

**STICKABILITY, TRANSFORMABILITY AND TRANSMITTABILITY:  
ALTERNATIVE, PULL-OUT PROGRAMS WITHIN SCHOOLS — WHAT THE  
LITERATURE SAYS ABOUT EFFECTIVE PRACTICE AND PROVISION FOR  
DISENFRANCHISED YOUNG PEOPLE**

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**Abstract:** This paper draws on the findings of a recent and extensive literature review to examine the efficacy of pull-out education programs (alternative programs) in schools in relation to student learning, well-being, and pathways. It synthesises the research on alternative education programs and their contribution to student outcomes using three main conceptual categories: how sustainable these programs are — their *stickability*; how effective these programs are in achieving their stated purpose of improving and enhancing vulnerable students' learning, well-being, and pathways — their *transformability*; and how these programs may be used successfully in other locations and contexts — their *transmittability*. It concludes with recommendations for future practice, suggesting that school systems should prioritise prevention and early intervention in providing support to vulnerable students in ways that take account of students' own reasons for why they are disengaged from schooling.

**Keywords:** alternative programs, withdrawal, pull-out, at-risk students

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The relationship between individual socioeconomic disadvantage and academic outcomes is well established. Current data confirm that underprivileged and disenfranchised<sup>1</sup> students have lower rates of school completion and university uptake than those of higher socioeconomic status (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2011; Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, 2011). There is also substantial evidence that both the quality and the socioeconomic profile of a school matter with respect to academic outcomes (Gemici, Lim, & Karmel, 2013; Gonski et al., 2011; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2010; Perry & McConney, 2010; Watson & Ryan, 2010).

In many instances, schools seeking to improve the educational engagement and achievement of underprivileged or disenfranchised students turn to alternative forms of educational provision. A growing number of external agencies have entered the market, developing and offering a burgeoning range of programs to address the learning, well-being, and pathway needs of young people who may otherwise become disengaged from schooling. In particular, there is a growing trend for schools to work responsively with such agencies by introducing “pull-out” education programs (alternative programs). These programs are characteristically developed outside of the school, the education system, or both. They either withdraw students from the mainstream curriculum or are conducted parallel to that curriculum.

The field of alternative education is famously diverse. It is characterised by a pervasive lack of clarity and a troubling lack of consensus about the definition, purposes, best practice implementation, and even the terminology of this kind of practice. It also operates under a wide range of organisational arrangements. In this paper, we are particularly concerned with “pull-out” programs because of the increasing support that they are attracting from education systems. Under the banner of partnership and innovation, many systems have acquired an increasingly external focus, looking to outside agencies to provide the means and the models for strategies to engage disenfranchised students in learning (Black, 2008). The provision of externally provided alternative programs is particularly supported by the shift in education policy to local partnerships as part of the notion of “neo-liberal localism” (Robertson & Dale, 2002, p. 470).

Such trends have led to what Riele has described as “a bewildering array of projects,” a “multitude of programs [that] has led to confusion and inefficiency” (2007, p. 54). Yet, despite the growth of this alternative education market, in which agencies often compete with one another for funding opportunities in what Thomson (2002) has described as an “at-risk industry,” there is very limited research literature that focuses on the impact of externally provided alternative programs on students’ educational outcomes. In this paper, in line with the intentions of this Special Edition, we have sought to review and critically analyse literature concerning

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<sup>1</sup> We prefer the term *disenfranchised* to *disadvantaged* or *at-risk* as it recognises the reality of these communities of promise — the working-class, inter-generationally poor, Indigenous and refugee communities — without any deficit implications.

alternative programs to help advance our understanding of externally provided programs. In synthesising research on the efficacy of alternative programs within schools in relation to student learning, well-being, and pathways for disenfranchised youth, we have used three main conceptual headings to capture the findings concerning external provision: how sustainable these programs are — their *stickability*; how effective these programs are in actually achieving their stated purpose of improving and enhancing vulnerable students’ learning, well-being, and pathways — their *transformability*; and how these programs may be used successfully in other locations and contexts — their *transmittability*.

