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Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning

*Supporting Students
through Structure
and Community*



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Foreword

I am really pleased to be able to contribute this preface to *Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning*. The issue of ‘engagement’ is one that is of interest to many educators—myself included. However, what constitutes engagement and disengagement is often subjective and context specific. Whilst it is clear that young people who have ‘dropped out’ or been ‘pushed out’ of school, who do not complete their school work or who misbehave in class are not engaged in learning, they are not the only ones who might be considered disengaged. Many young people who manage the routines of schooling on a daily basis, who complete their work on time and have high levels of attendance are often considered ‘engaged.’ However, if they are only going through the motions of learning, and are neither excited by new knowledge nor stimulated to extend their knowledge and thinking in a particular area—are they really engaged in learning? The responsibility for engagement is also a key question. If ‘we teach’ and ‘they don’t learn,’ whose responsibility is that? I once interviewed a school principal who indicated that he hated the word “disengagement” as it implied that it was young people’s fault they were not embracing schooling. He preferred the word “disenfranchised”—they were being denied a right to a wondrous, intellectually stimulating and meaningful education.

I have a lot of sympathy for this argument; a blame game often accompanies debates about disengagement. Young people are blamed for being lazy, feckless, too caught up in new technologies, and unwilling to listen to their teachers. Their parents are often blamed for a lack of discipline, not valuing education, and not respecting their children's teachers themselves. However, blame often does not stop there. Teachers are blamed for failing to connect with the students, for not having appropriate behaviour management strategies, and not having the requisite knowledge to teach their subject areas in engaging ways. Teacher education is also often held responsible for producing ineffective teachers who cannot control classes, because they have spent too much time teaching about social justice and about other supposedly 'left' leaning materials such as 'Safe Schools' (a program to make schools a safe place for queer young people). Such blaming helps no-one.

Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning deftly avoids this blaming and identifies the ways in which schools and school systems can develop holistic responses to ensuring *all* young people are behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively engaged in learning. In my view, Jeanne Allen, Glenda McGregor, Donna Pendergast and Michelle Ronksley-Pavia are on track in highlighting the ways in which the traditional practices and concerns of mainstream schools (although not universal across schools) work against 'engagement.' For example, creative, exploratory and challenging forms of pedagogy are regularly avoided as schools are expected to meet increasingly narrow and high stakes accountability regimes. Furthermore, young people who are seen to threaten the reputation of schools through their disengagement from schooling that impacts upon their own learning and that of others in their classes are often 'pushed out' of school.

It is sometimes argued that schools and teachers make *all* the difference to students' engagement; the authors recognise the fallacy of such arguments. There are many factors beyond the school gates which impact upon young people's engagement in school. However, they also recognise, quite rightly so, that schools can make a significant difference. There is no letting schools 'off the hook' here. In my view, the authors are right to argue that engagement and achievement in traditional academic outcomes are linked, and hence the need for schools to address the engagement of those marginalised by poverty and other

factors is a matter of social justice. Australia has a high-quality education system and, as such, the disparities in outcomes between, for example, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and young people from low socioeconomic and high socioeconomic backgrounds, are a national disgrace. The authors' framework for 'best-practice,' developed from a large evidence base and out of work conducted in one Australian jurisdiction, which they refer to as the Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning (YAEL) Model, provides schools with a launch pad for addressing student engagement and addressing such educational disparities.

While engagement is addressed in the broadest sense in *Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning*, by considering behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement, bubbling under the surface of this book are questions about the purposes of education. Looking outside the mainstream sector to identify the ways in which 'alternative' forms of schooling work to engage those who have not fared well in the mainstream seems to me to be an appropriate site for raising such questions. Young people who have often been scarred by the pressures to attain in an environment that has not met their differing needs indicate that in these schools they are often trusted, the curriculum builds upon their knowledges, external factors impinging upon their ability to engage with school are addressed, and they are valued in their own right. This suggests that schools should not just be concerned with attainment (and young people as human capital)—although attainment and its distribution are obviously important—but also need to address issues of wellbeing and active citizenship in order that young people can '*live well in a world worth living in*' (Kemmis & Edwards-Groves, 2017, p. 7, emphasis in original).

As a central feature of this book, the YAEL Model recognises that there are three overarching dimensions of approaches to addressing student engagement (Layer 1): *school structure and school community*, *student wellbeing* and *teaching, teachers and leaders*. It then indicates that there are nine sub-dimensions of these dimensions (Layer 2), including, for example: whole-school reform; practical and network supports; meaningful curriculum for young adolescent learners; inclusive school structure; and positive relational climate. The Model is then completed with a third layer outlining the degrees of support required across a continuum that identifies those supports that all young people should

experience through to those targeted towards young people with varying needs and differing degrees of disengagement from schooling.

Many approaches to addressing student disengagement fall into one of two categories (although sometimes both): changing the student or changing the school (see, e.g., IFF Research Ltd, Mills, & Thomson, 2018). The former is often grounded in deficit assumptions about the young person, and approaches are designed to ‘fix up’ the student. The underpinning assumptions of the YAEL Model avoid such constructions; they recognise that there are individual factors and hence the need for schools to provide, for example, their students with ‘social, emotional, psychological and health support.’ The Model takes a strengths-based approach to supporting students in that it is concerned with beginning from where the student is at—not with fixing them up. The Model also focusses on what the school can do to address disengagement and to ensure that all young people are seen as having the right to a fulfilling and rich educational experience. The Model also recognises that teachers have to be at the centre of meaningful change, whether this is in developing whole school responses to disengagement, or developing meaningful curricula and rich forms of pedagogies in their classrooms. As is recognised in this book, teachers’ work, especially when working with young people from highly marginalised backgrounds, involves significant emotional (as well as intellectual) labour—teachers’ wellbeing is thus also important.

The focus of the YAEL Model is on young people in the ‘middle years’ of schooling. There are very specific pressures and factors which impact upon young people who fall into this age bracket. These are neatly identified in this book. However, as this book quite rightly illustrates, ‘disengagement’ affects all students, young and old, and high and low attainers, and, as such, the Model is one that will have applicability to all schools and all students. Furthermore, whilst the book has a very strong Australian focus it has relevance beyond that context. The analyses and arguments presented in this book are embedded in a substantial international literature base. Schools and systems in multiple locations are seeking to address the concerns raised here, and the book will provide a valuable resource for provoking and initiating action.

There are two aspects of the book that I would like to highlight before concluding this foreword. Many reforms in schools are done to

young people and teachers. This book puts the voices of both young people and their teachers central to addressing the issues of engagement. Within schools, there has been a severe erosion of trust in both young people and teachers. This Model suggests that young people have to be trusted to make meaningful contributions to their education, to contribute to decision making in matters that affect them, and that schools have to create the environment within which such trust can flourish. It also implies that teachers have to be trusted, to be consulted on matters affecting their students, to be trusted in developing curricula and pedagogies that will engage their students free from, using the Connell (2012, p. 682) quote in the text, the “club of auditing.”

The book concludes with suggestions as to how it might be employed by policy makers, system and school leaders, and teachers in a system-wide change. I think that it may well be used productively in such ways. However, once a book begins its journey from the hands of the publisher to those of distributors and ultimately to those of readers, authors lose control over its use and interpretation. I think *Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning* is going to be used in multiple ways with multiple effects. This is as it should be. I can see schools, and staff within those schools, concerned about the issues raised by the book poring over the Model, interpreting its different layers in the context of their own schooling and developing their own responses based on the Model’s principles. The authors are right to suggest caution in determining causes and solutions to the problem of schooling disengagement. There are no easy solutions. Engagement with this text and with the Model it provides will, I believe, ensure that the complexity of this problem is tackled in ways that neither blame the young person nor blame the teacher. I am positive that this book is going to stimulate many an exciting and productive conversation in staffrooms, teacher education classrooms and various departmental offices—all of which will hopefully lead to action. Allen, McGregor, Pendergast and Ronksley-Pavia should be extremely pleased with such an outcome.

London, UK

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Preface

Student engagement is fundamental to learning and yet a major and long-standing challenge to educators in Australia and elsewhere is how to engage all young adolescents in learning at school. This book is the first of its kind in that it provides an evidence-based theorisation of a range of features associated with schooling engagement, along with targeted strategies that underpin a continuum of pedagogical, curricular and social supports during the years of young adolescent schooling (typically 11–16 years).

Drawing upon an international evidence base, as well as data from one major Australian schooling jurisdiction, the book consolidates a range of learning theories and approaches to engaging young adolescents. As such, it provides a broad lens through which to view the needs of all students during this middle phase of learning, particularly those who might be at risk of disengaging. Our starting premises are twofold. First, as demonstrated in extant literature, all young people are potentially at risk of disengaging from learning because of a myriad of personal factors shaping young adolescence, as well as schooling pressures and transitions. Second, risks associated with disengagement can be mitigated via a spectrum of proactive, supportive and responsive measures that foster student engagement and enhance levels of retention in schools.

Rationale

The central feature of this book is the Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning (YAEL) Model, which provides a framework for best practice approaches to the learning engagement of all young adolescents, and thus increases the likelihood of them staying at school. The Model is multi-layered and incorporates a continuum of behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions of engagement. Engagement in education is an issue at the core of the work of all school leaders, teachers, parents and other stakeholders who work with young adolescents, such as counsellors and welfare service officers. Given the importance of the topic, this book is potentially relevant for this range of interested parties, making it distinctive as a product. Further, the connection of theory with practical applications addresses stakeholders' needs in an informed and accessible way.

Content

The book provides deep insights into the myriad of factors associated with dis/engagement in learning in young adolescence and an evidence-based, theorised approach to engaging learners during this key stage of their development. It is comprised of six chapters, synopsised below. The first two chapters provide the background and set the scene; Chapters 3 and 4 model a continuum of support for young adolescent learners through the YAEL Model; Chapter 5 details the three key components of provision contained in the Model; and Chapter 6 exemplifies how the Model can be implemented through the reform approach of the Educational Change Model.

Chapter 1: Engaging Young Adolescents in Learning

This chapter foregrounds the context of young adolescent learning in schools, emphasising that engaging young adolescents is crucial to achieving optimal educational outcomes. The authors explain their contention that all young adolescent students are at risk of disengagement

or underachievement. The approach taken in this book reflects current educational trends away from a deficit view of young adolescents at risk of disengaging from schooling towards a more holistic view of the factors that lead to student disengagement. In this chapter, the authors explore the challenge of engaging young adolescents in learning, including those students with complex learning needs, who exhibit challenging or aggressive behaviour, or who have additional support needs; and interrogate the factors that may contribute to student disengagement and those that enhance engagement.

Chapter 2: Mapping the Terrain

There are concerns within OECD countries about many young people's apparent disengagement from education. Chapter 2 reviews current research in this field and explores the theoretical contexts and practical frameworks that have helped to inform the YAEL Model. Evidence is presented from individual schools and schooling jurisdictions that have experimented with their own responses to this challenge. Such initiatives have shown varying levels of success. Much of the literature highlights the need to change many of the traditional aspects of mainstream schooling that impact negatively on the engagement of many young people. Therefore, this chapter also turns to the alternative and flexible learning sector for practices and philosophies of schooling that provide holistic frameworks of support for students.

Chapter 3: Modelling a Continuum of Support

The YAEL Model provides a holistic approach to the provision of support for young adolescent learners. Developed from an extensive review of the international literature, as well as extant student learning support initiatives and strategies for student engagement, the Model represents a unifying framework of best practice approaches, which serves the needs of those working in the fields of student engagement and retention. Development of the Model was also informed by findings from a large research study, including consultations and interviews with a range of

key stakeholders, in an Australian educational jurisdiction. Chapter 3 first describes the methodological approach used to develop the Model and then discusses the overarching dimensions that constitute Layer 1 of the Model.

Chapter 4: Core Characteristics of Student Engagement

The preceding chapter described how the three dimensions of *school structures and school community*, *student wellbeing* and *teaching, teachers and leaders* are fundamental to the ways in which schools engage young adolescents in learning. As such, they constitute the superordinate layer (Layer 1) of the YAEL Model. Couched within these three dimensions is a suite of interconnected sub-dimensions, which represent the core characteristics of the continuum of support that has been shown to most effectively address the needs of *all* young adolescent learners. The purpose of Chapter 4 is to describe and exemplify these sub-dimensions, which comprise Layer 2 of the Model, and demonstrate their importance to school innovation and improvement agendas for student engagement and retention.

Chapter 5: Components of Provision: Continuum of Support for Adolescent Learners

This chapter describes the three components of provision that provide increasing levels of support to young adolescent learners. The first section outlines Component 1, the *five core elements for young adolescent learner engagement*, that together create an ecosystem of learning that serves as best practice for all young adolescents. Next, Component 2, *flexible learning options*, is described. This component comprises early intervention and preventive approaches and strategies for students who require assistance beyond those provided by Component 1. Due to many complex factors, some students require more individualised teaching and intensive care. Thus, Component 3, *alternative educational provision*, sits at the end of the continuum of support and allows for student transfer into either on-site or off-site facilities so that they may receive more support.

Chapter 6: Reforming Schools and Systems to Engage Young Adolescent Learners

Implementation of the YAEL Model requires intentional actions and change in classrooms, schools and at systems' level. Extant literature provides high-level understanding of the major phases of reform and the elements required for reform success. Chapter 6 focuses on one approach to reform that has driven change—the Educational Change Model (ECM)—and how the YAEL Model can be intentionally implemented through adopting this reform approach. The components in the phases of the ECM may be utilised as a guide for the implementation timeline and serve as an audit tool for effective implementation, alongside the components of provision of the YAEL Model. The chapter also discusses some of the key challenges and enablers in school reform for student engagement.

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Abbreviations/Acronyms

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACER	Australian Council for Educational Research
ACT	Australian Capital Territory
AEP	Alternative Education Program
AITSL	Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership
AMLE	Association for Middle Level Education
APSC	Australian Public Service Commission
ARACY	Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth
ATM	Attitudes Towards Mathematics
BOSS	Behavioral Observation of Students in Schools
CCR/AES	Consortium on Chicago School Research/Academic Engagement Scale
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
DEEWR	Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations
DEP	Deemed Enrolment Program
DETYA	Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs
ECM	Educational Change Model
HoL	Hands on Learning
HSSSE	High School Survey of Student Engagement
ICAN	Innovative Community Action Network

xxiv Abbreviations/Acronyms

IEP	Individual Education Plan
ILP	Individual Learning Plan
IPI	Instructional Practices Inventory
ISQ	Identification with School Questionnaire
KPMG	Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (research company)
MCEETYA	Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs
MES	Motivation and Engagement Scale
MS-CISSAR	The Main-Stream Code for Instructional Structure and Student Academic Response
MSLQ	Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NSW	New South Wales
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PCYC	Police Citizens Youth Club
PD	Professional Development
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
RAPS	Research Assessment Package for Schools
REI	Reading Engagement Index
RTI	Response to Intervention
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEC	Student Engagement Continuum
SEI	Student Engagement Instrument
SELT	Student Engagement and Learning Team
SES	Socio-Economic Status
SOBAS	Sense of Belonging at School
SSES	Student School Engagement Survey
SSP	School Success Profile
VET	Vocational Education and Training
YAEL	Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning

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1

Engaging Young Adolescents in Learning

Introduction

In this chapter, we foreground the context of young adolescent learning in schools, emphasising that engaging young adolescents in learning is crucial to achieving optimal educational outcomes. We explain our contention that all young adolescent students are at risk of disengagement or underachievement. Our approach reflects current educational trends away from a deficit view of young adolescents at risk of disengaging from schooling towards a more holistic view of the factors that lead to student disengagement. Many experts argue that mainstream approaches to education, as currently constructed, may not satisfactorily match the needs of young adolescents due to the variety of factors inside and outside school that contribute to their disengagement. In this chapter, we explore the challenge of engaging young adolescents in learning, including those students with complex learning needs, or who exhibit challenging or aggressive behaviour, or who have additional social, health or welfare support needs; and interrogate the factors that may contribute to student disengagement and those that enhance engagement.

Young Adolescent Learners

The idea of adolescence has been around for more than 100 years with theorist G. Stanley Hall credited with bringing the idea of adolescence to prominence, positing that all individuals experience predictable maturation in physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains (see also Bahr, 2017). This developmentalism lens characterised adolescence as a time of storm and stress, of raging hormones, and of transition from a child to an adult (Garvis et al., 2018).

Over the last hundred years there have been many educators, theorists and researchers who have contributed to our evolving understanding of adolescence, extending beyond this rather narrow conceptualisation, including, for example, Vygotsky (1978) who points to the interplay between socio-cultural factors and adolescents. Importantly, there is still no one single definition of adolescence that is universally accepted. Among the aspects that remain contested is whether age can be used as a way of constructing adolescence. In contemporary times, the beginning of adolescence may be argued to be as young as 11 or 12 years and extending through to the age of 20–22 years, based on markers such as the onset of puberty as a starting point and completion of formal education as an end point. More latterly, adolescence is described as the period of life between childhood and adulthood (Steinberg, 2010). Adolescence is also more likely to be regarded as a unique journey with predictable patterns that are individually experienced. Furthermore, adolescence is also typically identified as a time of opportunity and growth, marking a shift from a generally negative to a more positive discourse.

The extent of changes including those that occur physically, psychosocially, emotionally, cognitively and spiritually during early adolescence is second only to that experienced in the first two years of life (Pendergast, 2017a). The changes are interrelated and overlapping and impacted by many factors (Caskey & Anfara, 2014). In addition, we can expect the most differentiation from individual to individual, as for each person the journey through adolescence is unique, with changes occurring at different times and at different rates. The impact this brings to classrooms is wide differentiation, both in the usual sense of

socio-economic status (SES), ethnicity, gender, location, and other generally accepted variables, but also in terms of the widest range of maturation diversity across the developmental domains.

The developmental changes that typically occur in adolescence are intertwined with each other, along with sociocultural and environmental influences and experiences. A summary of some of the key developmental aspects of adolescence and the nature of these changes follows in Box 1.1.

Box 1.1 Summary of key changes during early adolescence

Physical development

- In early adolescence, the body undergoes more physical change than at any other time, apart from the age of birth to two years;
- The rate of growth is rapid and uneven, with each individual following a similar pattern;
- Changes include increases in height, weight, and internal organ size as well as changes in skeletal and muscular systems;
- Puberty occurs at the outset of early adolescence, triggered by the release of hormones which lead to the development of primary sex characteristics (genitalia) and secondary sex characteristics (e.g., breast development in girls, facial hair in boys);
- Increased hormone production affects all aspects of the body, especially skeletal growth, hair production, and skin changes;
- Growth spurts typically occur about two years earlier in girls than boys.

Social development

- Adolescents establish a sense of identity and establish a role and purpose;
- Body image is a key factor in developing a sense of self and identity;
- Family and, increasingly, peers play an important role in assisting and supporting the adolescent to achieve adult roles;
- Social and emotional development are closely intertwined as young people search for a sense of self and personal identity.

Emotional development

- Individuals develop in the way they think and feel about themselves and others;
- The development and demonstration of individual emotional assets, such as resilience, self-esteem and coping skills, are heightened;
- Schools are important sites for social and emotional learning and have developed policies and programs around student wellness, often with a focus on a strengths-based approach.

Cognitive development

- Cognition is the process involving thought, rationale and perception; physical changes of the brain that occur during adolescence follow typical patterns of cognitive development;
- Cognitive development is characterised by the development of higher-level cognitive functioning that aligns with the changes in brain structure and function, particularly in the prefrontal cortex region;
- Structural and functional brain changes affect the opportunity for increased memory and processing and may also contribute to vulnerability, such as risk-taking and increased sensitivity to mental illness;
- Sensitive brain period, that is, a time when brain plasticity is heightened. During this time, there is an opportunity for learning and cognitive growth as the brain adapts in structure and function in response to experiences.

Young Adolescent Learners and Education Policy**Sustainable Development Goals**

Framing education policies from 2015 to 2030 for the 194 member states, the United Nations’ resolution adopted on the 25th September 2015 known as *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (United Nations, 2015) sets out a global agenda that is characterised as “a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” (p. 3). It outlines a commitment to 17 aspirational global goals, often referred to as the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs), which have 169 targets between them. The agenda has a deliberate approach and Goal 4 relates to quality education, with the goal to: “[E]nsure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (United Nations, 2015, p. 11). At the time of the adoption of the resolution, every country in the world fell short on more than half of the 17 SDGs and a quarter of the world’s countries fell short on all 17 of the goals (Bauer, 2016).

According to Sachs, Schmidt-Traub, Kroll, Lafortune, and Fuller (2018), Australia has a global rank of 37 (out of 156 countries) across the 17 SDGs but is declining rather than improving this ranking. Overall, Australia generally ranks highly on SDG 4—educational quality. Highlights include primary school enrolment rate of 96.7% and the

mean number of years of schooling of 13.2 years. However, there are some key areas for attention, including a large disparity between outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, with an 83.4% attendance rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in 2016, similar to 2014 (83.5%) compared to the attendance rate for non-Indigenous students remaining steady at 93.1% (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2017). As the SDG agenda gains momentum, finding ways to activate change and accelerate progress towards achieving SDGs by 2030 sets the context for a focus on quality education, including student engagement, and this provides an impetus for focusing particularly on those targets where Australia falls short, but generally on maintaining and enhancing quality education in general.

According to the Australian Government Productivity Commission report (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018), and built on the educational goals for young Australians outlined in the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008), the vision and objectives of the Australian school system are as follows:

Australian schooling aims for all young Australians to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens positioning them to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives. It aims for students to excel by international standards, while reducing educational disadvantage.

To meet this vision, the school education system aims to:

- engage all students and promote student participation; and
- deliver high quality teaching with a world class curriculum.

Governments aim for school education services to meet these objectives in an equitable, effective and efficient manner. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018, p. 4.6)

A school education Performance Indicator Framework has been developed to reflect on the achievement of the objectives, using equity, effectiveness and efficiency as a frame, as presented in Fig. 1.1.

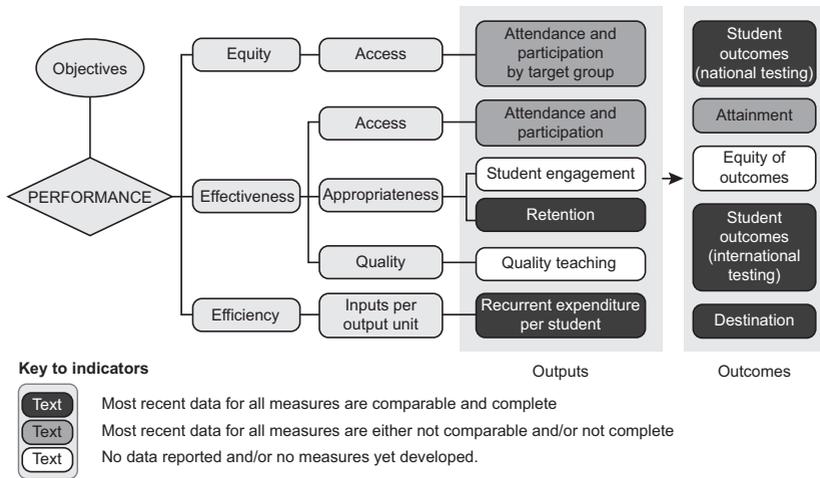


Fig. 1.1 School education Performance Indicator Framework (Source Commonwealth of Australia [2018, p. 4.6])

As part of this framework, *student engagement* is an indicator of the government’s objective that school education services are effective for all students, with the report outlining the way in which student engagement is positioned as an outcome.

‘Student engagement’ is defined as the engagement of students with schooling across the following three dimensions:

- *Behavioural engagement* — which may be measured by identifiable behaviours and by attendance, attainment and retention [...];
- *Emotional engagement* — which may be analysed by seeking students’ attitudes to learning and school; and
- *Cognitive engagement* — which has been less frequently measured in a classroom setting, but research studies have used measures such as students’ perception of intellectual challenge, effort or interest and motivation.

High or increasing levels of student engagement are desirable. (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018, p. 4.12)

According to the 2018 report, data are not yet available for reporting against this indicator of student engagement (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018).

Young Adolescents and Schooling

In Australia there are more than 1.6 million adolescents aged 12–18 years who are enrolled in schooling from Year 6/7 to Year 12 (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2017). Secondary schooling is typically comprised of two stages—the middle years, typically Years 7–9/10 and the senior years, typically Years 10/11–12. Around the nation, the middle years stage is formally known by several names, including Junior Secondary and Middle Years, to identify it as a unique stage. In this book we are particularly interested in engaging students in their young adolescent years, with subsequent benefits in the senior years.

Young adolescence is also typically characterised by a transition in school from a student-centred model to an increasingly subject-centred model, with accompanying structural, organisational, cultural and other aspects of the school experience coinciding with this time of change and adding to the complexity of school experiences. The interrelatedness between the distinct developmental changes and the shift in school environment has been identified as contributing to challenges in schools for young learners.

It is pertinent to note that it has been more than a decade since the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) identified enhancing middle years teaching and learning practices as a priority to ensure young adolescents have the best education opportunities. The Declaration notes that early adolescence and the transition to secondary school is “a time when students are at the greatest risk of disengagement from learning. Student motivation and engagement in these years is critical, and can be influenced by tailoring approaches to teaching” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 10). The Declaration makes a direct connection between engagement and achievement, and the importance of effective transition, stating that

“[F]ocusing on student engagement and converting this into learning can have a significant impact on student outcomes. Effective transitions between primary and secondary schools are an important aspect of ensuring student engagement” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 12). This focus on dis/engagement continues to be even more relevant a decade later.

In this context there is a need to ensure that schools and, specifically, classroom teachers know how to plan age-appropriate educational experiences for young adolescents where classroom practice moves beyond the taken-for-granted notions of adolescents and adolescence constructed on developmental views alone (Vagle, 2012) in order to address the engagement challenge. According to Pendergast (2017a, p. 5), “the purpose of a focussed approach to middle years education is to intentionally and with a full understanding of the context, employ a range of evidence-based practices to provide the best learning opportunities to engage and improve student achievement.”

The vulnerability of young adolescents to underachieve academically has been under the spotlight in Australia for at least three decades and there is an increasingly widely-held view that “all students in the ‘middle years’ are at risk” (Luke et al., 2003, p. 16). Researchers in the national study *Beyond the Middle* (Luke et al., 2003) reported that, while initially they were sceptical of this claim, they recognised that the middle years of early secondary education “made up ‘a site’ where many of the key issues around community change, demographic change, economic and cultural shift were being played out” (p. 13) and that schools were not adapting to these changes because of the “tenacity of the secondary school ‘ethos’ that failed to recognise the unique needs of this age group in ‘new times.’” In relation to this lack of change, the researchers suggested that “where many youth in the middle years are not already at risk in the light of these new conditions, it is quite plausible that unresponsive, irrelevant and inflexible education structures can make them at risk” (Luke et al., 2003, p. 16).

In a report by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) for the Queensland Government to inform the shift of Year 7 from primary to secondary school, the authors note that “a globalised and highly technologised marketplace requires mobile and flexible workers with generic and transferable skills (such as problem solving,

critical thinking, good communication skills, and the ability to work with others in a team)” (ACER, 2012, p. 3). As noted by Pendergast, Allen, McGregor, and Ronksley-Pavia (2018, p. 3), “[T]he needs of students in their physical, psycho-social and cognitive dimensions remain the same but the demands on them increase with these additional societal pressures.”

Young adolescent learners, particularly those making the transition from primary to secondary schooling contexts, are especially vulnerable to disengagement from education as they struggle to make the adjustment to a totally different school environment where there are changes in class size, number of teachers, increased expectations of and desire for independence, and greater workloads, both in and out of school and in the form of homework (Pendergast, 2017b). These changes are compounded by a shift in status from the ‘big fish/little pond to little fish/big pond’ which impacts on the self-esteem of students simultaneously with the vulnerabilities experienced during young adolescence, especially those involving identity formation and peer group acceptance (Pendergast, 2017a).

During this transition, and associated with the challenges mentioned above, there is often a drop in academic achievement known as the ‘middle school plunge’ and it is estimated that the drop in academic achievement can represent a loss of between 3.5 and 7 months of learning achievement (West & Schwerdt, 2012). The impact of this plunge is greatest in vulnerable groups who may not have mastered key skills in primary school so that, “during the early years of secondary school, students make the least progress, the gap between low and high performing students increases, and students are less engaged in education” (Pendergast, 2017a, p. 4). Those students who lack literacy and numeracy capacity, especially reading and spelling, are most likely to experience transition issues, and transition challenges are often magnified for children with disabilities (Langberg et al., 2008). Yet, surprisingly, a recent study of Australian teachers revealed that 60% of primary and 42% of secondary teachers do not do anything to prepare their students for transition (Hopwood, Hay, & Dymont, 2016).

All these factors can have a negative effect on students’ social and emotional wellbeing. Researchers point out the importance of

appreciating this dimension of adolescent development, as well as the challenges of transition on the part of teachers involved in the middle years. Main and Pendergast (2017) articulate this dimension of adolescent development as wellbeing pathways, which, drawing on the research of Noble, Wyatt, McGrath, Roffey, and Rowling (2008), they define as: supportive, caring and inclusive community; pro-social values; physical and emotional safety; social and emotional learning; strengths-based approach; sense of meaning and purpose; and, a healthy lifestyle. The suggestion is that schools need to actively address these social-emotional areas with a well-thought out, evidence-based program.

Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Sammons, and Siraj-Blatchford (2008) have developed a three-factor model to be used as a guide to optimise the experiences of students in transition. The first factor—social adjustment—is the degree to which students are able to adjust to their new social environment. Initiatives such as peer mentoring programs and pastoral care are promoted to assist this aspect. The second factor—institutional adjustment—is the degree to which students adjust to their new physical surroundings and new patterns of behaviour. Strategies to foster institutional adjustment include data sharing, teacher looping (keeping groups of students with the same teacher for two or more years), and induction visits, all of which strengthen the connections between institutions. The third factor—curriculum interest and continuity—is the degree to which students are engaged by the curriculum and perceive a continuity in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment between primary and junior secondary. Strategies to address curriculum interest and continuity include personalised learning programs that connect across the school sites, and a focus on tools that foster independent thinking and learning.

Outcomes of Young Adolescents

The report *Educational Opportunity in Australia* (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015) investigated the academic outcomes of Australian students at Year 7 when they are aged 13–14 and at the start of their journey as young adolescent learners, revealing that:

- Just under three-quarters (72%) of all 13–14 year olds meet the milestone at Year 7, which increases their chances of acquiring the foundational skills they need in later years;
- An estimated 73,000 13–14 year olds (28%) are not meeting expected standards in academic skills—this means the education system is failing to prepare these students for learning in later years;
- Males are more likely to miss out on the reading benchmark at this milestone than females (31% versus 26%), but females are more likely to miss out on the benchmark for numeracy (32% versus 29%);
- Some children, who did not meet the first milestone at entry to school, improve during primary school and succeed at the Year 7 milestone. This is affirming information because it suggests that schools can bridge gaps and can help young people overcome set-backs; and
- Due to a combination of risk factors, the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students grows at Year 7, with Indigenous students 2.3 times more likely to miss out on the milestone than their non-Indigenous peers (62% versus 27%).

As is highlighted in this list, the disparity of outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students is remarkable, despite an awareness of the issue. In 2008, the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (MCEETYA, 2008) set the goal of “improving educational outcomes for Indigenous youth and disadvantaged young Australians, especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds” (p. 10) over the next ten years. The Australian states and territories made a commitment that all young people under the age of 25 years would be entitled to an education or training place, subject to course requirements and availability. In the context of setting minimum retention rates, there was a commitment on the part of government to provide the necessary supports for some of the most marginalised students.

Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) demonstrates a strong relationship between SES and educational outcomes (OECD, 2012; see also Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Between 2006 and 2011, Year 12 attainment (or equivalent) for young people from the lowest SES backgrounds grew from 71.6 to 73.7% in Australia. However, inequity is highlighted when these

rates are compared to a national completion rate of 85 and 93.3% for young people from the highest SES backgrounds (Council of Australian Governments [COAG], 2013). COAG (2013, p. 9) reported that “in 2011, after leaving school, 41.7 per cent of young people from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds were not fully engaged in work or study, compared to 17.4 per cent for young people from the highest socio-economic backgrounds” and that this gap had widened in the five years to 2011.

Furthermore, despite incremental progress over the last few years, the situation is gravest for Indigenous young people. According to the 2018 *Closing the Gap Prime Minister’s Report* (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018):

Nationally, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander 20 to 24-year-olds who had achieved Year 12 or equivalent increased from 32 per cent in the late 1990s to 65.3 per cent in 2016. Of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women aged 20 to 24, 66.8 per cent had completed a Year 12 or equivalent qualification. This was slightly more than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men (63.7 per cent) [...] Remote and Very Remote regions (both 41.7 per cent) were one-third lower than in Major Cities. (p. 66)

For non-Indigenous students, Year 12 attainment averages at 90%. Attendance rates are also significantly different:

In 2017, the overall attendance rate for Indigenous students nationally was 83.2 per cent, compared with 93.0 per cent for non-Indigenous students. (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018, p. 9)

Despite marginal improvements over the years, this disparity in education follows these young people into the workforce:

In 2016, the Indigenous employment rate was 46.6 per cent, compared with 71.8 per cent for non-Indigenous Australians. (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2018, p. 9)

In an attempt to better understand the issues related to young adolescent learning, ACER (2012) summarises the key challenges for education in the early adolescent years as being: a decline in student academic performance; the need to manage a heterogeneous student population without sacrificing inclusiveness; a *knowledge gap* between what is taught and the kind of content that would engage early adolescents and match their cognitive skills; transition, which often entails major change; and high incidence of disengagement, disruptive behaviour, boredom and disconnection from schooling. Importantly, these challenges are not exclusive, and impact all and any students, and in addition overlap and may have a compounding effect.

Engagement as an Educational Goal

Learner engagement has been identified as the most reliable predictor of academic achievement, elevating researcher interest in understanding the causes and effects of student dis/engagement. The current comprehensive understanding of engagement incorporating behavioural, emotional and cognitive domains is a relatively recent development, attributed to Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004) less than two decades ago. This has grown out of earlier understandings in the 1980s of student engagement as behavioural, reflected in indicators such as attendance and participation. In the 1990s emotional engagement aspects, such as sense of belonging and enjoyment were added. A decade later, cognitive aspects have been added, including volition, self-regulation and sense of agency (Fredricks et al., 2011).

The research literature is clear that all dimensions of adolescent development come within the ambit of the responsibility of schools working with young adolescents. Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) tease out possible indicators of the three domains of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement that need to be nurtured in students by teachers (see Fig. 1.2).

If the three main dimensions of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement are appropriately addressed, it is argued that students will increase their level of investment and commitment to learning

Increasing levels of investment and commitment to learning 		
exemplify in the following elements		
Behavioural	Emotional	Cognitive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participation ● Presence ● On task ● Behaviour ● Compliance with rules ● Effort, persistence, concentration, attention, rates of quality contribution ● Involvement in school related activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academic activity and school ● Student attitude ● Perception of the value of learning ● Interest and enjoyment ● Happiness ● Identification with school ● Sense of belonging within a school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Volition learning (learning by choice) ● Investment and willingness to exert effort ● Thoughtfulness (applying the processes of deep thinking) ● Self-regulation ● Goal setting ● Use of meta-cognitive strategies ● Preference for challenge ● Resiliency and persistence ● Mastery orientation ● A sense of urgency

Fig. 1.2 The engagement dimensions (*Source* Adapted from Gibbs and Poskitt [2010, p. 12])

(Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010). For this level of student engagement to be achieved, there are key pedagogical approaches that need to be adopted: first, connective instruction so that students perceive the relevance of learning because it is made meaningful to them; second, lively teaching so that students are more actively engaged when learning and so that they perceive learning as fun, inspiring and challenging; and, third, academic rigour so that academic dimensions are promoted through teachers demanding high levels of cognition and focus. These approaches are similar to the productive pedagogies (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006) of intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environment and recognition of difference.

According to the 2017 *Australian Productivity Commission Report*, approximately 40% of Australian school students are behaviourally disengaged from education, becoming increasingly exposed to unemployment and civic and social under-contribution (Commonwealth of Australia, 2017). Indeed, according to the Australian Institute of

Health and Welfare (2015), poor engagement with school may result in poor educational outcomes, diminished employment prospects and, for some, adverse life outcomes, including social exclusion, poverty and involvement with the justice system.

The extent of classroom disengagement is significant where “nearly one in four students are compliant but quietly disengaged” (Goss, Sonnemann, & Griffiths, 2017, p. 3) and 40% are regularly disengaged, including students who are passively disengaged or inattentive, those that are disruptive, through to those that are aggressive and antisocial. Passive disengagement includes avoiding work, being late for class and talking out of turn. Despite the extent of disengagement, the causes of passive disengagement and low-level disruption in Australian classrooms is under-researched (Goss et al., 2017) but speculation points to factors such as lack of interest in the curriculum, home related issues, and teaching quality.

Importantly, passively disengaged and disruptive students impact not only on their own learning, but the learning of those around them (Goss et al., 2017), and they impact the effectiveness of teaching. Sullivan, Johnson, Owens, and Conway (2014) revealed that nearly one in three teachers reported being “extremely stressed” or “very stressed” by the challenges of engaging and re-engaging students in class, and over one quarter of experienced teachers say they need further professional development on this issue (McKenzie, Weldon, Rowley, Murphy, & McMillan, 2014).

Complexity of Student Dis/Engagement

In Chapter 2, we explore the ways in which schools and systems have responded to ameliorate the effects of disengagement, which are complex in nature. As Goss et al. (2017, p. 3) argue, “[O]vercoming student disengagement is complicated. What is taught and the way it is taught are crucial.” What is certain is that ...

[W]hen students are engaged in class, they learn more. It is vital that teachers create the right classroom climate for learning; raising student expectations; developing a rapport with students; establishing routines;

challenging students to participate and take risks. These all affect how much their students engage and learn. (Goss et al., 2017, p. 3)

Authors of the *Expert Panel Schools for All* report (Shaddock, Packer, & Roy, 2015) comment that some aspects of the Australian Government's education reform agenda such as assessment of a limited range of student academic skills via the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (<http://www.nap.edu.au/>) “may also have some unintended, negative consequences for classroom practice, student-teacher relationships and student well-being” (p. 13). External standardised testing places pressure on schools through the publication of results and may result in counterproductive pedagogical approaches, such as streaming, because some schools want to ‘coach’ the best students. Peter Kraftl (2013), a British expert on geographies of education, suggests that:

[W]hile ‘mainstream’ may look very different in different places, it is characterized by a set of increasingly homogenous tendencies that are becoming globalised — neoliberal governance and financing, responsabilisation, flexibility, standardized testing, and so on. (p. 5)

There is also a tendency in government education policy, with its current emphasis on teacher quality and school improvement, to ignore the influence of lower SES on student engagement. Building on the work of prior research (e.g., Connell, 1993, 1994; Smyth & Wrigley, 2013), Lamb et al. (2015) have reaffirmed that the link in Australia between lower socio-economic backgrounds and lower school performance, particularly in rural communities, remains strong despite the current suite of education policies. Lingard and Sellar (2014) refer to this policy approach as the “absent presence of socio-economic context” and suggest that this:

... is part of a broader policy move, in Australia and globally, to “bracket out”, or hold constant, questions of school and social context in order to focus policy attention on improving and measuring the performance outcomes of students and teachers. (p. 1)

As Smyth and Fasoli (2007) observe, “there may be a mismatch between formal educational policy, and the lived experience at the level of the school and classroom for the most vulnerable young people” (p. 273). In particular, these researchers identify what might be termed the “accountability regime” (p. 273), parental choice and a more prescriptive curriculum as elements of national education policy that are key elements in this mismatch.

Thus, the challenge to engage young people in schooling is complex and the combination of personal factors and contextual issues for each individual student will be different. In developing responses, it is important to acknowledge, as does Loutzenheiser (2002), that the:

... reasons that students disconnect or reconnect with schooling cannot be boiled down to a single, neat package or list of alterations. Neither ethnic nor racial identity, life experience, or schooling encounters alone caused students to disconnect or reconnect. A confluence of factors related to identity, personal experience, school, family, and community played parts in these processes—even different and intersecting parts depending on the student. (p. 461)

Educators need to be cognisant of this complexity and plan schooling responses accordingly. A major part of the complexity of schooling engagement is the socio-economic, cultural and familial ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1992) in which the young person lives. If lacking in a variety of material and emotional resources, young people may struggle to connect with the demands of school.

When the demographics of young people who disengage from schooling are considered, it is clear that this is a challenge with immense social justice implications. Data provided by the OECD demonstrate a strong relationship between SES and school completion (OECD, 2012). Research (e.g., Apple, 2010; Connell, 1993,1994; McGregor, Mills, Te Riele, Hayes, & Baroutsis, 2017; Thomson, 2002) demonstrates that many of the factors affecting disengagement interconnect and include: poverty, gender, Indigeneity, family circumstances (including family conflict), caring responsibilities, pregnancy and lack of parental resources, transience or residential mobility, experiences of trauma,

mental health issues, substance abuse, homelessness, school refusal/anxiety, social dislocation, and disability.

As noted by Thomson (2002), young people come to school with a “virtual backpack” of experiences, learnt behaviours, knowledge and skills, and a variety of social, cultural and economic elements that shape their connection to formal schooling. It is at the interface of the contents of this virtual backpack and the school that engagement may be facilitated; for example, the degree to which high schools have young adolescents’ needs reflected in curricular, pedagogical approaches and environmental structures will be significant. As Mills and McGregor (2010) observe, these factors often result in poor achievement, which can lead to low self-esteem issues. Further, they point out that:

[I]f this [achievement] gap remains and grows the consequences including low achievement, low self-esteem and eventually disengagement from learning, often provoke resistant behaviours in the classroom and school. These challenging behaviours set such students up for cycles of conflict with schooling authorities leading to absenteeism, suspension, expulsion or ‘dropping out’. (p. 15)

For social minorities, such learning gaps may become generational. Hayes (2012) describes the experience of Indigenous young people going through three life courses that resulted in a sense of “persistent social exclusion” from mainstream schooling as it was perceived to be “irrelevant and of little importance to them” (p. 647). In the first life course, children were missing from school for temporary periods, often spending time with family due to commitments arising from cultural considerations or family needs. In the second life course, families were dealing with difficult or traumatic events, such that school was no longer a priority at that time. In the third life course, following their disrupted attendance at school and the inability of the schooling system to respond to these disruptions, the children dropped out of school altogether.

In recent times, governments in Australia and like countries have attempted to compel young people to remain in education by tying social security provision to training programs. A study in the United

Kingdom known colloquially as Back on Track, was “intended to reduce to a minimum the number of 16 to 18 year olds who are *not in education, employment or training* (NEET)” (Evans, Meyer, Pinney, & Robinson, 2009, p. 4). In response to this legislation, the Barnardo’s organisation sponsored a study conducted by Evans et al. (2009) who concluded that school-based factors played a very significant role in students’ decisions to leave school early. Using these findings, Barnardo’s argued that there should be greater recognition of what led to the existence of the NEET population and that support was needed to improve the skills, job prospects and life-chances of these young people. The school-based factors alleged to trigger disengagement included:

- negative interactions with teachers;
- boredom;
- school failure;
- inadequate personal, social and health education, especially sex and relationship education;
- bullying;
- special educational needs, learning difficulties and disabilities; and
- behaviour, truancy. (pp. 21–25)

Such findings have been corroborated by a number of other studies. In a review of its Deemed Enrolment Program for young people under the age of 15 who had disengaged from the schooling system, St Luke’s (2009), a non-profit organisation in Bendigo, Victoria, Australia, identified the following as school-based reasons for early school leaving:

- behavioural issues;
- inability of schools to be inclusive of young people who are ‘challenging’ to the school system;
- young people feeling socially isolated and in other ways unable to cope personally within the school system;
- young people not coping with the day-to-day routines and expectations of schools;
- lack of relevant school curriculum; and
- inability to keep up academically. (p. 10)

In another United Kingdom study (Duffy & Elwood, 2013), based on 15 focus groups of previously disengaged young people, a number of similar themes emerged about the barriers to learning. These included: poor relationships with teachers, students feeling labelled, a lack of a sense of belonging, poor relationships with peers and the poor quality of teaching. One of the most positive grounds for hope in this research was the ongoing value that the so-called disengaged young people still placed on education, as well as the aspirations they held for what they could achieve if the barriers they had previously experienced could be overcome and if their motivation for learning could be recognised and enhanced through relevant curriculum and authentic and personalised pedagogy. Duffy and Elwood (2013) suggest that learners are more likely to engage in schooling when:

... they are encouraged to take ownership of learning; when teachers use flexible approaches to teaching; when teachers can demonstrate strong subject knowledge and expertise; class sizes must not be too big; teachers must be more alert when pupils need extra help; and lessons should be delivered in an appealing and where possible take into account real-life contexts. (p. 119)

In a similar vein, findings from a United States study by Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006), which included interviews of 500 students who had dropped out of school, include criticisms of schooling contexts alongside pressing personal issues:

[C]lasses were not interesting, they were not motivated or inspired to work hard, they did not get on with their teachers or they had personal reasons (needed to get a job to earn money, became a parent, needed to care for family). (p. iii)

This study also mentions students' difficulties in meeting learning requirements and failing academically.

The dominant perspective of the research literature, as we show in this and later chapters, thus reflects a move away from a deficit view of children at risk of disengaging from schooling towards a more holistic view of the factors that lead to student disengagement (McGregor,

2015; Smyth & McInerney, 2013). A number of school-based factors intersect with out-of-school factors to construct cycles of school refusal, conflict and academic failure. International literature (e.g., Hayes et al., 2006; McFadden & Munns, 2002; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006; Smyth & Fasoli, 2007; Smyth & Hattam, 2004; Te Riele, 2007; Thomson, 2002; Wishart, Taylor, & Shultz, 2006) indicates that school policies may not take account of young people's complex lives in the following ways: lack of recognition of significant learning gaps; curricular and pedagogical practices that fail to engage young people; poor relationships between students and between students and staff; lack of flexibility in learning and assessment modes and options; lack of emotional, psychological and material support; and exclusionary elements within the culture of the school.

While acknowledging that factors of poverty and disadvantage clearly lie outside the school gates, if all young people are to have access to a meaningful education, there must be internal schooling processes and systems that support young people to combat these complex challenges. In order to ameliorate the effects of external factors shaping disengagement, schools must examine their practices and develop comprehensive responses.

Another way of considering the complexity surrounding student dis/engagement and highlighting the range of associated elements is presented in a Western Australian study of children and young people which gave voice to the factors that support their engagement in school and learning. Surveys were completed by 1812 students from 98 schools and 1174 students participated in group discussions. Of these, 837 Year 7 to Year 12 students participated in the survey (Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2018). Underpinning the study was a literature review that revealed a number of key concepts as being core to understanding the complexity surrounding student dis/engagement:

- Students can be disengaged at different levels, for example, disengagement may be related to content, specific classes, or with school education as a whole;
- There are different types or domains of engagement, for example, emotional, behavioural, and cognitive;

- Where levels of disengagement intersect with types of disengagement, different indicators of disengagement can be identified (e.g., behavioural disengagement with class content may be indicated by poor classroom behaviour; emotional disengagement with school in general may be indicated by poor school connectedness). Disengagement can therefore be indicated and measured in multiple ways;
- Disengagement is both a process and an outcome, for example, student absenteeism may reflect disengagement from school, but it is also a risk factor for other disengagement indicators such as early school leaving; and
- Contexts beyond the educational setting, for example, family setting, are an integral part of disengagement processes for children and young people. (Commissioner for Children and Young People, 2018, p. 6)

Nine factors that influence engagement in school and learning were identified from the interviews with students, these being divided into primary and secondary factors—see Box 1.2.

Box 1.2 Factors that influence engagement in school and learning

Primary factors

These three factors provide the foundation for a student's sound and sustainable engagement in school and learning:

1. Having friends and positive relationships with other students;
2. Teachers who have a genuine interest in our wellbeing and future; and
3. Families that are involved and interested.

Secondary factors

These six factors can accelerate engagement by supporting the student to be ready to learn and intrinsically motivated:

About learning

1. A positive, fair and supportive classroom environment;
2. Teaching and learning that is interesting and relevant; and
3. Choices and a say on decisions that affect us.

About the student

4. Feeling safe;
5. Help to overcome personal issues; and
6. Feeling physically and mentally well.

Level of engagement

The following four elements were used to measure students' level of engagement in school and learning:

1. attendance;
2. academic achievement;
3. liking school; and
4. sense of belonging at school.

Source Commissioner for Children and Young People (2018, p. 9)

Schlechty (2002) suggests that there is:

... a continuum of engagement and disengagement that ranges from what we would see as 'true' engagement in terms of, for example, children being voluntarily and enthusiastically immersed in a task or activity; through various types of strategic compliance, ritual compliance, retreatism and rebellion. (p. 3)

The latter two forms of disengagement can present as particular areas of concern, in that they are forms of disengagement most likely evident in students with complex needs or challenging behaviours. *Retreatism* can lead to a passive form of disengagement, while rebellion tends to manifest in more active and confrontational behaviours. Additionally, behaviours associated with strategic and ritual compliance can also be of concern to schools as they may represent levels of disengagement that are less obvious and that affect students who are quite able academically but whose connection to what is happening in mainstream classrooms is minimal due to current cultures of schooling.

Measuring Student Engagement

As we have indicated in this chapter, data are not yet available for reporting against the student engagement indicator in the school Performance Indicator Framework—inclusive of behavioural, emotional and cognitive domains—in Australia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). Ironically, this is despite a call from bodies such as the Australian

Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) (AITSL, 2014) who have clearly identified this need, viz:

[M]ore nuanced indicators on student engagement should be developed so that better information can be collected in Australia. At present, student achievement, attendance and behavioural incidents are typically tracked at a school and system level. These are blunt measures of student engagement and do not give much information on the nature of their social, emotional and cognitive engagement in class. (Goss et al., 2017, p. 34)

and

[C]ollect better data to provide more insight into student engagement on the ground, with more nuanced indicators. (Goss et al., 2017, p. 4)

There are instruments available that set out to achieve this outcome. For example, Fredricks et al. (2011) analysed 21 instruments, of which 14 were student self-report instruments, three were teacher reports on students, and four were observational measures. They mapped the instruments in terms of the capacity to provide data related to the behavioural, emotional and cognitive domains of engagement, reflecting the multiple dimensions of student engagement first proposed by Fredricks et al. (2004) and further developed by Gibbs and Poskitt (2010). In the final chapter of this book we return to consider the value of these instruments.

Effective Education for All Young Adolescent Learners

Around the world there is advocacy for adopting intentional approaches to teaching and learning that is responsive to, and appropriate for, young adolescent learners. It is in this space that there is potential to proactively set in place pedagogies and practices that set up the conditions to engage all young adolescents. The underpinning principle is that if these intentional approaches are not in place there is a heightened risk of disengagement. In the United States, for example,

the Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE) is “dedicated to improving the educational experiences of all students aged 10 to 15 by providing vision, knowledge, and resources to educators and leaders” (AMLE, 2018, n. p.). The age group is referred to as the *middle years* and in schools the year levels are referred to as the *middle grades*. Since 1982, AMLE has operated on the foundations of a policy entitled *This We Believe: Keys To Educating Young Adolescents* (AMLE, 2010), which describes 16 characteristics of successful middle grades schools. The approach is built on an ever-growing body of evidence that emerged from an ideological base.

In Australia, the professional organisation Adolescent Success is an equivalent body that advocates for effective learning and teaching for young adolescents (Adolescent Success, 2018a), also using the language of *middle years*. In the renewed *Adolescent Success Position Paper* (Adolescent Success, 2018b), the four pillars of the policy are presented in Box 1.3.

Box 1.3 Four pillars for effective young adolescent education

Adolescents

Developing physically, intellectually, emotionally, socially and ethically.

Pedagogy

Innovative, challenging, integrative, contextual, informed, relevant, pastoral, inclusive, global and responsible.

Places

Flexible, diverse, democratic, positive, safe and engaging.

Educators

Dedicated, knowledgeable, empathetic, passionate and relational.

Source Developed from Adolescent Success (2018b)

A closer look at the pedagogy pillar outlines the specific approaches for effective education for young adolescent learners, as presented in Table 1.1.

In keeping with this approach, ACER (2012) identified six guiding principles (see Table 1.2) that were developed for the young adolescent age group, in this case called *Junior Secondary*, which take into account

Table 1.1 Features of effective pedagogy for young adolescent learners

Features of the pedagogy	Explanation
Informed	Pedagogical practices utilised are research and evidence based, and teams are specifically trained, ensuring that educators implement these practices
Inclusive	Pedagogical practices recognise the diversity of learners, acknowledging that they have a range of different personalities, aptitudes and attitudes, cultural, religious prior experiences and current needs
Relevant	Teaching and learning experiences are challenging, dynamic and exploratory by nature, and are negotiated, differentiated, integrated and/or interdisciplinary
Pastoral	Pedagogical practices foster in young adolescents empathy, compassion, gratitude, a sense of belonging and connectedness, recognising it is an education of the heart alongside an education of the mind
Global	Pedagogical practices develop young adolescents as global learners and citizens, who can come to understand their place in the world. They are enthused and compelled to make connections, engage with and learn from others
Innovative	Teaching and learning explores and incorporates new, advanced and transformative practices into programs by encouraging new initiatives, entrepreneurialism and creative thinking
Challenging	By having high expectations of young adolescents, the teaching and learning challenges their thinking and capacity to learn, enabling them to rise to the expectations and be excited by their learning
Integrative	Teaching subjects in a way that promotes the twenty-first century skills is essential in the middle years. Educators are knowledgeable and skilled in multidisciplinary teaching, capable of making natural links between curriculum areas, engaging in learning experiences that connect multiple areas. Core teaching teams are ideal in the middle years
Responsible	Pedagogical practices create an understanding that learning empowers young adolescents to be community minded and thus be active citizens who contribute positively to society and the global community

Source Developed from Adolescent Success (2018b)

Table 1.2 The six guiding principles of Junior Secondary underpinning Years 7–9 in Queensland state schools

Guiding principle	Explanation
Distinct identity	Junior Secondary students are encouraged and supported to develop their own group identity within the wider high school. This can involve dedicated school areas and events
Quality teaching	Teachers working with students in the Junior Secondary years are given the skills they need through additional professional development, so they can support young teens through these crucial early high school years
Student wellbeing	The social and emotional needs of Junior Secondary students are met with a strong focus on pastoral care. For example, schools provide a home room to support students as they adjust to new routines and greater academic demands
Parent and community involvement	Parents are supported to stay connected with their students' learning when they enter high school. Parent involvement in assemblies, special events, award ceremonies and leadership presentations are welcomed
Leadership	Schools are encouraged to create leadership roles for students in Years 7, 8 and 9. Dedicated teachers experienced with teaching young adolescents lead Junior Secondary, supported by the principal and administration team
Local decision making	The needs of each school community influence how Junior Secondary is implemented in each school

Source ACER (2012)

the challenges of transition from primary to secondary. These principles were utilised to underpin the introduction of a new, mandatory approach applied to students in Years 7, 8 and 9 in Queensland from 2015. The principles, which incorporate structural and philosophical aspects, look different in every school and aim to promote challenging educational offerings that engage young adolescents, while giving them a sense of belonging and support through the changes they face.

This framing emphasises where the support for a focussed middle school approach to transition would come from, that is, teachers, leaders, parents and community. Teachers are the front-line workers here

and, for these strategies to work, it is important that teachers undertake the requisite professional development to address the needs of this kind of educational approach, make the appropriate connections with parents and community, and gain the support they need from school leaders who also understand the challenges of supporting young people as they transition through their school years.

Explanations for the intransigent nature of schooling disengagement and the keys to schooling engagement may be found at the complex interface of internal and external institutional factors and their interrelationships with the personal needs and attributes of individual young people (Abrams, 2010; Francis & Mills, 2012; McGregor, 2015). This multi-dimensional ecosystem is further situated within broader social and political contexts that favour neoliberal educational policy settings. Such policies are not conducive to child-centred schooling as they are data-centric, prioritising external tests, competitiveness, accountability, and league tables (Ball, 2012; Connell, 2013; Lingard, Martino, Rezai-Rashti, & Sellar, 2016) that hinder teaching creativity and innovation. Research by Ogg and Kaill (2010) supports this conclusion. They suggest that:

[T]he pressure to achieve high examination results, as opposed to favoring the rounded development of all the students in a school, skews teaching priorities. It undermines the professional and inclusive ethic of teachers who would normally wish to do the best for all their students, rather than the majority who can do well in their exams. (p. 27)

As school systems and schools attempt to address dis/re/engagement, it is important to recognise the diversity of the needs represented by young adolescents, and the diversity of approaches that are currently in place to support and engage them in education. This is not a simple matter. As Cranston et al. (2016) characterise it, keeping young people in education is a “wicked problem with implications for leadership, policy and practice” (p. 1), involving “sociocultural, structural as well as curriculum, teaching and learning considerations” (p. 11). This complexity needs to be recognised in research into different schooling contexts. A recent initiative led by the state government in Queensland entitled *Everybody's*

business: Re-engaging young Queenslanders in education (Department of Education and Training, 2017) is an example of a sector-wide effort to intentionally focus on engaging young adolescents in learning. We will explore this, and other initiatives, in the following chapters.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we have shown how addressing young adolescent dis/re/engagement requires a whole-of-school approach informed by research into the age-appropriate responses. This extensive body of research argues that this transitional phase is likely to provide a continuum of challenges for most young people. That is to say, *all* young adolescents are potentially at risk of schooling disengagement if appropriate pedagogical, curricular and environmental measures are not undertaken by their high school. However, such risks increase with the addition of social, economic, cultural and psychological factors that shape young lives. Although these factors are beyond the control of schools, in order to provide the best possible educational opportunities for every student, regardless of background, schools are nonetheless charged with the responsibility of providing extra support structures for those young people. If such provision is unavailable, then students who have the least personal resources are likely to experience the most problems in terms of successful transitions and engagement with schooling.

Research Implications

As outlined in this chapter, the Australian Government Education Performance Indicator Framework includes engagement—across behavioural, emotional and cognitive domains—as one of the performance indicators. As of 2018, data were not yet available for reporting across these engagement domains (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018), making this a high priority for research. One way of progressing this agenda is to align such research with our model for engaging young adolescents, the features of which will be detailed throughout this book. We explore

the challenge of engaging young adolescents in learning, and outline a continuum of support built around behavioural, social and cognitive engagement aspirations. Furthermore, the complexity of dis/re/engagement needs to be recognised by conducting research into different schooling contexts.

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2

Mapping the Terrain

Introduction

This chapter builds on the psycho-social theory of schooling dis/engagement provided in Chapter 1 by exploring broader schooling contexts and research into experiments by schools, schooling jurisdictions and sectors to find solutions to this challenge. In recent decades, many countries have raised concerns about engaging and retaining all young people until the senior years of schooling. Early school leaving can lead to lifelong problems with finding employment and impact on the capacity of young people to lead fulfilling lives. There are also many social and economic consequences from losing significant numbers of young people from education, particularly as blue-collar work decreases and service industries and technology drive future knowledge economies. Influenced by pressures from international competitors, schooling retention is seen as a significant issue by national governments. Thus, in Australia and abroad there have been numerous attempts to address issues of schooling dis/engagement.

Approaches are usually one of two types: changing students or changing schools, including systems of schooling. The first approach entails

various remediation programs, behaviour management policies, and supports for students. The second can involve changing the climate of a school, providing a variety of services beyond curriculum delivery, and providing a range of educational alternatives to the mainstream. From much of the literature it appears that the greatest success has occurred where the focus of change has been the school, including the use of flexible learning options. This is not to say that individual factors do not matter. They clearly do. However, the most successful approaches have been those that have worked to address the individual causes of dis/engagement within a context of institutional change.

Changing Schools

There are numerous contextual issues that contribute to the situation in which some young people feel alienated by and disconnected to schooling processes; however, one of the most powerful factors is indeed the way we ‘do school,’ what Tyack and Tobin (1994) refer to as the “grammar of traditional schooling” (p. 454). By this, they mean the traditionally recognised organisational structures, the rules, the divisions of space and subject matter along with the classification of students into year levels and grades. According to Dewey (1902), “the manner in which the machinery of instruction bears upon the child... really controls the whole system” (pp. 22–23). Tyack and Tobin (1994) argue that, like the grammar of a language, the grammar of traditional schooling structures—understood to be the norms as in teacher–student relations, for example—is so taken-for-granted that there is no need for conscious analysis.

Accepted constructions of teacher authority, along with the hierarchical power structures of conventionally organised schools, combine to position young people as deficit troublemakers if they ‘rebel’ and/or fail to fit mainstream schooling cultures and modes of learning.

As neoliberal discourses continue to reshape our social conscience from notions of collective responsibility towards acceptance of the primacy of individual accountability (Apple, 2006), the problem of student *alienation* from schooling processes is represented as personal

disengagement from learning. Thus, the semantics of educational policies position young people as being responsible for their situation because they are not ‘engaged’; and, whilst schools are often asked to respond to this ‘problem,’ their fundamental structures and processes are not challenged. Thus, attempts to ‘fix’ the problem often begin with remedial solutions: authority is wielded over young people according to the rules of the institution and the diagnoses of ‘their problems.’

‘Fixing’ the Student

Remedial interventions to schooling disengagement that focus on changing the child may occur on campus or in external sites. Constructing the child as problematic may lead to punitive or therapeutic responses that provide temporary intensive academic remediation or socio-emotional support or both. However, Raywid (1994) notes that punitive alternatives are ineffective and engender increased resistance. Similarly, therapeutically-oriented settings may improve behaviour and performance in the short term but, once such supports are removed when the child returns to the conventional setting, problems of disengagement are likely to return. This echoes the findings of a study conducted by research company Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG) (2009) into the efficacy of internal or external remedial/behavioural centres in Victoria, Australia.

