

Working with youth at risk in the Granville area: the story of the Granville alternative TAFE education (GATE) program

Therese Douglas

TAFE NSW South Western Sydney Institute, NSW, Australia

Abstract:

Local Granville high schools, Granville Schools District Behaviour Team, TAFE NSW South Western Sydney Institute (SWSI) Granville College's Outreach and various trade sections have worked together for 9 years offering the Granville alternative TAFE education (GATE) program for students in years 9 and 10 identified as at risk of dropping out of high school.

The GATE program is an example of social inclusion through education. This paper tells the story of its formation and importance, its structure and some of the outcomes for the participants. It also highlights the challenges faced and why the course is no longer running in 2009.

In the Beginning.

In 1999 the Granville District Behaviour Team and the TAFE Outreach section based at Granville College conceived the idea of selecting groups of 12 students in years 9 and 10 who were at risk of dropping out of school to participate in an alternative education program. Some of the concerns raised at school regarding these students were disruptive behaviour, lack of concentration and unmet learning needs (Granville District Behaviour Team, 2001). According to the NSW Department of Planning in 2005, Granville, an area of south western Sydney, has a slightly higher level of young people aged 15-17 than the rest of the state (4.2% to 4.1%), over 44% of its population speaks a language other than English at home, it has a higher than state average level of unemployment (6.7% to 5.9%) and more households renting (38.3% to 29.5%). Quite possibly these factors have contributed to the students' disengagement from school based learning.

The Granville District Behaviour Team interviewed and selected students for the program in consultation with the deputy principals of the participating schools.

The basic structure of the course included study of communication and conflict resolution skills, pre-skills preparation such as Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), and job preparation skills such as resume writing and mock job interviews. But the main emphasis has been on introductory trade skills. Granville College of TAFE has been the venue for the course which is held over two days for two school terms.

The Granville Behavioural Team provided one teacher to be with the students through all classes as well as teaching the communication and conflict resolution skills. Outreach provided a teacher for job preparation skills and trade sections provided teachers for the introductory trade skills components.

Funding for the course has been provided through grants from two main sources: Get Skilled and Helping Young People at Risk (HYPAR).

What is the importance of the GATE program?

The GATE program is a great example of social inclusion through education.

In December 2007 the Rudd Government established the Social Inclusion Board and Unit to achieve better outcomes for the most disadvantaged people in our community.

The stated policy areas for the first term of office as listed on the website were:

- the incidence and needs of jobless families with children
- delivering effective support to children at greatest risk of long term disadvantage
- focusing on particular locations, neighbourhoods and communities to ensure programs and services are getting to the right places
- addressing the incidence of homelessness
- employment for people living with a disability or mental illness
- closing the gap for Indigenous Australians

www.socialinclusion.gov.au/pmc_social_inclusion_unit.htm

The GATE program corresponds to the second two policy priorities stated for the Social Inclusion Board, namely

delivering effective support to children at greatest risk of long term disadvantage

focusing on particular locations, neighbourhoods and communities to ensure programs and services are getting to the right places

The rationale for the course is to help students “develop relationships and a sense of connectedness to the local, school and tertiary community” (Granville District Behaviour Team, 2001). It has been argued that social inclusion needs to be more than just addressing the distributional inequities of resources. It should also be developing relationships between people and organisations (Babican, 2008).

Looking at the feedback from participants, the development of relationships between people and organisations has been a regular outcome of the course for many participants.

“One more thanks to Antonia, Bill and Sharneil for the time they take to help me to be a better person they have taken a big place in my life and I will never forget them” (Sonny, 2008).

“The experience of the GATE program course was so great because of teachers. They were helpful and caring. (From) All my experience in this GATE course I’ve learned a lot and how to use machines and what machines to use for our job. From day 1 to now I have finished my jobs with the help of my teachers. The GATE program has helped me a lot with my behaviour and (I’m) very thankful” (Hussein, 2008).

“Hi I’m Ahmed...and I am doing a great course in Granville TAFE we do mechanics and spray painting. It is really good I have had a really good time I have learnt a whole lot. I have to show respect and be polite and I have learnt a whole lot about cars and how to spray them and stuff. We had four teachers Ms Antonia, Ms Kerrie, Bill and Sharneil and they were all great. We had our ups and downs but in the end I’m really glad I got picked for the course and I think you should still run it so other kids out there can get to learn what I did” (Ahmed, 2008).