### Methodology

As stated above, we know much about alternative education programs, but surprisingly little about ones that are externally provided. Our purpose in this paper was therefore to review relevant literature concerning alternative programs to inform our understanding of the contribution that alternative, pull-out, and externally provided programs within schools make towards student learning, well-being, and pathways to employment. To identify relevant literature, we conducted an extensive search of education-focussed electronic databases. Such databases included *Proquest*, *Expanded Academic ASAP*, *Informit*, *A+ Education*, *ERIC*, *PsychINFO*, *The British Education Index*, and *SpringerLink*. Other databases — perhaps less uniquely focused on education issues — such as *JSTOR* and *Web of Knowledge* were also included in our electronic searches. We used *Google Scholar* (<http://scholar.google.com>) to help compare search results across the academic databases. We also searched the websites of relevant organisations whose work encompasses the topic area. These included the OECD, Departments of Education (states and federal), and the Dusseldorp Skills Forum.

The keywords and phrases we used included the following: (1) alternative, pull-out, “at-risk”, pathways, student well-being, and student engagement programs; and (2) external provision, external providers, and external agencies. Other keywords used in combination with the main search phrases included research, effectiveness (and its variants, such as effects or effective), and outcomes. We limited our search to literature published in English but not necessarily from Anglophone countries. We focused, initially, on primary research literature, and subsequently reviewed the multitude of programs in Australia highlighted as good practice by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum<sup>2</sup> on the Learning Choices online database. Such programs offer pathways to enable young people to remain in school or to return to complete their education in safe, inclusive, innovative, and flexible settings. Overall, we reviewed 100 Australian and international research papers and reports relevant to this research, from which we formed our framework of stickability, transformability, and transmittability.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/program-database/>

### **Measuring the Effectiveness of Alternative Programs: Their Stickability**

Alternative, pull-out, and externally provided programs within schools are developed in response to the identified needs of individuals and groups of young people. Some programs are of a more general nature, and are concerned with “preventative” approaches, addressing issues of education structures, curriculum, and pedagogy in ways that seek to make schooling more inclusive of the needs of all students, particularly those who are currently marginalised. Such preventative approaches can also be seen to include programs inclusive of all students as well as those specifically targeted towards keeping “at-risk” youth engaged in school.

The landscape of alternative programs is often characterised by ambitious aims and purposes; they seem to provide a strong vision and purpose for the particular services they offer. At the same time, it must be asked how realistic the aims of such programs are. Tyler and Stokes (1997) proposed that three questions should be satisfactorily answered before the decision is made to base an alternative service in schools: is it in the best interests of the young people?; is it in the best interests of the service?; and is it in the best interests of the school? These questions could be usefully applied to all alternative programs for disenfranchised and disengaged youth.

The lack of agreement about what constitutes the effective provision of alternative programs, and how this provision should be accessed and coordinated within any one given school, makes it almost impossible to determine what the successful outcomes of such provision would look like (Aron & Zweig, 2003). The development of mechanisms for the evaluation and assessment of alternative programs would be an important step in understanding their efficacy, and coordinating the most effective provision of such programs, as well as documenting and sharing successful approaches, yet rigorous evaluation and assessment is relatively uncommon (Brown & Holdsworth, 2001).

One significant criticism of alternative programs that emerges from the literature (te Reile, 2006, 2007, 2012) relates to the lack of consistency, coherence, and consensus that characterise alternative program provision overall. This lack of orchestrated provision represents a challenge for systems, especially at the regional or local level. It also represents an issue for individual schools. Black, Lemon, and Walsh (2010) noted that any effective practice should include “the thorough monitoring and measurement of its actions and outcomes and the capacity to respond to the evidence that [such measurement] yields” (p. 11). Yet the consensus from the literature on alternative programs is that there is a consistent lack of measurement or analysis in relation to either provision or outcomes. In her overview of alternative education programs in Australia, for example, te Riele (2012) noted that, while most programs are informed by clear objectives, “they do not necessarily gather or provide strong evidence on the extent to which these objectives are achieved” (p. 23).

