “independent”. Nevertheless, she was still in contact with her father, whom she had lived with for a short while, and her mother.

At the time of the *first visit* in September 2004, *Shaniah and John had both improved their literacy levels to NRS level 3*. In their interviews they *both claimed to have been regular attenders at the literacy/numeracy class*, although Shaniah had missed some of her other classes. But at the *second Visit* in December 2004, *Shaniah had left the program* and had not been in contact with her teacher since the end of September. *John, however, was still attending* and was about to receive his Certificate I that very week.

*What had gone wrong for Shaniah? What had kept John on track?*

First of all it needs to be noted that Shaniah did improve her literacy. When she first came into the course she did not write full sentences, and in class discussions she was not able to accept a different point of view. After nine months in the course her writing skills had markedly improved, where she could independently plan, draft, edit and produce an almost perfect final copy. She could use complex sentences, and structure her writing into three linked paragraphs. Also regarding class discussions, her teacher answered the question, “Did she come to understand other points of view?” with the following comment:

“Yes, she did, and she would adjust, sometimes, her own thinking then, after hearing other people’s points of view. And then just being able to reflect a bit more, too. And then she was able to make some insightful ...”

Nevertheless, in spite of improving in the area of literacy, right at the very end of her course she disengaged from the learning experience. She did not receive the Certificate I needed to enter into apprenticeship or traineeship programs, which would lead to better employment prospects.

Her teacher explained that *at the end of term three* (August to September 2004) *Shaniah’s attendance was becoming more and more irregular*. This was a different version about attendance than what Shaniah had reported. Shaniah did tell the author that she had previously had a period after the second term holidays where she could not get motivated, had missed quite a bit of work,

and felt she would fail the Retail and Office Administration components. Her teacher at the time had explained if Shaniah kept attending, her teachers would be able to help her pass these components and gain her certificate.

Unfortunately, not only Shaniah but *all the other girls* in her class became *very pessimistic about the feasibility of being able to gain their Certificate I*. The teacher described the situation:

“Yeah the group. It was strange. *The group actually developed a pack mentality*. And ah, and they actually sabotaged themselves. They thought they were harming us in some way, the teachers. In actual fact by sort of boycotting lessons, or just not turning up or this sort of thing. ...Just this one group...they thought they were really hardly done by.”

The teacher went on to explain what had triggered this reaction:

“One of their teachers was on leave for a very long time because she was ill. The replacement teacher didn’t keep them up to the curriculum work, and as a result they started to fall behind. Well instead of getting the mindset round, “OK, well we’ve got to get in there and do this work”, when the teacher actually *returned* they went into blaming...They blamed both [the old and the new teachers]. And they couldn’t move on. So they refused to do work. They refused to turn up to those classes.”

The teacher said this was very strange because the other four classes had experienced the same situation but had “got on and did the work”. Shaniah, she said, had been a very vocal, key part of the group of disengaging girls. *The teacher then had rung several of the students’ parents. John’s parents were rung. Shaniah’s parents were not contacted*. This was because Shaniah did not live at home, and the only contact number the teacher had was for Shaniah’s boyfriend. After the September school holidays, other students reported that the boyfriend had told Shaniah she “was not allowed to go back to TAFE”. This was surprising to the teacher because the boyfriend had been extremely supportive up to that point. Words the teacher had used to describe him were, “He was very supportive and telling her that she needed to get on and attend”; “He was there for her when she was at rock bottom”; “He was the light that got her through”; “He actually got her back ... to a person that believed in herself again.” Nevertheless, the teacher had not contacted Shaniah or her boyfriend. Neither had she heard from them. She indicated that this had been a very emotional time. All the girls, including Shaniah, had “grouped together” and none of them returned for the last term.

Like Shaniah, *John also had started to miss classes*. In fact his teacher reported he had been attending irregularly for three weeks prior to the September holidays, “just to be part of the crowd”. This was a different version of reality to what John had previously presented. According to the teacher his attendance immediately improved after she had rung his father. His father had spoken to him and now he was going to pass “with flying colours” and would be receiving his Certificate I along with two other boys from the class. A fourth boy was trying to get as many “Js” [pass] as possible and would receive a certificate of acknowledgment at the graduation ceremony. These four boys were the only ones who returned to the class for the fourth term.