“To be honest I loved going to TAFE because everybody in my class was so friendly. Even though there were some people at TAFE that were idiots in the end you make friends (with them)...And if I had a chance to do this course again I’d do it with passion” (Rami, 2008).

“The TAFE program was the best thing to happen to me while I’m in school...I AM A SPRAYPAINTER...This TAFE program is the thing I get up for at the start of the week” (Chris, 2008).

Also students regularly indicated an increase in self esteem and awareness of their own skill levels in their evaluations.

The schools have also seen positive outcomes from the course:

“The GATE program has provided an outstanding opportunity for at risk high school students to experience success. Strathfield South High school has been participating in this program for the last three years. The students involved in the program typically are experiencing difficulty at school with issues of disengagement, absenteeism, behaviour difficulties and very limited academic success. Without exception students involved in GATE have made enormous improvements in all these areas whilst participating in the program” (Greg Lucas Deputy Principal Strathfield South High School, 2008).

“In my capacity as Deputy Principal of Belmore Boys High School, working with significantly at risk students, I have found the GATE program the only saviour for students with which we had possibly had otherwise reached the “end of the road”; students that had been spending most of their time on suspension or in the custody of the police...For the students that fit into this category we have found nothing as positive and successful as the GATE program” (Alan Smith Deputy Principal Belmore Boys High School, 2008).

“The majority of these students have disengaged with mainstream school. Through habitual truancy they have been placing themselves in positions which could have rapidly led to deterioration in their ability to meet behavioural and society standards. On graduation day I witnessed the degree of accomplishment and self satisfaction in

each of the boys. Their parents were equally proud as each student had not had publicly recognised success previously” (Bill Hilliard and Tim Jurd, Deputy Principals Homebush Boys’ High School, 2008).

But this course is at risk due to funding cuts.

How Does the Program Work?

This program has been created in partnership between the Granville Behaviour Team and the South Western Sydney Institute Outreach section at Granville College. The Granville Behaviour Team has coordinated the selection and overseeing of the students from school to the TAFE campus. The Outreach section has coordinated the teaching on campus.

Outreach provides courses for people who find it difficult to enter formal education or training because of barriers such as income level, age, family commitments, physical or intellectual disability, English language ability, little previous education, lack of confidence or isolation.

Outreach sections are found at most TAFE NSW campuses. The coordinators work in partnership with community groups or government departments who identify groups of people as listed above who are interested in gaining skills in particular areas such as computing, fashion, automotive engineering, basic English as well as general employability skills such as planning and organising, teamwork and self management. These courses may be held in community venues or at the TAFE campus and are fee exempt which aims to allow easier access for the most marginalised of students. Some of the groups serviced by Outreach at Granville in 2008 included people recovering from drug and alcohol addiction, women wanting to return to the workforce, women who had experienced domestic violence, refugees and people on probation and parole. Youth at risk is a group often served by Outreach sections. In the past Granville Outreach has worked with local organizations such as Links to Learning, Information Cultural Exchange (ICE) to create various programs for youth at risk such as introduction to hairdressing and beauty, digital music and lyrics creation and performing hip hop dance.

The GATE students were enrolled through the Outreach section in a Statement of Attainment in Outreach Access which is a fee exempt course. The pedagogy of these classes aims to create participatory action research projects (Wadsworth, 1998) which in practice means that the students identify what they wish to learn and the Outreach section then creates the course using specific modules or units and negotiating with different teaching sections. Therefore the program aims to reflect the outcomes proposed by the students which may change or increase as the class reviews its own progress. Students, community partners and teachers are also expected to participate in ongoing evaluation of the course, contributing to a sense of ownership as well as assisting with future program development.

The course structure of the GATE program has been two days from 9:30am -2:30pm with an hour break for lunch. In semester 2 2008 the first day was practical skills in auto engineering and the second was practical skills in airbrushing as well as one hour of communication/conflict resolution skills. By emphasizing practical skills, the amount of time devoted to theory is limited which suits the short attention span of most of the students. Even the communication skills component has been very practical, with role plays for job interviews and conflict scenarios. The teachers have worked as a team with the Behaviour Support teacher accompanying the students in all classes and assisting the TAFE teachers with motivation and any behavioural issues allowing them to focus on the skills content.

Outcomes and Challenges of the GATE Program.

By giving marginalised young students an experience of an alternative form of education the GATE program assists in addressing some of the challenges students at risk face that Julia Gillard has labelled “acute, complex and multi-layered” (Tomazin and Nader, 2008).