This is not to underestimate the complexities that may attend the measurement of the efficacy of alternative programs. Some programs are interventions with multiple variables that

do not immediately lend themselves to “orderly” analyses. They often involve complex “real world” settings (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999, p. 114). Many of the outcomes that they aim to achieve require time to change the young person and to accurately assess the program’s efficacy and impact (Kenny, Waldo, Warter, & Barton, 2002). As te Riele observed, even a fairly fundamental measure such as attendance within alternative programs may be complex to assess as often alternative programs have a “chequered attendance history” (2012, p. 19). Student attendance within alternative programs may be better than their attendance within mainstream classes, but the base-level of attendance may still be low, or vary from term to term or week to week, as a function of the complexity of these young people’s lives, circumstances, and relationship to schooling.

Other challenges to the effective measurement of alternative programs may include the nature or the expertise of the agency undertaking the measurement. The evaluations of many alternative programs are conducted or commissioned by the agencies that are responsible for funding or conducting them and they are (understandably) eager to justify their provision and success (Black et al., 2010; Cole, 2004). Such self-monitoring is an important mechanism for the ongoing development and improvement of individual programs and agencies (Aron & Zweig, 2003), but it is unlikely to provide answers to more rigorous questions about the efficacy of alternative program provision, especially given that many of these self-evaluations have been found to be methodologically flawed (Raffo & Dyson, 2007).

Self-monitoring is also unlikely to provide the longitudinal data that is essential in understanding the efficacy of such programs for the young people they target. The lack of coherent and orchestrated provision of alternative programs already represents a significant challenge for such young people. Stokes (2000) has noted that some young people attending such programs move disjointedly from one program to another. Especially where the programmatic intention is to ensure better pathways to training or employment, such lack of coherence within program provision reduces the likelihood that the young people concerned will be able to utilise their experiences within these various programs to develop a coherent pathway to future success. Longitudinal analyses are needed to better demonstrate the long-term outcomes of such programs for participating young people. In the absence of such mechanisms for measurement, the stickability of individual programs is at risk.

### **Measuring the Effectiveness of Alternative Programs: Their Transformability**

A consistent theme that emerges from the literature is the efficacy of alternative programs, as researchers question whether such programs have the capacity to effect lasting or widespread transformations at the student, school, or community levels. In this section, we consider the debates that continue to attend the role of alternative programs in achieving these three levels of transformation.

### *Transforming Student Outcomes*

One of the most controversial questions that arises from the research literature is whether programs that remove students from mainstream activities also remove them from important sources of knowledge, including their peers, and from the kinds of authorised knowledge that is most valued, and rewarded, by education systems (Apple, 1993). Practices associated with such concerns expressed in the literature include maintaining environments that do not engage students, insisting on curriculum content that is too difficult or irrelevant, or alienating students through poor teacher–student relations (Young, 2000, p. 150).

The research also warns that students who are identified as being most at-risk of educational failure are the least likely to be exposed to intellectually challenging and relevant learning material and opportunities, causing them to fall progressively further behind their peers and so making it even harder to alter the pattern of inequality of outcomes (Lingard et al., 2001). These writers caution that the redistribution of vulnerable students into alternative programs will not address the root cause of educational underachievement.

Batten & Russell's (1995) major review of teaching and learning for disenfranchised youth suggests that even the most vulnerable students are capable of quality educational outcomes if they have access to a supportive educational environment that:

- builds on their strengths;
- responds to their needs, and monitors their progress;
- promotes their social and personal development as well as their academic and vocational development;
- has a focus on practical learning related to their own life experience;
- encourages them to share responsibility for their own learning and to be involved in decisions about that learning;
- sets high expectations for their achievement, challenges and extends them, and gives them the opportunity to work cooperatively with others, both inside and outside the classroom; and,
- involves parents, the community, and relevant agencies in a collaborative endeavour to support them.

Brown & Holdsworth (2001) add to such recommendations, suggesting that effective alternative programs should:

- link learning to real life and to work applications, and provide opportunities to learn outside the classroom and the school;
- have flexible pacing and allow young people to learn at their own rate;

- include opportunities and assistance for students to talk with staff about their future aspirations and goal-setting; and,
- maximise student autonomy and decision-making.