In Australia, one of the current responses to the complex needs of some students has been to return to various forms of academic streaming according to perceived levels of ability in particular school subjects (Johnston & Wildy, 2016). Research on streaming in the USA opposes the practice because of the negative impacts on ethnic minorities (Gamoran & Long, 2006) while in the UK there are similar claims based on class (Ansalone, 2010). In their comprehensive review of the literature on streaming, Johnston and Wildy (2016) conclude:

The assumption is that sorting into ability groups improves academic results for students. However, the long history of research into streaming has shown consistently that streaming does not improve academic outcomes for most students ... Australian studies focused on higher streamed students and did not often include the academic effects of streaming on

lower streamed students. Students streamed into high ability classes are often from higher socio-economic backgrounds, and this group experiences clear academic advantages from streaming. (p. 47)

Hattie (2012) supports these conclusions, emphasising that not only does streaming fail to produce the desired improvement in student outcomes, it actually increases educational inequality by disadvantaging students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Other researchers point to the negative impacts of streaming on social integration (Caro, 2009; Charlton, Mills, Martino, & Beckett, 2007). Additionally, international research has found that streaming does not promote cross-cultural understandings and relationships as promoted in many national curricula (Hallinan & Williams, 1989). From a psychological perspective, research indicates that streaming has negative consequences for self-esteem for students at all levels (Hallam & Ireson, 2005; Mulkey, Catsambis, Steelman, & Crain, 2005). There is constant competitive pressure for students in higher streams whilst students on lower rungs may feel ashamed and 'dumb.' There are fewer opportunities for peer-to-peer learning for students in lower streams and there may be tendencies for teachers to have lower expectations for such students, leading to cycles of on-going academic failure and schooling disengagement (Rubie-Davies, 2010). To sum up the effects of streaming practices, Johnston and Wildy (2016) conclude that "the vast majority of international research finds streaming to be disadvantageous for students academically, socially and psychologically" (p. 54). If the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) estimate that 98% of Australia's schools use some form of streaming is correct, this is clearly of some concern for educators seeking to find solutions to schooling disengagement in this country.

Another approach that centres upon the student relies upon complete withdrawal from the classroom. Drawing on data from a study of in-school programs for disengaged students from 12 schools on the Mornington Peninsula, Victoria, Australia, Zyngier and Gale (2003) note that while the staff running the programs were very supportive of students, the programs themselves focussed on remediation and withdrawal of students from mainstream classes. This was accompanied by a

lack of intellectual rigour and the authors concluded that “we do at-risk students few favours by removing them from mainstream programs and pathways, thereby diminishing their knowledge and skill base and potentially constraining their futures” (p. 26). The study by Zyngier and Gale (2003) illustrates a traditional approach to schooling dis/engagement: an attitude of considering all students disengaging from school as having some sort of intellectual deficit. However, it is now well documented that there are multiple issues affecting young people’s lives and therefore schooling experiences.

Some authors in the research literature have expressed concerns about the short-term nature of such programs (see Te Riele, 2007). A key issue was whether students could re-engage in their original school after attending a short-term remedial program. This extract from the report by St Luke’s (2009) on their Deemed Enrolment Program (DEP) reinforces this point:

While some younger DEP participants are re-engaging with their referring school, and in a few cases the re-engagement is focused, gradual and successful at this stage beyond expectations; most young participants do not return to their referring school and in those schools that have deemed to enrol a student for the purposes of enabling participation in the DEP, they may never sight the student. (p. 50)

Some barriers to school retention (for instance, severe family conflict, learning difficulty or economic disadvantage) are not amenable to change within a six-month withdrawal period to attend a short-term program.

International experience with short-term alternative provision is similar to that in Australia. Writing about urban-based programs in the USA, Aron (2006) answers the question, “What are the noteworthy attributes of high quality alternative education programs?” with nine points: “academic instruction, instructional staff, professional development, size, facility, relationships/building a sense of community, leadership, governance, administration and oversight, student supports and other contributing factors” (pp. 11–13). This emphasis on supportive organisational factors points to the weaknesses of short-term programs.

The complexity of factors shaping schooling dis/engagement indicates the need for creative responses. Recognition of the role played by communities is long-standing. In 2001, the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA) in Australia noted:

Sustainable change can only be achieved where there is clear ownership at the local community provider level which supports the structural change ... innovative models are likely to link significantly with related and often parallel programs in the community bringing together different sectors ... 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. (pp. 95–102)

The Queensland Government has embraced this approach through the Department of Education and Training's (2017) plan for schooling engagement: *Everybody's business: Re-engaging young Queenslanders in education*. This policy comprises a multi-pronged response to schooling engagement contextualised within diverse communities. Recognition that schooling dis/engagement is a *collective responsibility* paves the way for structural changes within schools that disrupt 'old grammars' of schooling.

Changing Structures

The significance of community involvement in the welfare of young people and their education has been recognised in many jurisdictions and in the literature. Indeed, Kemmis (2000) argues strongly that community partnerships are "essential in enabling schools to do their educational work" (p. 16). The Innovative Community Action Networks (ICANs) in South Australia (Stehlik, 2013) provide one example of successful practice. These networks have sought to bring young people, families, schools, community groups, businesses and different levels of government together to ensure that young people are enabled to complete their education either in a mainstream school or in an alternative setting. Underpinning ICAN is a commitment to finding 'joined up solutions' to young people's issues of dis/engagement. The approach involves

individual case management; individualised learning delivered in flexible ways; positive and respectful relations among teachers, students and case managers; and community participation in addressing student needs (<https://www.ilc.sa.edu.au/case-management/ican-guidelines>).

Another example of community involvement in educational support is what is variously known as ‘full service’ or ‘extended service’ schooling. Black, Lemon, and Walsh (2010) review a variety of Australian and international models that incorporate ‘wraparound’ social, health, legal and community services to support young people deemed to be at risk of non-completion of schooling. Examples of such practices differ according to whether the services are embedded or external to the school. Generally, there appears to be an attempt to centre the school at the heart of the community, which “positions the extended service school as a community development initiative that empowers the community and provides a locus for its collective expertise” (Black et al., 2010, p. 24). Clearly these practical supports are vital for the health and wellbeing of young people and their families, but they must be accompanied by curricular and pedagogical innovations. For young people to achieve and thrive at school, the three domains of behavioural, emotional *and* cognitive engagement (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010) must be addressed.

Changing Curriculum and Pedagogy

The answer to schooling dis/engagement, according to many researchers, is to develop ways to make it more possible for young people to positively engage with *learning*. Lamb and Rice (2008), in their discussion paper *Effective intervention strategies for students at risk of early leaving* (see also Chapter 5), canvass a comprehensive range of student-focussed strategies to enhance engagement, demonstrating exciting possibilities for installing in-school supports to counter disengagement more effectively. Lamb and Rice’s findings were based on a review of the national and international literature on school completion and early leaving and on interviews with staff in 25 state secondary schools in Victoria that had notable student completion rates and/or innovative ways of working innovatively to engage students.

Providing tasks with immediate and tangible benefits was also seen as important to successful strategies because young people at risk of disengagement often did not have a sense of the future, or of any kind of plan, that would achieve a long-term goal. Consequently, starting with project-based learning or vocationally-oriented coursework allowed students to be involved in learning that had a more immediate benefit or pay-off. Features of successful programs noted in the study included “making spaces within schools and curricular for diverse student needs,” “addressing poor achievement,” and “targeting practical personal obstacles to staying at school” (Lamb & Rice, 2008, pp. 23–24). These features highlight the highly specific nature of students likely to disengage, and the need for schools to provide each student with relevant support, and to set appropriate levels of expectations and flexibility.

For young people to believe in their learning options, the curriculum must be couched within intangible elements. In their study, Lamb and Rice (2008) noted the importance of increasing the trust placed in the students with “strategies and school cultures that give students real power and responsibility [and] also tell students that the school believes they can do the right thing” (p. 23). This is often a new experience for young people who have felt previously as if they had very little power associated with, or responsibility for their own education. Other strategies included: student case management; mentoring; attendance policies and programs; welfare support; targeted assistance for skill development; tutoring and peer-tutoring; supplementary or out-of-school programs; pathways planning; targeted financial support; project-based learning; creative arts-based programs; and connectedness of the young person with people beyond their immediate family, both within the school and the broader community (Lamb & Rice, 2008, pp. 18–22). Note that these strategies are not so much about changing the student but recognising their circumstances, providing appropriate support, and modifying the curriculum.

Another example of such an innovative approach to pedagogy and curriculum for students at risk of disengagement is the *Hands on Learning* (HoL) program (<http://handsonlearning.org.au/>), which is a one-day a week, in-school early intervention program that has been shown to significantly increase attendance and retention of middle-years

students most at risk of becoming early school leavers. The program is conducted by a non-profit organisation in over 20 high schools in Victoria. The aim is to provide students with one day a week of hands-on activities, such as building and construction. According to the HoL website, the outcomes are positive: the average attendance for students in Years 7–10 for HoL programs is 98%; 92% of students have moved into apprenticeships or further study; at Gordonvale High in 2011, unexplained absences dropped by more than half; and student detention rates are at a fifth of what they were before HoL was introduced. Further, a Deloitte Access Economics (2012) report states that “real retention rates for HoL students have been above 95% each year for the 10 years to 2009” (p. 14). The report also advocates the savings that could be made to the Australian economy through implementing this kind of program nationwide.

Fostering Positive Relationships

Along with programmatic experimentation, relationships within schools have been cited as fundamental to a sense of belonging and subsequent schooling engagement (Duffy & Elwood, 2013; Pendergast, Allen, McGregor, & Ronksley-Pavia, 2018). Changing teachers’ attitudes towards students is a large step towards changing schools, according to Chubbuck (2010). The author focuses upon two ‘dispositions’ for teachers—fairness and a belief that all children can learn: “The assumption is that these two dispositions will prompt teachers to adopt policy, curricular, and instructional practices leading to equitable learning experiences for all students” (p. 199). Other researchers believe that relational factors within schools must go much further than a focus on the positive; they must include the opportunity for student voice. Fielding (2004) contends that a lack of dialogic spaces for teachers and students stands in the way of any real change:

Students have student councils and other arrangements within which they pursue their joint interests. Teachers have team meetings, faculty meetings and so on. Occasionally, students are allowed to present issues in faculty meetings and staff attend student council meetings. But, so

far as I am aware, there are no spaces, physical or metaphorical, where staff and students meet one another as equals, as genuine partners in the shared undertaking of making meaning of their work together. Until and unless such spaces emerge transformation will remain rhetorical rather than real. (p. 309)

Fielding (2004) also points to the current neoliberal context of hyper-performativity and accountability as being counterproductive to trusting and reciprocal relationships between teachers and students: “If we see and relate to each other within the context of a reciprocal responsibility we will indeed transform what it is to be a teacher, what it is to be a student, and the spectre of schools as nineteenth-century institutions will begin to fade” (Fielding, 2004, p. 308).

Holistic Responses

A powerful example of an holistic or comprehensive approach to changing schools in order to engender re-engagement, as also discussed elsewhere in this book, is Darling-Hammond and Friedlander’s (2007) research in the USA, *High schools for equity*, which analysed effective practice in the operation of five Californian high schools with predominantly African-American students from families of low income backgrounds: “All of them send 80 to 100 per cent of their students to higher education, exhibiting college-going rates more than twice the state averages for the kinds of students they serve” (p. 15). The emphasis here is on empowerment: “these schools offer an educational experience that engages students in intellectually stimulating, socially and practically relevant, and personalized learning that empowers them to contribute to their communities and to learn throughout their lives” (Darling-Hammond & Friedlander, 2007, p. vi).

At the risk of over-simplification of the sophisticated research-based practices in operation at these sites, these characteristics could be summarised as: personalisation, rigorous and relevant instruction (pedagogy), and professional learning and collaboration. These elements are worth elaborating. In terms of personalisation:

The school's efforts in this respect include constructing small learning environments; fostering continuous, long-term relationships between adults and students; and creating advisory systems that systematically organise counselling, academic supports, and family connections. (Darling-Hammond & Friedlander, 2007, p. 16)

In relation to rigorous and relevant instruction, “the schools connect students to the communities and their futures through community service, internships, and partnerships with community groups and local colleges. Authentic learning experiences connect to the world outside of school” (Darling-Hammond & Friedlander, 2007, p. 17). This work with students is supported by an emphasis on professional learning and collaboration that goes on outside of class: “time for teachers to collaborate, design curriculum and instruction, and learn from one another” (p. 18). Consistent with Raywid's (1994) observations, this expansive study also identified the need for policy changes in four areas of focus: organisation and governance, human capital, curriculum and assessment, and funding. This aligns with calls from the Grattan Institute in the report *Making time for great teaching* (Jensen, Hunter, Sonnemann, & Cooper, 2014) that argued “education strategy must change” (p. 3) in Australia. The report points to the dilemma that “most teachers spend too little time on active collaboration and too much time on administration and coordination” (p. 7), leading to less effective teaching than is optimal. The report sets out strategies for flipping this scenario, with a strong focus on professional learning programs that work. There are three key features of this approach: teacher mentoring and coaching; lesson and grade groups; and teacher research groups. Each of these require time and resourcing.

Three distinguishing features of the High Schools for Equity project were: its holistic nature; its recognition of the importance of a “human scale” (Tasker, 2010) of operation in education; and the recognition of the context of students' lives, especially in the situation of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds. These approaches indicate the need for a transformation in the way a school functions and addresses its approaches to pedagogy, discipline and relationships in order to effectively address disengagement. Scotland presents one example of

an approach that seeks to change schools by transforming the learning environment and providing flexible, personalised learning opportunities (Mackie & Tett, 2013). This initiative also incorporates a multi-agency personal support for students.

In the final chapter of *Changing schools: Alternative ways to make a world of difference*, editors Wrigley, Thomson, and Lingard (2012) sum up the key ideas presented in their preceding 15 chapters in respect of how to transform mainstream schooling in order to make it more student-centric and engaging. Their main points reflect the consensus of most of the researchers in this area, particularly those already cited in this chapter. They include: the transformation of pedagogies so that they are inclusive, contextual and connected to the life-worlds of young people; curricular relevance and connectedness; inclusion of non-dominant “funds of knowledge”—youth, Indigenous, community; student-led curricula and student control over time; institutional flexibility; a focus on young people as problem-solvers and “philosophical questioners”; an inclusive school ethos that challenges deficit notions of young people; institutional restructuring that includes student *agency*—not merely ‘voice’; and school leadership that is collaborative and premised upon a shared, socially just ‘vision’ that “schools must be different because the world must be different, and ... schools can and must contribute to this” (Wrigley et al., 2012, p. 206).

Educational responses to disengagement that adopt a patchwork approach to the problem are likely to fail. One of the key conclusions from the literature cited is that responses to schooling disengagement should be predicated on the belief that the deficit does not lie in the student and their difficulties, but rather on programs, pedagogies and communities of engagement associated with traditional schooling. Moreover, the literature supports a socially just approach to the situation, as exemplified here by Connell (2012):

A just education system, finally, can allow itself to trust: to trust learners, without the whip of examination, and to trust teachers, without the club of auditing. It seeks security rather than insecurity, knowing that a basic security allows both deep learning and intellectual and cultural adventuring. That has been possible in the past for privileged minorities; but an

education based on privilege is a corrupted education. We now know how to do better. (pp. 682–683)

In recent decades, there has been significant growth in alternative and flexible educational provision (Te Riele, 2012, 2014) in Australia and like countries (McGregor, Thomson, Mills, & Pennacchia, 2018; Wrigley et al., 2012); these learning options have utilised holistic, socially just practices and philosophies. Some are stand-alone facilities dependent upon charities while others are members of growing networks of like sites supported by major sponsors. Some qualify for special assistance from governments if they meet certain criteria. This is in response to the increasing numbers of students who have left the mainstream either through choice or compulsion. The rapid growth in this sector points to significant difficulties in the mainstream with regards to effective responses to schooling dis/engagement and a need to understand the schools to which many of these young people are going—and staying.

Alternative and Flexible Education Provision

Alternative and flexible schooling sites are those non-fee paying schools that work with young people who no longer fit into the mainstream system. Diverse in terms of governance, philosophies, structures and offerings, they are sometimes referred to as “second chance schools” (Gallagher, 2011). Te Riele (2012) refers to such schools as “learning choices.” In the English context these schools are known as Pupil Referral Units (PRU) to which students suspended or expelled from mainstream government schools are referred, usually to be “fixed” and returned to their original schools. They have become an important feature of many international systems (Harper, Heron, Houghton, O’Donnell, & Sargent, 2011); however, there have been significant concerns about this largely unregulated system in England (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills [Ofsted], 2016). In Australia, researchers (e.g., Te Riele, 2012, 2014) have been trying to map the great variety of alternative and flexible learning sites that have sprung up in this country. Here, it is helpful to refer to two typologies of this form of provision.

In an analysis of alternative education, Raywid (1994) identifies a key model: one where there is a modification in the school experience because of changes in school goals, programs and relationships. These alternative schools, which are often outside the mainstream in many countries, may also fall under state jurisdiction, particularly in the USA. According to Raywid (1994), these types of alternative schools

... offer full-time, multiyear, education options for students of all kinds, including those needing more individualization ... Students choose to attend. Other characteristics include divergence from standard school organization and practices (deregulation, flexibility, autonomy, and teacher and student empowerment); an especially caring, professional staff; small size and small classes; and a personalized, whole-student approach that builds a sense of affiliation and features individual instruction, self-paced work, and career counselling. Models range from schools-within-schools to magnet schools, charter schools, schools without walls, experiential schools, career-focused and job-based schools, dropout-recovery programs, after-hours schools, and schools in atypical settings like shopping malls and museums. (p. 26)

This description matches the most successful alternative schooling options that have been the subject of recent research in Australia and elsewhere (see McGregor, Mills, Te Riele, Hayes, & Baroutsis, 2017; Mills & McGregor, 2014).

Te Riele (2007) suggests a way of mapping the provision of alternative education along two dimensions, as shown in Fig. 2.1.

Te Riele's (2007) model shows that one end of the dimension is aimed at changing the young person in some way, and the other end is focused on changing the provision of education to better match the needs of the student. This is very similar to Raywid's (1994) analysis. Te Riele's second dimension refers to the stability of the alternative education program. At one end of this dimension, there are those programs with low stability, often due to uncertain funding, which is a common situation experienced by non-government, charity or community organisations. At the other end of the spectrum are established schools, or those units within schools, that offer short-term withdrawal programs or longer-term, comprehensive programs. This schema yields

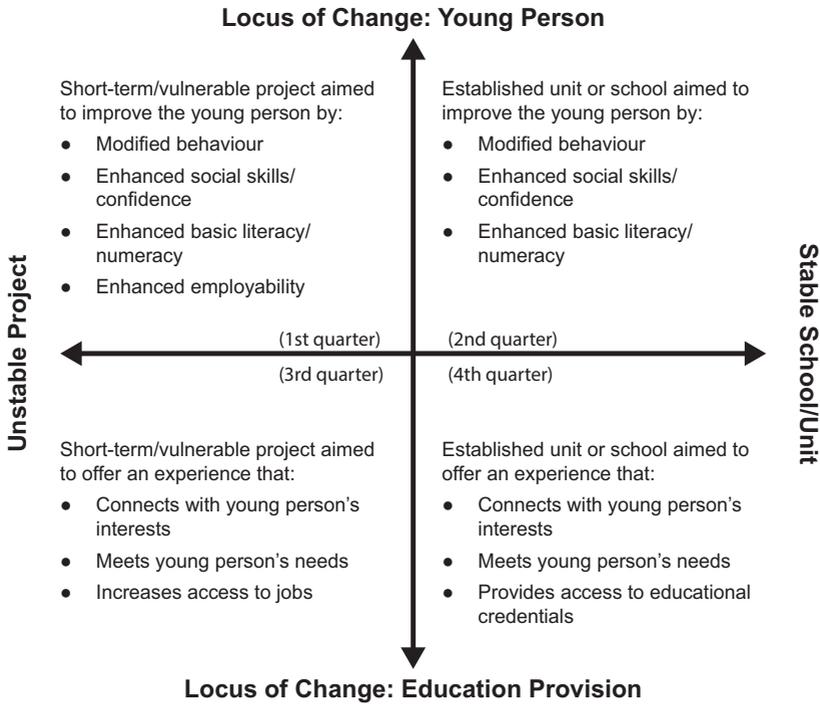


Fig. 2.1 Map of educational alternatives for marginalized youth (Source Te Riele, 2007, p. 59)

four quadrants. The fourth quadrant includes those alternative education programs that are more stable and longer-term, and that focus on providing an innovative education provision (changing the school) as being the most desirable and effective.

The argument here is that these innovative alternative programs may well be the incubators of better educational programs for all students, *not just* those who are seen as alienated or being at risk of not completing schooling. However, as Te Riele (2007) points out:

This does not mean that all schools should become like fourth-quadrant alternative programs. Rather, these kinds of alternative schools emphasise the need to replace uniformity with diversity based on building on the unique interests, capacities and experiences of the students the school serves. (p. 65)

In attempting to conceptualise the philosophy behind alternative and flexible schooling aimed at re-engagement in education for marginalised young people, Smyth, McInerney, and Fish (2013) developed a model of *Critical pedagogy of re-engagement*. This model foregrounds five key elements:

- creating relational spaces;
- challenging deficit views;
- re-igniting aspirations;
- pursuing rigorous forms of learning; and
- crafting a different policy trajectory.

This re-philosophising is also reflected in Te Riele's (2006) "practice-with-hope" as capturing what is being attempted in schooling practices with marginalised students.

Such conclusions have been supported by a plethora of recent research projects in the field of alternative and flexible educational provision. Research evidence from the alternative and flexible education sector reveals that these sites have long waiting lists and that young people who enrol get a genuine 'second chance' at accessing education. Indeed, researchers have documented their practices and made numerous recommendations that there is much that mainstream schools might learn from these facilities.

Lessons from the Field

In all Australian states and territories, there is a growing number of alternative schools and flexible programs set up by both government and non-government authorities that attempt to re-engage young people in schooling, sometimes referred to as "learning choice programs" (Te Riele, 2012, p. 3) or "flexible learning centres" (Mills, McGregor, & Muspratt, 2012, p. 5). The Learning Choices National Scan (Te Riele, 2012), commissioned by the Dusseldorp Skills Forum, identified "over 400 schools in 1200 locations nationally, working with 33,000 young people during 2011" (p. 3). It was noted that almost

half the schools reported a waiting list of students for enrolment, so the numbers attending would be much higher if there was greater capacity. Such sites cater to young people who have left or been asked to leave a mainstream high school. They may be run by a state or territory department of education and may have a direct relationship with a local high school. Voluntary attendance is one of the key features that make them successful, because the students attending have made the choice, albeit on advice, to be there and participate (Mills & McGregor, 2014).

Alternative and flexible educational provision is a dynamic field within which best practice may be experimental and context-responsive. De Jong and Griffiths' (2006) commentary on the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA, 2002) survey of best practice in Alternative Education Programs (AEPs) characterises effective programs as having three interlocking dimensions: organisation and partnerships; pastoral care and ethos; and curriculum and pedagogy. They note a concern that AEP programs may potentially lead to students being negatively labelled: "Being an AEP student can stick indefinitely, and undermine self-esteem and contribute to an increase in the very behaviour targeted for modification and change" (p. 32); however, they go on to identify a number of features (e.g., support, personalised learning plans, positive school climate) that point to AEPs providing students with opportunities for success. The most important aspect of this seems to be the quality of the teachers in such programs, as De Jong and Griffiths (2006) observe:

They are able to involve staff who want to work with students who have high support needs and who have the values and skills to build strong relationships with the young person and their family. They have the capacity to work with the whole child and provide teaching and learning adjustments within a flexible learning environment. (p. 35)

This view is supported by Hargreaves' (2011) *At a glance* report in relation to Vocational Education and Training (VET) with young people in the period 2006 to 2010. The author notes especially that the quality of persistence was of great value to young people who were battling against the weight of a disadvantaged socio-economic background.

An important element in nurturing this quality of persistence was involving the young people in identifying their own learning and training needs. Having staff who are willing to listen to the voices of young people is a common feature of effective programs.

Mills et al. (2012) summarise key features of successful alternative education flexible learning centres in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). Across the sites visited, key elements in their success in re-engaging young people included:

- facilitating access to personal supports such as drug and alcohol counselling, child care, legal advice and housing support;
- providing accredited academic and vocational programs;
- a philosophy that facilitated long-term educational options rather than short-term programs concerned with ‘fixing up’ the young person;
- creating a context which enabled the young people to articulate hopes and ambitions and to establish plans for achieving these goals;
- developing an environment characterised by high expectations in terms of academic achievements and behaviour;
- having flexible processes that could accommodate the stresses these young people faced in their everyday lives;
- a focus on developing positive relationships between workers and young people; and
- providing a learning environment which was conducive to the teachers and workers responding to the diverse personal and academic needs of the young people. (pp. 5–6)

Mills et al. (2012) emphasise the many challenges facing these centres, and the financial and staffing pressures which could affect quality of provision in the longer term. To address this issue, they suggest a “regularly updated on-line register of sites” which could provide some quality control by ensuring that alternative providers “offer an accredited curriculum; employ qualified teachers; provide a real alternative and not short-term fixes; reject a deficit view of young people” (p. 6). In their study of alternative education provision in the (ACT), Mills et al. (2012) reported that “a strength of the alternative sector is its diversity” (p. 5) insofar as young people have a choice in what kind of educational service suits them best. In relation to enrolment and attendance, it was

noted that attendance at these sites was voluntary and yet many had waiting lists and, also, many students travelled long distances to get to school. Clearly, the students attending were gaining a benefit from their involvement.

In contrast to their disengagement from mainstream or conventional schooling, the young people interviewed for this project were highly engaged with the learning opportunities provided to them at these sites. This attitude was linked to the kind of learning environment that the teachers at these alternative schools had created. It appeared that this environment or atmosphere was not so much due to an absence of discipline but that rules were negotiated and applied within a context of dialogue with students treated as young adults who were assumed to be responsible for themselves and who deserved the respect one would extend to another adult. The ‘problematic’ of the identity of young people as ‘not children but not yet adults’ was resolved in a satisfactory way for all concerned, and this respect seemed central to the success of the whole enterprise.

One challenge that alternative education settings experience with governments used to dealing with mainstream schools is the issue of accountability. How do they demonstrate the efficacy of their programs? Mills et al. (2012) suggest that “sites should be monitored for their outcomes via ‘rich’ forms of accountability that go beyond numerical measures of success. This type of accountability would entail listening to the ‘accounts’ of young people attending alternative education sites” (p. 6). This would be in contrast to the typical desk-top audits required of mainstream schools.

Te Riele, Wilson, Wallace, McGinty, and Lewthwaite (2016) reviewed the so-called “grey literature” of evaluation reports of flexible learning options to examine the outcomes of such programs and the evidence that is provided to substantiate the claims made. They found “the reports focus on five different sets of outcomes: traditional academic outcomes, post-program destinations, student engagement, personal and social well-being, and broader community engagement and well-being” (p. 1). Te Riele et al. (2016) explain the contribution of alternative education in terms of the broader benefits to the community of helping young people finish their education and become not only

employable but to also feel part of society, rather than marginalised from it: “Broader benefits to society discussed in reports include breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage, reduced health-related costs, reduction in crime and reduction in (youth unemployment)” (p. 8).

Te Riele (2006) proposes an orientation, centred on care (which is congruent with the concepts discussed above): “Successful teaching and learning in these (alternative) settings relies on a recognition of teaching as a caring profession and of the emotional dimension of schooling” (p. 59). Te Riele (2006), like Smyth et al. (2013), highlights the key role of positive teacher–student relationships in these environments and summarises these as featuring:

...friendliness, helpfulness, fairness and respect; and a caring whole-school culture—characterized by school-wide support and a positive atmosphere. These aspects were interrelated, as the work of individual teachers was supported by whole-school culture, while the whole-school culture also depended on the contributions made by individual teachers. (p. 71)

Loutzenheiser’s (2002) research in an alternative school in Northern California also foregrounds the importance of the affective dimensions of schools, arguing that simply listing the points which help with re/engagement will not give an adequate picture.

Nevertheless, the young people interviewed in this study commented on a number of qualities in the atmosphere, relationships, pedagogy and curriculum that enabled them “to risk” re-engaging in a school, albeit a very different type of one from the schools from which they had come. Central to these reported qualities was a “sense of family and caring” (p. 455) where the young people experienced acceptance of difference and a breakdown of the artificial division of their public and private lives in school. This was enhanced by ways of teaching and learning that made (a) positive relationships between teachers and students the foundation for reconnection and (b) culturally relevant pedagogy the basis for heightening student interest and motivation where “culture included race, gender, sexuality, and so on, as well as their life experiences, traumas, and conflicts” (p. 457). This approach translated into

what Loutzenheiser (2002) called “a passionate and listening pedagogy”, which utilised student interests as points for organising classes and course materials, and resulted in a “challenging and pertinent curriculum for each student” (p. 258).

This element of the social climate that the teachers and other staff are able to create and maintain with young people in alternative education environments is one of the key factors in making it attractive to young people disengaged from mainstream school. In their study in the USA, Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, and Tonelson (2006) undertook an examination of school climate in three effective alternative programs in urban areas. They found similar results in each of the three programs representing 11 alternative schools:

Based on these findings we can posit that students identified as troubled or troubling tend to flourish in alternative learning environments where they believe that their teachers, staff and administrators, care about and respect them, value their opinion, establish fair rules that they support, are flexible in trying to solve problems, and take a non-authoritarian approach to teaching. (p. 16)

These international examples reflect closely the findings of Australian studies already noted. Alternative and flexible educational provision has an important place in catering to the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised of young people. One of the attractions of the alternative education settings has been shown to be the holistic personal support they receive, which enables them to participate in education. Part of the attraction is that such sites do not just cater to the academic needs of the students; “They also often provided counselling, assistance with finding accommodation and financial resources, and help with child care and personal advocacy” (Mills & McGregor, 2010, p. 9). Alternative schools have a strong resemblance to what has been termed “full service schools” (Dryfoos, 1998) or “extended service” schools (Black et al., 2010).

Mills and McGregor (2014), in their study of alternative schooling sites in Australia and the UK, endorsed the efforts of staff to address, in practical ways, the highly challenging personal circumstances of

young people who were early school leavers: “They provided crèches and social workers and employed specific support workers, for example, Indigenous staff, to help their students find homes and to negotiate with welfare agencies” (p. 53). This holistic approach implies a capacity and facility of staff to tap into the services of a variety of agencies. In a further Australian study involving specific sites in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales, McGregor et al. (2017) consolidate these findings by describing such services as vital to “clearing the path for learning” (p. 95).

Serving the social, health, financial, legal and physical needs of young people is an essential part of alternative education provision whether it is school-based or in a non-school setting. National and international research evidence on alternative education options consistently emphasises the importance of this type of service in facilitating the engagement and participation of young people in schooling and education. Schools need personnel who can co-operate with government and non-government agencies in identifying and servicing these needs where they cannot provide for these themselves. Schools can be a central hub in the community for looking after young people in this way. In an overview of alternative education for the Urban Institute in the USA, Aron (2006) emphasises the need for inter-agency co-operation with schools: child protective service systems, the juvenile justice system, and a variety of health and human service agencies, such as mental health and substance abuse treatment agencies, crisis intervention centres, runaway and homeless youth shelters, and others. Once more, the notion of community is fundamental to effective responses to schooling dis/engagement.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an analysis of the research field within which the YAEL Model of a continuum of support for young adolescent learners has been conceived. Traditionally, schooling disengagement has been constructed within a deficit model of young people and subsequently responses have included measures such as academic streaming, remediation, withdrawal into short-term programs and various

punitive solutions, such as cancellation of school privileges, suspension and exclusion. In recognition of the complexities of schooling disengagement, in recent times, there has been an increasing shift to more positive resolutions as reflected in the literature documenting attempts by some schools and schooling jurisdictions and sectors to shape institutional reforms that will provide more supportive contexts for young people who may face significant challenges in their personal lives and at school. We have drawn upon such research and also studies conducted in the field of alternative and flexible learning to construct the YAEL Model, which is described in detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

Research Implications

Research in the field of schooling disengagement indicates that there is not a ‘one-size-fits-all’ solution. Responses should be diverse and take into account community contexts and student needs. However, a broad set of principles relating to school climate, relationships, support structures, curriculum, pedagogy and flexibility have attained broad consensus in the literature. Most of the studies appear to be relatively short-term in nature. The next step should be longitudinal research that documents a diversity of sites and ways of translating these principles into practice.

