

Title Making a World of Difference for Youth at Risk? Crossing School Boundaries for Vocational Education and Training

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Abstract

This paper will explore implications for vocational education and training in secondary schools of the findings from a largely qualitative, statewide evaluation of the Victorian Full Service Schools (FSS) Program. This Program was a national initiative, funded by the Commonwealth, and was established in eight, selected Program Areas in Victoria. It was designed to improve school retention rates through the development of innovative programs and arrangements to address the specific needs of students at risk of not completing Year 12 to a satisfactory level. Area Network Committees were established in each Program Area to devise these programs and arrangements, in partnership with local community agencies and TAFE organisations, as well as employers. Data collection in the evaluation included administering questionnaires to participating teachers and other FSS personnel and conducting focus groups with students and committee members in each Program Area.

It is argued that many of these programs and arrangements have the potential to engage young people at risk in highly productive learning experiences. They can enhance employability skills, empower and motivate, reduce levels of disaffection, improve social connectedness in schools and build social capital. However, tensions and difficulties also exist in relation to these programs, given the prevailing culture and structure of many schools, the complexity of funding arrangements and limited access to suitable employers for work experience and work placements. If vocational and workplace learning are to become integral to secondary school curriculum, then greater flexibility within schools and more extensive arrangements for community participation appear to be required.

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Introduction

This paper will explore implications for vocational curriculum provision for secondary school students of the findings from a State-wide evaluation of the Victorian Full Service Schools (FSS) Program (James, St.Leger and Ward 2001). This Program was a national initiative, funded by the Commonwealth, and offered in eight selected Program Areas in Victoria (and in other States) over 1999-2000. It was designed to improve school retention rates through the development of innovative programs and arrangements to address the specific needs of students at risk of not completing Year 12 to a satisfactory level. Area Network Committees (ANCs) were established in each Program Area to devise these programs and arrangements in partnership with many local community agencies, training organisations and employers. The evaluation was largely qualitative and involved administering questionnaires to participating teachers and other FSS personnel and conducting student and ANC focus groups in each Program Area.

We argue that many of these programs and arrangements have the potential to engage young people at risk in highly productive learning experiences. They can enhance employability skills, reduce levels of disaffection, increase confidence and improve social connectedness in schools. However, difficulties also exist for these programs, given the prevailing culture and structure of many schools, the complexity of funding arrangements and limited access to suitable employers for work experience and work placements. If vocational and workplace learning are to become integral to secondary school curriculum, then greater flexibility within schools to support more extensive arrangements for community participation appear to be required. In this paper, then, we present an account of some of the background literature pertinent to this area, followed by an outline of the theoretical framework used to interpret much of the data collected. This is followed by a description of some of the program offerings studied, positive outcomes and difficulties and suggestions for making them more successful.

Background Literature

Early school leaving is of worldwide concern because of its correlation with high rates of youth unemployment. In Victoria, approximately 11,000 young people leave school each year without any kind of qualification and with only limited job prospects (Kirby 2000). Most have attempted Year 11, the first year of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), but many opt out at the end of Year 10 or sometimes even earlier. In a recent study of early school leavers, Stokes (2000) found that 55 per cent of those interviewed had left school in or before Year 9. Based on a study of risk factors that affected early leaving in a Queensland high school (Bradley 1994), Batten and Russell (1995) suggest that schools can address the issue of increasing retention by: enabling attitude change among teachers, thus encouraging cooperation with interventions for at risk students; increasing curriculum options to include more practical and vocational learning; and improving school climate.

While many schools have achieved considerable success with the VET in Schools program, integrated into the VCE for Years 11-12 (Polesel 2001), Kirby (2000) notes that this, as well as vocational learning programs (Years 9-10), is continually threatened by 'restrictions in costs, organisational complications and a lingering academic bias in schools'. As a consequence, vocational approaches are marginalised in many schools (Ryan 1997), putting additional

pressures on students who wish to pursue them. Indeed, Lamb, Dwyer and Wyn (2000, p 3) argue that 'there is a need for [VET] programs to be treated as having the same value as traditional academic courses' to provide relevance and inclusiveness. This requires a mind shift in policy and practice from what is described by NCVET (2000) as a 'one size fits all' approach to education, to one that embraces flexibility, choices, coordination and planning in teaching, training and work-based learning to meet individual students' requirements.