The teacher’s explanation was “the boys were able to move on ... the girls couldn’t”. She had tried to

talk with the girls but “no amount of reasoning would turn these kids around”. An additional factor she gave was the impact on severely at risk adolescents of losing a stable support person:

“I think that’s what ... sent this group particularly into a spin was one of their stable adults got sick and that brought back all those fears that they had before of the abandonment and rejection and all those insecurities that they already had, it brought those back. And the physiological responses to that. And they went back to their old ways of dealing with it.”

And these kids hate change. They’ve had so much change in their lives and that was one of the major contributors to this particular group was the changes that occurred within the group and they couldn’t deal with it. And it sent them into a tail spin, because of their life beforehand, the physiological responses were very negative and we couldn’t begin to deal with those.

In fact the teacher felt some of the girls had moved from the lower levels of disengagement, when they had first entered the course, back up to the highest levels. The course was just not set up to cater for students at this highest level, so these students left the program. The next case study site also grapples with the problem of the highly disengaged student.

#### ***Case study 2: Alternative Education Centre, Queensland [rural city]***

Unlike all the other centres where I was able to interview at least four students per site, because of the *highly disengaged nature of the students* at the Rural Alternative Education Centre, I only managed to interview two students during Visits 1 and 2. This site was unique in catering for not only a highly disengaged group of students, but also a *much younger cohort of students aged 10 to 15*. Although still living at home, with either one parent, a grandparent or foster parents, these children have often experienced a great deal of domestic violence and trauma at home or at school. This trauma has greatly affected their ability to function in every day society, let alone become confident risk taking learners and developers of their own knowledge. If graded on the NRS scale, the literacy level of these students would often be below level 1.

This centre was established by the state education department, Education Queensland, as one of five trial alternative education centres in 2000, and in 2005 is still in operation. It is housed in an 81 year old weatherboard school building, which had previously been used as the regional state education offices, and now adjoins a Special School for children with disabilities. The mantra given to the husband and wife teaching team [aliases, Mrs T and Mr T] who run the school was *to develop individual programs* for children not coping with mainstream schooling. To assist them they have two teachers’ aides, art, music and woodwork teachers, plus a volunteer tutor. Students are referred to them from primary and high schools across the city. “All the referrals that come in say they need one-on-one. And that’s what we struggle with.” (Mrs T, 13/9/04) They try to provide this specialised one-on-one assistance to extra high needs students on a Monday. Mrs T and her husband used to allow ten to eleven of these students to attend at one time but it did not work. “It was a whole tense environment,” Mrs T explained. They have now cut back to only five students on Mondays, with better results. Flexibility and needs based educational assistance is a means whereby they try to engage or re-engage students. Some students come just for an hour or two, once a week, attending

the rest of the week at their own primary or high school. Other students come regularly every day from 9am to 1pm.

The two students I interviewed at this centre, were "Alf" aged 14 and "Matt" aged 13. Both students attended the centre daily. (Aliases were chosen by the students themselves). Both students had *extremely low* literacy levels. Alf is only just beginning to read simple texts fluently, while Matt would often simply refuse to participate in reading and writing activities. Also both boys could have explosive emotional outbursts, which their teachers put down to frustration. Added to the literacy and behavioural problems, Alf also has a speech language impairment, along with many other sensitivities, such as fear of enclosed spaces. He has done some tests for Asperger's syndrome as a possible explanation, but Mr T also stated that some studies have found children who were emotionally abused as babies or very young children, often exhibit similar characteristics as those with Asperger's syndrome.

However, of his several difficulties, Alf's main issue is his speech language impairment. This is what his teachers are trying to target, and which has often been the cause of many misunderstandings, and resultant inappropriate behaviours. Alf has been coming to the centre for over four years. He began when he was about nine. At the time he had been excluded from three different schools in short succession. His teacher described this behaviour when he first came:

"When he first came to us he was very aggressive. Also he would just sit at the computer and type like abstract things. There were a couple of words and letters, and a lot of it was supposed to mean something." (Mrs T, 13 September 2004)

Also Alf would draw a lot of stick like figures engaging in war-like activities covering whole pages. So the first thing Mrs T did was ask him what was happening in the pictures, "Tell me the story". She would then type the story up on the computer. "And then I'd try and get him to just read back, because it was basically what he had exactly told me. The words were just his words. And sometimes we'd just get four lines down." This method of literacy teaching is often used in Queensland primary schools for reluctant writers, building on students' existing vocabulary and knowledge. The coordinators at this centre have also employed another method to help reluctant learners like Alf engage in learning.