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3

Modelling a Continuum of Support

Introduction

The Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning (YAEL) Model provides a holistic approach to the provision of support for young adolescent learners. It is predicated on the understanding that all students should have the opportunity to learn, thrive and be equipped with the skills and attitudes to lead fulfilling, productive and responsible lives. High expectations are held for all students, regardless of their ability, behaviour or personal circumstances. Access to powerful and relevant learning experiences, which meet the learning needs of every student, are critical to achieving educational success.

Developed from an extensive review of the international literature, as well as extant student learning support initiatives and strategies, the Model represents a unifying framework of best practice approaches, which serves the needs of those working in the fields of student engagement and retention. Development of the Model was also informed by findings from a large research study, including consultations and interviews with a range of key stakeholders, in an Australian educational jurisdiction.

In this chapter, we first describe the methodological approach used to develop the Model and then discuss the overarching dimensions that constitute Layer 1 of the Model. As will become clear in this and the following chapters, the YAEL Model is multi-dimensional, with three inter-connected layers, and we therefore weave in and out of key themes in order to elucidate different aspects and characteristics of the overarching dimensions and sub-dimensions. Furthermore, given that it has been developed as a holistic approach to student engagement, those who adopt it should consider the Model in its entirety, adapting features of its characteristics according to contexts and needs.

The Student Engagement Continuum Study

Previous chapters describe the international literature base that informed the development of the YAEL Model. The first section of this chapter provides an overview of the qualitative study (comprising the major part of a consultancy) that was also central to this development work. It is important to note in the methodology sections that follow that the emphasis is at times on *disengagement* and *at-risk students*, in line with the requirements of the consultancy. Drawing from the extensive evidence base, the team's collective previous research in this area and the findings of the Student Engagement Continuum (SEC) study itself, we were able to demonstrate, however, the importance of approaching student engagement from a proactive and positive stance (focusing on *re/engagement*) rather than one of deficit and correction; as is reflected in the YAEL Model.

Study Context

The SEC research study was contextualised in the large educational jurisdiction of one of Australia's eight states and territories. To comply with principles of ethical research, the name of the state/territory and other identifying features of the study have been anonymised. The study sample comprised a cross-section of all government high schools in the

jurisdiction, with participants drawn from across the schools and school communities.

The context in which the jurisdiction is situated performs well on a majority of national indicators, such as median weekly income, post-school qualifications, work participation rates, health, levels of life satisfaction, and levels of participation in sport, recreation and culture (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2011). With a schooling retention rate of over 90% for Years 10–12, the state/territory is also well ahead of national rates. Additionally, it performs highly in the National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) (<http://www.nap.edu.au/results-and-reports/national-reports>), a series of tests focused on basic skills that are administered annually to Australian students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9.

By contrast, distinct areas of disadvantage have been identified, with 44% of the population aged 15–64 experiencing levels of socio-economic disadvantage and 22.4% of this age group falling into the most disadvantaged 40% of all Australians. The high schools in the SEC study were situated both in these geographical pockets of disadvantage, as well as the more affluent areas. Issues related to schooling that have raised concern across the state/territory include a decline in school attendance rates during transition from primary to high school; the number of suspensions in the young adolescent years; and the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children identified as developmentally vulnerable on one or more of the domain/s as measured by the Australian Early Development Census: physical health and wellbeing; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills (school-based); and communication skills and general knowledge (Community Services Directorate, ACT Government, 2015).

Research Study Objectives

In addition to conducting a review of the local, national and international evidence base around young adolescent student dis/engagement, the study objective most relevant to this current discussion was to

develop a model of a continuum of educational support for high school (Years 7–10) with the following features:

- a unifying framework based on research and congruent with jurisdictional strategic planning and existing school network structures; and
- a map of a continuum of educational support components for high schools that addresses the different needs for at-risk students.

To meet these and other objectives, the research team conducted an intensive study over the course of four months in late 2016.

Methodology

The qualitative study focused on gathering the views of stakeholders across the educational jurisdiction on the range and numbers of at-risk and disengaged young adolescent learners, and types of educational services required to meet their needs. Specifically, it sought to gain views on what works and what does not work in engaging young adolescents, and the evidence to support this. The data collection consisted of three parts: interviews, focus groups and school site visits. In total, 107 participants were involved in interviews, including school leaders, teachers, students, parents/carers, education union representatives, school network staff and allied personnel such as youth support workers and community agency leaders. Table 3.1 shows the range and number of participants involved in each part of the data collection. In line with approved ethical procedures, stakeholder and site names have been anonymised.

Throughout the data collection process, all those who were willing to participate were invited to do so, although, as is the nature of school life, many were constrained by timetabling and availability issues. They could also elect whether to contribute individually or in a focus group.

Table 3.1 Range and number of participants in the data collection phase

Data collection method	Participants	n
Focus groups	High school principals, senior advisors/managers, school network leaders	22
	Multidisciplinary support teams	7
	Student engagement and learning teams (telephone focus group)	4
Individual telephone interviews	School principals	9
	Australian Education Union representative	1
<i>School site visits (nominated by the Department of Education Office)</i>		
Site 1	Deputy principal interview	1
	Students—individual interview	2
	Teacher focus group	6
	Teacher individual interviews	2
Site 2	Principal interview	1
	Deputy principal—individual interview	1
	Teacher focus group	5
Site 3	Student focus group	5
	Deputy principal interview	1
	Student focus group	5
	Student individual interview	1
	Teacher focus groups (2)	6
Site 4	Principal interview	1
	Student focus group	9
	Teacher individual interview	1
	Parent individual interview	1
Site 5	Principal telephone interview	1
	Teacher focus group	4
	Student focus group	2
Off-site alternative provision	Parent individual interview	1
Community agencies	Focus group	6
	Individual telephone interviews	2
Total		107

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted across the participant group and, in order to elicit views from this range of stakeholders on the same focus areas around student dis/re/engagement, we developed an interview schedule that was used across all interviews. Questions were developed on the basis of the objectives of the study and the extensive evidence base and were designed to encourage participants to voice their opinions and experiences on a range of matters relevant to schooling disengagement and at-risk students, as well as appropriate solutions to identified issues. Although the same basic lines of inquiry were followed with each of the participants, we modified the questions to suit each of the stakeholder groups. Box 3.1 provides the list of questions used for school leaders.

Box 3.1 Semi-structured interview questions (school leaders)

1. How do you believe schools can focus more directly on engaging at-risk students in their education?
 - a. What provisions need to be in place in the school for at-risk students?
 - b. How can at-risk students be most effectively engaged in learning with other students?
2. What do you see as the main barriers to engaging at-risk students in school?
3. What are your experiences in catering for at-risk students in your own school?
 - a. Have you been able to put in place any programs, interventions or initiatives to re-engage students?
 - b. If so, how have you ascertained the success of these provisions for at-risk students?
 - c. What are the particular features of your context that have led you to cater for these students in your school rather than through alternative schooling provisions?
4. Do you believe school leaders are effectively prepared to identify and work with at-risk students?
 - a. What could be done to prepare school leaders to work more effectively with at-risk students?
5. Do you believe teachers are effectively prepared to identify and work with at-risk students?
 - a. What could be done in this regard?

6. What resources are needed, including in relation to professional learning and development of school staff?
7. My next question relates to Contact for Learning and Attainment Centres.
 - a. What are your experiences of, and views about these types of provision?
 - b. Do you believe the methods used in these types of centres would work at your school?
8. I'd like to hear your views about curriculum, and about the kinds of changes that might need to be made to accommodate the needs of at-risk students.
 - a. What are your experiences of differentiating the curriculum for at-risk students?
 - b. What are your experiences of personalising the learning for at-risk students?
 - c. How effectively are you able to work within the Australian Curriculum with at-risk students?
9. Finally, I'd like to hear your views about pedagogy, and about the kinds of pedagogical practices that might be suitable for re-engaging and teaching at-risk students.
 - a. What types of teaching approaches work best with these students?
 - b. What pedagogical strategies would you like to try with at-risk students that you haven't yet been able to? (What has constrained your use of these pedagogical practices?)
10. What kinds of supports and pathways are necessary to support at-risk students at school?
11. We know that it is important for students to have a sense of belonging in high school. What do you think could be done to increase the sense of belonging of those students who are at risk?
 - a. What do you believe some of the impacts are on at-risk students when they don't have a sense of belonging at school?
 - b. What kind of skills do teachers need to have in order to build a strong sense of belonging with at-risk students?
12. A number of people in our earlier focus groups identified the need for a comprehensive and integrated or 'holistic' approach to developing an educational support model for at-risk students. This type of approach would draw on a broad range of stakeholders and support mechanisms to cater for the educational and individual needs of at-risk students.
 - a. What are your thoughts about this?
 - b. In such a model, who would be the key people involved?

The audio recordings of all interviews (lasting on average 45 minutes and recorded with consent granted) were professionally transcribed and then analysed for emergent themes that included responses to the core concerns of this part of the project: (a) the range and numbers of students and (b) the types of educational services required to meet the needs of at-risk and disengaged students.

Focus Groups

The aim of the focus groups was to centre participant responses on the topic of student dis/re/engagement, guided by discussion questions facilitated by an interviewer. In total, ten group interviews were conducted with representatives from across the range of stakeholder groups. All were single focused in that only one stakeholder set participated in each, although groups such as the education support office and community agencies were represented by members with a variety of different roles. In some cases, follow-up telephone interviews were held with those wanting, but unable to participate. As with the individual interviews, the same discussion questions were used across the groups, with each set tailored for the particular set of stakeholders. Box 3.2 includes the questions used in the student focus groups.

Box 3.2 Focus group discussion questions (students)

1. To start with, please talk about what you like most about school—what really engages you and makes you want to come to school?
2. What does being engaged at school mean to you? (Prompt: How often do you feel totally absorbed/engrossed in your learning at school?) What does it feel like for you to be totally engrossed in your learning?
3. If someone was to look into your classroom when you (and your classmates) are totally engrossed in your work, what would they see?
4. Please talk about any particular subjects that really engage you in your learning.
 - a. Please tell me in what ways you've done well in that subject.
 - b. Why do you think you did well in that subject?

5. What types of programs have helped you to feel/be engaged at school? (Prompts: e.g., in sports, science, hobbies, pastoral care, etc.)
6. Please tell me what you like least about school.
7. What type of things have stopped you from learning or put you off learning at school?
8. Do you think that the school values good academic outcomes for all students, not just some? In what ways do they show this? (How do you know?)
9. Please talk about what works best for you in the way that a teacher teaches their class and engages you in the lesson.
10. What makes a really engaging lesson for you?
11. What makes a really engaging teacher? (Prompt: What skills make a really engaging teacher?)
12. What do your teachers do to encourage you to participate in class?
13. What do your teachers do that discourages you from participating in class?
14. What makes a really engaging school for you (e.g., what is it about the whole school culture that makes you want/not want to come to school?)
15. How do the school leaders (e.g., the Principal, Deputy Principal) show that they care about students at this school and how well they are doing?
16. How well do you feel that you have a sense of belonging (fit in) at this school?
 - a. [If well] What does that mean to you, to feel you belong (fit in) here?
 - b. [If not well] What would help you to be able to feel that you belong (fit in) better here at school?
17. My last question is about what would suit you best for your learning. What two or three things do you think would make learning and being at school a really engaging and good experience for you?

Focus group discussions, which lasted between one and two and a half hours, were recorded (with consent) for data transcription, analysis and interpretation. The findings both added to and elaborated on the

emergent themes from the interviews, as well as generated new themes in response to the aims of the study.

Site Visits

Five school sites were nominated by the Department of Education Office and the research team contacted each school to arrange mutually suitable times for the visits. The purpose of the site visits was to both observe schools' engagement initiatives and innovations and to seek perspectives and views on student dis/re/engagement from a range of stakeholders, in formal (e.g., interviews and focus groups) and informal settings (e.g., class observations and walk-arounds). Criteria for the selection of the sites aimed for diversity in terms of location, socio-economic status (SES), school size and the types of engagement programs available.

Schools were requested to select a range of participants who would potentially offer a richness and diversity of perspectives on student engagement. Interviews were conducted with school principals, teachers and students. Attempts to secure parents were largely unsuccessful with only two participating; similarly, attempts to secure former students were unsuccessful. Additional challenges included the absence of some participants on the day we visited and this impacted on the number of interviews we were able to conduct.

Data Analysis

In our analyses of interviews with stakeholders, we sought to focus on key ideas emanating from the database as a whole. Due to time constraints and the qualitative nature of this research we did not have equal numbers of representatives from every stakeholder group. Nevertheless we achieved data saturation on the key themes, thereby ensuring that the main findings reflect the most frequent views expressed.

Analysis of the interview data resulted in themes around student engagement of extreme importance not only to the educational jurisdiction under study but also to schooling more broadly. As Coffey and

Atkinson (1996) point out, the delineation of the particular within a study of this nature is informed by an understanding of more general forms and processes—particularly by way of international research—and, therefore, it is appropriate to make generalisations to the global context that remain grounded empirically in the local.

To this end, and before moving to the key themes that emerged from the research, we discuss the nature and extent of student disengagement as identified by participants in this study. This is important in that it can represent a problem for key stakeholders who need to be able to define what student disengagement is before determining its prevalence and acting in ways to mitigate against it.

Quantifying the Problem

After consulting a wide variety of stakeholders in the SEC study, it remained problematic to attempt to quantify the numbers of young people in the jurisdiction's high schools who were deemed to be at risk or disengaged from learning. On the one hand, this was because of the nature of the jurisdiction and the way that disadvantage was (and is) largely spread very thinly across its districts. While there might be some areas with higher numbers of low SES students, it needs to be recognised that every high school will have varying and changing numbers of young people who require variable kinds of extra support from one year to the next. On the other hand, this is because, according to the literature on young adolescents and schooling, the transition from primary to high school places all students at risk in highly individualised ways (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2012). Thus we contend that any model of support developed should use this notion as its starting point.

Defining the Problem

It is important to note that terms such as *at risk* and *disengaged* were subjectively interpreted by adult participants in the SEC study, who nominated diverse indicators that included non-attendance, school failure, non-compliance, non-participation, trauma, mental illness, social

anxiety, and conflict. Regular attendance at school was seen by stakeholders to be vital to learning re-engagement, given the right environment, provisions and teachers. Among other factors, poor literacy skills, along with low sense of self-efficacy, were seen to commonly lead to externalising behaviours in the form of non-compliance, avoidance and conflict. Reasons provided for non-attendance ranged from transport issues to mental health issues (particularly anxiety), to parents needing help at home or not seeing the purpose of education, to trauma. Participants believed that there was a need to address attendance early before it became entrenched. Furthermore, they referred to the need for early intervention, in primary school, to identify and support at-risk students and to alleviate the disengagement of students, particularly as they transitioned to high school.

Mental health issues, including social anxiety, depression, suicide ideation and attempted suicide, were cited as particularly predominant among at-risk and disengaged students. Many adult participants spoke of the impact of various kinds of trauma on students; citing this in conjunction with low SES backgrounds, family dysfunction, abuse and neglect. Deemed problematic in this regard was the availability of health and other support personnel, numbers of personnel, timeliness, regularity of visits, and consistency of personnel approaches. According to a number of participants, students often seemed to reach crisis point before being able to access the kinds of counselling and/or psychological support needed, with teachers commonly placed in the position of doing their best yet without having the in-depth expertise required.

Views were expressed that not all learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia) are identified early (e.g., in primary school) nor catered for. Low levels of literacy skills in particular were identified as a significant problem for at-risk and disengaged students. While it was evident that there are some students whose struggle with learning is a strong factor in schooling disengagement, there are others who are insufficiently challenged by the current school curriculum and disengage through a perceived lack of curriculum rationale and relevance, and the apparent disconnect between their learning and their aspirations. Other students were identified as highly intelligent but not interested in school or the curriculum; this was particularly evident in some of the student interviews. Many participants said they felt that, as long as students were attending

school, their needs could be addressed and that the real problem lay in attracting back those who no longer attended school.

Number of At-Risk and Disengaged Students

Before beginning data collection, we sought information from school leaders about the numbers of students they deemed to be at risk or disengaged in their schools, as well as the measures they used to identify these particular students. To enable consistency in responses, we also asked them to characterise their definition of the terms *at-risk* and *disengaged*. Responses were received from five of the 22 school leaders, and one leader provided anecdotal information.

Identification measures varied across the schools; however, common practices included suspension data, attendance data, school grades, and tests of literacy and numeracy levels. Particularly for at-risk students, identification measures included referrals from teachers, parents/carers, Student Engagement and Learning Team (SELT), year level coordinators, other students, and external agencies. Two schools indicated that at-risk students included those with disabilities, learning difficulties, mental health issues and behavioural difficulties. Students who had disengaged from learning were mostly identified by suspension data, attendance data, school grades, behavioural issues and academic progress. One school principal identified a system-wide issue relating to the collection of individual data on disengaged students, stating that “[the] system-wide survey provides good evidence for cohort engagement and disengagement but no individual data is collected.” Table 3.2 summarises the school leaders’ responses on the numbers and identification methods used to identify at-risk and disengaged students in their school context.

Snapshot Responses About Causes of Disengagement

Included below are indicative responses to questions about the causes of disengagement, as identified by school principals in the data collection phase of the SEC study.

Table 3.2 School leaders' responses on the numbers and identification methods used to identify at-risk and disengaged students

Schooling context*	Level of engagement	No. of students	Definition	Identification measures/practices
1. High school within a P-10 school	At risk		Multi-generational dysfunction evident, leading to lack of parental support. Indicators including: truancy, beginning drug use, threats of violence, bullying, academic results dropping	Suspensions, attendance, grades
	Disengaged		Non-attendance, violence, verbal abuse of staff, vandalism, theft	Suspensions, attendance, grades
2. P-10 multi campus school (answers in reference to Year 7-10)	At risk	80	Those students who are not meeting their potential, anomalies in learning, attendance or behaviour data	Tests: Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT), Middle Years Ability Test (MYAT) Reports
	Disengaged	11	Students who are Tier 3 and beyond for who supports have not worked or support can't be found/accessed	Data: Transition data, Attendance data, Wellbeing Data Data: Suspension, Catch up Lunch Data, Attendance Effectiveness of programs Case management data External agency minutes SELT referrals
3. High school	At risk	16	Drop in participation in school—academic, social and extra-curricular activities. Students start to lose their sense of connection with school. They don't see learning as particularly purposeful or relevant to their lives. In early adolescence, the loss or fracturing of social connectedness is also a significant factor	Referrals from teachers, parents, year coordinators and other students External agency referrals

(continued)

Table 3.2 (continued)

Schooling context*	Level of engagement	No. of students	Definition	Identification measures/practices
4. High school	Disengaged	14	Disengaged students typically have low attendance, low literacy and/or numeracy and little or no interest in school and often want to leave school. They have negative interactions with peers and consistently present behaviour issues manifesting in violence, aggressive 'bullying' behaviours or they completely withdraw socially from others	Attendance and behaviour data Academic results, progress reports
			At risk of cognitive, physical or emotional harm or poor development in these areas	Diagnosed disability but not meeting Individual Learning Plan (ILP) goals. Learning difficulties (e.g., dyslexia), psychological difficulties (anxiety, depression) and/or behavioural difficulties that are impacted on their ability to experience success both personally and academically. This includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • difficult home or families situations, including young carers • students with major illnesses (excluding psychological) or siblings of these • transgender students
	Disengaged	Year 7–2 Year 8–1 Year 9–3 Year 10–4	Disengaged from academic learning and socially interactions	Poor or no attendance at school or individual classes. Unwillingness to engage in learning

(continued)

Table 3.2 (continued)

Schooling context*	Level of engagement	No. of students	Definition	Identification measures/practices
5. High school	At risk	25% of student population	A student who has a significantly higher likelihood of not completing compulsory schooling or being disconnected from their peers due to a broad range of issues usually referred to as the circumstances of their life (family background, carer role, mental health needs, household income, domestic violence, etc.)	Literacy and numeracy achievement testing/levels, grades, attendance, parent/carer meetings, teacher identification and student self-identification
	Disengaged	5–10% of student population are behaviourally disengaged Emotionally, socially and intellectually the numbers would be much higher, say, 40–60%, maybe even higher if you consider all the students who are passively engaged in learning	There is a continuum of disengaged—passive participation in class to aggressive threatening behaviours towards staff and other students	Limited/No literacy and numeracy progress. Frequency and intensity of behaviour issues in classrooms and on the playground. Grades, attendance. For broader disengagement, system wide survey provides good evidence for cohort engagement and disengagement, but no individual data collected

*Response rate 5/22

This principal highlighted the increasing numbers of students with anxiety and a sense of isolation in the school context:

Certainly something that's really becoming more apparent in the last few years for students becoming disengaged is this sense of being anxious and isolated. Anxiety and isolation are really becoming something that is quite striking, far more than 10 years ago. That's to do with, I guess, feeling part of school, part of school community, part of the student body. I'm sort of thinking that things that can help a student feel integrated and involved and engaged in a cohort would be very beneficial and that would be, for me, things like programs and the time for programs that would have students of particular year groups—or not even year groups, you could actually do it across year groups to have peer support as well.

In the following comments, the issue of the complexity of defining disengagement is raised, as is the effectiveness of teachers in recognising the signs of disengagement:

We use the term often, don't we?—disengaged learners and so forth. I guess in the simplest sense—it's a complex thing—but in the simplest sense it is about losing that connection with learning, with their nurturing and development as a young person through education. So how that manifests itself or what the indicators are could be many and varied. I think schools are very, very good—teachers are particularly good at picking up on what those blips on the radar are. They can take a variety of different forms.

The issue of multigenerational dysfunction is noted here:

In terms of agency of the school to help those children to engage in the school is usually typified by multigenerational dysfunction. The police now tell us that they've been working with those families for three generations. The outcomes are the same for the children in that third or fourth generation.

In this high performing school, the principal comments on the importance of supporting those who are not achieving academically:

It might be that they're not connected with peers or that they're not connected with teachers or they're not connected with the teaching and learning that goes on. Because we are a very high performing school there is an enormous focus on academic success. I'm very aware and my student services team are very aware of the students who don't have strengths in that area [and who] are at risk of disengagement because they don't feel that they fit.

Coming through clearly in these and other comments was the focus that principals place on understanding the key issues around student engagement and in being proactive in dealing with associated problems.

Schooling Responses

Again drawing from the principal data, the following extracts exemplify the types of responses provided about how schools can, and do engage students.

This principal emphasised the importance of providing and valuing alternative pathways to the academic route:

Particularly for our upper year kids, Year 9 and particularly Year 10 kids, the role that all work experience and careers officer play ... is huge in terms of supporting those children and often their parents in understanding that we as a school or a system value a vocational pathway as much as we might value an academic pathway. In our context that's actually really tricky because there is this implied value on academic success. So, the time that we devote to—the time allowance that we give to our careers and work experience coordinator is essential in supporting those families and those kids.

Flexibility is considered crucial by this principal:

I think the flexibility around the response is the key element to that; and the idea that the complexity of education today is dramatically different to what it used to be. And so having the capacity to be flexible for those students where school is the problem. And what do you adjust and how do you adjust it, to actually make it appealing for them to make it

something that they can connect with and belong with? [This] is critical to having success.

Here we see the issue of school curriculum and pedagogy being raised, particularly in relation to the need to make them personally meaningful and relevant to students:

Curriculum needs to be able to accommodate more self-direction, more connection to student interest, I think. ... Pedagogy—again, it needs to be more student centred, typically less talk-type thing and more about getting the students doing the work and engaging in that particular passion or interest that they have and try to do their best.

Relationship building was key to this principal's success in strengthening student engagement:

But when I went to that school some eight years ago we had nearly 400 suspensions in the first year. So, it was all about punitive justice, suspensions. Really, it was just—there was a whole element of culture there that we had to shift. ...But the point is that it was the relationships that were required to bring that change.

Leading on from these snapshots, we now move to a description of the YAEL Model and include a selection of the most prominent themes that emerged from the full sets of interview data collected from the range of stakeholders represented in the SEC study.

The YAEL Model

In developing the YAEL Model (Fig. 3.1), the overall intent was to provide a holistic model of schooling support for all students, and with increasing levels of assistance and alternative educational pathways for students with additional behavioural, emotional, psychological, and educational needs. In doing so, the Model points to core components for enhanced engagement for all young adolescent

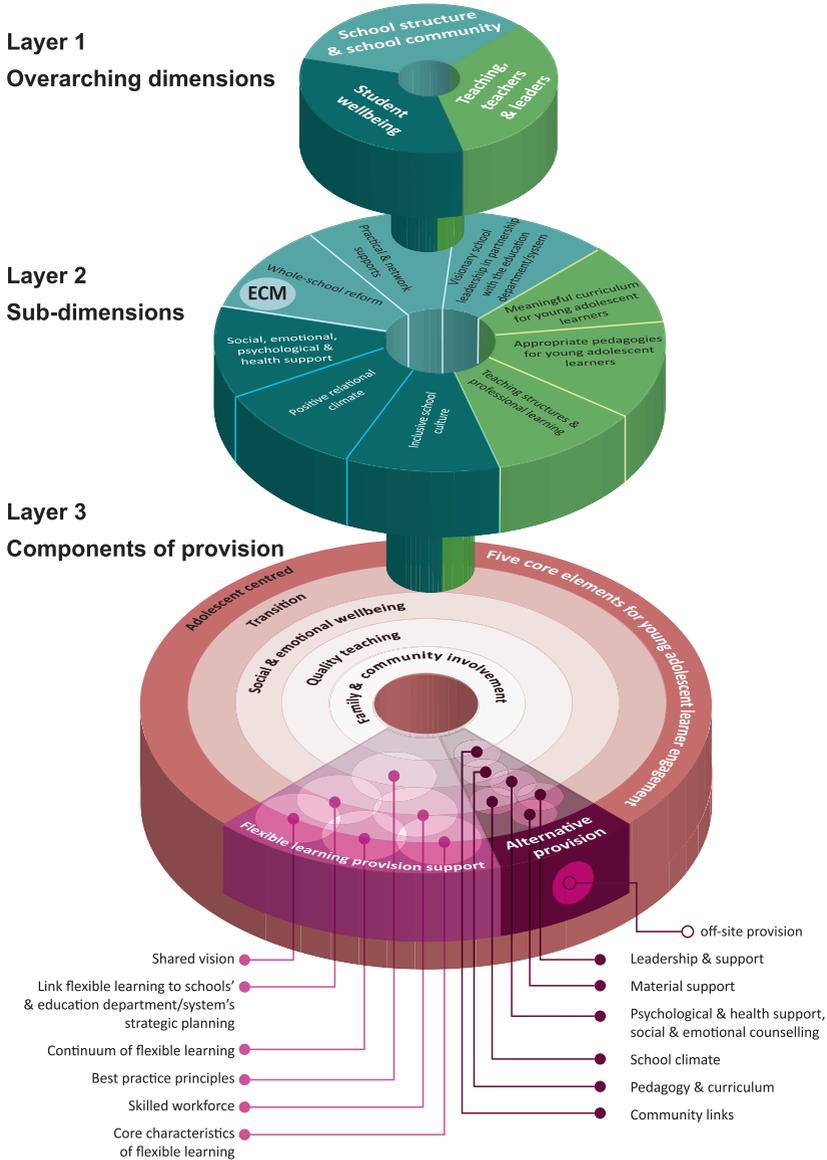


Fig. 3.1 The Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning Model

learners and then progresses to in-school flexible options; non-government agency partnerships; and alternative educational programs in concert with a variety of types of support for disengaged students who may have a range of complex learning needs, exhibit behaviours that are challenging or aggressive, or have additional social, health or welfare support needs.

The following sections present a guide to understanding the Model in terms of the elements of best practice in educational re/engagement discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, and contextualised within the specific locale of a large educational jurisdiction and the perspectives of a broad range of key stakeholders. In relation to the latter, while we listened to all who were free to be interviewed and embedded their views, where possible, in constructing the final version of the Model, we were strongly guided by signature educational research in respect of teaching young adolescent learners, particularly those from diverse backgrounds and those who may be marginalised due to a range of social welfare indicators.

Rationale for the Model

As the SEC study proceeded through reviews of literature, examinations of existing schooling support systems locally, nationally and internationally, and analysis of the data collected from key stakeholders in the educational jurisdiction, we experimented with various representations of the key components necessary to re/engage young adolescents in learning.

The starting point of the Model, represented as *Layer 1: Overarching dimensions*, is a school culture that seeks to provide requisite levels of support to *all* young adolescent learners. The second and third layers of the Model have been strongly shaped by national and international evidence of ‘what works’ for young people on a sliding scale from the risk of disengagement to behaviours that are so unacceptable in mainstream schooling contexts that they warrant students being removed to an external alternative educational site. In terms of numbers of students with needs along the continuum of support, data suggest that these should decrease across this continuum of behaviour, whereas, the need

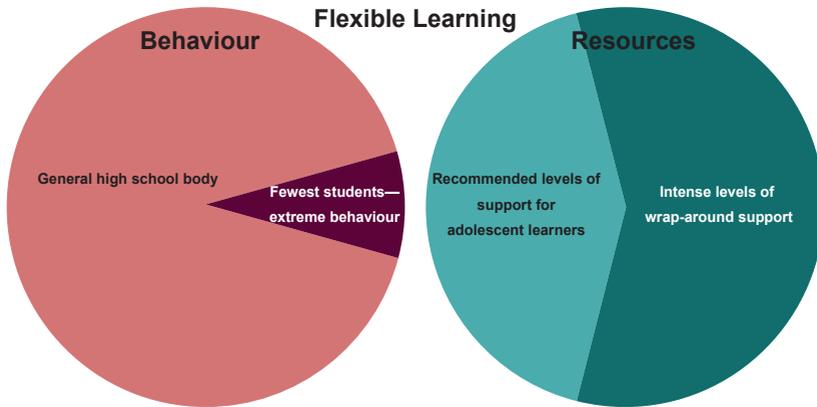


Fig. 3.2 Resource allocation and prevalence of support—an inverse relationship

for student support and flexible learning provision increases across the continuum of behaviour, as depicted in Fig. 3.2.

Therefore, the Model is not a 'one size for all'; rather, it is intended to provide a range of learning and support options that respond to the varying and changing needs of students over time.

Enabling Principles

There are a number of enabling principles that need to be considered to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of the implemented Model. Fundamentally, the Model represents a *strengths-based approach* to assessing students' academic and personal needs, beginning with what students can do and building from there. As discussed in previous chapters, research in the field of student engagement is often approached from an angle of deficit, with a focus on how to manage students who have already become, or who are at imminent risk of becoming disengaged. As has been widely argued (e.g., De Jong & Griffiths, 2006; Te Riele, 2007), these types of approaches tend to position disengaged students as deficient in one or a number of areas, and in need of remediation or intervention. The YAEL Model conceptualises student engagement differently, premised on the understanding

that the way schooling is currently constructed plays either a direct or contributory role in marginalising some young adolescents. The Model thus approaches student engagement from an innovative and proactive stance through focusing on aspects of school and teaching improvement, rather than student deficit.

