

Indie School & Australian College of Higher Education

Research Review

"Giving young people the skills and tools to find a job is not only good for their own prospects and self-esteem, it is also good for economic growth, social cohesion and widespread well-being. That's why investing in youth must be a policy priority the world over."

OECD Secretary-General, 2016

April 2019

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Introduction and Context

The first research review for the Indie Schools/Australian College of Higher Education (ACHE) – ‘The Establishment Research Report’, was completed and published in May 2014. In that report we highlighted the context as it was then for the role of alternative learning programs for young people across Australia and in particular the success of programs run by the Indie Schools/ACHE operated through Albury Wodonga Community College. In addition, the Establishment Research Report outlined the Strengths Based approach underpinning much of the work of Indie Schools/ACHE.

The context for the Establishment Research Report highlighted the challenges facing all those concerned about young people:

Politicians, policy makers, academics and practitioners in education systems around the world are beginning to understand that diverse approaches to learning are needed for the complex world within which young people find themselves today. The global financial crisis over the last 6 years or so has concentrated the impact of a complex world on young people: an ineffective ‘one size fits all’ approach to school education; poor access to apprenticeships; unemployment; an increasing range of health and wellbeing issues; reduced direct state/government funding for young people and indirect funding for support services; increased homelessness and increased crime have all in one way or another led to a growing number of young people ‘at risk’. (p.2)

Needless to say the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) has continued now for about 10 years and has entrenched many of the issues outlined above and in regional and rural Australia, these have been even more chronic. Even though Australia technically didn’t enter a recession during the GFC it still has suffered in many ways and the lives of young people in Australia have been impacted for years to come. According to the Brotherhood of St Laurence (2016) there is a kind of ‘malaise’ from policy makers around the GFC and the way in which it is impacting young people.

The GFC has highlighted, in particular, issues related to equity. Challenges facing governments around the world in relation to equity are significant. We know from UNESCO (2017) that approximately 264 million children and young people globally are not attending school and, according to the Public Education Foundation in Australia, the gap between those who do well at school and those who don’t is widening (Hetherington, 2018). Indeed, it’s been estimated that in Australia about 3 million adults have low basic skills (OECD, 2017) and this affects populations differently with rurality, ethnicity (especially Aboriginality) and gender also playing their part.

Success in, and engagement with, education and learning is crucial for lifelong opportunities especially for those classed as NEETS (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and we know that the GFC led to an increase in the number of young people classed as NEET. As Carcillo and colleagues writing for the OECD on a global basis (OECD, 2014) point out:

Reducing NEET rates is a great challenge for governments, as youth who remain jobless for long periods typically come from more disadvantaged backgrounds, have low levels of educational attainment, and are in many cases inactive (in relation to looking for support). There is substantial evidence, however, that even the most disadvantaged youth benefit from a variety of targeted interventions including for instance, special education programmes and mentoring (p.5).

The OECD later (OECD, 2017) suggest that in Australia there needed to be a 'Strengthening focus on basic skills throughout initial schooling and in post-secondary programs, and reaching out to disconnected youth' (p.5). Significantly, for the Australian National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER, 2017) NEET status is a 'predictor of future vulnerability' (p.4). According to NCVER's analysis of the 2017 Longitudinal Survey of Australian Youth (LSAY), NEET status is often a result of young people not completing year 12, having children or coming from a more disadvantaged background (NCVER, 2017). Responses to Mission Australia's (2017) survey of young people suggest that the three main barriers to young people achieving their goals after school are:

1. academic ability,
2. financial difficulty, and
3. mental health.

For young people who do go on to employment, their status in the workforce is changing. Since 1996 the number of young people in full time employment has reduced from 37% to 26% and in part time employment has increased from 23% to 30% (NCVER, 2017; p.6). There is a trend for young people's employment towards part-time, casual hours with the so called 'gig economy' being the only source of employment for many.

Indie Schools/ACHE's Response

In that early Establishment Research Report from 2014, we highlighted Indie Schools/ACHE's Strength Based school and accredited learning programs and how they could address the conventional, learner 'deficit' education model current in most schools and learning programs in Australia (and across the globe). In this 'deficit' model, the teacher is the 'knower of all knowledge' and the student the recipient of that knowledge. Students are seen as a 'bucket' into which the teacher 'pours' their knowledge. This is the classic didactic pedagogical approach to teaching and learning which has seen a resurgence largely because of performance testing pervading curricula across the world. This deficit model pervades almost all of the literature on NEET young people and 'disadvantaged' young people in particular.