Theoretical Framework

From the perspective of a social theory of learning, Lave and Wenger (1991) describe how learning takes place through participation in 'communities of practice', one example of which might be a group of students working in a vocational program. From this perspective, an inevitable consequence of learning, for good or ill, is identity change. Wenger (1998, p 5) describes identity as 'a way of talking about how learning changes who we are' creating 'personal histories of becoming in the context of communities'. Thus students who are seen as marginalised within a school may acquire negative identities as 'the dumb ones' or the 'trouble-makers'. On the other hand, given opportunities to engage in activities that demonstrate and develop competence, positive identities as 'good students' or 'competent team members' may begin to emerge. One of the advantages of vocational programs, as seen through this perspective, is that they offer the chance of membership in a job-related community of practice that may provide an immediately valued identity and/or a learning trajectory for the future (Wenger 1998, p 155).

Each school is the location for many communities of practice. However, it appears that schools alone are inadequate to provide the kinds of learning opportunities that many students require. Thus other communities of practice, such as community agencies, TAFE Institutes and industrial workplaces, appear essential to offer a 'full service' for many students. Yet crossing the boundaries of these communities and linking them to the schools may be quite difficult. Wenger (1998, p 105) describes personnel, in this case VET coordinators whose business it is to make this process easier, as 'brokers' and their work of introducing elements of the practice of one community into another as brokering.

Program Offerings Studied

Most programs described by FSS personnel involved components of: VET/TAFE courses, for example, in retail, hospitality, office administration, building and construction, furniture making, horticulture and bricklaying; and work preparation courses, such as the Certificate of Work Education and the Jobs Pathway Program (JPP). Personal and life skills and literacy and numeracy programs, study management, career planning and advice, and mentoring were also described. Many of these programs included one day of work placement per week for periods of between one term to a whole year. In some programs, students experienced different work placements each term. Work experience, on the other hand, tended to be focused on exposure to work. For example, in one school, 'Year 9 students had two one-week placements in workplaces as early "taster" experience'. In another school, students were encouraged to undertake two two-week blocks of work experience in an industry that interested them. Some work experience programs also included industry visits and tours.

Eight FSS-funded programs for both male and female students in Years 9-11 were also studied through student focus groups. Most were 'alternatives' to mainstream schooling and included work experience and/or work placement as a central component. One program specifically focused on job preparation, providing career guidance and practical assistance in, for example, writing resumes, managing money, searching the web, filling forms and interview preparation.

Another program involved excursions to workplaces, such as a tyre factory, as often as twice a week. One program involved case management, another concerned 'enterprise' education in which students worked in teams to design and make products suitable for sale.

Positive Outcomes Of Vocational Programs

Staff Perspectives

Staff reported that students had gained a large range of employability skills and attributes as a result of their involvement in FSS programs. These included personal development, general work skills and knowledge, specific work skills and knowledge, and skills for staying on at school. Many students had developed a more positive attitude to work and a work ethic. Work placements and work experience were seen as two key influencing elements, exposing students to 'real life' working situations so that they could gain an appreciation of the expectations and responsibilities of work. Exposure to different workplaces was also said to broaden students' horizons about the range of opportunities available to them. In addition, the students' confidence in their capacity to learn had been increased. As one staff member noted: 'Students have enjoyed the opportunity to participate in "outsourced" courses at the local TAFE, defensive driving school and leisure centre. Confidence has improved; students no longer feel that they aren't clever enough to do further education'.

Thus students had benefited from being away from the 'everyday school environment'. Visits and excursions to local organisations were also said to be valuable and gave students access to key people. One person explained the advantages of such excursions for acquiring new identities as follows:

For a lot of kids it's comforting to get them into a [more relaxed independent learning environment], that is, transporting themselves somewhere, going to a different campus, ... not having to wear uniform, ... being able to have a cigarette at recess and lunchtime without having somebody jumping down their throat. And having somebody come out to see them and then being really excited ... because they want to show you what they're doing. That's largely the benefit of going off-campus one day a week or so. And they get the envy of other kids too, in terms of ... they can come back and say 'This is what we did, this is what we're doing'.