Such thrusts towards improvement cannot rest solely under the auspices of the school or even the school system. It has become increasingly evident through case studies and the international literature that it should be incumbent upon *school communities, families and their immediate community networks to take co-responsibility with schools* in responding to the challenges of student dis/engagement and in cooperatively developing grass-roots responses to the generic components of the Model. Cranston et al. (2016) refer to student disengagement as a wicked problem, involving issues of a highly complex educational, social and cultural nature. It is a problem that requires input by a range of stakeholders from a number of different angles. Consider this indicative statement by a SELT (pseudonym) interviewee in the SEC study:

Often times ... the issues are much bigger than education ... they're really a social issue. For example, if we've invested in an engagement officer and tried to work with the schools as best we can to get kids back into school but they're not coming to school because of trauma or drug issues in the home, or alcoholism or mental health, those are concerns that are bigger than our scope is to service sometimes. (SELT focus group participant)

As the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) (2007) points out, "Wicked problems hardly ever sit conveniently within the responsibility of any one organisation. ... They require action at every level—from the international to the local—as well as action by the private and community sectors and individuals" (n.p.). Clearly, in problems of this magnitude, there are political and policy considerations that must also be taken into account. While beyond the immediate scope of the Model, politics and policy do bear an impact on the conceptualisation of its overarching dimensions (Layer 1), to which we turn shortly.

At the local level, in contexts where it is feasible, young adolescents are best served when there is *a comprehensive, cohesive interagency approach and collaboration among schools*. This type of culture can enhance students' experiences as they transition between schools (e.g., primary to high school), as well as promote the establishment of shared understandings among stakeholders (e.g., schools and allied support services) about student engagement in learning. Shared services and resources are of little avail if their ambit is not understood; to wit:

I look in there, it's the hotchpotch of what services are there. If you could just map them—it would be like what you're trying to do is get a map in a region. I'm trying to look in [name of school district] and say, okay, what are people actually doing [there]? The PCYC [Police Citizens Youth Clubs] are in there. The youth engagement teams are in there. We've got messengers in there. We've got ... I think if it's confusing for us, I can't imagine what it's like for a school. Absolutely confusing for schools. (Community agencies focus group participant)

Through a comprehensive and collaborative approach, issues of dis/engagement can be looked at across the whole school sector, from early childhood through to the end of high school, which is particularly important given the existing evidence of disengagement beginning in primary school (see, e.g., Cranston et al., 2016). Collaborative relationships and partnerships between school administration offices, schools and external alternative education providers can also prove particularly important for those small number of students whose behaviour does not respond to the range of supports provided by the YAEL Model.

Along all stages of the Model, attention needs to be given to *student voice and parental consultation* so that students can make informed choices to opt into different learning choices, rather than opting out. Today's students commonly want to have a say in how they learn (Taylor & Parsons, 2011; Willms, Friesen, & Milton, 2009): "Students want their teachers to know how they learn. They want their teachers to take into account what they understand and what they misunderstand, and to use this knowledge as a starting place to guide their continued

learning” (Willms et al., 2009, p. 36). The following comments by a student in the SEC study are apposite:

My main concern is that teachers sometimes forget that they’re the main reason why we go to school. If a teacher gives us a bad impression about learning and knowledge then that’s going to destroy us because our parents—we see them for like probably six hours a day and the rest of the time we’re at school in front of a teacher. This person is going to lead me into the big world. So if he or she gives me a bad impression about learning is horrible or learning is too hard then that’s going to completely disengage you. Teachers need to inspire students because at the end of the day we see them more than our parents, five days a week. (High school student focus group participant)

Parental involvement and encouragement has also been identified as a key influencing factor in student engagement (Hay et al., 2016; Willms & Flanagan, 2007). Parents need to be made aware of the possible educational choices open to their children, as they have an influence on their children’s decisions from early in their school lives (Schnabel, Alfeld, Eccles, Koller, & Baumert, 2002).

It is important to ensure *positive framing of all components along the Model continuum* so that they are not perceived by students or others as inferior. In the case of flexible learning pedagogies, for example, the focus should be on the potential *benefits* that students will gain from intensified pedagogical approaches, and not the student *needs* that might result in their involvement in these approaches.

Further, *sufficient flexibility in the implementation of the Model* is required to enable students to transition in and out of classes and programs that suit their needs. For example, it is envisaged that some students, over the course of their high school years, might require a more targeted approach via flexible learning programs, yet still remain within the general classroom environment. They might move in and out of flexible learning and mainstream curricula and, if necessary, on-site alternative educational provision. Thus, the overlap of the flexible learning provision indicates that learning and support strategies can and should occur in both mainstream and alternative provision environments.

A Layered Ecosystem

The Model is conceived as a layered ecosystem of overarching dimensions, sub-dimensions and components of provision of educational support. Layer 1 of the Model comprises three overarching dimensions that provide the focus of student engagement. Couched within each of these overarching dimensions, at Layer 2, are their core, overlapping characteristics or sub-dimensions. Layer 3, the components of provision, is situated at the base of the Model and is informed intrinsically by the upper layers.



Fig. 3.3 Layer 1—overarching dimensions

Layer 1: Overarching Dimensions

Layer 1 of the Model (Fig. 3.3) comprises three overarching dimensions that provide the focus of student engagement: *school structure and school community*; *student wellbeing*; and *teaching, teachers and leaders*.

School Structure and School Community

Schools need to be structured in such a way that they encourage young adolescents to come to school and engage in learning. This cannot be done in isolation; rather, in what can be constructed as a symbiotic and mutually beneficial relationship, schools need to fit in with, draw benefit from, and give back to their own and the wider community. Hence, this is a dimension of engagement that encompasses myriad potential opportunities and barriers, many of which are context-specific. Let's consider some examples.

In their state-wide case studies into student retention beyond Year 10 in the Australian state of Tasmania, Cranston et al.'s (2016) findings included the following:

- The Department of Education at a systemic level, and individual schools and colleges have implemented a range of programs aimed at enhancing student (and family) engagement with education. However, often the fragmentation and lack of continuation of funding for such support programs impacts on their on-going availability;
- The physical separation of schools across primary to high school and high school to Year 11 and 12 college locations can present as a barrier to continuing in education for some students and their families;
- Perceived and real geographical isolation of students from schools and colleges are barriers for some students – accommodation and transport issues then become significant for some of them;
- Some students disengage from education well before transition points, such as primary to high school, and for some this occurs in early primary school; and
- College-centred issues act as barriers for some students in some locations. These include the college timetable, which results in high levels of free-time for some students; a lack of structure in learning (compared

with high school) that impacts negatively on some students (e.g., low engagement with studies and, for some, non-attendance). (p. 12)

American researchers Osher, Banks Amos, and Gonsoulin (2012), in their study of delinquent youths transitioning between institutions and alternative and community schools, generated findings that have wider implications for student engagement:

At the system level, a youth's successful transition is complicated by his or her high level of mobility. Given current policy and practice, this mobility makes it difficult to hold one jurisdiction or agency solely responsible for the youth's welfare. At the school level, there are often insufficient data available on alternative school outcomes with which to assess the effectiveness of their educational services, and neighbourhood schools often lack staff with the training and capacity to support the transition process. The lack of formal policies and practices in alternative settings and receiving schools regarding data use for monitoring, accountability, and alignment can adversely affect the sharing of information between these settings and comprehensive high schools about students' re-entry. This gap may also impede the timely transfer of student transcripts between alternative and comprehensive schools. Inattention to these factors by both the alternative schools and the receiving schools can compromise the likelihood of a successful transition. Effective alternative settings address this disconnect by reaching out to the receiving schools. The alternative settings are successful when the receiving schools are receptive to the lessons learned about how to create conditions for success for returning students. (pp. 3–4)

In the SEC study, stakeholders noted a number of factors they believed potentially contributed to disengagement:

SEC Case Study

School Structure and School Community

A number of participants commented on the generally traditional schooling structures, such as timetabling, streaming and subject groupings, as potential contributing factors to the alienation of some young people.

Some of the student participants, especially, were very critical of the policy of streaming students, stating that they felt this made them feel “dumb” and “stupid.” Adult participants in particular noted that the transition from primary to high school could be problematic for some young adolescents in terms of structural factors. They also believed that sending students off-site for periods of alternative education created problems when they returned to their home school, and that those students soon reverted to old behaviours, which affected the overall school environment.

These illustrations underscore the common misalignment between what students require and what they encounter at school. In 2007, Rudduck expressed concern that, during the previous twenty or so years, schools had changed less in their regimes and patterns of relationship than young people had changed, noting that:

Schools have tended to offer less challenge, responsibility, and autonomy than many students are accustomed to in their lives outside school. We need a more accomplished way of recognizing young people’s capabilities, hooking into their thinking, and harnessing their insights. (Rudduck, 2007, p. 588)

There is significant evidence to suggest that, more than ten years on from Rudduck’s claims, the issues she identified in her work persist, with many schools yet to adapt to provide the continuum of support required by twenty-first century young adolescent learners.

Student Wellbeing

The centrality of student wellbeing to engagement in schooling and academic achievement is incontrovertible (see, e.g., Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2013; Pollard & Lee, 2003). In their OECD report on the analysis framework for student wellbeing in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2015 study, Borgonovi and Pál (2016) note that:

Over the past decade, there has been growing interest in students’ well-being and in comparing countries, not only in terms of how well

students fare academically, but also in how well education systems promote students' overall development and quality of life. (p. 7)

The five dimensions of wellbeing measured in the 2015 study were: cognitive, psychological, physical, social and material.

In Australia, as discussed in Chapter 1, ACER (2012) identifies student wellbeing as one of six guiding principles for junior high school teaching, and many schools and school systems across the country have begun to make matters related to student wellbeing a priority. The Queensland Department of Education, for example, has developed a student learning and wellbeing framework (<http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/healthy/docs/student-learning-wellbeing-framework.pdf>) for implementation in schools across the state. Similarly, the New South Wales Department of Education has developed a wellbeing framework for schools (<https://education.nsw.gov.au/student-wellbeing/whole-school-approach/wellbeing-framework-for-schools>), which includes a self-assessment tool to assist schools to understand wellbeing, to self-assess their current wellbeing approaches and to make informed judgments and decisions about future approaches.

In the YAEL Model, student wellbeing is represented as one of the three overarching dimensions because of the crucial role it plays in the engagement of young adolescents. It can be characterised in numerous ways; for our purposes, we subscribe to the definition provided by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2008):

Student wellbeing is strongly linked to learning. A student's level of wellbeing is indicated by satisfaction with life at school, engagement with learning and social-emotional behaviour. It is enhanced when evidence-informed practices are adopted by schools in partnership with families and community. Optimal student wellbeing is a sustainable state characterised by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimisation and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences. (p. 9)

Linked to student wellbeing is a *sense of belonging at school* (SOBAS), which (as discussed in other chapters) has emerged as a focal area for practitioners and researchers in recent years.

Teaching, Teachers and Leaders

The impact of teaching, teachers and leaders on levels of student engagement and achievement in schools has been demonstrated to the point that it has become almost self-evident. As shown above in Fig. 3.3, *teaching, teachers and leaders* constitutes one of the overarching dimensions in Layer 1 of the YAEL Model, with Layers 2 and 3 including approaches and strategies conducive to *high-quality* teaching and *best practice* teachers and leaders. Although each plays different roles in student engagement, teaching, teachers and leaders form a logical grouping, as evident in the findings of the SEC study specifically and across the literature more broadly.

In their US study, Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) came up with a number of suggestions for what might help, depending on context and student need, to stem high levels of high-school “dropout.” According to these authors, schools should work towards:

- improving teaching and curricula to make school more relevant and engaging;
 - enhancing the connection between school and work;
 - improving instruction, and access to supports, for struggling students;
 - building a school climate that fosters academics;
 - ensuring that students have a strong relationship with at least one adult in the school; and
 - improving the communication between parents and school.
- (Bridgeland et al., 2006, pp. v–vi)

Similarly, the Australian ACER report mentioned above includes quality teaching and leadership among six guiding principles for effective junior high schooling.

The provision of engagement approaches and strategies through effective teaching, teachers and leaders has been widely advocated, prompting many experts to call for school reform. Americans Rumberger (2011) and Theobald (2009) and Australians Mills and McGregor (2010) are of this number, arguing that approaches to education, as currently constructed, do not satisfactorily match the needs of at-risk students and thus contribute to their disengagement.

In the SEC study, there was an acknowledgement across the stakeholder groups of the importance of tailoring teaching to the needs and interests of young adolescents, as exemplified in these comments by a high school principal:

... it needs to be more student centred, typically less talk type thing and more about getting the students doing the work and engaging in that particular passion or interest that they have and try to do their best. More time on task is what I'd say but I'd say that for all education everywhere; that's primarily what we need to be looking at. (High School Principal interview participant)

During young adolescence, students increasingly seek more autonomy to explore their worlds and interests. Student participants in the SEC study were articulate in their desire to do that, but stated that they often feel they have no control over the manner and content of their learning:

You don't really get a choice over what you learn. ... I know that everything that we learn is important, it's just some teachers aren't good at teaching. I've had teachers which I've been [with] for years and I haven't learnt much... I feel like teachers treat you one of two ways, they either treat you like kids or they treat you like adults because being treated like a teenager is kind of a mix in-between and it's more difficult to treat someone like a teenager. Since some teenagers are harder to deal with you have to compensate for them. I've had teachers that just treat every single person like a Year 3 and I've had teachers that just treat everyone like a uni kid. I think that you've got to find the balance in there to get the kids to learn something. (High school student interview participant)

By contrast, we also heard from young adolescents in schools, including one school in particular where project-based learning is a featured pathway, who are engaged and focused on their personal projects.

The importance of having the right leader/s in the right school working collaboratively with a strong and capable staff, which was underscored by many in the study, aligns with commonly-held understandings about school leadership, such as those articulated

by Shaddock, Packer, and Roy (2015): “School leaders play a crucial role in establishing and maintaining good relationships, shaping school culture, developing the attitudes actions of staff, and influencing their colleagues’ interactions with students and families and colleagues” (p. 15).

The SEC study thus served to confirm commonly-found themes in the literature about teaching, teachers and leaders, as well as about the other over-arching dimensions of the YAEL Model (*school structure and school community* and *student wellbeing*). In Chapter 4, we turn to a closer examination of these themes in describing Layer 2: sub-dimensions of the Model.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided key understandings about modelling a continuum of support for young adolescent learners. Specifically, it has:

- described and justified the methodological approach used to develop the YAEL Model, which drew from the international literature on student engagement and retention, as well as the findings from an empirical study into student engagement conducted across a large Australian educational jurisdiction;
- discussed key themes related to young adolescent learners’ engagement and achievement in twenty-first century schooling contexts across the globe;
- introduced the multi-dimensional YAEL Model and elucidated its significance as a whole-school approach to student engagement;
- demonstrated how the Model is appropriate to the needs of current-day young adolescents across a broad range of schooling contexts, and shown ways in which these needs can be met; and
- focused on different aspects and characteristics of the overarching dimensions of *school structure and school community*, *student wellbeing*, and *teaching, teachers and leaders*—which constitute Layer 1 of the Model.

Research Implications

The Model is currently being implemented across the educational jurisdiction in which the SEC study was undertaken. A mixed-method evaluation of the Model will take place from the second year of the roll-out, providing anticipated insights into the outcomes of the implementation project, as well as elucidating levels of significance of the Model in enhancing student engagement and retention in the SEC study context. Implications for further research include: studying the integration of the Model across different international contexts; adapting the Model to the needs of younger learners (e.g., primary school students), and older students, such as those in senior high school and beyond; and researching the importance of the Model to teacher professional learning in regards to student engagement and academic growth.

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4

Core Characteristics of Student Engagement

Introduction

The preceding chapter described how the three dimensions of *school structure and school community*, *student wellbeing* and *teaching, teachers and leaders* are fundamental to the ways in which schools engage young adolescents in learning. As such, they constitute the superordinate layer (Layer 1) of the Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning (YAEL) Model. Couched within these three dimensions is a suite of interconnected sub-dimensions, which represent the core characteristics of the continuum of support that has been shown to most effectively address the needs of *all* young adolescent learners, as outlined in Chapter 3. The purpose of this chapter is to describe these sub-dimensions, which comprise Layer 2 of the Model, and demonstrate their importance to school innovation and improvement agendas for student engagement and retention. The graphic representation of the Model (repeated in this chapter at Fig. 4.1) shows how the layering of the Model is conceptualised.

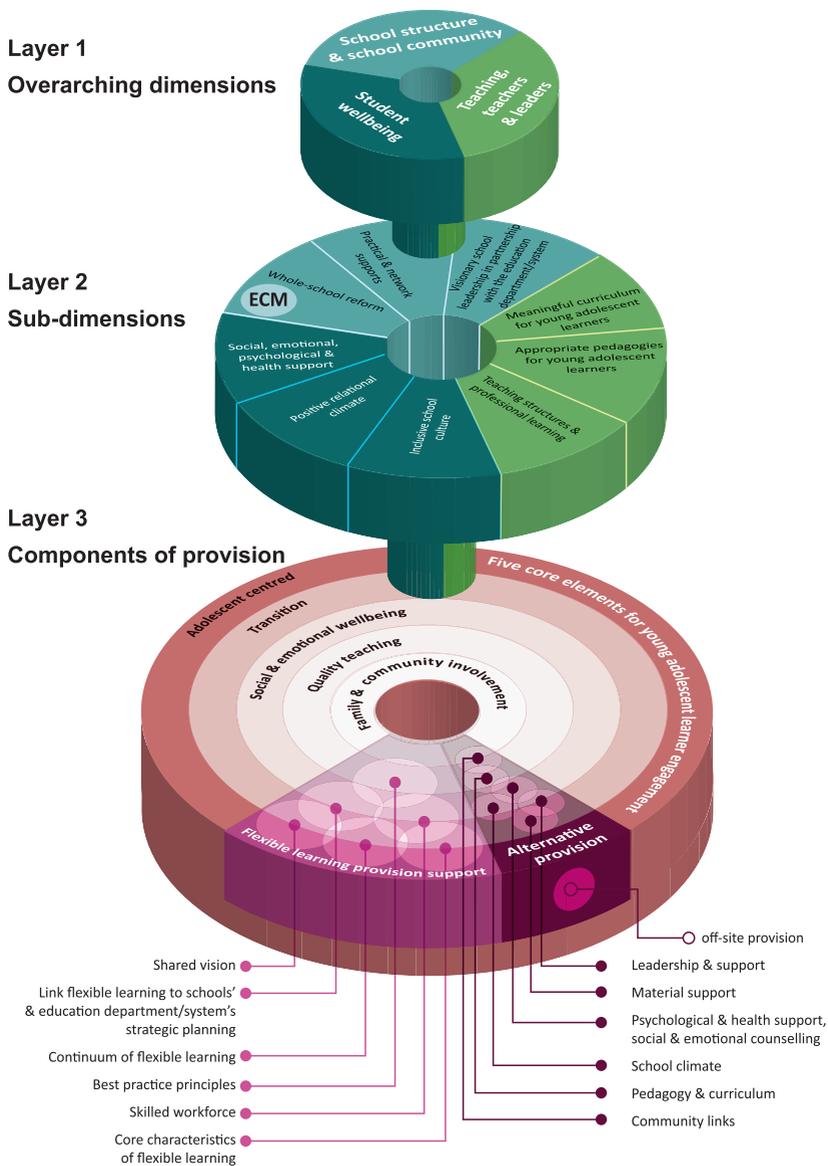


Fig. 4.1 The Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning Model

Layer 2: Sub-dimensions of the YAEL Model

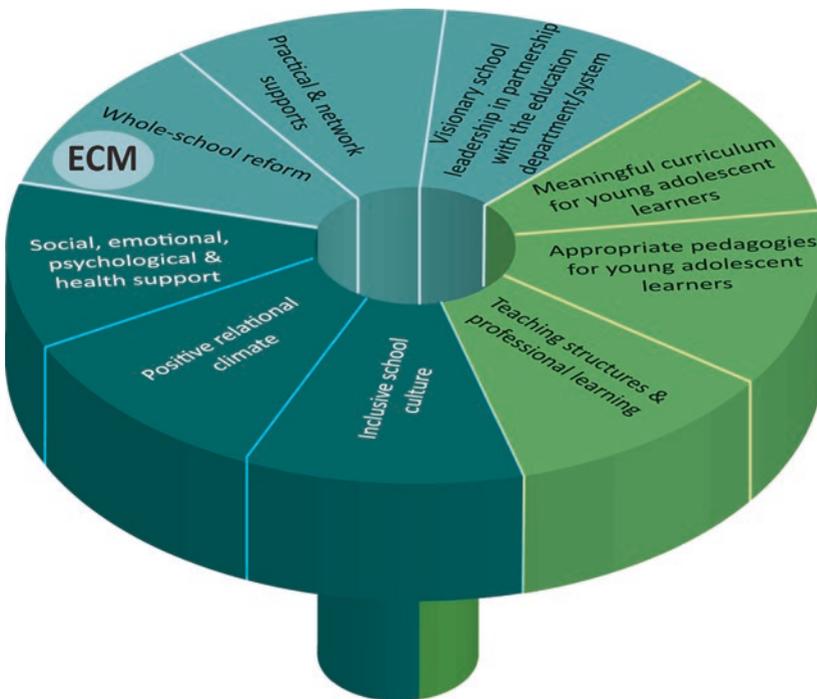
Situated within each of the three overarching dimensions that provide the focus of student engagement are core characteristics or sub-dimensions. They are situated at Layer 2 of the Model (Fig. 4.2).

Table 4.1 also displays the sub-dimensions, in relation to the overarching dimensions.

We now discuss each sub-dimension in turn.

Whole-School Reform

As has been made clear above and in previous chapters, issues around student engagement in learning are complex. Keeping young adolescents at



(ECM - Educational Change Model; see Ch 6)

Fig. 4.2 Layer 2—Sub-dimensions

Table 4.1 Dimensions and sub-dimensions

Overarching dimensions (Layer 1)	Sub-dimensions (Layer 2)
School structure and school community	Whole-school reform Practical and network supports Visionary school leadership in partnership with the education department/system
Teaching, teachers and leaders	Meaningful curriculum for young adolescent learners Appropriate pedagogies for young adolescent learners Teaching structures and professional learning
Student wellbeing	Inclusive school structure Positive relational climate Social, emotional, psychological and health support

school requires a multi-dimensional and long-term, visionary approach at the whole-of-school level, and should be positioned as a key consideration of whole-school reform. The Educational Change Model (ECM) (see Chapter 6) has been included in conjunction with the YAEL Model specifically because of the centrality of reform to raising levels of student engagement and attainment.

Despite an increased focus during the past few decades on the whole child, rather than just their cognitive growth and educational attainment (Social Policy Research Centre, 2010), we remain overly reliant on measures of educational performance as indicators of engagement, and we can only move beyond this through avenues of major reform. The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (2014) claims we lack appropriate measures of engagement in learning and that:

Major reform is needed. The current focus gives predominant emphasis to educational attainment. However, educational attainment is best achieved through an emphasis on engagement of children and youth in learning. (p. 13)

According to ARACY (2014), major reform should focus on enhancing engagement through a stronger emphasis on the use of personalised learning approaches, information technologies and social media. Similar reform innovations are also advocated in the recent *Report*

of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools (Gonski et al., 2018). This federally-commissioned review focused on actions to improve *student outcomes* as an approach to school improvement and reform. In the YAEL Model, by contrast, the conception of school reform is premised, first and foremost, on *student engagement*, based on the understanding that when students are engaged behaviourally, emotionally and cognitively, high levels of achievement will follow. In our Student Engagement Continuum (SEC) empirical study, which informed the development of the Model (see Chapter 3), stakeholders stressed the importance of site-specific, whole-school solutions to maximise engagement and learning (see Box 4.1).

Box 4.1 SEC study—Whole-school reform

Participants in the SEC study were of the view that each individual school needs to tailor student engagement approaches to the requirements of the particular school context and to the needs of the young adolescents that it serves. At the same time, it was acknowledged that shared understandings need to be established through the education department and via school partnerships, if reform outcomes are to be viably sustained in the long term. Of particular note was the need for consistency in the provision of services provided by support personnel, such as Student Engagement and Learning Team (SELT) (pseudonym) staff and student counsellors. Both school staff and support personnel commented on the often inconsistent and sometimes ad hoc approach to the provision of support services, which they deemed to sit outside the parameters of current school reform agenda.

Emerging from across the empirical and theoretical work into student engagement is the issue of student voice. As reform agenda are actioned in and across schools, it is essential that students are supported in finding and using their voices. Put quite frankly, in the modern era of schooling, how can it be otherwise? If we are to best serve the learning needs of young adolescents, we need to hear from the young people themselves about what engages them, and what does not. This is not to suggest that the student voice is currently absent but, rather, that it needs to be made more centre stage in deliberations about how to get young adolescents engaged in, and excited about learning. As noted by UK researcher Jean Rudduck (2007):

School reform is not a question of a quick makeover to meet the requirements of the moment. It is not about a bit of liposuction to improve the school's grades profile. It is, instead, about reviewing the deep structures of schooling that hold habitual ways of seeing in place. We need urgently to review the goodness of fit between schools and young people—and their commentaries on what helps them to learn in school and what gets in the way of their learning will help. (p. 588)

Rudduck (2001, 2007) builds on the work of Hodgkin (1998), who argues that “students themselves have a huge potential contribution to make, not as passive objects but as active players in the education system” (p. 11). This sense of student agency or students as *active players* needs to become part and parcel of school reform measures.

Practical and Network Supports

The YAEL Model was initially developed as a unifying evidence-based framework that was congruent with the targeted jurisdiction's department of education and existing school network structure. Clearly, the practical and network support structures of individual schools vary according to an array of factors, and no two schools are ever exactly the same in terms of their support requirements. When implementing the Model, it is therefore important to undertake a contextual support needs analysis before ameliorating structures currently in place in the school or school network, as well as determining what is feasible in terms of the provision of sustainable support in the long term.

In some cases, support structures need to be developed from outside to within schools. In their report to the Victorian Government, *Re-engaging our kids: A framework for education provision to children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school*, professional services and auditing company Klynveld Peat Marwick Goerdeler (KPMG) (2009) provides a four-tiered approach to disengagement where the emphasis is placed squarely on “school networks and regions identifying and planning for the needs of their communities, drawing on the *what works* evidence to support the effective engagement of children” (p. 1).

Frameworks of this kind are predicated on the development of a shared vision among stakeholders about what it means to engage young people in learning. The same goals, together with common understandings about how to reach them, need to drive the actions of those in institutions, networks, agencies and elsewhere who come together to foster student engagement. Once established, these alliances should collaborate to consider the potential benefit, as well as the feasibility, sustainability and cost-effectiveness of proposed engagement measures. Too often, they are seen to flounder or fail, as Cranston et al. (2016) discovered in their study into retention in Tasmania mentioned previously. The problems identified by these researchers around the funding and integration of support services and programs represent a common thread in the literature. Canadian rural education researcher Dawn Wallin (2007), for example, found that educational funding formulae fail to meet the challenges of service delivery in rural and remote areas, and similar findings have been reported by Norwegians Baeck and Paulsgaard (2012) and Americans Brown and Schafft (2011).

A summary of the SEC study findings around practical and network supports is included in Box 4.2.

Box 4.2 SEC study—Practical and network supports

In the SEC study, differing views were expressed about how school-based and external personnel manage their roles in relation to student engagement responsibilities. For example, a SELT member raised the matter of policy compliance in schools, suggesting that students were sometimes referred on as a matter of correct procedure rather than through concern for the individual student:

Well, I just think that they wanted to make sure they ticked all the boxes and that. Yes, this is a child. They're at risk or there's a severe behaviour issue or whatever the situation, we need to let the [SELT] know about this. We're going to refer this ... because they were nervous of what actions they had to take with this child, how they can manage the situation. ... You could call it policy compliance, I guess. Yeah. (SELT focus group participant)

School teachers and leaders, by contrast, were in many cases critical of the level of access to support provided by the SELT teams, claiming that it was

inconsistent, with support often not available when needed. Some also questioned the effectiveness of bringing in SELT personnel; for example:

We have the [SELT] teams that deal with student engagement but they work at arm's length—it's not personalised, et cetera. They can be objective and they're obviously providing resources to the system but, then again, it's problematic on the ground because they don't have a relationship with the parents, they don't have a relationship with the kids. We generally engage them at a point when we can't solve the problem ourselves. So, it gets to that point and then goes to them and then, ultimately, I feel it comes back to us to deal with. (Year 11/12 college principal interview participant)

The multidisciplinary SELT teams play a key role in supporting students across the four districts of the jurisdiction. Teams include allied health personnel, such as occupational-, speech- and physio-therapists, psychologists and social workers. Members also include ex- and seconded teachers and leaders, with specialisations including behaviour support, disability support and student engagement. Teams provide support to schools on a referral basis, by working with schools and their staff to build their capacity to engage students in meaningful relevant learning. This work often involves students who are at greater risk of disengagement. It is concerning, then, to note the perceived disconnection found in this study between the schools' and SELTs' ways of working with young adolescents.

Family and community involvement also emerged in the study as highly beneficial to students' engagement in schooling, with many participants acknowledging the positive contributions made by family and community members and groups. Perceptions of the importance of developing and sustaining strong relationships between families, the community and schools were constantly reiterated. As Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, and Rumberger (2004) point out:

The decision to leave school early comes at the end of a long process and represents the culmination of many years of interaction between a young person, his or her parents, teachers, and the school and community contexts in which he or she develops. (p. 32)

This evidence-based finding, which is supported throughout the engagement literature, also appeared in our SEC study where participants were

of the clear view that responsibility for young people's education does not stop at the school gate.

There is also a broad literature about the provision of practical support to mitigate against student disengagement. The types of issues that must be addressed before young people can turn their minds to learning include:

- **Accommodation:** safe and supportive accommodation needs to be provided to students in need, including those who are geographically isolated from schools;
- **Availability of food:** some schools in the SEC study had closed their canteens, resulting in students sometimes going hungry or leaving the school grounds (often against school rules) to buy food;
- **Timetabling:** flexible timetabling, including the school day start and finish times, can be an incentive for young people to stay at school (see, e.g., Watson et al., 2013); and
- **Transport to and from school:** this is a challenge for some young adolescents, not only in terms of extending the school day (sometimes quite significantly), but also in regards to the social environment in public transport, for example, buses.

The provision of practical and network supports is particularly important for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, who have been shown to encounter greater physical, material and dispositional barriers to educational engagement and achievement than their more advantaged counterparts (Lamb, Jackson, Walstab, & Huo, 2015). Thus, it warrants us to reiterate the importance of considering school context and student demographics in the application of the YAEL Model.

Visionary School Leadership in Partnership with the Education Department/System

Reflecting the myriad influences of its function in schools, leaders/leadership is included twice in the Model. Under the dimension of *school*

structure and school community, as discussed here, is *visionary school leadership in partnership with the education department/system*. Earlier, in Layer 1, we outlined the overarching dimension of *teaching, teachers and leaders*. At that higher level of abstraction of Layer 1, leaders are included because of their influence across the sub-dimensions of meaningful curriculum, appropriate pedagogy and teaching structures/professional learning. At Layer 2, leadership is included as a core characteristic of the dimension of effective school structures and productive school communities. Box 4.3 provides an outline of issues associated with school leadership identified in the SEC study.

Box 4.3 SEC study—Visionary school leadership

The SEC research team discerned the need for a strengthened, integrated, coherent and more coordinated approach to addressing the needs of at-risk and disengaged students across the jurisdiction. As discussed above, this requires a collective approach across the education and community sectors, including the generation and consolidation of common understandings by and between different stakeholders about the provision of support for vulnerable young adolescents. An essential feature of this approach is that it is underpinned by a school-designed conceptual and implementation strategy emanating from visionary school leadership in partnership with the education department.

