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Equitable access to education for young homeless people

Abstract

At the National Social Policy Conference in 1995 we were one of a minority of service providers presenting a paper; in fact we found ourselves presenting with one other of this minority at the last session of the conference on Friday afternoon. It was a disappointing time slot and left us pondering the question of how seriously 'policy makers' take the contributions of the people who are at the 'coalface'. We made the decision to present a paper at the conference because we believe the program we initiated is innovative and beneficial to a severely marginalised group of young people. The program is different because it looks at the dilemma of homeless youth, health and education holistically. The difficulty we have encountered is that at the departmental level (New South Wales Department of Health, New South Wales Department of School Education, Department of Social Security, Department of Community Services, Department of Employment Education and Training) this issue is not considered holistically. For example, the NSW Department of Health will not fund us, as we are 'education' and the NSW Department of School Education will not fund us because we are 'health'. Our work raises issues at the service level, and we want to suggest that it is critical that these issues be heard at the policy level, where recognition of how we 'compartmentalise' young people because of departmental structures can be both understood and addressed. Education is something we are all told (and some of us tell others) is a basic right. Yet there are many young people who do not have access to this 'basic right'. Some of these young people are experiencing homelessness and for some, the complications of school problems have been a determining factor in their homelessness. It will not be until integrated methods are put in place that the needs of our younger generation who have difficult life circumstances and for whom schooling is not designed will be equitably serviced.

Keywords

homeless, equitable, people, access, education, young

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Harwood, V. & Phelan, R. (1995). Equitable access to education for young homeless people. In P. Saunders & S. Shaver (Eds.), *Social Policy and the Challenges of Social Change: Proceedings of the National Social Policy Conference, Volume 2* (pp. 49-59). Sydney, Australia: Social Policy Research Centre.

Equitable Access to Education for Young Homeless People

Valerie Harwood and Ruth Phelan
High Street Youth Health Service

1 Introduction

At the National Social Policy Conference in 1995 we were one of a minority of service providers presenting a paper; in fact we found ourselves presenting with one other of this minority at the last session of the conference on Friday afternoon. It was a disappointing time slot and left us pondering the question of how seriously 'policy makers' take the contributions of the people who are at the 'coalface'. We made the decision to present a paper at the conference because we believe the program we initiated is innovative and beneficial to a severely marginalised group of young people. The program is different because it looks at the dilemma of homeless youth, health and education holistically. The difficulty we have encountered is that at the departmental level (New South Wales Department of Health, New South Wales Department of School Education, Department of Social Security, Department of Community Services, Department of Employment Education and Training) this issue is not considered holistically. For example, the NSW Department of Health will not fund us, as we are 'education' and the NSW Department of School Education will not fund us because we are 'health'.

Our work raises issues at the service level, and we want to suggest that it is critical that these issues be heard at the policy level, where recognition of how we 'compartmentalise' young people because of departmental structures can be both understood and addressed. Education is something we are all told (and some of us tell others) is a basic right. Yet there are many young people who do not have access to this 'basic right'. Some of these young people are experiencing homelessness and for some, the complications of school problems have been a determining factor in their homelessness. It will not be until integrated methods are put in place that the needs of our younger generation who have difficult life circumstances and for whom schooling is not designed will be equitably serviced.

2 Cool School and High Street Youth Health Service

The aim of this discussion is to present Cool School as a model which has the potential to facilitate equitable access to education for young people experiencing

homelessness or young people at risk of experiencing homelessness. Our work raises questions regarding presumptions made that young people experiencing homelessness cannot or do not want to be involved in education. We want to suggest that young people experiencing homelessness can engage in education and emphasise that the question is 'how' they engage in education.

Cool School is a project which brings an education program into a community-based health service and uses a holistic model of care with the aim of improving the health and welfare of at risk young people. The Cool School project was developed in response to a perceived need for an education service within High Street Youth Health Service to complement the existing services. The project was originally funded through the Youth Strategy Action Grants (YSAG), a Department of Education, Employment and Training (DEET) initiative. The grant was for a twelve month period only and allowed High Street Youth Health Service to employ an education officer from April 1994 to April 1995.

A collaborative model of staffing was decided upon and the position of education officer was shared with two other staff members of High Street Youth Health Service. All staff involved in the program have qualifications in education and teaching experience. The staff at High Street Youth Health Service decided that the continuation of the Cool School Project was a priority and have committed funding (derived from savings accumulated due to an unstaffed medical position) from April 1995 to January 1996.