Student Perspectives

(i) Understanding a range of future options

Students viewed work placement as an important aspect of all the programs in which it featured, with new and valued identities seen to be on offer (Wenger 1998). For example, one student explained: 'You get to learn about the workforce, and you can get an idea of jobs and if you don't want to do them, instead of just going for an apprenticeship'. Students could 'get good hands-on experience', 'learn about the real world out there' for a whole day each week and understand how tiring and 'hard the work is'. This part of the program was designed, students said, to help them get the careers they wanted and to understand the implications of their choices, such as very early morning starts for some jobs. They explained that if one workplace site was not 'that good', they could still maintain a positive attitude towards the next one, 'pick a winner' and find out 'what's better for your future'. Most students apparently enjoyed their experience of work, saying how well they were treated. One student commented: 'I'm working with an electrician and it's lots of fun', while a student who wanted to be a mechanic really liked his work placement because he was 'learning to put cars back together'. This, he said, was 'way better' than school. It had given him a clearer sense of direction about what he wanted to do when he left, as it had with another student who reflected: 'I have been a panel beater and a mechanic. I like the mechanic way better'.

Students also valued excursions to workplaces, with one enjoying a visit to a factory because ‘... if we want to get an apprenticeship as a mechanic, [they show us] how to get in it and what it's all about’. Excursions thus provided valuable insights into certain occupations and workplaces. The students listed where they would like to go at the beginning of the year and the teacher organised a schedule of visits. One student said of a visit to a TAFE Institute:

That actually gave me a good perspective because I went there on Open Day last year – I didn’t get a good look around, I just got information. Then when I saw it actually inside ... There was a lady giving us a tour. She was answering questions and she was showing us different areas ... it's got mostly every area that we want.

While some students had not yet made decisions for the future, one said it ‘lets you go over what you want to do’. Most of the students interviewed either intended to stay on in school or had decided on a course of further training. A number said that they wanted to undertake a TAFE course the following year, for example, ‘I want to be a panel beater and I don’t need Years 11 and 12’. Others commented: ‘I didn’t know what I was doing last year. I’m in a better position this year’ and ‘it’s given me a wider range to look at’.

(ii) Seeing school as offering valuable learning trajectories

Many students affirmed that, if the work placement component of the program were not there, they would probably have left school, but without a sense of direction. ‘You don’t know what you want to do when you’re in school’, one student said. Many thought that a wider range of vocational programs would help to keep students in school. One young person explained that he wanted to undertake a commerce degree at university. His work placement at the Credit Union had helped him considerably and, through the program, he had acquired the confidence to undertake a degree. As another student reflected: ‘If you’d asked me last year, I’d have told you I was going to be a dole bludger for the rest of my life’. Having experienced the program, he was going to stay on. Many students became convinced of the wisdom of remaining in school until they could secure a job in which they had a genuine interest and which offered reasonable prospects for the future. As one commented: ‘The job is not going to be there forever, and you probably get fired and if you quit you might not get a better job. I would stay at school’. Most students indicated that finishing Year 12 was a goal that was important to them, unless they had another specific goal, such as an apprenticeship or a TAFE course in mind.

(iii) Becoming more skilled and confident

Developing skills and confidence and building positive identities through the program was a theme of most focus group discussions. Many of these programs seemed to provide communities of practice in which student participation was valued and a sense of belonging and connectedness achieved. Recognising their capacity to learn, sometimes for the first time in their lives, the students felt able to continue their schooling. Lack of confidence as learners appeared endemic among most students but their experiences had changed this. ‘People didn’t know they had it in them and [the program] showed them that they did’, one student said.

In particular, the confidence and skills to communicate were much prized. As one student noted: ‘I’m a lot more confident to speak out, or hand in work and say when somebody’s wrong and somebody’s right. It’s just raised my self-esteem a hell of a lot’. Another reflected: ‘I feel more confident and can go and talk to people. You sort of know what to say and what not to say’. Others felt that they could now talk to an employer at interview without being nervous or, at least, being less so; they knew to have a ‘back up line’ ‘if they get stuck’; and could write down a list of questions to ask. One student said: ‘I really wouldn’t ... stand up in front of everyone and now I can do that quite easily’.

One young person noted the importance for confidence building of being able to contribute to the design of the program, a key characteristic of adult learning environments. Respect for their opinions helped them to feel better about themselves. 'I got more confidence from coming here. They always asked your opinion. They didn't actually have a full set program for us so we got to say what we wanted to do'. One student also suggested that team-work was important in building self-confidence because, in a team, communication was essential: 'you've got to talk because you are in a team, and so you can go and get ideas off other teams. You talk to them more...'. Thus confidence had improved through 'developing people skills', 'getting out in the workforce', and 'interacting with a lot of people besides school friends'.