The endeavours of leaders to drive change in this approach risk being thwarted without a re-imagining of current partnership arrangements between the education department and schools and without the provision of departmental enablers to foster visionary school leadership. It is then incumbent on school leaders and the department to work together to raise awareness among and between stakeholder groups about how the leadership-driven conceptual and implementation strategy is enacted in each school.

Visionary leadership is thus crucial to the implementation of the YAEL Model. Nonetheless, it must be noted that the challenge for sector and school leaders in meeting the demands of a range of legislative and policy requirements is substantial. One difficulty, for example, is providing education for children with challenging behaviour while, at the same time, meeting safety requirements for other students and teachers. In the context of the SEC study, the education department has responded

to this challenge with a raft of measures to be implemented over several years in collaboration with Catholic Education, the state/territorial Association of Independent Schools and various support agencies and government departments. This is an example of the need for leaders to branch beyond the local in enacting their vision for the school.

Also problematic for current-day leaders is the top-down shift to regimes of standards-based practice and associated accountability measures in schools. In a report on alternative provision, exclusion and children's rights by the UK think tank Civitas, Tom Ogg and Emily Kaill (2010) make the observation that the current system of accountability, based on national testing and the publication of results allowing leagues tables-type comparisons, has driven educational leaders towards excluding students who will get in the way of a school's best academic performance.

One can see a similar concern among educators and youth workers working with young disengaged people in other Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Moving the perspective from changing the student to changing the school would appear to have more support from those working most closely with marginalised young people.

These types of challenges notwithstanding, visionary school leadership needs to take account of the different components of provision included in the YAEL Model: *five core elements for young adolescent engagement, flexible learning provision support, and alternative provision*. Importantly, school leaders must ensure there is an enabling school culture, including provision of a safe, risk-taking environment for teachers and others. As one of a number of predictable enablers to the reform process, enacted visionary leadership can be seen as pivotal to raising levels of student engagement. We elaborate on these points later in this and the coming chapters.

Meaningful Curriculum for Young Adolescent Learners

Three main issues in relation to curriculum engagement for young adolescent learners emerged from the SEC study. First, the Australian

Curriculum needs to be implemented in ways that are appropriate for the levels and needs of individual at-risk students. Study participants overwhelmingly felt that, in order to alleviate challenges associated with meeting the requirements of the perceived crowded curriculum, high schools should be enabled to pare back the Australian Curriculum, as appropriate for each school or cluster of schools. This would free up teachers to devote more time to differentiating learning and building positive relations with students. Across the stakeholder groups, many expressed their belief that there is a rigid, inflexible directive from the jurisdiction's department of education about implementing the Australian Curriculum in its entirety rather than being able to use what is needed and appropriate for the level and needs of individual and groups of students.

Nationally prescribed curricula such as the Australian Curriculum have come under fire from a number of quarters for obstructing the learning experiences of young adolescents. Australian researchers Smyth and Fasoli (2007), for example, identify prescriptive curricula as one of the key elements of national education policy in the “mismatch between formal educational policy and the lived experience at the level of the school and classroom for the most vulnerable young people” (p. 273). From a proactive stance, Lamb and Rice (2008), in a review of the national and international literature on school completion and early leaving, suggest that modifying the curriculum serves as a successful strategy in increasing student engagement and retention. This points to one of the key tenets of the YAEL Model, which we reiterate through this book, that engagement strategies are not so much about changing the student but about recognising their circumstances, providing appropriate support, and modifying the curriculum.

Secondly, SEC study participants underscored the importance of curriculum that is relevant to students' lives and future career aspirations, with real-life application. While it was evident that there are students whose struggle with learning is a strong factor in schooling disengagement, there are others who are insufficiently challenged by the current school curriculum and who disengage through a perceived lack of curriculum rationale and relevance, and the apparent disconnect between their learning and their aspirations; for example:

Curriculum needs to be able to accommodate more self-direction, more connection to student interest, I think. ... I think we have to be able to manipulate curriculum so that we can engage these young people around their interests first and foremost and then build the requisite skills and things after that. (High school principal interview participant)

Other students were identified as highly intelligent but not interested in school or the curriculum, as evinced in the following:

I don't really agree with the structure of the—I don't agree about anything. I don't really agree with the structure of the school because it's like in classes, like maths and science, you learn the topic and it seems like you learn that topic for too long and then when you learn it for that long you kind of get drawn away from that subject, because I'm good at maths and we've done the same thing since Year 7. So I don't like maths like I did in Year 7. ... They tried giving me more work or more, harder work. But it's just not really in the direction that I want my learning to go in that subject. (Year 9 student focus group participant)

Students stated that they want opportunities to select subjects that build on their strengths and interests, and that are relevant to their lives and future career aspirations.

The third and associated issue was the need for flexibility and a personalising of curricular pathways to cater to diverse learning needs, rather than schools having to make students “fit” their year level. For teachers to be able to provide more personalised curriculum support, participants pointed to the need for lower student-teacher ratios for at-risk and disengaged students, as well as for those transitioning into high school from primary school, and more time for pastoral care and continuity of support from individual teachers as students move through young adolescence. Teaching staff noted, however, the lack of time available to do this well, and limited skills and professional learning in this area.

The push for more personalised learning approaches has been on various policy agenda for some time now. In Australia, the 2008 nationally-endorsed *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2008) called for the promotion of “personalised

learning that aims to fulfil the diverse capabilities of each young Australian” (p. 7) and, a decade later in their report of the review to achieve educational excellence in Australian schools, Gonski et al. (2018) recommended personalised learning for all students to assist them to meet the target of achieving at least one year’s learning growth every school year.

Learning that is individualised and tailored to each student has been shown to empower young adolescents in their school and later lives. Darling-Hammond and Friedlander’s (2007) research in the United States, *High schools for equity* (referred to in previous chapters), which analysed effective practice in the operation of five Californian high schools with students from families of low income backgrounds, found “these schools offer an educational experience that engages students in intellectually stimulating, socially and practically relevant, and personalized learning that empowers them to contribute to their communities and to learn throughout their lives” (Darling-Hammond & Friedlander, 2007, p. vi). Similarly, in the UK study by Duffy and Elwood (2013), based on 15 focus groups of previously disengaged young people, one of the most positive grounds for hope was the ongoing value that these students still placed on education, as well as the aspirations they held for what they could achieve if the barriers they had previously experienced could be overcome and if their motivation for learning could be recognised and enhanced through relevant, authentic and personalised curriculum and pedagogy.

Appropriate Pedagogies for Young Adolescent Learners

Closely linked to the need for meaningful curriculum is appropriate pedagogies for young adolescent learners, a sub-dimension in the YAEL Model that also incorporates assessment practices. Teacher pedagogy is consistently identified in practice, research and policy as one of the key enablers in engaging young adolescents in learning. In recent decades, just as there has been an increasing emphasis on personalising the curriculum, so has there been on the use of relevant and age-appropriate pedagogies. For example, in their review of the curriculum

and qualification needs of young people at risk of disengagement in the UK, Bielby, Judkins, O'Donnell, and McCrone (2012) underscored the importance of personalised pedagogy, arguing that learners are more likely to engage in schooling when, among other things: teaching is student-centred; class sizes are not too big for individual learner needs; teachers are alert to when students need extra help; and lessons are delivered in an appealing way, taking into account real-life contexts. Personalised pedagogy also featured in the SEC study (see Box 4.4).

Box 4.4 SEC study—Appropriate pedagogies

Across the stakeholder groups, comments were made about how schools responded effectively to the pedagogical needs of students; for example:

I really like [name of school] because I think ... it gives you the opportunity to learn how you want. It's structured but it's not so structured that you're—you can kind of choose how you learn and how you best learn, and I really like that. (High student focus group participant)

So a lot of our pedagogy within our school is around teachers working with small groups of students or moving around to individual students. Then also using students as tutors within classes as well and identifying them as a resource within the classroom, too. (High school principal interview participant)

Participants pointed to the scope that exists for differentiation and personalisation of the curriculum to cater to diverse learning needs. A number of contextual inhibitors were noted, including the lack of time available to teachers, and limited skills and professional learning in this area:

I'm going to go back to the point about the kids that vandalise and stuff. I know some people that do it but I know that they're not bad kids. They're just misunderstood or they don't like their teachers or they don't enjoy the class and no one really understands. So they wag that class and they don't feel like anyone understands them. They don't feel comfortable at the school. (High school student focus group participant)

But I also think there's a lack of skill around curriculum and curriculum adjustments, and how to meet the needs of individual students in regards to the curriculum and how schools are bound with the curriculum as well. That's what we were just having a conversation this morning around the idea that the curriculum isn't a contract. ... You

can actually be flexible with it and that's where the skill of a teacher comes in—to actually turn that into personalised learning and focus on the student. (SELT focus group participant)

This snapshot demonstrates the clear need for key middle schooling practices, which have proven effective in other educational jurisdictions. As outlined in Chapter 1, middle schooling is an intentional approach to teaching and learning that is responsive and appropriate to the full range of needs, interests and achievements of young adolescents in formal and informal schooling contexts.

The importance of relationship building through teacher pedagogy for young adolescent learners is also becoming increasingly pronounced across the field. For example, Mills and McGregor (2010), in relation to flexible learning options in Queensland schools, reported that pedagogy and teaching strategies were reflective of the teacher-student relationships at these schools and that this was central to their success and crucial to students' re-engagement in education:

Students frequently used adjectives such as 'caring, small, community, family, respectful, equal, supportive, non-judgmental, mutual responsibility' when discussing their flexi school/centre. ... These relationships were identified by young people and workers alike as being central to the young people's on-going engagement in the learning processes at the sites. (Mills & McGregor, 2010, p. 11)

In the SEC study, the following comments by the parent of a student in a Year 9/10 re-engagement program were indicative of the emphasis that stakeholders placed on the pedagogy of relations:

They've [teachers in the re-engagement program] just got a higher level of emotional intelligence, I think. Their skills around checking out how they're feeling, because they're dealing with students that have anxiety issues and different issues, as well as the fact that they really make it very clear to students that difference is okay, that they're not the only ones experiencing those really uncomfortable feelings about getting to school. (Parent interview participant)

A focus on relational pedagogy is also exemplified in the work of Israeli researchers Hadar and Hotam (2012), who explore the concept of *Pedagogy in Practice* as a way of describing the teaching and learning that students actually experience as compared with what is articulated by school authorities in text-based explanations, that is, “pedagogy that actually acts on their minds and hearts within the particular learning environment” (p. 4). Hadar and Hotam (2012) compared a conventional school with an alternative arts and sciences high school, and collected data through dialogue with students. Features of the pedagogy in the alternative school included “autonomy in curricular development, its small classes, student-centred instructional methods and alternative ways of assessment” (p. 15).

In summary, considerations of appropriate pedagogies in the implementation of the YAEL Model need to be centred on personalised and relational strategies for young adolescents, contextualised to the particular schools and environments in which they learn.

Teaching Structures and Professional Learning

How teaching is structured in a school, including expectations, roles and responsibilities of teachers, is an essential factor in reforming schools for enhanced student engagement. Furthermore, contingencies must be in place to ensure that the corresponding professional learning needs of teachers are addressed. The views expressed by a principal in the SEC study encapsulate this effectively:

The question of PD [professional development] requirement is essential, but then the leadership culture of school is also really important to that as well. So the way the principal and the deputy and the school leadership group work together, to promote sort of positive responses amongst all the members of the staff at the school is critical. You know, you can't have a mismatch between well intended and aware teachers, if the school leadership isn't seeing that at the same level. And the inverse relationship can't exist, either; because the school leadership team alone can't do all of the work in identifying those tension points/

risks. So, absolutely, grassroots professional learning, professional development for teachers; but that has to be matched with the skills, knowledge and disposition, if you like. (High school principal focus group participant)

This identified need for an integrated approach to structuring teaching and professional learning is echoed widely throughout the student engagement literature. As underscored in the ECM (see Chapter 6),

... the role of the educator as an active agent of reform and development is crucial. Providing opportunities for individuals to work together and take collective responsibility to improve practice is a positive, whereas a lack of agency has been recognised as a problem in [reform]. (Pendergast & Klopper, 2017, p. 3161)

In order to achieve collaborative practices, educators need time to reach a common understanding and establish a shared commitment, thereby setting up the conditions for embedding a shift in the fabric of learning and teaching. As Darling-Hammond and Friedlander (2007) found in their work in US schools, effective learning and teaching practices are supported by an emphasis on professional learning and collaboration that goes on outside of class: “time for teachers to collaborate, design curriculum and instruction, and learn from one another” (p. 18). Hence, providing time for effective professional learning and agentive engagement of educators is essential.

Returning to the SEC study, there was general consensus among staff that teachers would benefit from greater access to professional learning in respect of young adolescent learners, particularly for those at risk. Needs and expectations that are not filled by school psychologists/youth workers and other trained personnel seem to fall by default on teachers, with many “bending over backwards to help support these students and breaking their backs in the process” (Union representative). The snapshot in Box 4.5 summarises ways in which participants felt practices could be improved.

Box 4.5 SEC study—Teaching structures and professional learning

To strengthen teaching structures and professional learning practices, participants called for strong leadership and a whole-school approach to the following:

- The creation of professional learning communities within schools to share practices that work for re-engaging students;
- Quality teachers who are taken out of teaching roles to become executive teachers to serve as mentors for new teachers who may be lacking in particular skills, such as understanding of, experience with, and empathy for young adolescents. In particular, there is a belief that beginning teachers need more assistance with developing inclusive classroom practices;
- Targeted professional learning for identifying and catering for at-risk students;
- Support for teachers to avoid burn out;
- A greater focus on appropriate pedagogies for the middle years and ways of working with students to build confidence, self-esteem, and develop agency and learner capacity;
- Staff dedicated to accessing community agencies and the development of networks of support with community bodies to provide supports such as work experience opportunities, fund-raising and mentoring of students; and
- Staff responsible for resources at the school level and coordination with extra external agencies for example, the Department of Human Services Centrelink Program, out-of-home care, transport to school and access to bus passes/funds, and other practical supports needed to clear emergency needs so students can focus on learning.

Inclusive School Culture

For optimal student engagement, schools need to foster practices, as part of changes to mainstream school culture, to take account of the needs of all young adolescents, including those with complex needs and challenging behaviours through: greater focus on social-emotional learning; emphasis on relationship-building; small groups for learning support; targeted engaging pedagogy; and, a safe and supportive environment.

In this regard, much can be learned from alternative education. If mainstream schools intend to be fully inclusive, they should focus on adopting some of the insights and strategies from alternative approaches to schooling, which have been shown to be effective with disengaged children. Ken Robinson, an international advisor on education to government, non-profits, education and arts bodies, argues that:

[Alternative education programs] designed to get kids back into education have certain common features, and they work. What's interesting to me is that these are called "alternative" education. When all the evidence around the world is that if we all did this there would be no need for the alternatives. (Robinson, 2013, Time: 14:55–15:57)

Evidence drawn from successful alternative education approaches includes: offering alternative settings within the mainstream, which are of a smaller scale and which provide a more scaffolded approach to learning; a more personalised relationship between teacher and students; greater connection to real-world experiences; more explicit attention to social and emotional learning; and wraparound support in terms of services that are required by young adolescents with additional social, health and welfare needs.

This evidence is further corroborated in the SEC study where the benefits to mainstream schooling of adopting alternative education programs and practices seem clear. Take, for example, the case of the Attainment Centres (pseudonym), designed to support and re-engage vulnerable and at-risk students. The Centres have had demonstrable success in raising students' achievement levels and also in promoting their social-emotional development, especially attitudes towards schooling. The fact that these gains are often not sustained on return to their "home" school arguably says more about the culture of the mainstream schooling system rather than about the students, or the Attainment Centres.

In many contexts, there is a desire, on one hand, to have mainstream schools as inclusive of all, but, on the other, there is also a need for diversity in the schooling sector, given the variety of needs among disengaged

students at different stages of their development. How possible is it to change the mainstream schooling culture to accommodate these diverse needs? This does not mean lowering expectations of appropriate behaviour or academic performance, but adopting different means of achieving these expectations and adjusting to the complex needs and challenging behaviours of young adolescents. According to participants in the SEC study, there are several overarching ways by which school cultures can be transformed for the inclusion of all (see Box 4.6).

Box 4.6 SEC study—Inclusive school culture

Participants emphasised the importance of a sense of belonging in school as a factor in engagement and re-engagement. These comments are indicative:

One of the things that's happening in my network and across the system is the positive behaviours to learning. I think the system needs to put a bit of—a fair bit more effort into that cultural change as well. Because what a school develops as its strategies for positive behaviours, the evidence is that it actually makes a big difference for all kids. So that's belonging, positive behaviour. (Network leader focus group participant)

But if the student is not feeling a sense of belonging, they will not change their behaviours to meet the expectations of the school. They will always behave in a way which is often contrary to that, to show that they are not belonging in the school, to show that they are outside of the expectations of the school. (High school principal interview participant)

Also identified was the need to develop ways for students *to participate on their own terms and at their own pace*. For some students, attending school exacerbates underlying conditions, such as mental health (e.g., anxiety) and trauma:

... kids that are traumatised, they don't read the world the same way the rest of us do. It's simple, simply that. One of the things also for adolescents is that they distrust adults because adults let them down, adults fail them, adults tell lies to them, adults never deliver, all of that sort of stuff. They've got example after example after example of that in their lives over many years. (High school principal interview participant)

In order to support students' participation and progress, *wraparound support*, with additional (external) services factored in, should be provided, particularly for those at risk:

I am saying I think that the model of distributing the resourcing and support is essential. ... It is complex but certainly the off-site support, but local, is very powerful. (High school teacher focus group participant)

The factors identified above are representative of a range of approaches and strategies identified as essential in school culture reform, and indicative of the perceived need to consider the needs of, and include *all* young adolescents in the schooling context.

One of the most salient factors that emerged in this study in terms of building inclusive school climates, resonating with the international literature, was fostering a *sense of belonging at school* (SOBAS) in students. Indicatively, the OECD's (2013) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) now includes in its data collection about students' general attitudes towards school, statistics about their sense of belonging. SOBAS is explored further in other chapters.

Positive Relational Climate

Across all sets of stakeholders in the study, positive and mutually respectful teacher–student relationships were deemed to be of paramount importance to addressing at-risk behaviours and disengagement. There was consensus among participants on the need to have teachers who are genuinely interested in students' wellbeing. A Year 10 student, for instance, who had attended a number of schools internationally, applauded the focus on wellbeing at his school:

So I've been adapting to different school systems since I came here. ... I would like to ... congratulate [the school] for actually having a wellbeing centre because most places I've been in the world they don't care about students and how they're doing, their opinions. It's just usually you go to school, learn and go back home. Here it's structured, things flow and you

should be proud of that because most systems in the school don't have that. (Student focus group participant)

Research evidence shows that students with high levels of wellbeing are more likely to have:

- higher academic achievement and complete Year 12;
- better mental health (e.g., they have lower and/or less severe rates of illnesses such as depression and anxiety); and
- a more pro-social, responsible and lawful lifestyle (i.e., they display concern for the wellbeing of others, make responsible decisions about the consequences of their actions on themselves and others.

(Australian Catholic University & Erebus International, 2008, p. 6)

Thus, a positive relational climate, as a key influencing feature of student wellbeing, is essential to the growth and achievement levels of the learner.

It perhaps goes without saying that strong relationship building needs to extend beyond the school gate: the importance of developing and sustaining strong and meaningful relationships between families, the community and schools is now well recognised. As one SEC participant pointed out:

... every child or young person needs someone that is a champion for them in a school setting, as well as the other people around them, their carers and so on, so that there can be a real investment about how to support those young people and children in the educational setting. It does become the responsibility of people within that school setting to really try and maintain [the relationships] so children and young people within a school setting engage in a positive way, without disregarding the challenges that are there. (Community agency coordinator focus group participant)

Strategies for relationship building with the wider community are included in other parts of this book (e.g., Chapter 5). In terms of the implementation of the YAEL Model, relationships with local community groups and agencies should be built as appropriate to each school's needs, and depending on levels of access.

Social, Emotional, Psychological and Health Support

To engage effectively in education, young adolescents require appropriate levels of social, emotional, psychological and health support. While this has presumably always been the case, the school focus on these aspects of student growth and development has escalated in recent generations, in line with increased knowledge and understanding about the importance of providing a holistic education and personalised learning for the individual student (e.g., Social Policy Research Centre, 2010). In the YAEL Model, the provision of these forms of support intensifies along the continuum of support, in the understanding that each school will respond to its own students' emotional, psychological, and health needs in appropriate ways in partnership and collaboration with external support providers. This can only occur once schools identify the needs of their particular students. Nevertheless, patterns of need for current-day young adolescents can generally be found across school clusters, districts, regions, and so on. In the 26 schools in the SEC study, for example, the following clear messages emerged:

- There is a pressing need for shared understandings about the provision of support between stakeholders;
- Schools should have a stronger voice on their particular needs with regards to psychological support for their students; and
- Longer periods of pastoral care are required to enable teachers to better contribute to the health and wellbeing of all students, particularly those deemed to be at risk.

These themes are explored in the snapshot in Box 4.7.

Box 4.7 SEC study—Social, emotional, psychological and health support

Some participants expressed the view that schools have a limited say on their particular needs with regards to psychological support for their students. There was an impression that the provision of services is based on school population rather than context. Support staff were deemed to

spend a lot of time crisis managing and testing students, leaving them with limited time to deal with emerging issues, and to address these issues before they turned into a crisis. This was seen to leave little time for on-going support for individual students. There was a call for consistency of representation of psychologists. One school had three different psychologists across the week, who spent a lot of time trying to catch up on the issues. This was believed to negatively affect the sense of continuation of support for at-risk students who need to connect with the same person as often as possible for stability because previous experiences of unstable relationships are often a key feature of their difficulties.

Many participants requested the provision of a full-time psychologist at each school. Similarly, youth workers were seen to be invaluable, yet participants believed that there was a lack of consistency in their levels of professional learning and quality. It was noted that some schools have productive pastoral care programs and daily contact time with students, with the same teacher at the same time each day, however, this was often not the case, with some schools only allowing a very limited amount of time for pastoral care. Participants called for longer periods of pastoral care to enable teachers to better contribute to the health and wellbeing of all students, particularly those deemed to be at risk. Such practices are consistent with recommended best practices when teaching in the middle years (Pendergast & Bahr, 2010). Other participants identified the need for social workers at school in connecting with community resources and working through issues at a family level.

These themes echo those reported widely in the literature and advocated by mental health support agencies and initiatives, such as the Australian Response Ability network which states that, in order to promote students' social and emotional wellbeing and positive development, teachers need to:

- Create safe and supportive environments that promote wellbeing and personal development as well as learning;
- Help children and young people develop effective social and emotional skills and manage their own behaviour;
- Identify children, young people and families who may need additional support for their mental health and wellbeing;
- Link children, young people and families with support and information services for mental health and wellbeing; and
- Develop broader organisational school and community strategies that support wellbeing.

Department of Health and Ageing (2013, pp. 1–2)

As identified in the SEC study and more broadly (e.g., Cranston et al., 2016; Dryfoos, 1998; Watson et al., 2017), the provision of these forms of support is a shared responsibility between schools and, depending on the context, a range of different community and external providers and stakeholders. It cannot be left to schools alone.

Chapter Summary

In order to engage all young adolescents in their learning, there are a number of core characteristics of schools and school education that need to inhere in school innovation and reform agenda. These core characteristics have been conceptualised in the YAEL Model as nine sub-dimensions of the overarching dimensions of *school structure and school community*, *student wellbeing* and *teaching, teachers and leaders*. This chapter has discussed each of these sub-dimensions, underscoring their importance in the leadership and management of current-day, twenty-first century schools. The conceptualisation and integration of these core characteristics in schools and school systems need to be made context-specific so as to cater to the particular learning requirements of the students whose needs those school/s serve. Drawing from empirical work and a large body of international literature, this chapter has provided examples of the ways in which this can and does occur.

Research Implications

Taken together, the core characteristics of student engagement discussed in this (and other) chapters are fundamental to the YAEL Model in potentially equipping educators and other stakeholders with an evidence-based and futures-oriented approach to best-practice schooling. In light of some of the current trends and waves of change in schools, such as increasing student mobility in certain contexts, the constant influx of new learning and teaching technologies, and the strengthening of performance and accountability measures placed on schools and school staff, it would be beneficial to further investigate how each of the

core characteristics discussed above have been enacted in specific contexts and for particular students and student cohorts. The need for current and ongoing research in these areas is essential as we adapt to new times and the changing learning needs of young adolescents.

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5

Components of Provision: Continuum of Support for Adolescent Learners

Introduction

The Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning (YAEL) Model, which represents a continuum of support for students during the years of young adolescent schooling (typically 11–16 years), rests on the premise that within any school there will be a continuum of dynamic and variable student needs. Schooling engagement is also fluid and students will experience a number of periods when they may be more or less intensely engaged in learning.

According to Cranston et al. (2016):

The complexities and challenges of [student engagement] issues, and the interactions across them are indisputably multidimensional and steeped in the histories, behaviours and cultures of communities (educational and otherwise). It is for these reasons that the challenges are well conceived of as a ‘wicked problem’, understanding that there are no quick fixes nor simple solutions to a range of what are highly complex interdependent factors at play. (p. 14)

For too long, those who disengage have been constructed as problematic and as the binary opposite of “good” and well-engaged students. The literature presented earlier in this book reveals that the situation is far more complex. Rather than trying to engage young people deemed *deficit*, schools need to become places of learning engagement for *all* their students; because *all* students are liable to need assistance during some part of their high school journey. In this chapter, we outline the three core components of provision of the Model that we believe would provide this support. These three components of provision are situated at Layer 3 of the Model.

As discussed in Chapter 3, engaging in learning can be enhanced for all young adolescent learners when an ecosystem of learning with identifiable features is in place. Component 1, the *five core elements for young adolescent learner engagement*, represents a supportive and innovative approach to student engagement that incorporates: adolescent centredness, transition, social and emotional wellbeing, quality teaching, and parental and community involvement. When these elements are in place, there is less likelihood that students will need additional and/or alternative learning provision. For example, the benefits of enhanced parental and community involvement have been shown to include an improvement in students’ learning outcomes; support for the social and cultural development of students; and increased understanding by students of options for employment and further education and training.

While the learning needs of the majority of students will be accommodated by the *five core elements* component of the continuum, there will be some students who require other provisions of support to maximize their learning engagement. Component 2: *flexible learning provision support* is intended to address the needs of those students deemed to be at risk of disengaging from education, but not to the point of requiring alternative provision. This second component along the continuum of the YAEL Model thus represents an early interventionist and preventive approach to student disengagement. In the Model, it is acknowledged that there are myriad ways that flexible learning can be conceptualised and implemented, through both tailored pedagogies and targeted programs. Schools should work in partnership with the relevant department of education/education system to design and enact

flexible learning provision support that addresses the needs of their particular student body. Suggestions about how this might occur are included in this chapter.

Finally, Component 3, *alternative provision*, is situated at the end of the Model of the Student Engagement Continuum. Drawing upon educational research (see Chapter 2), this part of the Model demonstrates a more intense holistic framework for engaging adolescent learners who are experiencing the most difficulties with schooling engagement. Alternative educational provision is intended for students whose needs are best met outside of the general classroom environment within fit-for-purpose contexts. This component thus represents a more personalised, highly supportive response to schooling dis/engagement. The Model defines the parameters of two suggested types of alternative educational provision: on-site and off-site. Given the importance of context, we emphasise that each school should take responsibility for its own at-risk and disengaged students and set up on-site, purpose-built alternative provision most suited to the particular needs of the school. Off-site alternative provision should be reserved as a last resort and be accompanied by appropriate protocols as outlined in this chapter. We now begin with Component 1.

Component 1: Five Core Elements for Young Adolescent Learner Engagement

The architecture of the continuum of learning support constituting the YAEL Model is consistent with the principles articulated in the framework of positive behaviour support recommended in the *Schools for all children and young people: Report of the Expert Panel on students with complex needs and challenging behaviour* (Shaddock, Packer, & Roy, 2015). In this framework, positive behaviour support involves a tiered approach, where Tier 1 is to implement strategies that apply to every student. Tier 1 strategies must start with the creation of learning environments that are perceived by the student to be safe, welcoming and engaging. This implies that Tier 1 supports are not just about how and what teachers teach, but how students perceive the quality of the school

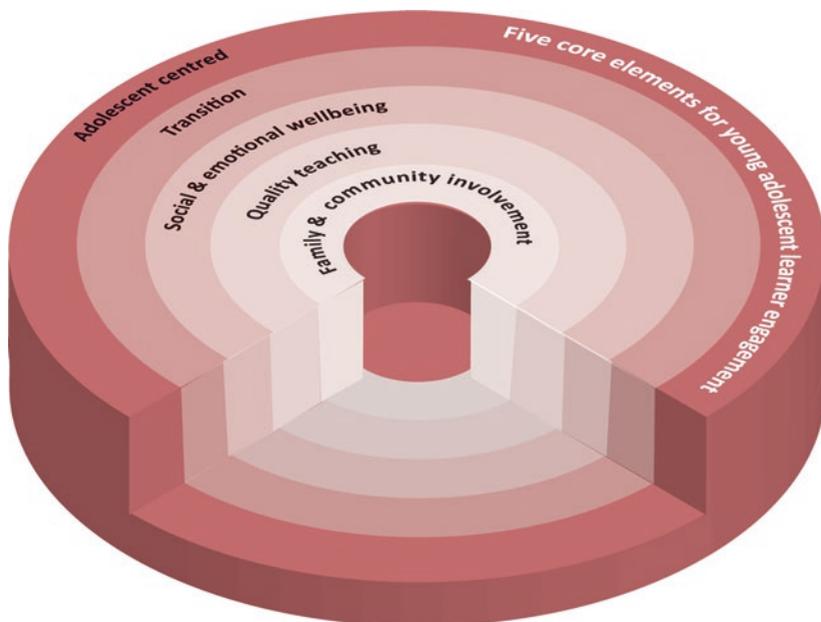


Fig. 5.1 Layer 3: Component 1—Five core elements for young adolescent learner engagement

and classroom environments. Hence, our Model commences with strategies that apply to every high school student (see Fig. 5.1).

We have previously expounded the risk of disengagement from learning that all young adolescents face. The high school setting is where young adolescent learners are located in formal learning and hence the overall approach to this sector of schooling needs to be highly intentional and include pedagogies that best align with young adolescent learning so that optimal engagement can be achieved. In other words, the overarching approach should enable a learning ecosystem that is intentionally designed to be responsive and appropriate to the full range of needs, interests and achievements of young adolescent students. A consistent approach built on the principles underpinning young adolescent learning has the potential to lift the overall engagement levels for all students in high schools.

There are a number of approaches that operate in Australian and international settings that are intentionally designed for young

adolescent learners, and these feature some predictable elements. For example, the *six guiding principles* (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2012), mentioned in previous chapters, have been incorporated in all government schools in Queensland since 2015 and the set of *signifying practices* associated with middle schooling (see, e.g., Hilton & Hilton, 2017) have been adopted in many schools around Australia. By employing these predictable elements it can be ensured that a responsive approach that is intentionally designed for young adolescent learners is factored into the schooling system.