High Street Youth Health Service is a State and Federally funded unit of the Western Sydney Area Health Service. It is a multi-access centre providing: primary health care; counselling; drug and alcohol counselling; keywork; outreach; drop in centre and arts program. High Street Youth Health Service uses a holistic model for working with young people and has a brief to target the needs of young people experiencing homelessness or those at risk of experiencing homelessness.

The holistic model aims to work with the individual as a whole, as opposed to focusing or specialising on one aspect. Therefore High Street Youth Health Service provides a range of services in order to cater to the varied and demanding needs of young people.

3 Young People, Education and the Experience of Homelessness

In answering the dilemma of how young people engage in education, we suggest there needs to be a reconsideration of how 'education' is conceptualised. We have found this involves evaluation of both the desired 'outcomes' of education

and the process of education. Our understanding of education is that it is a life process; a process of learning about the self; and that 'schooling' is an aspect of this life process. Looking at education in broader terms can enable the validation of a young person's experiences - such as reporting sexual abuse; leaving home; resisting physical or verbal abuse. In such instances the young person has learnt how to recognise and somehow manage threatening situations, which is all educational. But the problem of education in the context of schooling remains. For many young people, learning about the self has very little to do with the rules of factorisation in mathematics, particularly for young people who are in crisis because they have no place to live.

Young homeless people or those at risk of experiencing homelessness are invariably excluded from continuing their education for a variety of reasons. Examples of these reasons include:

- the way they are living their life is not compatible with the routines of schooling (e.g. being able to get to school on time and regularly and in school uniform);
- schooling structures are not able to cater to the demands placed on them by young homeless people; these include the range of behaviours which challenge schooling routine and authority (e.g. drug use, aggression, depression, truancy and independence);
- basic needs issues such as sleep, food, health, mental health, lack of supportive accommodation;
- alienation. The young homeless student is often perceived as different to the other students, by the school, by students and by the young homeless person themselves;
- Assumptions about young homeless people, that they are not interested in education or that they cannot take part in it until they resolve other more pressing life issues;
- lack of information and understanding regarding the complexity of issues involved in youth homelessness; and
- the time factor involved in school administration (particularly when resolving disputes/suspensions) is often prohibitive and directly in conflict with the needs of adolescents.

In the Cool School program we have aimed firstly, to recognise and support the concept of education as a life process and secondly, to address the issue of young people accessing education in the context of schooling.

4 Our Philosophy

The purpose of this discussion of our philosophy is to illustrate the relationship between our beliefs about young people experiencing homelessness and education and the methods we have applied. It is important to emphasise at this point the distinction we make between our program and 'conventional schooling'. It is implicitly because our program is not a part of 'conventional schooling' that we have been able to work in a particular way which reflects our beliefs. Because we are situated within a holistic youth health service we have been able to address the multiple issues presented by the young people, and maintain their links with education.

The philosophy of the Cool School project is based on the belief that education is a basic right of all young people and that young people have a right to have some say in what and how they learn. Young people are encouraged to take responsibility for their education and to develop self-directed learning programs. The project actively seeks to differently interpret the constructed 'challenging student' and to explore the potential intervention strategies.

A prerequisite to the negotiation of learning by young people who are 'outside' of the school system is to establish the possibility of their agency in learning. The term 'agency' refers to the conceptualisation by an individual that they can be their own 'agent' for change. We have worked toward this by assisting our clients to re-examine the experiences of schooling which have influenced their relations with learning and education. In approaching the dilemma of how to involve young people in thinking about their experiences of learning we found ourselves looking at how it is that young people come to 'own' certain beliefs about themselves. Michel Foucault (1984) similarly encountered this problem:

My problem has always been...the problem of the relationship between subject and truth. How does the subject enter into a certain game of truth?...So it was that I was led to pose the problem of power-knowledge, which is not for me the fundamental problem but an instrument allowing the analysis - in a way that seems to me to be the most exact - of the problem of the relationships between subject and games of truth. (Foucault cited in Bernauer and Rasmussen, 1988: 11)

Identifying the relationship between the young people (the subjects) and their ideas about their ability and right to education (the games of truth) provides a means of challenging the totality of 'truth'. It is important to note how influential these 'truths' can be over a young person. We have encountered many young people who hold a belief that **they have failed** in school. This self-conceptualisation can be so overwhelming that when faced with school tasks they will give up if they cannot immediately grasp at a 'correct' answer.