Because of the continued connection between the local high schools and TAFE NSW SWSI Granville College, students and schools have become more aware of the possibilities of alternate training and education courses and approaches. As mentioned earlier, Outreach pedagogy is a participatory action research approach, which involves students, organisations and the Outreach section contributing to the formation of the program structure and proposed outcomes. As the school system is committed to

specified hours in certain subjects to have students articulate to a School Certificate this level of flexibility is currently not possible. Outreach courses essentially act as a bridge, enabling students to become more aware of possibilities for future training. This is generally at a Certificate 1 or Statement of Attainment level and leads to enhanced self esteem and improvement in employability skills such as communication and problem solving .

Alternative ways to work with students who are at risk of leaving the school system have often been debated (Joseph, 2008; te Reile, 2008). Australia’s retention rates for high school are struggling. Compared to other OECD countries, Australia is ranked 20th in terms of school completion for 25-34 year olds (National Skills Policy Collaboration, 2008). Outreach pedagogy uses empowerment through learning, where students are encouraged to ascertain their own skills and then plan for education or training building on this. Students are thus engaged in defining their own goals and pathways. This is in contrast to a needs deficit approach, which believes there are gaps in learning that need to be filled. Kitty te Riele (2008) argues this latter approach ultimately has teachers lowering their expectations of students whereas an empowerment approach such as Outreach validates all students for their unique strengths and abilities.

By researching this program it could be seen whether it is also addressing the first social inclusion policy area of helping to support the needs of jobless families with children by contributing to breaking the cycle of generational unemployment through exposing students to alternative training not offered through the school system.

Table 1. Relationship between student attendance at the GATE program and subsequent enrolments with TAFENSW.

Year	Starting number of students	Finishing number of students	Percentage of students finishing	Students starting other TAFE courses	Percentage of students that started another TAFE course
2000	9	9	100%	6	66 %
2001	20	17	85%	17	85%

2002	13	7	51%	5	38%
2003	15	14	95%	14	93%
2004	43	37	83%	29	67%
2005	46	40	86%	24	52%
2006	36	28	77%	10	28%
2007	39	38	97%	16	41%
2008	41	32	78%	*5	N/A

****These 5 students have withdrawn from the programme and enrolled in other TAFE courses.***

Funding has been an ongoing challenge in planning the GATE program. The Department of Education (DET) has provided the funding for the Granville Behaviour Team teacher for all courses. From 2000-2007 the Outreach section has been successful in obtaining funding for the TAFE expenses through Get Skilled and Helping Youth at Risk (HYPAR) funding. Get Skilled funding was provided by the Equity Unit in SWSI for courses targeting specific clients groups. The HYPAR funding focused specifically for youth at risk programs across TAFE NSW Institutes. However TAFE NSW now competes with other registered training organisations (RTOs) for an increasing percentage of its funding as more and more government funding is made contestable (Coutts-Trotter, M., 2008). Perhaps an indication of this is that HYPAR funding no longer exists. Also the TAFE NSW South Western Sydney Institute Strategic Plan 2009-2011 indicates that priority will be given to increasing enrolments in Certificate II and above as well as in gap training to increase the number of people qualified at Certificate II or above (TAFE NSW South Western Sydney Institute, 2009). As Outreach courses are usually at certificate I level this means less opportunity to work with the most marginalised of students.

Due to the cost of the program, semester 2 2008 saw a scaling back of the course to only one program for 12 students. DET has continued to pay for one teacher but the TAFE teachers have been funded completely through the Outreach budget at Granville College. Collation of data on the program has only been attempted recently, so further funds would assist with this. However, no agreement for joint funding for 2009 has been reached so now the course is itself at risk!

Another challenge is working with young students in an adult learning environment. It could be argued that TAFE NSW should not be responsible for the provision of education for students of compulsory schooling age. In fact, there are restrictions and specific requirements regarding enrolling students less than 15 years of age in any TAFE course (DET, 2005). An adult learning environment differs from a school environment in that attendance is not compulsory as opposed to schooling (DET, 2008).

Risks therefore exist for both the students in terms of personal responsibility for turning up to class and for the TAFE College in terms of extra responsibility for duty of care of the young students. The GATE programme has partially addressed these risks by having a teacher from the Schools District Granville Behaviour Team in attendance with the students throughout all lessons as well as the TAFE teacher conducting the classes. The students are not supervised during the hour break for lunch, however TAFE colleges have security personnel available at all times.

Future Challenges for Youth at Risk Programs at TAFE.

