

Creating a focus on education in residential care



Background

- Research has strongly identified that the many young people in care had only completed year 10 or less of schooling
- The educational competencies and personal development are consistently lower for children in care than would be expected of students at comparable ages in the general public
- Most children who come into care have experienced significant school failure, mainly for behavioural problems
- The focus of educational systems is often on behaviour management rather than educational achievement

Background (cont'd)

- Factors identified as most strongly associated with educational success are:
 - ✓ Stability & continuity of care placement
 - ✓ Learning to read early & fluently
 - ✓ Attending school regularly
 - ✓ Having a parent or carer who values education
 - ✓ Having friends outside care who do well at school
 - ✓ Developing out of school interests & hobbies
 - ✓ Meeting a significant adult who offers consistent support & encouragement & acts as mentor or role model

Background (cont'd)

- Studies in the UK (Jackson 1987 & Goddard 2000) have found that there was a lack of high quality learning materials for young people in residential care
- A lack of priority given to study areas for young people in residential care was also identified
- Residential care workers have traditionally been untrained with a low level of educational achievement that may result in workers placing little emphasis on learning in the house and interacting with schools only when necessary

The current picture in Burnside

- Education has become one of the main areas of focus in all Burnside programs
- An emphasis has been placed on employing youth workers in residential care with a mix of qualifications, including staff with degrees in psychology and social work
- In October 2002, an Education Support Worker (ESW) was employed for 24 hours per week to work with staff & young people in 2 residential care programs
- The employment of the ESW marked a shift in Burnside's service provision to dedicate specific resources to supporting education, learning & cultural pursuits for young people in residential care

The role of the Education Support Worker

- The major tasks of the position are to:
 - Tutor & support young people with homework & assignments
 - Liaise with schools to support strategies to help young people with their learning
 - Liaise with other educational bodies to assist young people with searching for courses &/or vocational training
 - Support staff with strategies to keep education and learning as everyday concerns of the house
 - Engage staff & young people in cultural & leisure activities according to interests and background
 - Carry out an action based research in relation to the needs of young people in residential care

The action based research method

- The ESW undertook a flexible and qualitative approach to the research to reflect on the work practices in the houses that can be thought of as ‘an idealised version of professional practice itself’ (Winter 1998)
- Information for the research was gathered from a variety of sources including:
 - Team meeting minutes
 - Personal notes, thoughts & ideas of staff
 - Specific workshops with staff & young people
- The research was an attempt to gather ideas from staff for the purposes of reflection on the work done to focus their inquiries and contribute to change in the work done with young people

The voices of young people

- There was some difficulty in collaborating with young people in the research process to make it meaningful for them rather than just fulfilling the need of the research
- Some short interviews were held with young people as part of the research.
- The results indicate some of the things that some of the young people found useful or interesting
- No general conclusions about how the young people 'felt' about the research will be drawn and no claim that young peoples' voices are represented will be made
- The challenge for Burnside is to work with young people to develop more interesting ways to allow them to choose to participate in research

The voices of young people (cont'd)

- Some of the experiences and learning that have come out of school homework or other interests have included:
 - Assignments on dream catchers
 - Reading for interest and as a strategy for clearing the mind before sleep
 - Writing a speech on Pemulwoy, the Aboriginal warrior
 - Museum and theatre visits
 - Attending yoga classes and discussing their purpose and meaning
 - Placing stickers on objects in the house in the language a young person is learning

Decentring the role of staff

- Before approaching young people as partners in our work we critiqued and reflected on our own practices, philosophies & ideas that informed our work
- This reflection has been informed by Solution Focused Brief Therapy and Narrative Therapy
- This helped to avoid the pathologising tendency of our work with young people where explanations for the 'problems' and behaviours become the sole focus of the work
- We challenged the idea 'helping' young people to focus on being a partner or ally in our work with them. This allowed partnerships to be formed where work could be done around 'the stuff of life'

Decentring the role of staff (cont'd)

- The focus of the work done with young people has shifted from just wanting to achieve an education outcome such as a year 10 certificate
- Staff have recognised that many young people view attending school as a problem and have tried to look at ways to get through it with them
- Separating education systems and outcomes from learning occurred
- Young people were supported to gain knowledge & information that was empowering, independent and positive

Finding meeting places

- Staff expressed the view that moments of change and movement have come when they feel they are in partnership with young people and meet with them on an equal basis
- Staff acknowledged their power over young people with them and tried not to use this power to try and make decisions that go against the interests of young people
- The focus of learning became about working together to complete a task and to gain a different idea of what study could be like
- The struggle to get the task completed was overshadowed by the spirit of partnership, of 'being in this together'

Finding meeting places (cont'd)

- Some of the ways staff found to open a collaborative place were to:
 - Plan the activity together
 - Regularly check with young people about how they were experiencing the activities done together
 - Shed the idea that the young person has 'let them down' or not achieved if the activity was not completed
 - Bring ideas and suggestions to the partnership to show the young people that they were interested

Working with schools

- Staff, especially the ESW, have taken on the role of being advocates for young people in schools as schools sometimes do not understand the fragmented and interrupted education of young people in care
- Often this has meant advocating and working against assumptions or stereotypes of young people in care
- We have also worked with DET's Substitute Care teachers in arranging extra support for young people or to help navigate the system to help schools accept an enrolment

Working with schools (cont'd)

- Other ideas that have helped in our work include:
 - Establishing a relationship with a teacher a young person identifies with to work out ways to support the young person to complete work
 - Attending parent/teacher nights with the young person's parents to help maintain a presence at the school
 - With the permission of the young person, calling teachers or year advisors to show the young person has support for their work

Homework

- Over the past 2 years, the programs have tried to make sure that homework, study or reading became a daily part of the lives of all in the houses
- Some of the ways we have of working with homework include:
 - Recognising that at times homework may be difficult or boring
 - Finding a place in the work that is familiar rather than starting from the beginning of a difficult piece of homework
 - Marking the progress in completing the homework or assignment each session
 - Going off on a tangent to discuss other things such as a personal interest, history, science or literature

Homework (cont'd)

- Some support materials that have been gathered in each of the houses to help support homework have included:
 - A good computer with internet access, scanner and printer
 - A collection of interesting books, magazines and other research resources being available in each house
 - Building a collection of documentaries and films
 - Video cameras and digital cameras

Playing with time to support workers

- Education and learning has become part of the daily life of the houses
- Discussions take place at team meetings every week about strategies to support young people with their learning needs and is coordinated by the ESW
- Flexible working arrangements have been implemented to allow staff to spend more time with young people in the afternoons and evenings to support education and learning
- Staff have found methods for combining work and developing the reading skills of young people. For example, one staff member asked a young person to read an interesting article to him while dinner was being cooked

Achievements

- The focus on education as being a part of the daily life of the houses has resulted in:
 - Increased attendance at school for all young people
 - A gradual improvement in the grades of the young people
 - Increased enjoyment of reading, homework and cultural events for the young people
- It is important to recognise the achievements have come only through providing a context and environment for education & learning
- The capability and capacity for young people to make changes in their lives cannot be underestimated