The stories the young people have about themselves in relation to education have the effect of reducing their possibilities for learning. Combined with problems such as lack of food, shelter and psychological turmoil, it is not surprising that these young people give up any hope of accessing education. To look at how the young person has come to hold particular concepts of truth about themselves requires insight into how these truths came into 'actuality'. For a young person to look critically at the names they have for themselves we encouraged a contextual perspective of their experience. Quite often the young people had not considered the effects of their life circumstances as influential in their inability to attend school or to pass tests - they simply had the opinion of themselves that they were no good at school. Jones(1991) suggests this lack of questioning could be attributed to the influence of 'authority':

Authority in the traditional sense closes down inquiry into the nature of relationships that authority stabilises. In a very strong sense, that is precisely what traditional notions of authority are intended to do: suspend the process of judgement and decision-making as an ongoing, conflicted, and collective process, and locate it in one ultimate sovereign point. (Jones, 1991: 109)

The absence of this 'sovereign point' in our program (in the form of the school) was essential to the young person's development of questioning. It is important to consider that the production of 'truths' about young people is not limited to schools, as Davis (1993) in *A Study of Homeless Female Street Youth* notes:

Many social services implicitly pathologize adolescents by focussing on their deficits and shortcomings, rather than on their strengths and talents. This is particularly true of law enforcement and psychiatric intervention, where labelling and stigmatising take priority. The 'manufacture of deviance' is frequently employed among some social sectors, as well, which label unsuccessful cases as 'hopeless', 'dysfunctional' or 'uncontrollable'. (Davis, 1993: 35)

These 'truths' have a 'knack' of becoming all pervasive in the sense that the young person identifies with this particular notion of themselves, becoming a 'character' in an ever increasing spiral of labels which differentiate the young person from what is considered 'the norm'. Differentiation from their school attending peers invariably exacerbates a young person's sense of 'not belonging in school', rendering it impossible for them to participate in 'conventional education'.

To begin the process of questioning we have used a Foucauldian interpretation which disrupts traditional views of power as hierarchical one way interactions, alternatively suggesting that '... power is a relation not a possession or a capacity' (Orner, 1993: 82). This view of 'power' can be used to assist a young person to differently interpret their experiences and importantly, acknowledge the strengths they have in surviving. Faced with alienation from schooling, difficult life circumstances or homelessness, a young person's resistance to schooling could be a method for '... producing an alternative sense of self ...' (Linnell and Cora, 1992: 3), an experiment with the discourses they encounter. Practically, this meant that in the program we interpreted 'troublesome' behaviours as a form of resistance, a form of preserving power though the production of 'an alternative sense of self'. Due to the holistic nature of our service we could look at the issue of a young person's agency in a multiple sense: their agency in education, physical health, accommodation, mental health, income and in their relations with 'officials' such as the Department of Community Services.

For many of our clients, to re-engage in schooling or education meant they needed to become aware of stories as constructs and then challenge and critically re/think the narratives used to explain their experience. We therefore describe our work as having a narrative style:

... the narrative metaphor proposes that persons live their lives by stories - that these stories are shaping life, and that they have real, not imagined effects - and that these stories provide the structure of life... ..it is through the narratives or the stories that persons have about their own lives and the lives of others that they make sense of their experience. Not only do these stories determine the meaning that persons give to their experience, it is argued, but these stories largely determine which aspects of experience persons select out for expression... (White, 1992: 28)

Using this method the young people could begin to consider the issues as systemic. Previous identities such as 'failure' could then be understood as a construction which they could decide to accept or reject. This was the case with

one of the young people in the project, who moved from a narrative of power through a type of resistance which placed her in an 'at risk' lifestyle, to one in which her resistance and strength could be used to re-engage in schooling. For the young people in our program, reframing interpretations of school experiences is an opportunity for alternative stories to emerge, providing different structures by which to live their lives.

Foucault advocated being constantly '...sceptical about dogmatic unities and philosophical anthropologies' (Rajchman 1985: 2), suggesting we must seek to locate and deconstruct 'the givens', the 'self-evident' and urged changes away from models which suggest universality. 'Conventional schooling' is one model which operates more or less on a premise of universality. It is because of this premise that different life circumstances become 'problems'. Stemming from this observation, it becomes clear that there needs to be a variety of options available in education, and some of these will need to be flexible enough to address the multiple issues of homeless youth.

This discussion has endeavoured to argue the importance of agency in the delivery of education services for young people experiencing homelessness or those at risk of experiencing homelessness. Young people need to be involved in a process of rethinking their interpretations of their schooling experiences in order to negotiate education and learning. Our assertion is that the structures existing for the provision of education for young people do not cater to the needs of those who do not fit the paradigm of 'living at home in a supported and safe environment'. The problem of youth homelessness is **multi-dimensional**, therefore demanding **multi-faceted** service provision.