Two strategies are strongly suggested for promoting the most significant improvements in the learning, well-being, and pathways of disenfranchised students: first, implementing an intensive and individually-targeted alternative program; and second, changing the nature of pedagogical practice within the regular classroom in line with the kind of measures described above (Slavin & Madden, 1989). While different organisational arrangements may suit different programs, settings, or student needs, the general consensus within the relevant research literature is that where alternative programs are poorly integrated with regular classroom pedagogy and fail to influence that pedagogy, they fail to make a significant or sustainable difference to student outcomes.

Rice and Lamb (2008) have shown that the most favourable outcomes are achieved when specific interventions, such as alternative programs, are provided within the context of a supportive school culture and by school-based strategies designed to ensure the best possible classroom practice at the mainstream level. This sentiment is echoed by other researchers (Druian & Butler, 1987; te Riele, 2006), who conclude that the factors that are most predictive of educational success for students placed as “at-risk” include effective school leadership, coherent classroom management across all curricular areas and year levels, and the regular and coordinated monitoring of student progress. Less integrated models of alternative provision are less likely to substantially build the capacity of the school and its community to meet disenfranchised young people’s needs, let alone to inform or support systemic change.

Other studies (Apte, 2001; Dwyer, Stokes, Tyler, & Holdsworth, 1998; Teese & Polesel, 2003; Zyngier, 2003) are more forceful in their analysis, suggesting that many vulnerable students are “driven out” of school (Zyngier, 2003). Such studies deplore the labelling or stigmatisation of vulnerable students, but they also recognise some of the forces that may impel educators to isolate such students within the school. These include the need within a competitive educational market, so prevalent in neo-liberal societies, to show improvement by moving under-performing students on to other schools, or to improve the educational profile of specific classes or year-level groups by moving such students into diversionary or alternative programs. There is a clear warning from the literature that the needs of vulnerable students may be given less consideration in what has become a market-driven education system.

### ***Transforming Schools***

While Slavin and Madden’s review (1989) is now more than two decades old, its themes continue to have currency within more recent studies. Their primary recommendation is that a comprehensive and whole-school approach is the only strategy that will have significant outcomes for the learning, well-being, and future transitions of disenfranchised students. By

contrast, the uneven or sporadic provision of alternative programs is unlikely to achieve these aims. In particular, the uncoordinated provision or proliferation of disparate programs within any one school runs counter to the conclusions of the research. As Slavin and Madden (1989) note, “it is not enough to take a little of Program A and a little of Program B and hope for the best” (p. 10). Moreover Stringfield, Millsap, and Herman (2005) concluded that students in schools using externally developed pull-out programs tended to achieve less than did students in schools that attempted whole school reform programs.

Particularly in highly disadvantaged contexts, alternative program provision has been criticised for targeting a cohort of students without changing the culture of the school, focusing on superficial problems rather than addressing root causes, and implementing educational reform without the social and economic reforms needed to change the circumstances of such communities (Dyson & Raffo, 2007; Muijs, 2007). Such programs are supplemental rather than fundamental or mainstream; they are directed at specific “sub-populations” of students and remain isolated alternatives to the mainstream (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs [DETYA], 2001a). It has been suggested that such programs work against sustained student improvement because they are poorly linked to, and lack articulation with, the mainstream curriculum (Luke et al., 2003). As Slavin and Madden (1989) have argued, such programs fail to emphasise the responsibility of the whole school, and of all teachers, for the educational success of all students.

In some ways, the continued emphasis in some schools on alternative programs that are poorly connected to the mainstream curriculum and pedagogical approaches can be seen as running counter to the direction and priorities of their systems. National and state-based initiatives such as extended service schooling, school regeneration projects, and the integration of early childhood and schooling services are driven by a desire to achieve more integrated service provision for children and young people in high-need contexts (Black et al., 2010). They are also driven by the recognition that the achievement of positive learning, well-being, and pathways for all students requires not just “a proliferation of new practices ... but also whole-of-school change ... backed up and mandated by systemic guidelines, policies and appropriate resource allocations” (DETYA, 2001b, p. 26). Even with the best will in the world this is sometimes too much to ask of over-worked and over-stressed public school teachers.