The key challenges in the high school years are closely linked to the nature of the changes that occur during early adolescence, along with the challenges associated with transition between primary and high school (ACER, 2012). These key challenges impact on the school experiences of students:

- The need to manage a heterogeneous student population without sacrificing inclusiveness;
- A decline in student academic performance;
- High incidence of disengagement, disruptive behaviour, boredom and disconnection from schooling;
- A 'knowledge gap' between what is taught and the kind of content that would engage early adolescents and match their cognitive skills; and
- Transition, which often entails major change, such as larger school size, more emphasis on teacher control and discipline, disrupted peer relations, more impersonal relationships between student and teachers, and different expectations of students' performance. The transition experience can be different for different students, depending on individual factors and contextual factors.

In light of these key challenges, and in order to provide optimal opportunities for productive student engagement for all young adolescent students, a combination of core elements is now highlighted, which draw from the informing literature in conjunction with the review of evidence base and analysis of stakeholder consultations presented earlier in this book. By actively committing to an intentional approach

to teaching and learning in high school settings, optimal productive engagement, moving from behavioural through to emotional and ideality to cognitive engagement (see Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010) is achievable.

The five core elements, which together make up the first component of provision on the Model's continuum of learning, provide an intentional focus on:

- Adolescent centred approach;
- Transition;
- Social and emotional wellbeing;
- Quality teaching; and
- Parental and community involvement.

Boxes 5.1–5.5 elaborate on this component of provision and provide examples of strategies that are typically aligned with its five core elements.

Box 5.1 Adolescent-centred approach

What is it?

Young adolescence is a distinctive developmental stage of life. Research on growth and development during adolescence has grown exponentially over the past three decades. To appreciate young adolescents and how to cater for them in the classroom, teachers should have a basic understanding of their physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. Having a foundational understanding of young adolescent development has implications for quality teaching and also for student wellbeing and engagement in learning. By way of example, one of the more interesting aspects is cognitive development. Adolescence is a time of experience-dependent brain reorganisation—use it or lose it—hence the educational environments young adolescents are immersed in have a direct impact on how the brain reworks its architecture. The emotional, judgment and cognitive systems in an adolescent brain are all maturing at different rates. While the cognitive system of a 16-year-old is at its peak in terms of speed and accuracy, and the limbic (emotional) system is highly activated, the 16-year-old's prefrontal cortex is still quite immature.

What strategies can be used?

For the example of cognitive development, giving students opportunities to be reflective improves the quality of learning, since learning with understanding is more likely to promote transfer of knowledge than rote learning or memorising information. New knowledge needs to be relevant to the learner and linked to their current knowledge base. Some of the key skills students must develop are how to:

- reflect on learning;
- link new knowledge to existing knowledge;
- establish what is true and accurate;
- challenge what knowledge is untrue and inaccurate;
- explore knowledge that is delivered in a variety of contexts and through a range of learning strategies as it is more likely to be applied or transferred broadly; and
- organise information and make explicit links between concepts in order to help store and apply knowledge.

The maturation disparity between the cortex and limbic systems is responsible for the inconsistent scenarios that most young adolescents experience. Importantly, the range and diversity of developmental maturity may span up to five years in the year levels included in the high school contexts; therefore, a focus on personalised learning is crucial. Some of the challenges that may be evident and should be considered when planning work and scaffolding students' learning in relation to brain development alone include:

- difficulty planning projects;
- problems comprehending how long a project will take to complete;
- struggling to tell a story (verbally or in writing);
- trouble communicating details in an organised and sequential manner;
- difficulties with mental strategies to memorise and recall information; and
- trouble initiating tasks or generating ideas independently.

Box 5.2 Transition

What is it?

Transition in schools, both internal (within the same school environment) and external (moving to a different school), can have a negative impact on students' general academic achievement. The evidence is that transition from primary-style classes to high school-style classes (subject-centred), whether internal or external, is often associated with a drop in academic achievement regardless of the age and year level at which transition takes place. This has been named the "middle school plunge" (West & Schwerdt, 2012), and it is estimated that the drop in academic achievement can represent a loss of between 10 and 14 months of learning achievement. The effects are widespread and typical, rather than the exception.

What strategies can be used?

Transition (not just orientation) features strategies prior to, during and following the shift from a primary to a high school setting.

Social adjustment:

- social and personal skills so students can expand their friendship networks, self-esteem and confidence;
- pastoral care program that focusses on the development of social and personal skills; and
- peer mentoring, matching older and younger high school students.

Institutional adjustment

- scaffolding development of student independence in managing their time, equipment, commitments and assignments; and
- close links and co-ordination with primary schools, for example, induction programs, "taster" days, teacher exchanges, teacher looping, data sharing.

The impact on academic achievement is most significant in students who lack literacy and numeracy capacity, especially reading and spelling. There is considerable research into the factors that may influence a successful transition for middle years students. As stated in Chapter 1, the three factor model proposed by researchers Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Sammons, and Siraj-Blatchford (2008) is a convenient way of bringing together the range of themes: (1) social adjustment: is the degree to which students are able to adjust to their new social environment; (2) institutional adjustment: is the degree to which students adjust to their new physical surroundings and new patterns of behaviour; and (3) curriculum interest and continuity: is the degree to which students are engaged by the curriculum and perceive a continuity in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment between primary and junior high.

Curriculum interest and continuity

- student understanding of the expectations of them with regard to level and style of work and level of effort required;
- staff understanding of the differences between primary and junior high practices and the implications for their practice;
- teachers to continue to refine their programs to further engage students in deep learning;
- teacher understanding and the ability to apply different learning approaches that foster student learning, e.g., teachers reflect on their pedagogical strengths and weaknesses, learning approaches to cater to the diversity of learners, create a personalised professional development program; and
- an emphasis on the teaching of the tools of learning to foster student independent thinking and learning, e.g., note taking, analysing, report writing, the importance of sleep, how to revise, how to study, and so on.

Box 5.3 Social and emotional wellbeing

What is it?

Young adolescent learners have distinct social and emotional needs that require attention. This ensures the general wellbeing of each individual student. Wellbeing can be defined as: "a sustainable state characterised by predominantly positive feelings and attitude, positive relationships at school, resilience, self-optimisation and a high level of satisfaction with learning experiences" (Noble, Wyatt, McGrath, Roffey, & Rowling, 2008, p. 30). Issues of which schools should be aware in terms of young people's wellbeing and health include: student motivation and engagement; academic achievement; student attendance; relationships with peers, teachers and parents; nutrition and health, all of which impact on student wellbeing. Understanding students' needs and addressing ways in which to meet these needs will ensure positive outcomes.

What strategies can be used?

A range of strategies is needed, such as:

- an emphasis on strong teacher-student relationships through extended contact with a small number of teachers;
- consistent student cohort achieved, for example, by utilising core teacher models;
- building small learning communities that provide students with sustained individual attention in a safe and healthy school environment;

Seven 'pathways' of student wellbeing have been identified in the literature (see, e.g., the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2011) report *Young Australians: Their health and wellbeing*), each of which has implications for the approaches adopted for supporting adolescents during the high school phase:

- a supportive, caring and inclusive school community that fosters school connectedness;
- pro-social values, such as respect, honesty and compassion;
- physical and emotional safety, such as anti-bullying policies and programs and setting up a home room;
- social and emotional learning, such as interpersonal skills, goal-setting, self-awareness;
- a strengths-based approach which identifies and builds on students' intellectual strengths;
- a sense of meaning and purpose, reflected in peer support, participation in school clubs and teams and collaborative group projects; and
- a healthy lifestyle, including good nutrition and exercise.

- a pastoral care structure that links academic and non-academic learning and social and emotional wellbeing; and
- a focus on issues of relevance and authenticity to young adolescent learners.

Box 5.4 Quality teaching

What is it?

Student engagement sits squarely within the ambit of quality teaching that meets the needs of students where they are currently located in their learning. The relationship between student engagement and teacher quality is strong. Quality teaching for young adolescents actively privileges a comprehensive range of practices to engage young adolescents in relevant, meaningful and challenging learning, along with organisational initiatives to facilitate their implementation. Teachers must do the following to optimise engagement for their students:

- deliver interactive, varied and relevant lessons;
- be encouraging and supportive to students;
- have classrooms in which students:
 - feel comfortable asking questions
 - are expected to do their best
 - feel challenged in their learning

What strategies can be used?

Quality teaching practices include:

- strengths-based approach;
- higher order thinking;
- integrated and disciplinary curricula that are negotiated, relevant and challenging;
- heterogeneous and flexible student groupings;
- cooperative learning and collaborative teaching;
- authentic and reflective assessment with high expectations; and
- supportive, personalised teaching.

- provide specific feedback to help students with their current learning;
- ensure lessons are well-paced and with varied learning tasks (not continuously listening to the teacher or note taking);
- focus on active learning, such as interactive group tasks, hands-on activities, differentiated instruction;
- deliver a relevant curriculum, drawing from students' background, interests and academic needs;
- make connections between information taught and real life, especially everyday concerns of the age group of students; and
- encourage students to set goals, make choices in their learning, experiment with new ideas, and self-regulate their learning.

Box 5.5 Parental and community involvement

What is it?

Parents are typically more actively engaged in their children's schooling during the primary years—supporting reading programs in the early years, participating in sporting events or tuck shops, accompanying students on excursions and a range of other activities. Historically, this has tended to fade as students move into adolescence. This is likely to be partly due to developmental issues: adolescent students are attempting to create their own identities independent of their parents, and may prefer not to have their friends and parents in the same place at the same time. It may also be a cultural pattern related to the shift from the primary to high school sectors, or related to the fact that high schools are typically much larger than primary schools. Benefits of enhanced parent and community involvement can include, but are not limited to, an improvement in students' learning outcomes. They can also support the social and cultural development of students and their understanding of options for employment and further education and training.

What strategies can be used?

A wide range of strategies exist in relation to parent and community involvement. These include:

- providing consistent research-informed information for parents about adolescent development;
- working collaboratively with parent bodies such as Parents' and Citizens' groups to develop and implement supportive approaches to involving parents in student learning;
- actively seeking feedback from parents on programs and activities in the school;
- seeking relationships with social workers and other support agencies in the community;
- seeking to build high-quality collaborative relationships with business partners in the community; and
- providing opportunities for volunteering.

Planning and Implementation

The five core elements for young adolescent learner engagement require structural attention for effective implementation. It is recommended that an Educational Change Model (ECM) (see Chapter 6) be employed to ensure that a conceptually consistent yet site-specific version of the core elements is developed for each individual school site. Importantly, structural changes should be underpinned by a strong understanding of the core elements and what they mean, ranging from classroom practice, teaching allocation processes and leadership arrangements through to the school culture. Utilising an audit process to determine the degree to which the core elements are embedded in practices is an important way to begin the process.

Goals, Outcomes and Measures, and Resources

Employing the core elements framework means setting goals that are inclusive of all learners. An overarching set of goals can be established to highlight this positive approach to inclusion, with goals such as:

- All high school students should experience a learning ecosystem that is intentionally designed to be responsive and appropriate to the full range of needs, interests and achievements of young adolescent students so they can be productively engaged with learning; and
- Student engagement should feature cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement.

Outcomes should be mapped against the established goals, and should be inclusive of the following:

- Behavioural engagement measures such as attendance and suspensions data;
- Emotional and cognitive measures such as school satisfaction survey, NAPLAN data;

- Levels of parental and community engagement;
- School satisfaction/climate survey; and
- Staff wellbeing/climate survey.

The following resourcing considerations apply to this component of provision:

- Short-term resource commitment is required around staff professional learning, developing pastoral care models, engaging with parents and communities;
- Long term, no additional resources are required; rather, a refocusing of resources on high priority elements is recommended; and
- Schools should organise current resources in a manner that provides an inclusive culture and high levels of pastoral care across the school.

Component 2: Flexible Learning Provision Support

Flexible learning support is structured as the second component of provision along the YAEL Model's continuum of support. This type of learning support can be provided within the context of early interventions (social, emotional, psychological, and physical) through both *tailored pedagogies* and *targeted programs*. In both types of provision, the academic research documents key principles, which, contextualised in the Model, mean that high schools should include a number of key features, as shown in Fig. 5.2.

The key features that enable effective provision of flexible learning support are:

- **Shared vision** among all stakeholders about the value and purpose of flexible learning provision as adopted by the school leadership;
- **Clear links** between the flexible learning provision and the key elements of the school's and the education department/system's strategic planning;

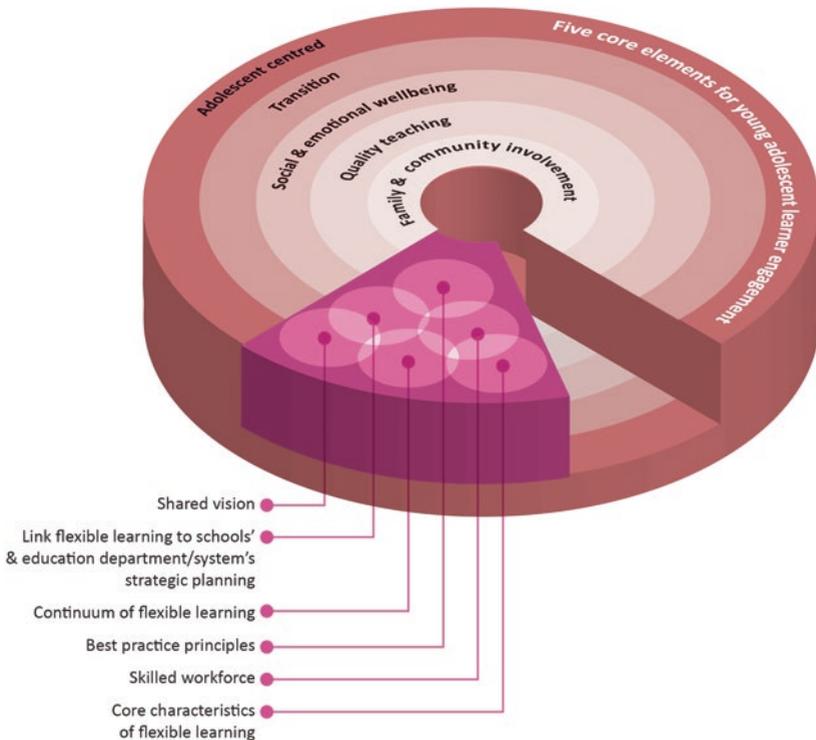


Fig. 5.2 Layer 3: Component 2—Flexible learning provision support

- **A clearly described continuum** of flexible learning provision adopted by the school, focusing on early interventions providing social, emotional, psychological and practical support to prevent escalation of schooling disengagement, and couched in a flexible approach to meeting the requirements of the mandated curriculum;
- **Best practice educational principles** providing students with pathways towards further education and work; flexibility to create a curriculum that is strengths-based and responsive to students' needs and goals; ensuring that young people are enabled to acquire new knowledge, skills and ways of seeing the world; and using a curriculum that is connected with students' worlds, as well as being intellectually challenging;

- **A skilled workforce** including knowledgeable, empathetic, skilled and experienced teachers, school and community support staff/teams, and community and non-government agency partners; and
- **Clear documentation of core characteristics** of flexible learning provision, including: purpose, goals, learning outcomes and measures; criteria for program referral and entry; and principal resources.

Embedded within the key features outlined above are a number of factors that need to be considered in the provision of flexible learning in schools. We turn to these in the sections below.

Intent of Early Intervention

As a means of early intervention, flexible learning has been shown to be effective in (re)engaging young adolescents in learning (e.g., McGregor, Mills, Te Riele, Hayes, & Baroutsis, 2017). The following points of intent need to be considered when adopting/increasing flexible learning in schools:

- Where circumstances allow, it is envisaged that most, if not all, high schools will provide flexible learning support for students who show signs of being or becoming at risk and/or disengaged;
- Flexible learning provision serves as early intervention measures that respond to spirals of educational disengagement;
- Flexible learning provision may be structured so that students who are not at risk may choose flexible learning support as electives or extension activities, as the meaningful curricula and appropriate pedagogies comprising effective flexible learning can benefit the learning of all students;
- The type of flexible learning adopted by each school will depend on factors such as: the needs of learners across the key engagement dimensions (behavioural, emotional and cognitive), the school context, flexible learning provision already in place, staff capacity and availability, school community support, school structure, access to community agency and non-government organization support, and funding. For example, genuine partnership with schools and community agencies to

holistically support students and their families could be developed with community agencies being co-located at schools;

- Flexible learning approaches are most effective when professional learning communities are created in which classroom teacher/s and support staff work with students to address low-level, but persistent misbehaviour and off-task behaviours. Professional learning communities can facilitate the implementation of a whole-school approach to flexible learning provision, as well as enable staff to share practices that work for re-engaging students;
- A school might adopt a range of flexible learning provision supports, depending on student need, and make adaptations and changes according to changing cohorts of students. Many services, such as those provided by youth workers, could be co-delivered by schools and community agencies. Community agencies could also play a supporting role to teachers through, for example, psycho-social mentoring to support teacher wellbeing and resilience; and
- Schools might elect to work at a cluster (or similar) level in developing flexible learning provision; this should be done in partnership with the department of education/education system office.

Box 5.6 describes what is meant by early intervention, as well as the types of strategies that can be used.

Box 5.6 Early intervention and examples of strategies

Early intervention and examples of strategies: What is it?

Educational disengagement and associated behaviours have complex causes and, in order to clear the way for meaningful learning, young people need their basic needs to be met. Early intervention in this area is intended to address personal problems that may inhibit engagement in general classrooms before they become entrenched and require significantly higher levels of support.

Early intervention and examples of strategies: What strategies can be used?

- Initial interview with a trusted teacher mentor or home room teacher to determine the scope and nature of the issues;
- Follow-up meetings with relevant trusted staff as appropriate (e.g., curriculum specialist, psychologist, social or youth worker) to diagnose and respond to possible learning difficulties, mental and physical health issues, and practical problems relating to transport, family dysfunction, food and shelter;

- Appropriate plans of actions are put in place to respond to individual and possibly group needs; for example, if a number of students are coming to school without having eaten, then a breakfast club could be established in cooperation with community support; and
- Support in this domain needs to be continued and student progress monitored while more flexible learning strategies are enacted as described below.

Helpful links:

- 'Helping at Risk Students Succeed' (article by Tori De Angelis), a psychologist-designed program that supports learning among at-risk kids in the US: <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/02/at-risk-students.aspx>.
- 'Response to Intervention' (RTI), a program of the US National Center for Learning Disabilities: <http://www.rtinetwork.org/learn/what/whatisrti>.

For flexible learning interventions to be effective, they need to comprise evidence-based measures and strategies that prevent student disengagement; these are overviewed below.

Insights into the Evidence

As discussed in Chapter 2, Australians Lamb and Rice (2008) drew from a large empirical study as well as a review of the national and international literature on school completion and early leaving to propose a broad range of student-focussed strategies to enhance engagement and prevent disengagement (see Table 5.1).

As shown in earlier chapters, there is considerable agreement in the research evidence about the main factors, inside and outside school, that tend to lead to disengagement from education among young people. Main and Pendergast (2017) have identified the strength of effect of a number of student disengagement factors, as well as the pedagogical approaches that can be employed to mitigate them, as shown in Table 5.2.

If we juxtapose the student disengagement factors identified by Main and Pendergast (2017) with Lamb and Rice's (2008) list of effective intervention strategies, we can see how appropriate flexible learning

Table 5.1 Effective intervention strategies for students at risk of early leaving

Supportive school culture (School commitment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continuous improvement; • Commitment to success for all; • Flexibility and responsiveness to individual need; • High expectations; • Encouraging student responsibility and autonomy; and • Shared vision.
School-wide strategies (School-level approaches)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad curriculum provision in the senior years; • Offering quality Vocational Education and Training (VET) options; • Programs that are challenging and stimulating; • Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy skill growth; • Programs to counter low achievement; • Pathways planning and quality careers guidance and counselling; • Strategic use of teachers and teaching resources; • Smaller class sizes; • Mini-school or school-within-a-school organisation; • Team-based approaches to teaching, learning and pastoral care; • Priority professional development; • Community service; and • Cross-sectoral initiatives.
Student-focused strategies (Addressing individual student needs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student case management; • Mentoring; • Attendance policies and programs; • Welfare support; • Targeted assistance for skill development among low achievers; • Tutoring and peer tutoring; • Supplementary or out-of-school-time programs; • Pathways planning for at-risk students; • Targeted financial support; • Project-based learning for disengaged students; and • Creative arts-based programs for at-risk students.

Source Lamb and Rice (2008, p. 8)

responses might be formulated through a range of relational and pedagogical approaches aimed to address disengagement.

Structure of Flexible Learning Support

Flexible learning provision is structured in two inter-related ways: (a) flexible learning pedagogies and (b) flexible learning programs. Both types of structure comprise measures of early intervention that can be aligned to the particular personal and learning needs of individuals and groups of students. Boxes 5.7 and 5.8 describe what we mean by flexible learning pedagogies and flexible learning programs, as well as examples of the strategies used in each.

Table 5.2 The strength of effect of student disengagement factors

Factor importance*	Factor	Brief explanation of factor	Pedagogical approaches that can be employed
Strong compelling evidence	Relationships with teachers and other students	Good relationships between teachers and students promote wellbeing and the academic lives of students	Nurturing trusting relationships
	Motivation and interest in learning	Motivation is what compels learners to invest time and effort. Fostering motivation is crucial for short-term learning and for equipping students to be lifelong learners	Engaging students in fun learning activities; Making learning meaningful
Moderate evidence	Goal orientation	One of the most potent ways to encourage students to be academically self-regulated is to involve them in planning and assessment related to their own learning. Goals influence the effort students put into learning tasks and direct future action	Making learning meaningful
	Academic self-regulation	Relates to the degree to which students are motivated to learn, think about their own learning (use meta-cognitive processes) and proactively use self-regulatory processes to improve their learning	Making learning meaningful
	Self-efficacy	Students who are cognitively engaged possess a sense of confidence about themselves as capable learners. Self-efficacy influences aspirations and commitment to goals and the use of meta-cognitive strategies	Making learning meaningful
Some evidence	Relational learning	The opportunity for students to participate in classroom activities that encourage them to work together	Nurturing trusting relationships
	Personal agency	Relates to the perceived and actual control students have over their learning. Autonomy-supportive instructional behaviours enhance personal agency	Making learning meaningful
	Dispositions to be a learner	Attitudes acquired by students make them inclined to work in certain ways. Being resilient, and a propensity to challenge themselves has a role in cognitive engagement	Engaging students in fun learning activities

*Evidence of the effect of factor/s on engagement and learning outcomes and/or achievement
Source Main and Pendergast (2017), reproduced with permission

Box 5.7 Flexible learning pedagogies

Flexible learning pedagogies: What are they?

Flexible learning pedagogies require a re-structuring or re-imagining of teaching. As such, these pedagogies are beneficial for all students and can be understood as simply intensifying the pedagogical approaches recommended in Component 1 of the Model. Flexible learning pedagogies address student needs in diverse ways, across the dimensions of engagement (behavioural, emotional and cognitive).

Flexible learning pedagogies: What strategies can be used?

- Classroom environment and use of space:
 - Provide students with a choice of what kind of learning space works for their individual needs; for example, large sharing desks, stand-up desks, lying on the floor, sitting on a balance ball or bean bag;
 - Flexible classrooms allow for children (overtly shy or extrovert) to find a place in the classroom where they can work at their best, or even find a place where they can take a moment for themselves.
- Refer to existing frameworks of engaging pedagogies, for example:
 - The Productive Pedagogies: <https://digitised-collections.unimelb.edu.au/bitstream/handle/11343/115606/scpp-00431-qld.pdf?sequence=1>
 - Marzano's Dimensions of Learning: <http://www.ascd.org/publications/books/197133/chapters/Introduction.aspx>
 - Effective Pedagogical Practices: <http://www.cese.nsw.gov.au/effective-practices/toolkit>
 - Quality Teaching Framework: <http://www.theelements.education.nsw.gov.au/the-elements-manual/policy-reforms-and-focus-areas/quality-teaching-framework>
- Experiment with varying numbers and groupings of students, for example, a one-on-one teacher-student approach, small groups with a shared learning goal, and larger groups in alternative settings, such as outdoors;
- Blended learning, where students' engagement in traditional classroom learning activities is supplemented by online learning;
- Problem-based learning and inquiry-based learning, where students can build on strengths, engage in topics of interest to them and take greater charge of their learning;
- Small group social skills training, including reinforcement for specific pro-social behaviours, as advocated in the Positive Behaviour Support model (e.g., <http://synapse.org.au/information-services/positive-behaviour-support-techniques.aspx>);
- Registered training organisations' units of work that can be articulated into vocational certification.

Box 5.8 Flexible learning programs

Flexible Learning Programs: What are they?

While not excluding interested students from mainstream classes, these programs are primarily designed to meet the needs of specific group/s of targeted learners, for example, off-task students, English as an Additional Language/Dialect students, and gifted and twice exceptional students (gifted students with disabilities). There are a number of such programs already available worldwide, which may be adapted, according to context;

Flexible learning programs should sit within the school programming structures but may include off-site components. They are not conceived of as a 'pull out' or 'send away' option for young adolescents;

Flexible learning programs may be offered in a variety of ways. They may take the form of electives, extracurricular activities and/or as replacement for regular classes for part of the school week;

Student participation in flexible learning programs can extend from a one-off engagement for a specific period of time (e.g., a school term), through to ongoing involvement over a number of years; and

Flexible learning programs invite a range of stakeholder participation. In partnership with the education department/education system office, schools should explore ways of incorporating the services of, for example, allied health services, youth support workers, and integrated community agency support.

Flexible Learning Programs: What strategies can be used?

- Flexible learning programs may bring associated credits and qualifications but their chief use here is to enable young adolescents to learn and remain engaged in their school. Examples of major organisations supporting such programs in Australia include:
 - The Beacon Foundation: <http://beaconfoundation.com.au/>
 - Clontarf Foundation: <http://www.clontarf.org.au/>
 - Hands on Learning Australia: <http://handsonlearning.org.au/>
 - Duke of Edinburgh scheme: <https://dukeofed.com.au/>
 - Lions Youth Haven: <http://lyh.org.au/>
- Schools might also adopt and/or develop in-house project-based learning programs, such as Big Picture learning (<http://www.bigpicture.org>), which has been successfully implemented in a number of high schools;
- It is recommended that each school audit the range and availability of short-term programs and interest-based courses available to young adolescents in their immediate community.

In the case of both internal and external flexible learning programs, there are general principles that need to be considered, as exemplified in Australia by Edmund Rice's Youth+programs (<https://youthplusfoundation.org.au/>):

- Meeting the individual needs of young people;
- Developing a learning community;
- Providing learning that is critically reflective; and
- Promoting a culture of success.

Student referral processes should be in place (see below) although participation should be voluntary, with students and/or their families afforded the right to withdraw.

Goals, Outcomes and Measures, and Resources

Goals should in principle be established for each early intervention and flexible learning provision and, where appropriate, individualised for each student according to age, year level, capacities and aspirations. An overarching set of goals should also be developed for each school according to the particular flexible learning pedagogies and programs adopted, and should include the following:

- To mitigate a range of social, emotional and psychological factors associated with learners being/becoming at risk and/or disengaged;
- To foster a greater sense of wellbeing, self-efficacy, self-esteem and social inclusion for students who are at risk of disengaging from education and school;
- To alleviate gaps and/or low levels of interest in learning; and
- In the case of flexible learning programs, to develop appropriate pathways for re-integration in mainstream classes and/or manage them alongside mainstream subjects.

Outcomes should be mapped against the goals established for the flexible learning provision implemented by the school, and should show:

- Evidence of learning engagement/re-engagement by students;
- Evidence of students achieving traditional academic outcomes; and
- Increased personal and social wellbeing.

The types of measures that can be used include:

- Behavioural engagement measures such as attendance and suspensions data;
- Student wellbeing surveys;
- Student academic performance data and ongoing monitoring of student progress;
- Re-engagement by students in mainstream classes;
- Students achieve learning outcomes;

- Post-program destinations; and
- Levels of parental and community engagement.

Measures such as these provide evidence of what works (and what doesn't) in particular contexts. They can also be used to inform the adoption of flexible learning approaches in other schools and school regions/districts.

The following resourcing considerations apply to this component of provision:

- The implementation of flexible pedagogies may come at very little material cost to each school but will require some changes in culture and thinking in respect of classroom organisation and management. Hence, professional learning options for staff may be required;
- Each school will require different types and levels of resourcing, depending on the levels and nature of flexible learning provided and existing support networks; and
- Negotiations and agreements reached with the education department/education system office, support staff and community networks are key.

Component 3: Alternative Provision

The suggested Model of a continuum of support for young adolescent learners is consistent with the best-practice principles articulated in the literature cited in Chapter 2. Regardless of whether an alternative education site is situated within or off the school grounds, there are key principles recognised in the academic research that have been documented as underpinning the success of such schools, as shown in Fig. 5.3.

The principles can be elucidated as follows:

- **Insightful leadership and professional support for teachers:** Successful alternative providers have been shown to have school principals who are champions for doing school differently. Due to the

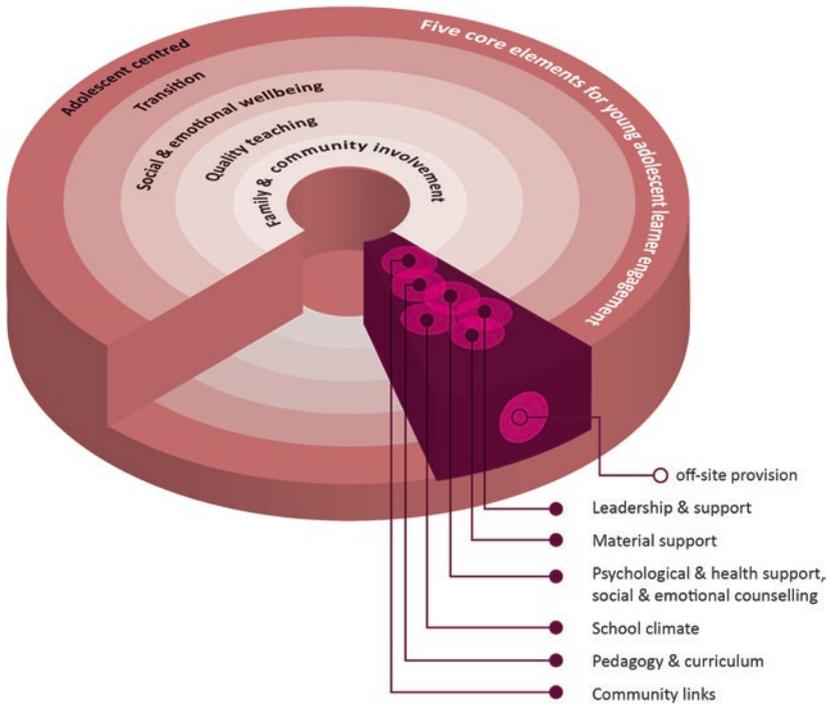


Fig. 5.3 Layer 3: Component 3—Alternative provision

high demands on staff, it is necessary that they have access to professional learning, respite and strategies for developing resilience;

- **Material support:** Some young people require considerable support in terms of basic needs that include: food, shelter, clothing, legal representation and crèches (for example) so that they can then focus on their present educational needs and pathways to their preferred futures;
- **Psychological, social and emotional counselling and health support:** Consistent provision of trusted personnel and access to health services, which are key requirements for some students before they can re-engage in meaningful learning;
- **School climate:** a positive and inclusive school climate that is student-centred, flexible and relational, is values-centred and

community-orientated ensures that young people develop an attachment to their school;

- **Pedagogy and curriculum:** a strengths-based approach with pedagogical practices that are flexible and responsive to the needs of young adolescents; and, relevant curricula that challenge students intellectually and encourage them to see learning as meaningful to them ensure that the alternative sites are neither ‘dumping grounds’ nor ‘drop-in centres’;
- **Community links:** alternative educational provision benefits from having mutually respectful relationships with local businesses and community organisations. Such connections foster opportunities for work experience as well as giving back to the community via volunteering projects that can be incorporated into learning experiences.