Mr and Mrs T also have *incorporated into their curriculum framework*, a whole philosophy for learning developed by *Dr William Glasser* called *Choice Theory* to be used in a student's *Quality World*. In this philosophy Dr Glasser claims we have *five basic needs* which determine the behaviour we choose. "These needs, range from the most physiological *need to stay alive* and reproduce to the four psychological needs: *belonging* (which includes love), *power*, *freedom and fun*" (Glasser 2001, p. 15). Glasser's "Quality School Teacher" (Glasser 1993) will teach these needs to children, so they can be aware of the choices they are making. She or he will also be cognisant of these needs and will tailor her/ his pedagogy accordingly. Another aspect of this philosophy is the idea that everyone has mental pictures of "need satisfying activities". These pictures portray for each person what is his/her *Quality World*. When for example a student experiences repeated failures with reading:

“...it becomes increasingly easier to dismiss the whole effort to learn to read as impossible. In choice theory terms, when they do this, what they have actually done is to take the picture of reading as a need-satisfying activity out of their heads” (Glasser 2001, p. 38).

Reading then becomes an activity *not* included in the student’s *Quality World*. The teacher’s task is to first build a relationship with the student (satisfying the need for “love and belonging”). At the centre they do this by: sitting beside the student while they are teaching, by giving students individual tuition or tuition in a small group of three at most, and by having flexible individual programs that can be adjusted daily to suit the student’s greatest needs of that day.

Mrs T gave an illustration of how *building their relationship* with Alf had resulted in a marked improvement in his behaviour. She said initially “there were lots of issues with trust. And lots of negative experiences of learning”. “In the old days he would have thrown stuff around and stormed out” but in two recent incidents he instead withdrew to the kitchen, where he did do a bit of swearing but after having a chat with Mr T was able to calm down. This withdrawing from a frustrating situation and then being able to calm down, was exemplifying Glasser’s teaching that students should choose to control their own behaviour, rather than being controlled by their teachers. The Glasser theory being if teachers sit beside, discuss issues and connect with the emotional needs of the adolescent, then the student will come to experience “love and belonging”; that the teacher cares for him/her and will start to care about himself and modify his behaviours (Glasser 2000).

Matt, the second student at the time of the interview had been coming to the centre for about a year and a half. He told the researcher that he did not know why he was coming to the centre. He said, “I get frustrated, and say ‘I’m not going here no more’ and mum encourages me to come, yeah.” This comment corresponded with Mr and Mrs T’s perceptions of Matt’s disengagement. Mrs T described a recent situation where she felt she had only just connected with Matt, for the first time since he had been coming. She had been describing another “therapy” she used “*sand tray therapy*” as *another means of connecting and building a relationship* with the students:

“Matt one day made motor bike jumps [in the sand tray]. And he said to me, ‘Do you want to make the jump?’ And that was one of the first times Matt had ever really connected, included me. So you know you’re getting into their quality world, too. And straight away by what they pick, you’re often seeing *their* quality world. But Matt asked me to do it, yep. And I mean when you do sand tray often you are just sitting back like this and you don’t have to talk. It’s different to the other sort of counselling. You know ‘Tell me how you feel’. These kids won’t and they don’t want to” (Mrs T, 13 September 2004).

She continued on to express the desire to gain more skills in sand tray therapy, which could be beneficial in building a relationship with the students and also building their language skills. However, she said she only wanted to be a sand tray “facilitator” rather than a counsellor for fear of being unqualified to deal with issues the students might bring up. Later Mrs T mentioned that the students at her centre just did not want to go to counsellors, because they did not have a relationship with

them. They did not know them. This comment reflected the situation at the previous case study site, where the student John said he and his classmates would not talk to the counsellors but instead would only talk with their valued teachers, the ones they had a good relationship with. So for teachers at alternative centres deciding how much of a “counselling” role they should play in their students’ lives can be difficult.