### ***Transforming Communities***

A major review (Strategic Partners, 2001) of innovation and best practice in relation to the education of vulnerable young people found that schools that engaged the local community and participated directly in community capacity building had the greatest impact on the young people involved. Such schools provided options and strategies that attempted to address the factors that caused young people to be vulnerable in the first instance. They took a leading role in the rebuilding of “human communities” at the local level, especially in communities where disadvantage is an issue (Szirom et al., 2001).



There is a view, expressed strongly within the wider literature, that any alternative education service provision should be designed to meet the specific needs and reflect the specific context of the school and its local community (Black et al., 2010). Researchers recommend that the most successful provision for vulnerable young people is that which is developed locally and in response to local need. Doing so may require schools and brokers to establish strong links with other local agencies. It may also require the development and provision of culturally appropriate alternative programs and services, especially in contexts where Indigenous, working-class (see Rubin et al., 2014), migrant, and refugee young people are involved (Brown & Holdsworth, 2001).

In relation to extended service schooling (McKinsey & Company, 2010), the policy trend is to set no single blueprint for practice. An example comes from the largest centralised initiative to date, the Full Service Extended Schools program in the United Kingdom: within this model, schools are expected to decide what constitutes their local community; what the needs of that community are; whether interventions are best directed at the level of the young person, the family or the community; and which interventions should be employed (Success Works, 2001).

Researchers express caution, however, about how far such variability should extend. A dissenting view from the literature is that the absence of a single, coherent vision or mandate from educational systems represents a significant challenge to the efficacy of alternative service provision in schools. An authoritative evaluation of the United Kingdom Full Service Extended Schools initiative suggests that good practice should rely less on what it calls “entrepreneurship at the school level” and more on “policy coherence and stability” (Cummings, Todd, & Dyson, 2007, p. 4). The inference for alternative programs is that they may prove most effective when supported by a policy plan that establishes minimum standards for practice and considers long-term sustainability.

### **How Alternative Programs May be Used in Other Locations: Their Transmittability**

The research literature acknowledges that schools play a critical role in the prevention and early intervention programs for vulnerable youth. However, the research also suggests that much of this work appears to be fragmented, with individualistic approaches that contribute little to the capacity of the system overall. There is a view within the research literature (Black, 2007; Kenway, 2012; Mills & McGregor, 2010; Teese & Polesel, 2003; te Riele, 2007), that it is easier, and more desirable, to change the education system than to change the student. At the same time, researchers (Szirom et al., 2001; The Allen Consulting Group, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c) caution that proposals to change the system through a “bits and pieces” approach will not deliver long-term sustainable change. Such conflicting assessments raise the question of the extent to which alternative programs conducted in individual schools have the capacity, or even the potential, to effect lasting or widespread transformations at the level of the school system: that is, whether

they have the potential to be scaled up across a greater number of schools, or to inform and serve as models of practice in other schools.

Young people do not disconnect from education because of the failure of any one system, and reconnecting them requires collaboration and coordination among multiple systems. In this vein, one criticism of alternative education programs is that they are, on the whole, “dead-end” programs: they do not lead to recognised and credentialed outcomes, or allow movement or substantial entry qualifications to further education and training (Holdsworth, 2011). From such a view, the delivery of alternative programs within individual schools is considered to also overlook the consensus among researchers that “the problem of youth disconnecting from mainstream schools is largely a systemic problem” (Aron & Zweig, 2003, p. 42) that requires a better systemic overview and coordination of alternative provision (Mills & McGregor, 2010; Riele, 2012).

In particular, researchers recommend a better systemic overview and coordination of the cost of provision of alternative programs. While the proliferation of alternative programs in individual schools represents a groundswell of commitment to meeting the needs of vulnerable young people, government reports have acknowledged that “[a] lot of money can be spent in pursuit of limited benefits without some commitment to systemic change” (DETYA, 2001a, p. 2). The DETYA report (2001b) noted that “without system change, effective practice that serves marginalised or ‘at-risk’ young people will either remain localised, and/or dissipate as resources shrink and creative energy is exhausted” (DETYA, 2001b, p. 102).