Currently high schools have access to a successful vocational education and training (VET) program for students in years 11 and 12, or Stage 6. Students access these VET courses either through their school or a local TAFE college. There are discussions regarding the possibility of such a program being adapted also for students in Years 9 and 10, or Stage 5 (NSW Government Department of Education and Training, 2007). If these courses are to be held at TAFE Colleges the issues of students under 15 years and the challenges of teaching young people in a non-school environment would need to be analysed more closely.

However it could be argued that the students currently serviced by the GATE program would not necessarily respond well to the approach used for a broader VET course for students of Stage 5. These courses would be within a set curricula possibly based on a training package with little room for flexibility. Therefore the issues of social inclusion for youth at risk may not be addressed.

Outreach's pedagogy which emphasises flexible options to meet diverse learning needs as well as addressing the social needs of students brings a particular approach to the

teaching of VET which has seen successful outcomes for youth at risk. Analysis of past GATE students' pathways including employment, reengagement at school and alternate RTOs could assist in assessing the true value of the GATE program for youth at risk.. Creating a more structured approach to student support through the counselling unit and tutorial support for past GATE students who continue in the TAFE system could also help to evaluate how best to assist those students who may continue to be at risk of dropping out of courses.

Continued designated funding for specific youth at risk courses would enable continuity as the past situation of seeking funds every semester involved uncertainty in planning and budgeting. With the current emphasis on skills shortages and higher level qualifications the importance of relationships between the students and teachers may be missed. Providing the students with an environment where they can succeed has means that they are then able to consider alternate pathways. An example of this is that from the semester 2 2008 GATE program three students have enrolled in plumbing in semester 1 2009.

Conclusion.

The story of the GATE program is a cautionary tale. This Outreach program reflects the social inclusion goal of “delivering effective support to children at greatest risk of long term disadvantage focusing on particular locations, neighbourhoods and communities to ensure programs and services are getting to the right places” (Social Inclusion Board, 2008). The testimonies from students and deputy school principals have shown an increase in self esteem for students and that positive relationships between these students and teachers are possible. But TAFE NSW will be competing with other RTOs for future funding, as government funding is made contestable (Coutts-Trotter, M., 2008) and focused more on skills shortages and higher qualifications. So it remains to be seen how social inclusion through access to relevant education for the most disadvantaged will continue to be a viable option.

Bibliography

Babican, Hurriet. (Oct 2008). Social Inclusion: “Culturing Inclusion” 4 R’s Conference. University of Technology Sydney, Sydney.

Coutts-Trotter, Michael. (17 October 2008) Department of Education and Training, email to all TAFE staff.

Granville District Behaviour Team. (2001). GATE Terms 3 and 4 2001 Program Outline. Department of Education and Training, Sydney.

Joseph, John. (2008). Learning with the Brain in Mind, Conference Booklet. Focus Education Australia, Flagstaff South Australia.

DET(2005). “Minimum Age for Entry to Courses Policy -TAFE NSW”, Retrieved on 19th March 2009 from [Detwww.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_admin/enrolment/student_sel/PD2005TAFE Policies and Procedures](http://www.det.nsw.edu.au/policies/student_admin/enrolment/student_sel/PD2005TAFE%20Policies%20and%20Procedures)

National Skills Policy Collaboration. (April, 2008). Facing up to Australia’s Skills Challenge: Setting Priorities and Delivering Results.

NSW Office of Liquor, Gaming and Racing. (February 2009) Social Profile Report Parramatta LGA. Department of the Arts, Sport and Recreation www.olgr.nsw.gov.au

TAFE NSW South Western Sydney Institute. (2008). “Outreach: TAFE NSW –South Western Sydney Institute Faculty of Vocational Access” pamphlet.

TAFE NSW South Western Sydney Institute. (2009). Strategic Directions 2009-2011.

DEEWR (2008) Social Inclusion retrieved on 8th October 2008 from www.socialinclusion.gov.au/pmc_social_inclusion_unit.htm

te Riele, Kitty. (30th September, 2008). (Re-) Engaging marginalised young people, October VET. University of Technology Sydney, Sydney.

Tomazin, Farrah and Nader, Carol. (21st October 2008). The Class Divide. [www.The Age.com.au](http://www.TheAge.com.au)

Wadsworth, Yoland (1998). What is Participatory Action Research? Action Research International, paper 2 retrieved on 15th January 2009 from <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gem/ar/ari/p-ywadsworth98.html>

NSW Government. (February 2008). Raising the School Leaving Age Consultation Paper, 4.