Two other facets of the Glasser philosophy Mr and Mrs T used to reconnect students to learning were the needs for “*fun*” and “*freedom*”. Mr T related how he had given Matt the “freedom” to choose his learning activity. Other students had been doing radio ads [the centre has a radio room] and Matt asked if he could do one too. Although this had not been written into his program, Mr T “seized the moment” allowing Matt the “freedom” to choose this “fun” learning activity. Matt made up an imaginary pizza, verbally told Mr T the script for the ad, which Mr T then typed up, coached Matt through reading it [they read it over and over] and then they recorded it several times until they were both happy with the outcome. Matt chose the music to play with the advertisement. After this activity had been accomplished Matt was then willing to attempt another learning activity, a documentary on *Australian Idol* singer, Shannon Noll. Other evidence of Matt reconnecting back into learning was the fact that he had of his own initiative, at home written a one page paragraph on the wedge tailed eagle, copied from an article he had seen in a magazine. He had brought this article in to show his teachers and tutors. This form of “public exhibition” is what school reformers believe is important in any learning event (Sizer 1992,1994) and is part of Glasser’s “love and belonging” where students include others in their “quality world”.

Mrs T summed up the Alternative Education Centre learning experience and its motivating philosophy this way:

“The Glasser philosophy applies to everything — Learning is fun, no matter what they’re doing, they’re going to feel empowered by it, ‘I can do something’, ‘I’m going to have some fun’; The love and belonging — when they do it, it will go up on display, perhaps, or we’ll show someone else; Quality world — so it’s the quality world stuff, which goes back to their needs for belonging.”

The result for Matt and Alf, is that Matt in 2005 has now begun attending his local high school part time, while Alf, who had come to the centre as a non verbal child who could only sit in a room by himself, has joined the Army Cadets, is learning to read the cadet manuel, and is anticipating participating in work experience.

## **Discussions and conclusions: Second lens**

### ***Issues arising for two students at two case study sites***

The issues at the two case study sites were both different and yet similar. Although the literacy levels were quite different, both alternative sites were targeting *literacy as a core learning issue*. Also a second issue common to both sites was *keeping students engaged in the educational experience*.

At the Alternative Education Centre, Alf and Matt's literacy levels were a low NRS level 1. Both boys only being at a level of copying information, recognising a small number of words, and reading only very simple texts, some of which they are only able to read by committing them to memory. Nevertheless, for Alf who began as a non verbal, child, lacking even pre-literate skills of conversing and understanding language in context, he had improved from NRS 0 to within NRS 1. Matt was also working within NRS 1. His main improvement was he now had the confidence to participate in a variety of literacy activities, whereas before he had refused to read or write at all. At the time of interview he had orally scripted and then copy typed several fairly lengthy pieces of written work, as well as recorded an oral presentation in the centre radio room.

The two students at the suburban TAFE site increased their literacy levels from NRS level 2 to NRS level 3. This meant they had acquired a level of literacy that allowed them to function in society, to read newspapers and other written material; to write letters, and short reports. They would be able to gather information, make inferences, compare and contrast facts. John had remained engaged in education, which left open a path for further training and better employment prospects. Shaniah had again disconnected from education, but her teacher's perception was because of Shaniah's increased confidence and independent spirit, she still would be able to gain employment, albeit not at the level Shaniah was hoping for. Shaniah had spoken to the researcher about becoming a real estate agent, or doing a drama course. These pathways would not be open to her for another two years, when she could become a mature aged student, if she chose to re-engage in education again.

A third issue at the suburban TAFE was *the emotional maelstrom*, caused by Shaniah and John's class when a replacement teacher, failed to deliver the curriculum at the required pace. The at risk adolescents had neither the abilities or the parental support to make strong and appropriate representations to the TAFE to make allowance for this teaching deficit. However, their other teachers did make extra efforts and allowances, so it was possible for these students to gain the Certificate I, which John did eventually gain. For Shaniah and the other girls the perceived injustice of the situation, and the belief they would not be able to gain their Certificate I, resulted in a return to their former inappropriate behaviours. Framing this in Glasser's terms it was a physiological response to psychological needs not being met. It was an inappropriate response not just because of the emotional upset it brought to themselves and others, but because it did not result in the students achieving their desired outcome – institutional acknowledgement that they could continue on to further studies. In fact if they had stayed on and got as many "Js" there was a high possibility the college would have allowed them to enter other programs. Additionally, the certificate of attainment they would have received would have made employers more willing to take them on as trainees or apprentices.

*The importance these girls placed in gaining the Certificate I* is noteworthy. Teachers across all sites, from the GED program in Texas to the rural Flexi school in Queensland, had mentioned in their interviews the importance at risk adolescents place in receiving "certificates", whether it was the GED diploma, the Year 10 certificate, or the TAFE Certificate I. Many had expressed the view it was because many of these students had never succeeded in school, had never gained awards, and so

formal acknowledgement of their achievements in the form of a certificate was very important to them.