Researchers, including Gonski et al. (2011) in their *Review of Funding for Schooling*, urge school systems to better recognise that meeting the needs of vulnerable young people requires significant investment, including greater staffing resources and facilities and a higher level of leadership and support. Based on long-term research by the OECD, Mortimore and Mortimore (1999) concluded that improving outcomes for vulnerable students requires a move away from narrow or instrumentalist views of what educational success means as well as greater support and recognition of the role of educators in planning and implementing change. He also warns that these outcomes cannot be achieved without adequate resources. Such a view is echoed by Teese (2006), who argues that improved outcomes for vulnerable students “must be supported by an intensity of effort, high expectations and solidarity in sharing resources” (p. 3). Such studies, however, are not simply a call for additional resources, as echoed by Luke and colleagues (2003). In a significant review of provision for students in the middle years of schooling,<sup>3</sup> Luke et al. (2003) argued that dedicated funding tied to specific groups of vulnerable young people, including Indigenous young people, appears to encourage piecemeal and pull-out approaches that are not supportive of whole school change.

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<sup>3</sup> In Australia the middle years refer to Grades 8 to 10 or pupils aged 13 to 16.

The findings of such studies, and others, including Black (2007) and Brown and Holdsworth (2001), provide a reminder that educational change and innovation works best if it is both “top down” and “bottom up.” We suggest that investment should be particularly targeted towards teacher learning and the creation of new and supportive mechanisms and strategies for teachers to work together and with other staff and agencies to meet all students’ needs. These may include strategies to improve the professional knowledge and learning of all educators, not just those who are directly involved in the delivery of alternative programs. Also needed are strategies to deliver smaller student–staff ratios, strategies to provide time within the timetable for staff to provide pastoral care, and strategies to improve the quality and capacity of student welfare and mentoring programs. Investment in such strategies shifts the locus of expertise from the agencies or individuals delivering alternative programs to all teachers within the school. Doing so recognises that, with adequate support, all teachers can act as internal change agents within their own school contexts.

Before investment of resources can be more effectively directed, however, educational systems need to know the scale and extent of the provision of alternative programs in school. A necessary first step is a comprehensive environmental scan or mapping of existing provision. Cole noted in 2004 that, “there is no overall strategy that considers the location and placement of alternative settings within the community” (p. 11). Our findings likewise suggest that little has changed in this regard. Such mapping should go beyond a simple analysis of what kind of programs and agencies are operating in specific schools and regions to include an analysis of what funds are being expended in the provision of alternative programs.

Such an analysis should address the following overarching questions:

- What is the cost of alternative programs in schools? What resources are required to access externally provided programs and agencies, and where do schools obtain such resources?
- What are the sources and security of funding for such programs? (te Riele, 2012)
- What are the cost-benefits, cost-effectiveness, and opportunity costs of such programs?

It should also enable educational systems to answer these more specific questions:

- How do schools access externally provided programs and agencies? What issues of equity apply to such access? Do all schools have equal access to externally provided programs and agencies?
- What is the longevity of externally provided programs within any one school and what factors contribute to this longevity?

- What opportunities exist to coordinate the provision of programs across schools within the same geographic area? What collaboration exists between schools accessing the same externally provided programs and agencies (Myconos, 2011)?
- What is the nature of the young people being targeted for participation in alternative programs? What other services are these young people accessing, and what are the opportunities for better coordination of this provision?
- What are the short- and long-term outcomes for the young people who participate in alternative programs? What pathways or positive destinations exist for such young people, both within the school and beyond it, and how long does it take for such youth to achieve such positive destinations? What is the impact for students of their time spent in any one program as well as of the duration of the program (te Riele, 2012)?

### Discussion

Teese (2006) has concluded that “in the end, the quality of a school system can be judged by the experience of the most vulnerable children in it” (p. 3). Kenway (2012) adds that:

We can judge the virtue of a nation by how well it treats its most vulnerable people. Equally, we can judge the virtue and thus the quality of an education system by how well it educates its most vulnerable students. (p.78)

International research (OECD, 1998), as well as Australian research (Applied Economics, 2002; Macdonald & Marsh, 2002; The Allen Consulting Group, 2003a , 2003b, 2003c), indicates that if we do not purposefully address student and school failure, we risk paying a considerable economic and social penalty, as has been reaffirmed more recently by noted economists and scientists.<sup>4</sup>