Problematic Issues: Student Perspectives

(i) Labelling

A minority of students described forming identities as 'the dumb ones' because of their membership in an 'alternative' program. For example, students from one program explained how friends had initially been jealous of their going on work experience and camps. Yet, on learning that the program was not a preparation for a mainstream Year 12, these 'friends' had taunted them with the comments: 'Youse are losers; youse are no hoppers'. This appears to be a major issue to be addressed by schools. As Withers and Batten (1995) note, when programs form 'grafts' onto the 'real' work of the school, students may not perceive them as legitimate avenues for learning.

Some students had found different ways of looking at this issue. One student explained that perceptions in the school (and an earlier personal perception) were 'that's the dumb class'. Now, however, this was not the case. Students emphasised that 'we don't necessarily do easier work than anyone else'. The difference was that they got extra help. Similarly, a student in another program explained: 'I don't classify it as a dumb class ... It's just an enhanced class. We just need a bit more help than others'. One school reported that, when the curriculum was freed up to accommodate many different programs, the students participating in them did not stand out as being different. The solution appears to lie in curriculum, structural and cultural change in schools, as discussed later in this paper.

(ii) Absence from mainstream classes

Though extremely positive themselves about most of the programs, students noted that some of their teachers resented their absence from mainstream classes to attend these programs. Nor did these teachers believe the students at times when they explained where they had been. They described their teachers as 'crusty about it' and 'pretty angry' and annoyed. They suggested that the person in charge of each program needed to write notes to participants' teachers, explaining the reason for each student's absence from the class. This highlights the importance of communication across school boundaries.

(iii) Suitability of work placements

One student implied that some employers take advantage of students on work placements, not rewarding them sufficiently for the work that they do. He commented: 'Sometimes they make you do really laborious stuff ... and they give you five dollars at the end of the day. The first place I went to, I didn't get paid anything. The school had to pay me because they didn't want to pay me'. Similarly, another student whose work placement was at a metal storage company did not enjoy the experience. He wanted to be an auto electrician. These two examples highlight the importance of relevant work placements for students, especially for those committed to a particular occupation, and of ensuring that the work expected of them is not too onerous or exploitative. Mostly, teachers arranged the placements because, as one student who had organised his own placement noted, it makes it easier 'if you've got connections'.

Making Vocational Programs Work

What follows are FSS personnel perspectives on problematic issues for vocational 'at risk' programs, and suggestions for their improvement, gleaned from focus groups and questionnaires.

(i) Improving brokering across school-community boundaries

People from regions that reported the development of programs for at risk students as progressing well indicated that this was often the result of 'hard work by our careers/VET cluster over [many] years'. They also noted that certain requirements underpinned successful community linkages, smoothing the path across school boundaries. These included:

- A 'steering committee' to set strategic directions and ensure joint ownership by all parties.
- The willingness of key players, for example, the local TAFE Institute, to share ideas and procedures and invite other groups to contribute to program designs.
- Having joint goals and a shared vision and philosophy for the 'common good'.
- Good communication, for example, 'knowing the people and understanding each position and interest', regular reporting (that students know of) from external organisations to coordinators in schools and vice-versa, and the development of clear communication protocols.
- Having a coordinator with 'drive, skill and persistence', a designated person or 'broker' in each school to make and maintain the links.

It was explained that teachers are often unaware of all the possible partnerships available to assist young people. In addition, collaboration is often difficult in country schools due to isolation: '... the travel factor excludes us from collaborating in any meaningful way'. Small numbers also present problems in collaborating with some TAFE institutes and group training companies: 'Both agencies don't have sufficient flexibility to work with small numbers'.

(ii) Improving learning from work experience and work placement

Finding suitable employers who might help to identify and assist with student concerns, was often seen as difficult, and some schools were said to lack knowledge about work placements and the employers willing to be involved. It was also acknowledged that, while many employers are supportive, there is now much competition for work placements. More placements were said to be required, particularly for younger students, as were more apprenticeship and traineeship links, for example through group training companies. People also acknowledged the need for incentives for employers and one suggested appealing to the moral obligations associated with employers marketing their products to youth.

Putting work placements and work experience into a context for students was also advocated. While there is an obvious link for students engaged in industry-based certificate courses or the VCE Industry and Enterprise subject, younger or disengaged students might not be able to see the connection with employability skills so easily, and thus might be reluctant to engage fully and learn from the experience. Some teachers thus conducted interviews or class discussions with students prior to organising placements. Others provided mentors for students during placements and/or arranged for follow-up counselling and discussion at school. Many also included industry seminars and visits, or guest presenters, in the school-based programs. One respondent used the term 'round table discussion sessions' for students to debrief about visits to industry.