5 The Structure of Our Program

From a discussion of our philosophy, we now turn to a description of our methods. The methods of service delivery used throughout the project have developed from our beliefs about young people and education and in response to the needs and requests of the participants. The methods of intervention include:

Time Out. We provide young people with the opportunity of attending informal sessions at High Street in lieu of school attendance, enabling young people to take 'a break' from school. These sessions are also attended by young people who are not attending school and are very valuable as a space where young people can maintain some 'link' with education.

Tutoring. Individual tutoring for students provides a safe environment in which a teacher can assist a young person to explore and understand their patterns of learning.

Liaison with Schools. The role of the education officers extends to the school in the form of liaison or mediation. After working with young people in a non-threatening environment, it is quite often useful to liaise with staff in an effort to bring about a better understanding between the young person and the school. It has been useful at times to provide the staff with an opportunity to differently interpret the behaviours of students and to assist the young person to see their behaviours as valid choices in response to a difficult or unmanageable home/school situation.

Advocacy. Young people with little or no support at home are often in need of an advocate to assist them and to ensure that their legal rights are respected.

Educational Counselling. This is an important service and aims to assist young people make informed choices about their education. This involves assessing their current situation, looking at alternatives and building up skills to enable a young person to have some positive input into the future direction of their education.

Support and Supervision. This is for young people wanting to continue their education with the Sydney Secondary Distance Education Centre.

6 Outcomes

The Cool School program has been utilised by a range of young people; some information is included in Table 1.

The two young people identified as lesbian or gay had chosen not to attend school because of harassment. Over the 15 months the program has been operating, we have worked with 95 young people, ranging in age from 12 to 20. There has been a predominance of young people aged 15 using the program as there is literally nowhere else for them to go if they are not attending school. This has also been reflected in the numerous requests for assistance with this age group. Our statistics have supported other research findings (Burdekin, 1989; Carrington, 1993) which suggest a link between school breakdown, homelessness and involvement with Juvenile Justice.

As a result of involvement with the program, 46 of the young people decided to either continue, return or change schools. Significantly, thirty per cent of the Cool School participants engaged in other service strands at High Street as shown in Table 2.

The outcomes of the Cool School program for the young people are varied. Some of these outcomes have been:

Table 1: Some Characteristics of Young People Utilising Cool School

Information	Number
Unemployed	9
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander	4
Non-English speaking background	15
Young offenders	18
People with disabilities	5
Young pregnant women	2
Drug and alcohol issues	6
School breakdown (under 15)	39
Sexuality (lesbian or gay)	2

Table 2: Choices made by Young People After Attendance at Cool School

Choices made by the young person	Number
Continued at school	30
Changed school	5
Re-engaged in schooling	11
Engaged in other services at High Street	29
Gained employment	4

- the opportunity to learn in a positive environment with minimal restrictions;
- involvement in a learning environment which encourages difference and respects individual lifestyle choices and therefore enables young people to renegotiate their experiences of schooling and make informed decisions about their future;
- many early school leavers have explored their school experiences and their rights to an education and have consequently re-engaged in alternative education paths. Others have decided not to continue their schooling but

have a more positive interpretation of their experiences of schooling leaving them greater options if they decide to pursue a course in the future;

- tutorial assistance on request from young people experiencing homelessness;
- involvement in work experience programs and services outside of High Street Youth Health Service; and
- easy access to other service strands of High Street Youth Health Service which enables young people to deal with issues contributing to the identified 'school problem'.

The Cool School program owes a large part of its success to its inclusion in a Youth Health Service. This has enabled the education officers to fully exploit their philosophy which approaches education from a holistic point of view and encourages young people to look at education as part of a life process. The program provides a non-threatening point of access for many marginalised young people which can help them to look at education as one of the many needs in their life at that time.

The interactions between the Cool School project and High Street Youth Health Service have been two way, with information, knowledge and support flowing in both directions. The Cool School project has provided a valuable point of access for many young people who eventually accessed other services at High Street.

7 Policy Considerations

Our research and experience suggests that young people experiencing homelessness and young people at risk of experiencing homelessness are interested in education. The challenge for policy lies in finding ways which facilitate these young people having access to education.

Throughout this paper we have asserted that institutions (such as schools) which have contact with young people experiencing homelessness and young people at risk of experiencing homelessness are not designed to effectively work with this disadvantaged group of young people. The challenge for policy is to re/examine these systems so that they reflect the changes in the nature of the family, the life course and the state. The holistic approach we employed facilitated access to education for young people experiencing homelessness and those at risk. This has raised many questions: one is that it challenges the separation of education from health. We suggest that policy needs to advocate and support inter-sectorial collaboration.

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