A fifth and final issue, common to both sites, is the *importance of parental support and/or connection to mainstream community*. For the two younger boys at the Alternative Education Centre, Matt's mother and Alf's Nan were key people encouraging the students' continued participation at the centre. For John at the TAFE, the teacher's call to his father and his father's response was what put him back on track and led to a successful outcome of his obtaining his Certificate I. For Shaniah her only support person was her boyfriend. Shaniah had no supportive adult or community network to influence her to re-engage in the learning experience, and so she disconnected. Perhaps in this connection with support it needs to be said that the load on *teachers of at risk adolescents* can often be a heavy one, where *they themselves need support or a means of debriefing*. At the Alternative Education Centre Mr and Mrs T constantly talked to each other about student issues and gave each other support by either encouraging words, or by taking a difficult student thus giving the other teacher a break. They also had a high ratio of staff to students. If any of the staff were having a difficult day Mrs T said she would either talk to them after the students had gone home, or give them a call that night as a means of debriefing. At the GED site in Texas the Education Director similarly was constantly aware of the emotional needs of her staff, informally chatting with them in the corridor or in their classrooms about the progress of their students on a daily basis. As she had no teaching requirements, she was always available to both students and staff to talk about any issues as they arose. She was a person the students knew and trusted, so they were just as willing to discuss problems with her as they were with their own class teacher. This had not been the case at the suburban TAFE where the class teacher the students trusted was also acting as program coordinator. That at the end of the year she was able to graduate over 35 at risk students was a credit to her and her colleagues. However, an additional boost to the program could be to incorporate a debriefing or support structure for key teachers, whom students are using as quasi counsellors, as well as additional support tutors in the classrooms.

## **Discussions and conclusions: First lens**

### ***Collective participant perceptions of the learning engagement***

From the first framework of analysis, it was mentioned that for the success of any program *getting the right staff is essential*. This was borne out at the two case study sites. The replacement TAFE teacher, who failed to teach all the curriculum requirements, was the catalyst in the girls' disengagement. She was not the "right person" to be teaching youth at risk. So to add to the qualities of the "right teacher" along with flexibility, and a relaxed attitude, a teacher needs to be competent in the subject area he or she is teaching. If they are unsure of curriculum requirements they need to ask for help, because youth at risk are very dependent upon their teachers. If the teachers fail to deliver the necessary information, these students do not have the personal, emotional, academic, or parental support resources to make up for teacher failings. This is particularly true of adolescents in the highest levels of disengagement.

The other overall finding from the first analysis was the importance of *small class sizes and individual attention*. The two case study sites under scrutiny did comply with these two requirements. John and Shaniah succeeded in improving their literacy skills and stayed engaged in the literacy class because of the individual attention they received, and the flexibility within their literacy program. They were able to choose a program that was built around real life topics, such as conducting the class as a fund raising committee and actually writing fund raising letters to real businesses. They also chose to do an assessment piece on their favorite musician. The content of the course thus held their interests and kept them engaged. Compared to a mainstream high school class theirs was small in size beginning with only 16, which had reduced to about ten by mid year. Their teacher's comments quoted above was that 16 was still too large a class for disengaged youth, and that the next year she was hoping to have more tutors assisting her in the classroom. Alf and Matt also benefited from small class sizes and individual attention. Alf and Matt received one on one attention for reading and writing. They also participated in other hands-on activities such as art, woodwork and cooking where two or three students could work together in a group. This very individual attention had benefited them as described above.

### **In summary**

Thus by applying the first of these analytical lenses it has been possible to gain an emerging and deepening picture of the learning events taking place at the five education sites participating in the study, as experienced by representative students and teachers from each site. Additionally by comparing individual students' and teachers' experience of the same and similar events, the second lens has enabled a view of specific issues, their perceived underlying causal mechanisms, and correlating patterning that could indicate commonality between different alternative "systems". These emerging findings indicate that at risk adolescents do improve their literacy levels when attending alternative education sites, but for there to be continued engagement in learning that improve life chances, especially for extremely disengaged students, there needs to be a high level of support both for staff and students.