(iii) Changing school cultures

Respondents noted that increased competition has made schools very concerned about pass rates and grades. The ENTER score applied to VET programs in the VCE was said to be excluding

many at risk students because a high degree of organisation, commitment and motivation are required to be successful. It was recommended that a parallel certificate be introduced for these students, with connections to the VCE. This is now being taken up with the development of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). It was also said that the culture of many schools (and the community generally) has little respect for vocational skills and trades (as noted by Ryan 1997), and thus support for programs with a vocational focus is often tenuous. Many people nominated the support of other staff as an important factor contributing to the success of a program. Conversely, many identified the resistance of teachers not involved directly in a program as a major negative influence on its effectiveness. 'Elite attitudes by some teachers'. 'Some resistance by a few staff who have no time for them [students at risk]'. Similar data have also been reported in earlier research (Bradley 1992), implying that at least some teachers think that improving school retention rates is undesirable, particularly if changes in their teaching practices are required as a result.

Cultural change towards a more inclusive but differentiated curriculum that would engage all students in learning was deemed necessary. A number of strategies for increasing staff acceptance and support were outlined. These included rewriting 'discipline' and welfare policies, making programs for students at risk highly visible within the school so that mainstream staff could see the benefits and improving communication between staff in all programs. A better understanding of particular student difficulties helped to modify attitudes towards at risk students and prompted mainstream teachers to change some assessment tasks and workloads. FSS funding was seen as a 'catalyst' for change, leading to the 'mainstreaming' of 'alternative' programs in some cases. 'So it's got a cultural change under way that we should be providing not only for them [mainstream students], but for those who are less academic and the ones who are struggling'.

(iv) Changing school structures

Many respondents believed that the difficulties created by students attending out-of-school activities on either a block or weekly basis were major barriers to the outcomes of their programs. A typical comment was: 'Some programs were block release which had a negative impact on student progress in some subjects at the school'. Thus changes in this area appear necessary if vocational programs are to be accepted more generally. Indeed, in many FSS-funded schools 'block timetabling' of a full day each week was common, so that 'students do not need to catch up on work missed when attending off-campus courses'. Another arrangement was to provide a special program for young people at risk when other Year 10 students were attending an elective program. This provided flexibility to 'free up' the curriculum and 'cater to a wider range of student needs'. Yet it was only organised in this way because high numbers of vocationally oriented students in this particular school had helped provide a 'critical mass' as a basis for a compelling argument. Other arrangements included reducing the student workload (taking fewer subjects) and organising a part-time school program, with weekly TAFE attendance for one day, work for one day and school for three days.

(v) Improving funding and resourcing arrangements

Across all regions, resourcing – generally linked to funding – was identified as a significant barrier to the effectiveness of programs. Funding was often difficult to obtain for some TAFE programs, though it was essential to provide 'the staff to coordinate, facilitate and make it happen'. Difficulties were also noted in relation to: program development in small schools and their capacity to offer a range of programs; the high cost of outsourced programs; the organisation and staffing of some TAFE programs; and transport for students to off-campus locations. The cost of TAFE training and materials for hands-on projects was seen as a major issue to be addressed at both local and system levels. Short-term funding arrangements were also particularly damaging because of planning difficulties.

While FSS Program Areas have now been incorporated into Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) in Victoria, and funded to continue developing vocational and other programs, one Program Area indicated that it was using ANC members to find additional sources of funding. 'And so it's moving from being reactive (which we have been) to being positive and initiating ... "OK, we'll go out now and talk to people who we suspect may be useful partners and may have funds available to them"'. This may well be a trend for the future. In addition, it was seen as important that the whole school community lend its support to vocational learning programs, giving them the same priority for funding as other major areas within each school.

Conclusion

While it is apparent that much still needs to be done to enhance the learning of students at risk of leaving school early, the FSS Program clearly provided an important impetus for constructive change. LLENs have now been established across over thirty areas in Victoria and are in the process of developing further programs and arrangements that integrate personal and vocational learning. These have the potential to engage disaffected students, re-connect them to school, develop employability skills and an understanding of the world of work, and build positive identities of confidence and competence in relation to their capacities for learning and working. The challenge for the future is to ensure the acceptance and integration of these programs into the curriculum of all Victorian government secondary schools and the effectiveness of brokering across school boundaries – if boundary crossing is indeed to make a world of difference for some of the most vulnerable young people.

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