A criticism of alternative programs relates to their effects on the perception and identity of the students targeted for their inclusion. For young people, there is a persistent association among vulnerability, risk, and deficit. As Wright, McLaughlin, and Weekes (2000) note, vulnerable students may be stereotyped not only as suffering “deficit” but also as “deviant.” They too often are seen as capable of “contaminating” the school culture.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, British scientists Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Always Do Better* (see pp. 106–115); French economist Thomas Piketty's 2014 *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (see pp. 22, 218–219, 224,339–341); Nobel laureate and Columbia economics professor Joseph Stiglitz's influential 2013 treatise *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers our Future*. (see pp, 10, 13, 27, 36, 62, 76)

Schools that adopt such a deficit approach to young people’s learning, well-being, or pathways typically focus on individualised, de-contextualised understandings of student vulnerability that take little account of the wider forces and factors that influence young people’s experience of education, including school, community, and system-level factors. From such a view, programs are designed to “reinforce structures that have [already] broken down” (Wright et al., 2000, p. 35) rather than questioning the structures themselves. While programs to address students’ vulnerability may be either *preventative* (i.e., operating as part of an early intervention strategy; DETYA, 2001a), or *ameliorative* (i.e., remedial), the most common approach by schools, according to an earlier OECD study (1998), is to offer remediation rather than preventative programs. There is no conclusive evidence in the literature that suggests students have improved achievement or altered patterns of learning through such remediation programs (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1999).

There is also a concern expressed in the literature that alternative programs serve as “dumping grounds” for students whom the school has identified as problematic (de Jong & Griffiths, 2006, p. 32). The removal of students from the mainstream classroom to participate in alternative programs is often associated with reduced opportunities for normal social interaction between targeted students and others, with the negative labelling or stigmatisation of targeted low-achieving students (Teddlie & Stringfield, 2006) and with the formation or reinforcement in these students of a sense of self as “other” or as “delinquent” (Hawkins, Doueck, & Lishner, 1988; Slavin & Madden, 1989; Zyngier & Gale, 2003).

This last claim warrants greater investigation. The literature consistently emphasises the importance of schools “focusing on changing conditions rather than on [changing] the perceived problems of young people or their families” (te Riele, 2012, p. 32). Zyngier and Gale’s (2003) suggestion that schools and systems must “take account of students’ own reasons for why they are disengaged from schooling and what changes schools and teachers themselves might need to consider” (p. 1) continues to be a pertinent one for any alternative education provision.

### **Conclusion**

The findings from this review suggest that school systems must prioritise prevention and early intervention in the provision of support to vulnerable students. Remedial programs and interventions should be used as a last resort, not as the first or preferred strategy. As the review of the literature suggests, alternative pathways to educational success are needed at every stage of schooling, beginning with prevention and early intervention strategies in the early years, progressing to a range of high-quality alternative options within mainstream K-12 systems, and, finally, offering “second chance” opportunities for those who have been unable to learn and thrive in the general education system (Aron, 2005). It is essential that our teachers are active participants in change to ensure that alternative programs *stick* and *transform*. They may require considerable adaptation of their practices, habits, and beliefs. In particular, to ensure

*transmittability* and *stickability*, further research is required to establish a more definitive inventory of international “best practice” principles and exemplars in order to ensure:

That those students who currently derive the least benefit from their schooling years are provided with enhanced opportunities to attain academic and social outcomes from their learning that are of value in the difficult transitions and pathways that many need to negotiate in the years ahead. (Luke et al., 2003, p. 9)

Schools have not always taken up the challenge or had the resources or capacity to address such issues. As a result, many turn to external providers who offer “quick fix” and “off-the-shelf” solutions that have little or no impact on the deeper and substantive school-based issues that may contribute to the creation of young people’s vulnerability. However, our findings show a common flaw in these solutions: no single or overarching explanation can account for young people’s vulnerability in relation to education, and there is no simple or universally applicable measure that can address it. Overcoming risk for young learners requires a sustained and long-term effort to meet the needs of all students, especially of low achievers (OECD, 1998, p. 56). As Mortimore and Mortimore (1999, p. 113) observed, the maintenance of improvement requires considerable and sustained effort: “Schools cannot either rest on their laurels or switch to auto-pilot!”

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