Early in the development of its programs, Indie Schools/ACHE identified that a Strength Based Approach (SBA) was best suited to the young people it was working with, who were in the main disenfranchised and disengaged with traditional approaches to education and their learning in particular. A SBA to learning is so different from the norm that the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development suggested it was a 'paradigm shift' (2012) from traditional approaches.

For Indie Schools/ACHE, young people are always viewed holistically, that is, young people are seen 'in the round' in the sense of being seen as a whole and not just merely someone who sits in a classroom and learns what the teacher tells them to learn. In this respect, writing about using SBA in Australian schools from an extensive literature review, Palmer suggests that there are several benefits from using a Strength Based Approach including: young people are happier, more confident, they have higher self-esteem and more energy and vitality, have less stress and are more likely to achieve their goals, perform better, are more engaged and develop skills more (Palmer, 2015; p.5).

For Indie Schools/ACHE, a Strength Based Approach is more than just a teaching and learning 'technique' such as group work, or project based learning, rather, it is a fundamental change in the theoretical or philosophical underpinning or justification of the teaching and learning programs that both staff and learners' experience. Based in the relatively recently developed positive psychology all young people are seen as valued, coming to their learning with particular needs, abilities and experiences. It would be fair to say that Indie Schools/ACHE follows what Lopez and Louis (2009) calls 'the five principles of strength based education' including: measurement, individualisation, networking, deliberate application and intentional development.

Measuring learner traits is the cornerstone of a SBA, this in turn leads hand in hand to an individualization of learning for each learner. For Lopez and Louis, developing strengths allows learners to make connections and relationships with others thus allowing networks to develop which further enhance learning. The deliberate application of learner strengths leads to the building of personal examples or an increased repertoire of situations within which learners are able to explicate their strengths. Intentionally developing learner's strengths through the previous four principles, enhances the on-going and proactive seeking of new learning experiences.

Towards the end of 2018 Indie Schools/ACHE staff were asked, through a small scale research/reflective practice project, to provide examples of their engagement with a SBA underpinning their work. The purpose of the research was to identify 'what works' and why and how a SBA delivers as an educational alternative.

Specifically, the research aimed to:

- examine the extent to which Indie Schools/ACHE Programs has impacted upon and met the needs of the learners;
- identify which contexts and mechanisms/processes are most beneficial in terms of securing the desired outcomes of the program;
- describe ways in which outcomes from Indie Schools/ACHE Programs are being applied;
- review the transition success of Indie Schools/ACHE Programs, Indie Schools and learner outcomes towards a return to previous secondary school, into higher education, onto Vocational and Educational Training and/or employment;
- Reflect on the holistic approach to education that Indie Schools/ACHE Programs/Indie School(s) offer and the life improvements that occur for learners (and their families).

A short 6 item questionnaire was administered digitally to all staff via Survey Monkey. The 6 Likert style statements elicited responses on a 5 point scale ranging from 'very' to 'not very' were:

- I feel comfortable with my knowledge of the Strengths Based Approach to learning;
- I am confident in my ability to choose appropriate teaching/coaching techniques for different learners as and when needed;
- I understand that young people are complex human beings with a variety of needs and wants;
- I have a good awareness of the personalised progression possibilities for each learner;
- The teaching/coaching team at Indie Schools/ACHE are supportive; and
- Recording and reporting learner progress is appropriate and supportive.

The first 4 items are relevant to this report and are reported on below. For each statement staff were asked to provide examples to illustrate their answers wherever possible and we have used only a few of the responses to each statement to illustrate the staffs' responses. Twenty staff (with a minimum of two years Indie Schools/ACHE Delivery experience) responded to the survey.

Staff Responses

The teachers/staff provided many examples of their responses to each of the four statements. For brevity, we have only included one example which exemplifies the majority of the teacher/staff responses to each statement.

Statement 1 I feel comfortable with my knowledge of the Strengths Based Approach to learning

The teachers/staff spent a deal of time and effort getting to know their learners and creating a supportive and conducive atmosphere for learning. Developing trust between learner and teacher/coach was an important feature of learning, as well as getting to know the 'whole' learner. The teachers/coaches also used various tools to help to get to know the learner, such as their Individual Learning Plan, types of knowledge and various 'tests' (which the teachers/coaches stressed were not seen as tests in the traditional sense). Planning together with their learner and creating short and long term goals was seen as important by the teachers/coaches.