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## Appendix 1

### EMBEDDED CASE STUDY - STUDENT INTERVIEW

SITE: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Student: \_\_\_\_\_ Male / Female Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Program: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What is the program called? Tell me a bit about it?
2. How did you become involved in this literacy program?
3. Describe a typical literacy lesson.
4. Have you been to other High Schools or centres? How many?
5. How different is this program to the English or Literacy programs you did at your former High Schools?
6. How does the teacher teach this course - eg textbooks, worksheets, computers, tasks from everyday life, teaching from the front of the class, teaching individually, combination?
7. How long have you been involved in the literacy program
8. How often a week and for how many hours per session does the literacy program last?
9. How long will you continue in it?
10. Has the number of times per week and the number of hours per session stayed the same since you first began?
11. In what ways has the program worked for you? [Has it helped or been useful? How? If not why not?]
12. What do you think is the purpose of the program? Do you think it has achieved this purpose?
13. Is your participation compulsory or voluntary?
14. Do you have any input into altering the content or way the literacy program is taught? Can you describe this?
15. In class when you have trouble with anything [reading/writing/understanding] do you ask for help? If so who do you usually ask? Are there any others who help you?
16. Why do you go to that person/those people to get help?
17. What are the best things about the literacy program for you? What do you like about the program?
18. What are the weaknesses of the program? What don't you like about it. What is not helpful for you?
19. What do you think the teacher could do to make the literacy program better for you?
20. Are there any other people other than your class teacher who have helped you? Eg Centre Director, Principal, HOD, other staff, or official people outside the centre.
21. **What role do others play in your participation in this literacy course? Eg your parents, care givers or other adults involved in your life.**
22. Does your teacher have any contact with these people? How? Where? When? How often?
23. Is this contact/lack of contact a good thing or not so good?
24. In general, what do you think could be changed to help your literacy/numeracy progress?
25. Are there outside factors that if you received assistance with, would help improve your attendance or concentration while attending the program? Eg accommodation, financial, sick friend/relative
26. Do you think you have any ways of thinking and learning, or ways of behaviour that are stopping you from good attendance or keeping on task while you are here? And from getting all you could out of the program?
27. How could you be best helped or help yourself to overcome these barriers?
28. What will you do when you've finished the literacy program?
29. Have you decided to do this because of the program? What aspect of the program was it?
30. What do you read/write/speak/discuss more of now than you did before starting the program? Eg writing letters, reading instructions/directions, reading, shopping, buying goods, reading maps.
31. Can you give an example of types of reading/writing/speaking concepts that are easier to understand now and situations you would use them in? Eg reading for theme, genre writing, using genres orally.
32. Has anything changed in the way you read, think and talk about the information you get from these texts? Eg compare prices, get best deals, compare differing sets of information given by different politicians.
33. Can you give any examples of situations you were able to solve, because of more confidence from skills learnt in the program, or from things you are now able to read - eg girl I know read a magazine article that said legislation only prevents teenagers from working permanently at age 14yrs 9mths, but if you are working part time there is no such age restriction, and she was able to bring this to prospective employers attention; negotiating with Centrelink, rental agreements, employment; correct an error in your favour [rent, bill, change, Centrelink payment]

## Appendix 2

### INTERVIEW — PROGRAM COORDINATOR

1. What is the purpose (goals) of the program?
2. What background led to its development?
3. For whom is the program designed? [age/gender/culture/compulsory?]
4. In what ways does the program meet the needs of the individual participants?
5. Where is the program conducted?
6. Describe the program organization. [weekly/daily schedule]
7. How many students attend?
8. Outline the content of the program
9. What teaching-learning strategies are used? (eg teacher demonstration through modelling)
10. What resources are used? Human, material, technological? (provide specific details of material and technological resources - names, publishers, teacher-made)
11. What effect has the program had? How do you know?
12. Has there been any attempt to formally evaluate the program? If so describe the evaluation procedures used and outcomes.
13. What is the most effective part of the program? Why?
14. What do you see as the most significant outcome of the program as far as literacy teaching goes [authentic and critical literacy outcomes]?
15. What things would you change in the program?
16. What direction do you think the program will take in the future?
17. Is this program linked into other programs? Explain.
18. Describe how you liaise with other literacy/numeracy staff? How often and for what duration.
19. What further skills do you think would be beneficial for you and your staff to develop to better assist the at-risk students?
20. Does your organisation encourage and give opportunity for staff attendance at Professional Development sessions? Describe.
21. What Professional Development programs have you attended that were particularly beneficial / that weren't beneficial?
22. For other sites who may wish to initiate such a program what advice would you give? Identify any features of the program that you regard as essential to successful delivery?
23. Other comments?