This quote from a teacher/coach was typical:

"I ask questions like: What were some of the things you enjoyed at mainstream school? Why do you think that was? What are your interests and hobbies? What do you like most about doing those activities? What can you see yourself doing in the future? Why? Once I have this information I can incorporate it into the coursework delivery e.g. the setting of goals. If I have a learner that likes maths and is hands on, and wants an apprenticeship we can do study around becoming an electrician etc. I am always working in areas of interest and strength of the Learner. This helps with attention, motivation, confidence and helps build a purpose for re-engaging with learning."

Statement 2 I am confident in my ability to choose appropriate teaching/coaching techniques for different learners as and when needed

As we mentioned above a SBA to learning is not merely a pedagogical approach or teaching/learning method. Rather, it is a new and different underpinning or justification to learning. Having said that, the teacher/coach needs to have different techniques which reflect this new approach so they can implement a SBA comfortably for both themselves and their learner. The teachers/coaches displayed a caring approach to each learner and also learned themselves from other teachers/coaches, as well as seeking feedback from other professionals.

This teacher/coach highlights how they also need to be adaptable to address the strengths of their learners:

“To be a successful Teacher/Coach you need adaptability. Whilst the principles of SBL remain the same, how you engage, build rapport and motivate a learner constantly changes. When I work with a quiet, shy learner I don't speak loudly, I slow down and give them the time they need to speak. This is how I build trust and slowly progress from there. Some learners are loud and love a chat so I give them the forum to do that, I will listen to them and engage in a more excitable manner when needed...I try to remain congruent with my words and actions. This helps me remain authentic which gives me the ability to work with all ages and abilities. One of the greatest impacts I have had was getting an older Indigenous learner to believe that he had the ability to go onto University. Something just clicked with him, he ended up completing a Cert II and is now engaged at University. I feel that through my belief that he could do it he finally gave himself permission to take action and go for it!”

Statement 3 I understand that young people are complex human beings with a variety of needs and wants

Quite often representations of young people are negative and simplistic. The staff at Indie Schools/ACHE were conscious to represent young people in a positive and realistic light and to value young people as important and respected members of a community. The teachers/coaches used their extensive experience both inside and outside of education and created non-judgmental and non-threatening learning environments. Importantly, teachers/coaches considered their learners' life outside of their learning during their learning sessions as this teacher/coach illustrates:

“I (am) very open minded and observant during lessons with individuals and groups. I understand that an issue that is a 'big deal' to a young person may seem silly to an adult, however that doesn't mean that the issue isn't heavily impacting their ability to learn, engage and attend lessons. I am also extremely careful to consider and be understanding about issues outside of class that can impact mood, concentration abilities and attitude. Adapting the lessons at the last minute to accommodate for young people's needs and wants is extremely important.”

Statement 4 I have a good awareness of the personalised progression possibilities for each learner

In their responses to this statement the Indie Schools/ACHE teachers/coaches clearly identify and support the SBA principles outlined previously by Lopez and Louis (2009). The teachers/coaches use their extensive knowledge of their local area and contacts to steer the learners to meaningful work experiences. The teachers/coaches agree on individualised ground rules for each learner and use praise and supportive language differently for different learners, where appropriate. Importantly, the teachers/coaches attempt to 'normalise' each learner's contexts thus reinforcing their progression possibilities, whilst recognising their individual achievements. This teachers/coach's comments highlight how each learner is supported both inside and outside of their learning:

"I approach every learner with the positive potential to progress. (The majority of learners do progress, and the graduations are a testimony to that. My must current graduate started working with me around 2 years ago. When I first met her, she would not go any further than home then to the park up the road. The next 6-12 months resulted in a lack of stable living, lack of home safety and support. However, I told her I would always turn up. I did, and so did she. She has now completed our program, enrolled in TAFE and working whilst having her own flat and has just gained her driver's licence. She has a future plan that she now sees as being achievable."

Conclusion

There is a growing realization around the world that traditional didactic approaches to young people's learning are failing a significant and increasing number of young people. In these traditional approaches young people are often seen as passive recipients of knowledge. However, with the relatively recent emergence of positive psychology, strength based approaches to learning have been seen to have important benefits to young people's learning. Importantly, strength based approaches recognize and value the knowledge and skills that young people bring to their learning through viewing young people through a holistic lens. Indie Schools/ACHE has harnessed this approach and teachers/coaches across various programs have developed strategies and tools to enhance the effectiveness of strength based approaches to improve the lives of young people.

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