Alternative educational provision is a key component in the continuum of educational support for young adolescent learners described in this book. It warrants reiterating that our overall intent has been to provide a holistic model of schooling support for all students but with increasing levels of assistance and alternative educational pathways for students with increasing behavioural, emotional, psychological, and educational needs. Next we present the parameters of two suggested types of alternative educational provision: on-site and off-site.

On-Site Alternative Education Facility

Drawing upon the research literature, it is considered best practice for high schools to retain ‘ownership’ of their students so as to facilitate tracking of student progress and to nurture a sense of belonging on the part of the student. If students have not responded positively to the supportive structures and provisions, pastoral care and alternative curricular pathways earlier in the continuum, they may need more intensive educational, social, emotional or psychological support than can be easily provided in a mainstream classroom.

An on-site alternative education site allows students with high needs to receive intense personal and academic support to facilitate their re-engagement with education. It needs to be purpose-built so as to be welcoming and provide a positive environment for young people who are experiencing significant difficulties in general classrooms and programs. Key characteristics include the following:

- Provision of a dedicated, well-resourced, welcoming area of the school for students withdrawn from mainstream classrooms;
- Small numbers of students with an appropriately high staff ratio to enable thorough assessment processes and relationship building. Note: It is crucial to student success that they receive appropriate levels of personalised support for learning and wellbeing;
- Thorough assessment of each student's social, emotional, physical or psychological wellbeing;
- Development of individual 'wellbeing plans' (WBPs) for each student according to personal circumstances and individual needs;
- Regular consultations with appropriate personnel for any mental or health issues (e.g., youth or social worker, doctor or psychologist);
- Consistent contact with the same professionals whilst under treatment so that young people are able to develop trusting relationships with them;
- Contact with the student's family so as to garner cooperation and address particular problems that may be in the home, via the help of a social worker;
- Thorough assessment of each student's learning gaps and needs according to immediate and longer-term goals, and current levels of behavioural, social, emotional and cognitive engagement;
- Development of individual learning plans (ILPs) for each student according to their learning gaps, needs and immediate and longer-term goals;
- Modified curricula, scaffolding and one-to-one tutoring; and
- Individual case management of each student with close monitoring of progress towards personal goals identified in individual learning and WBPs.

Goals should be individualised for each student according to age, year level, capacities and aspirations. Overarching aims include, but are not limited to the following:

- To facilitate a greater sense of wellbeing, self-efficacy, self-esteem and hope for each student as per their individual WBPs;
- To remediate academic gaps and/or disinterest in learning so as to progress the goals developed in each student's ILP;
- To develop appropriate pathways, for example: reintegration in mainstream classes or learning options along the continuum; or to vocational training; or to college; or to employment; and
- To map the individual outcomes for each student against the goals established in individual WBPs and ILPs.

Specific student outcomes should be contextualised within the following domains:

- Social, emotional, physical and psychological wellbeing;
- Academic and vocational achievement; and
- Progression towards the established goals for each student.

All measurement of student progress in the following areas should be conducted within the context of mutually respectful and caring relations teacher/student—student/teacher. Trust may take time to develop, and this must be allowed for. Students will progress along different timescales and, of necessity, some will need longer than others. In terms of compliance, schools should report measurements of student progress in their annual school board reports.

In consultation with relevant network and/or high school support staff who have the requisite qualifications in adolescent psychology, health, mental health, youth and social work, teachers should draw upon existing instruments in these fields to track student progress. Assessments should be made on entry, during and at exit.

Teachers should be assigned a small number of students within the site. They would:

- Appraise learning needs on entry;
- Assist them in establishing learning goals; and
- Develop ILPs and assess these plans progressively using existing types of schooling assessment instruments, as appropriate to the level of achievement required (e.g., some high school students may have a reading age of much lower levels), and type of task (e.g., problem-based learning, workbook, checklist).

Effective staffing of on-site alternative facilities is crucial to their success. It is often effective to create a leader of, for example, 'Flexible and Alternative Education' so as to coordinate and facilitate these key components of the Model. This leader should have the requisite personal skills and appropriate training for working with high needs students. One of their key responsibilities would be to build a team of staff who have the necessary personal skills and training to provide appropriate levels of care and support to the students in the alternative on-site facility. The on-site alternative education facility would remain the responsibility of the individual high school administration.

As far as possible, teachers should be volunteers for the work in the on-site alternative learning option. Prior to commencement in the site they should be provided with appropriate professional learning in working with students with high needs. The leader of the site should bring each member of staff in purposefully to fulfil the learning and pastoral needs of students. Each teacher who volunteers should be interviewed by the leader (and by the school administration if desired) and screened for particular attributes. In particular, staff in these on-site facilities should be highly qualified, highly experienced and resilient with empathy for young people, particularly those with high needs; and exhibit positive and respectful attitudes towards young people.

Teaching staff would require the support of other professionals: psychologists, health workers, youth and social workers, and counsellors. Numbers need to be determined by each high school, depending on the size of the school and the numbers of students in alternative on-site provision. What is important is that students have access to the same teachers and workers so that trusting relationships may be formed at individual levels.

The amount of extra resourcing required to set up on-site alternative facilities will vary from school to school. Prior to the establishment of a site at a high school, the leadership team should conduct an audit and then, in partnership with education departmental or systemic offices, determine the amount and type of resourcing required and the funding necessary for the establishment and sustainability of the on-school alternative education site. Resources may include but not be limited to:

- Refurbishing of facilities within the high school and provision of appropriate furnishings and teaching materials and hardware;
- Possibly the provision of basic necessities such as food and clothing and access to a shower;
- Professional learning opportunities for staff who volunteer to work in the site;
- Provision of extra support staff (e.g., psychologists, health workers, youth and social workers, counsellors) who maintain consistent and regular contact with students in the site; and
- Community organisations who may have volunteers who are willing to mentor young people through the provision of crafts and hobbies and spend time just talking with them.

The number of students who are referred within individual high schools will also vary. Along the YAEL Model of a continuum of support, alternative provision should be seen as a last resort. By establishing an holistic approach to high school reform, students will have a supportive base in the first phase of the continuum; for those who may be at risk or who have forms of anxiety, the second phase provides a range of alternative programs (including digital learning options) that are intended to counteract the ‘risk of disengagement.’ It is anticipated that implementing earlier forms of prevention and support will lower the numbers of students who may require alternative educational provision. Thus, referral to the on-school site must not be chosen lightly and numbers must be limited to those who meet the following referral criteria:

- Over time, failure to engage in a range of alternative programs or pathways provided in the second component of provision of the Model;
- Persistently disruptive behaviour, coupled with underachievement and/or schooling failure which resists remediation at the second component of provision;
- Complete social withdrawal from normal classroom situations and/or demonstrated high levels of anxiety that prevent the student from participating; and
- Learning gaps and/or emotional/psychological needs at a level requiring more intensive personalised teaching or therapy than can be provided in the second level of the continuum, but the student poses no threat to peers or teachers.

It is in the interests of the high school and the alternative education site that liaisons are made and/or consolidated with non-government agencies, community agencies, charitable organisations, local businesses and other community groups, so as to draw upon as much local support as possible. These connections will draw upon untapped human and material resources and assist in helping young people with complex needs to develop a sense of belonging, not just to their high school, but to their community.

External (Off-Site) Provision for Very High Needs Students

We recommend that off-site educational provision is reserved only for the very small number of students whose behaviour can no longer be appropriately dealt with in a mainstream high school. If a student behaves in ways that are highly detrimental or dangerous to self, peers, teachers and the high school community in general, then the school leadership team should consult with staff and professionals who have been working with the young person, along with their parents/carers

so as to determine the best off-site educational option for that student. As it is unlikely that at this stage of the continuum the student would return to the school, thought must be given to the most appropriate external learning option which will progress the learning and development of that student, whilst allowing them to develop a sense of belonging to the new facility. Referral behaviours include:

- Violence;
- Substance abuse (including alcohol);
- High levels of abuse of staff and peers; and
- Complete non-cooperation and failure in the face of all of the options and support mechanisms (as previously described).

In enacting this phase of the Model, we emphasise the need to work collaboratively with community agencies, families, parents/carers and students. Students must be allowed a voice in matters concerning their educational pathways. Ownership of decisions taken will enhance their academic success and contribute to a greater sense of self-efficacy.

As the students utilising off-site facilities are expected to have very high needs, it would be expected that the guiding principles of alternative provision, as elaborated above, are underpinned by equally high levels of intensity so that the services provide a 'wraparound' model of support for each student. Independent alternative schooling sites facilities change quite regularly and it is important that leaders in each school update their database of options. It is also important during the referral process of students to an external site that the following are considered:

- Each student should be interviewed and assessed on arrival so as to establish their personal and learning needs and individual goals. Such goals should be individualised for each student according to age, year level, capacities and aspirations;
- A focus on achieving a greater sense of wellbeing, self-efficacy, self-esteem and hope for each student as per their individual WBPs;

- Strategies for remediating academic gaps and/or disinterest in learning so as to progress the goals developed in each student's ILPs; and
- Processes for developing appropriate pathways, as appropriate to vocational training; or to college; or to employment.

We recommend the following staffing structure as optimal for an off-site facility:

- Site manager/principal—demonstrated skills and appropriately empathetic attitudes for working with young people with high needs and challenging behaviours;
- Staff criteria—highly qualified, highly experienced and resilient with empathy for young people, particularly those with high needs and challenging behaviours; and positive and respectful attitudes towards young people;
- Psychologists, health workers, youth and social workers, and counsellors to provide appropriate levels of wraparound support for individual students; and
- Appropriate networks of community support.

While the off-site alternative facility is unlikely to be under the jurisdiction of a school (although such a model is possible), it remains the responsibility of that school to check the quality of such institutions before referring any students. Regardless of personal challenges and challenging behaviours, all young people have a right to an education that will help them to find a pathway to a productive and healthy future.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided detailed explanations of the three components of educational, social and emotional provision that comprise the continuum of educational support provided in the YAEL Model.

Component 1, *five core elements for young adolescent learner engagement*, ensures the learning environment is a positive engagement space for all learners. The intent of this approach is to create an ecosystem of best practice in learning through a focus on an adolescent-centred approach; transition; social and emotional wellbeing; quality teaching; and parental and community involvement. Component 2, *flexible learning provision support*, is intended to serve the personal and learning needs of young adolescents who are not fully engaged in learning through Component 1. Flexible learning support can be provided through both tailored pedagogies and targeted programs, both of which were outlined in this chapter. Key features of these types of learning support were considered, and examples of strategies were provided. For those young adolescents who have fully disengaged from education and/or who are demonstrating anti-social or violent behaviours, the provision of alternative measures of support may be required. The final component of the continuum, Component 3: *alternative provision*, responds to the needs of these students. As noted at the start of this chapter, learning dis/engagement is fluid over the cycle of the high school years. Figure 5.4

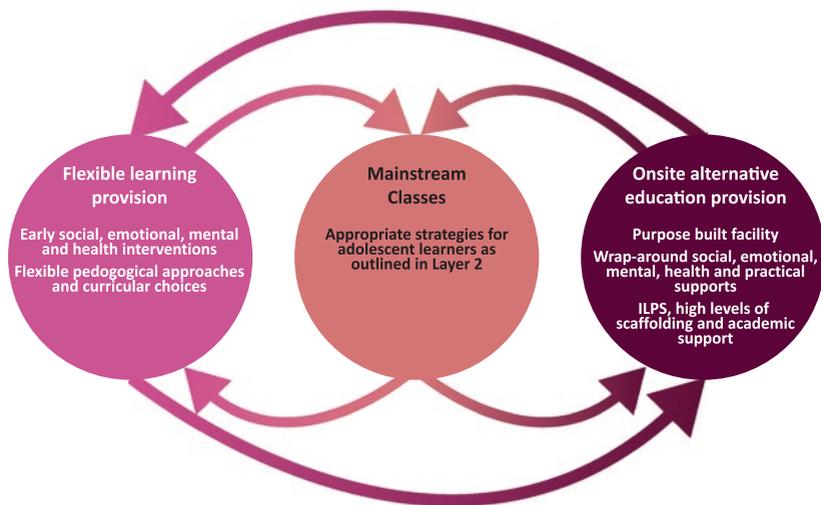


Fig. 5.4 Cycle of student re-engagement through early intervention and the use of flexible provision and on-site alternative provision

represents our view on how the three components of educational provision should interact.

Research Implications

Through conceptualising the *five core elements* as the first component of provision in the YAEL Model, we are underscoring the need for a holistic approach to learner engagement for all young adolescents. There is still a gap in efficacy studies across the range of strategies advocated for each of the five core elements; thus, we advocate the undertaking of further research in these areas. With regards to research relating specifically to Component 2: *flexible learning provision support*, we suggest two areas that are worthy of consideration:

- In the current era of evidence-driven decision making in schools, it would be beneficial to (continue to) closely monitor, and report on, measures of success against the pre-established goals associated with each of the flexible learning pedagogies and programs incorporated into the school/s. While these types of measurement already take place, there is scope for more work and research in this area; and
- Among the issues associated with the provision of flexible learning support is the sustainability of enacted strategies/approaches/initiatives. The literature attests to the frequency with which such support measures are wound down and/or discontinued, due to changes at the school level (e.g., in policy initiatives, school leadership, strategic planning), as well as more broadly (e.g., cessation of external support funding). In cases where flexible learning approaches are sustained medium or long-term, longitudinal studies into their efficacy would be welcome and informative to the international education field.

Finally, while there is considerable research documenting the social and emotional benefits that many young people derive from attending an alternative educational site, there is a gap in the literature concerning the short and long-term academic and vocational outcomes. Further research in this area is thus required, particularly given the importance

of alternative schools to the provision of the skills and knowledge that will support young people as they progress their lives. On-site alternative provision allows the school to engage in creative restructuring of curricula and pedagogy while tracking student success. However, once students have exited to external alternative provision, this is not as easily managed. More research is also required in this area to ensure that these young people are not further disadvantaged through such referrals.

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6

Reforming Schools and Systems to Engage Young Adolescent Learners

Introduction

Implementation of the Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning (YAEL) Model requires intentional actions and change in classrooms, schools and at systems' level. Extant literature provides high-level understanding of the major phases of reform and the elements required for reform success. This chapter focuses on one approach to reform that has driven change—the Educational Change Model (ECM)—and how the YAEL Model can be intentionally implemented through adopting this reform approach. The components in the phases of the ECM may be utilised as a guide for the implementation timeline and serve as an audit tool for effective implementation, alongside the components of provision of the YAEL Model. The chapter begins by discussing some of the key challenges and enablers in school reform for student engagement.

The Challenge of Engaging Young Adolescent Learners

A fundamental challenge that school system leaders face is how to guide their system through a course of action to improve student learning, an outcome that is intrinsically linked to student engagement. Overcoming issues associated with student disengagement is complicated and requires change driven by policy makers, system and school leaders, and teachers (Goss, Sonnemann, & Griffiths, 2017). This challenge is all the more complex because starting points are different, contextual realities vary, and leaders face multiple decisions and possibilities of what to do along the way. As we have argued elsewhere:

Perhaps the real challenge, however, to making a real difference in young people continuing meaningfully in school is not only to ask the hard questions, but to accept that there are some challenging, long-term responses that are required across the board. (Allen et al., 2018, p. 421)

In this book, we have shared our scheme for engaging young adolescent learners by employing a continuum approach, built around the engagement domains of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement, recognising that all young people are potentially at risk of disengaging from learning because of a myriad of personal factors shaping young adolescence, as well as schooling pressures and transitions. Our continuum approach is predicated on the understanding that risks associated with disengagement can be mitigated via a spectrum of proactive, supportive and responsive measures that foster student engagement across the domains and enhance levels of retention in schools. The implementation of the YAEL Model, therefore, requires an intentional reform strategy, implemented over time, to achieve positive outcomes and produce learning benefits for students.

In Chapter 1, we introduced the *Performance Indicator Framework* and identified student engagement as an indicator of success, where it is defined as the engagement of students across the behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions (Commonwealth of Australia, 2018). This definition was based on the school engagement framework by

American researchers Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris (2004), in which there has been a renewed wave of interest in recent times by the Australian Government and other parties. Researchers Robyn Gibbs and Jenny Poskitt, for example, utilised the framework to propose a continuum for engaging middle years learners in an extensive review conducted for the New Zealand context (see Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010). They used the model to propose indicators and strategies for each of the behavioural, emotional and cognitive dimensions. As indicated in previous chapters of this book, Gibbs and Poskitt's work helped inform our research during the Student Engagement Continuum (SEC) study (Allen, McGregor, Pendergast, & Ronksley-Pavia, 2016), conducted at the outset of our project, and in developing the ensuing YAEL Model. In 2017, the Grattan Institute, an Australian public policy think tank, published a report entitled, *Engaging students: Creating classrooms that improve learning* (Goss et al., 2017), which provides data on the extent of disengagement in Australian schools and on strategies to address this situation. Notably, this report also refers to the behavioural, social-emotional and cognitive dimensions of student engagement.

Concurrently, Pendergast et al. (2018) have used the engagement dimensions as the basis for exploring youth engagement capabilities as part of a Queensland Department of Education and Training initiative focusing on re-engaging young adolescents in education (Queensland Government, Department of Education and Training, 2017). In each case, the engagement framework has been invaluable in removing some of the ambiguity about what is meant by student engagement. However, we have consistently found that the wider education community does not have a sophisticated understanding of student engagement (e.g., Pendergast et al., 2018) and that there has been a focus on "trying to combat disengaged behaviours, rather than on understanding and promoting engagement among students" (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2014, p. 1).

Usually, teachers and administrators are acutely aware of those students who have disengaged or are in the process of disengaging from school. If the YAEL Model presented in this book is implemented with appropriate attention being paid to the relational elements inherent in schooling dis/engagement, then there will be ample contextual evidence

to initiate appropriate responses along the continuum of learning support. However, we are aware that some schools may require more formal measures for gauging learning dis/engagement and thus suggest a report by Fredricks et al. (2011), which reviews 21 instruments that have been developed and used in the US for measuring student engagement.

In their review, Fredricks et al. (2011) found considerable disparity between the instruments in terms of how engagement was defined. This was further compounded by issues around the number of engagement dimensions being assessed (behavioural, emotional and cognitive), and the object of engagement that was assessed (e.g., engagement in school; engagement of all students or engagement of individual students in particular classrooms). Of the 21 instruments (all of which are displayed in Table 6.1), only five measured all three engagement dimensions of behavioural, emotional and cognitive and used terminology that aligned with these three dimensions.

Out of the instruments listed in Table 6.1, there are only four that use diagnostic tools that link schooling dis/engagement to aspects of the school environment. With regards to our Model, these would appear to be the most useful, and we therefore provide a brief account of them below.

Engagement Versus Disaffection with Learning Reports

The *Engagement versus Disaffection with Learning (EvsD)* (see Fredricks et al., 2011, pp. 28–29) student and teacher reports and an observation report for a subset of students in a class, were developed to measure student motivation that includes engagement as a dimension (seen as a key factor in student motivation that leads to student learning and achievement). The EvsD reports account for both positive and negative expressions of behavioural and emotional engagement (participation) in classroom learning. Interestingly, Fredricks et al. (2011) posit that the EvsD is founded on a theoretical model of student motivation where “student engagement (behavioral and emotional) is promoted when social context of learning meets students’ basic psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy” (p. 28). As such, the EvsD

Table 6.1 Engagement dimensions measured by instruments

Instrument	Behavioural	Emotional	Cognitive
Student self-reports			
<i>Multidimensional</i>			
4-H Study for Positive Youth Development School Engagement Scale (4-H)	✓	✓	✓
High School Survey of Student Engagement (HSSSE)	✓	✓	✓
Motivation and Engagement Scale (MES)	✓	✓	✓
School Engagement Measure (SEM)-MacArthur	✓	✓	✓
Student School Engagement Survey (SSES)	✓	✓	✓
<i>Bidimensional</i>			
Attitudes Towards Mathematics Survey (ATM)	✓		✓
Education versus Disaffection with Learning (EvsD), student report	✓	✓	
Research Assessment Package for Schools (RAPS), student report	✓	✓	
School Success Profile (SSP)	✓	✓	
Student Engagement Instrument (SEI)		✓	✓
<i>Unidimensional</i>			
Consortium on Chicago School Research/Academic Engagement Scale (CCR/AES)	✓		
Identification with School Questionnaire (ISQ)		✓	
Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ)			✓
School Engagement Scale/Questionnaire	✓		
Teacher reports			
Engagement versus Disaffection with Learning (EvsD), teacher report	✓	✓	
Research Assessment Package for Schools (RAPS), teacher report	✓	✓	
Reading Engagement Index (REI)	✓	✓	✓
Observational measures			
Behavioral Observation of Students in Schools (BOSS)	✓		
Classroom AIMS	✓	✓	
Main-stream Code for Instructional Structure and Student Academic Response (MS-CISSAR)	✓		
Instructional Practices Inventory (IPI)			✓

Source: Fredricks et al. (2011, p. 11). See <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED514996.pdf> for detailed information about the 21 instruments

appears to be as much a measure of the classroom learning environment and how conducive it is to student motivation, as it is a measure of student behavioural and emotional engagement. The student report contains four subscales that measure: behavioural engagement (e.g., effort, attention, persistence and participation); behavioural disaffection (e.g., lack of effort, withdrawal from learning); emotional engagement (e.g., emotions indicating motivation in learning); and emotional disaffection (e.g., emotions indicating withdrawal from learning). The teacher report measures the same four subscales grouped in the same way as the student report.

Research Assessment Package for Schools

The *Research Assessment Package for Schools (RAPS)* (see Fredricks et al., 2011, pp. 38–39) has a student self-report questionnaire and teacher report of individual student engagement. This instrument measures three constructs of: student engagement; self-beliefs; and students' experiences of personal support from teachers and parents. This package has three main functions: to produce diagnostic information about students; evaluate school improvement initiatives aimed at improving student engagement; and consider changes in engagement over time. The student self-report consists of two subscales that measure ongoing engagement in school (e.g., facets of behavioural and emotional engagement); and reaction to challenge (e.g., resiliency strategies that students use).

School Success Profile

The *School Success Profile (SSP)* is a student self-report online questionnaire that is based on the theoretical contextual premise that the social environment of school has a profound effect on student development and academic success. The purpose of the SSP is to gain understanding of students' perceptions of self and their schooling environment in order to develop strategies for increasing student academic success (Fredricks et al., 2011, pp. 44–45).

Instructional Practices Inventory

The *Instructional Practices Inventory* (IPI) (see Fredricks et al., 2011, pp. 58–59) was designed to present a whole-school image of student engagement in learning that could be used for school-wide reflection and pedagogical change; its primary use is as a school improvement tool. Administered by trained data collectors from individual three-minute classroom observations across 100–120 classrooms on one day in a given school, the IPI can be used at three to four junctures across a school year to provide a picture of cognitive engagement from a classroom level to a whole school level. The instrument uses observational categories (student-engaged instruction, teacher-directed instruction and disengagement) that purport to describe a wide range of student cognitive engagement practices.

In looking for ways to determine the nature and degree of schooling disengagement, we advise caution. As noted throughout this book, the reasons are extremely complex and involve many in-school factors alongside those that exist in the worlds of the young people. Thus, diagnosing the problem must incorporate holistic approaches that take into account the numerous causes of schooling disengagement. Our Model is intended to address many of the in-school issues that contribute to this challenge. Therefore, we contend that schools need to undertake an holistic audit of their practices, environment and philosophy, and restructure along a continuum of support for all young people; however, they cannot do this in isolation. Recently, the Grattan Institute recommended that schooling systems play a significant role in responding to schooling disengagement (Goss et al., 2017). To this end, we now move to considering the way in which systemic reform might gain traction.

Reforming Systems

Fortunately, reform in education has been the subject of considerable attention, and hence there are some broad and generally accepted principles that can be applied to reform that enable implementation of the YAEL Model. A starting point is the eight key principles for educational

reform identified by Mourshed, Chijioke, and Barber (2010) who explored how 20 education systems around the world, each at different starting points, improved their performance. Their principles for effective reform are:

1. A system can make significant gains from wherever it starts and this can be achieved in six years or less;
2. Improving system performance occurs by improving the learning experience of students in their classrooms. School systems typically employ one or more of three intervention types—structure, resources, and process. Combinations of these three, with a focus on process, is optimal;
3. Each stage of school system improvement is associated with a unique set of interventions. Learning from others at the same stage is beneficial as is realising that doing more of the same will not propel a system to achieve different levels of improvement;
4. Different contexts respond to mandatory as opposed to persuasive arguments for reform. Hence, this is a decision that needs to be contextualised within the cultural and political context of the reform underway—in essence, there is the need for a mandate;
5. There are six ‘must haves’ for reform:
 - Building the instructional skills of teachers and management skills of principals (their efficacy)
 - Assessing students
 - Improving data systems (building evidence)
 - Improving education policy
 - Revising standards and curriculum
 - Ensuring appropriate rewards and remuneration for teachers and principals (esteem)
6. Systems sustain improvement by balancing school autonomy with consistent teaching practice. Sustaining reform is achieved with collaborative practice, the main mechanism both for improving teaching practice and making teachers accountable to each other;

7. It is necessary to ‘spark’ reform, that is, provide a trigger or purpose; and
8. Leadership continuity is essential, both for sparking reform and for sustaining it. Two things stand out about the leaders of improving systems—the median tenure of the new strategic leaders is six years; improving systems actively cultivates the next generation of system leaders, ensuring a smooth transition of leadership and the longer-term continuity in reform goals.

These eight principles are each reflected in the framework of the ECM (Pendergast et al., 2005) discussed later in this chapter. Interestingly, time periods for reform pointed to a six-year window for effective and sustained reform. This is an important factor, and one which is typically neglected in educational reform processes. Indeed, an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) think-tank considered 450 education reforms carried out by its 34 member countries between 2008 and 2014 and discovered that only 10% were evaluated for impact and most suffered the problem of short-termism where the reform was cut short to align with political cycles, rather than what is a long term trajectory for educational reform to determine genuine impact (OECD, 2015). This view is supported by UK academic and policy advisor Alma Harris (2011) who notes:

Where there is pressure to improve results, often governments will snatch at solutions even though they have dramatically failed elsewhere. The time scale for change in terms of policymakers and politicians is much shorter than the time scale for real, sustainable change in schools and school systems. Inevitably, this creates tension and the imperative to move more quickly than is either wise or ultimately good for the system. (p. 163)

Harris (2011), whose view is widely reflected in the research literature, argues for long-term, visionary approaches to school reform and advocates a shift away from narrow performance measures of school effectiveness and student success.

Challenging Dominant Discourses: The Vital Role of School Leadership

The research project that underpins our Model utilised a qualitative methodology with a focus on narrative approaches to data analysis. This fitted the stated aims of the research in that we were seeking the views of a variety of stakeholders, specifically though not exclusively, the perspectives of school leaders, teachers and students. Considering such stakeholders as experts in their own lives, however, does not discount the recognition that narratives are inevitably shaped by cultural narratives and powerful social discourses arising within specific historical and geographical spaces (Clandinin & Connelly, 2001).

When discussing the issue of schooling disengagement with participating school leaders, one dominant discourse emerged that indicated why solutions to the problem may fail in the long term. The school leaders we interviewed appeared to be highly competent at identifying the symptoms of schooling disengagement, even providing caring responses; however, in diagnosing the origins of schooling disengagement, they consistently situated the problem within the child. The construction of youth as dangerous and/or sick has a long history within modern western societies dating back to the nineteenth century (Hebdige, 1988). Recent research (see Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009; Giroux, 2009; Grossberg, 2001) argues that the negative stereotyping of economically alienated and socially disenfranchised young people as disengaged and at risk allows government systems to abrogate their responsibilities. Brunila (2014) argues that such trends are encouraging a “pathologising” of young people as they struggle to cope with the socio-economic challenges created by neoliberalism. She notes:

What sociologists define as a “therapeutic ethos”, where the language of disorder, addiction, vulnerability and dysfunction together with associated practices from different branches of therapy permeate both culture and political systems, is now prevalent in an increasing number of countries including the United States, Australia, Canada and EU member

states ... education seems to be finding a new role as a therapeutic entity employing therapeutic interventions, and is legitimised by finding the “real truth” about young people in therapeutic terms. (Brunila, 2014, pp. 9–19)

Given the pervasiveness in western societies of the neoliberal mantra of individual accountability (see Chapter 2), it is not unexpected that such thinking would permeate schooling systems. The resultant focus on *fixing the child* (see Chapter 2) detracts from initiatives that might *fix the school*. This is why enlightened school leadership is vital to solving the challenges of schooling disengagement. It is not enough to simply diagnose the symptoms; school leaders must be cognisant of the roles played by the community and the school in re-engaging young people in learning. Children are not born disengaged. Environmental factors have failed to provide the necessary conditions within which they might thrive (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Anger, anxiety, withdrawal are all ways of coping with that environment. Thus we need school leaders who can audit the schooling environment and create safe places for young people to be and to learn without having to draw upon such emotional crutches.

In this final chapter we present a longitudinal model for changing schools. However, its success depends upon having a school leadership team that resituates the issue of schooling disengagement within broader contexts than the child him/herself. Reforming the school environment does not preclude parallel psychological and material support for young people. However, if such students are going to develop a sense of belonging, doing the latter without the former will not work in the long term.

Prior to embarking on structural changes within a school, there needs to be attitudinal change and it needs to start from the top. The following excerpts from our interviews with school leaders are presented in their own words. The first demonstrates a deep internalisation of powerful social and cultural discourses of traditional schooling and dysfunctional youth; while the second articulates perspectives that are necessary for framing meaningful schooling reform:

School Principal 1:

There can be factors that are beyond the school control ... they're not fed, there might be criminal activity happening at the home, they don't have a bed to sleep in. We've got one student who sleeps on the couch because there are several families in one home. Those are factors that will impact on their education. *There are factors that will impact on their education that have nothing to do with education* [emphasis added]. Then other things, like their mental health. We have a number of students who have very stable home lives who have quite significant depression and anxiety. Those factors impact on their ability to engage with education. Then there are educational factors - the fact that a student might have some significant learning needs and we have a limited amount of resources to dedicate to support the learning needs of those students.

Schools cannot fix the external environments from which students come; however, they do have an obligation to ameliorate the effects of those environments on the learning of their students. To say that "there are factors that will impact on their education that have nothing to do with education" demonstrates a significant lack of understanding of pedagogy and curriculum and a century of educational research (see, e.g., Bernstein, 2000; Connell, 2012; Dewey, 1902; Lingard et al., 2001; Newmann & Associates, 1996).

This school leader went on to identify perceived barriers to change:

We're quite a traditional school, but it's a double-edged sword, in that if a child can't fit into that traditional, very timetabled structure of a high school that we struggle to create a space that allows for what we call a flexible learning option within the school context.... If I've got a year team that are taking care of 260 kids, how do I resource a reasonable workload for someone to work quite intensively with a kid who's at risk? So, there's a teacher workload issue that we experience because of the size of our year groups.

What we see here is the common discourse of the need for youthful compliance; the child having to "fit in." Our Model suggests otherwise: a school that can be responsive to the shifting needs of a diversity of

adolescent learners. In contrast to this viewpoint, the next excerpt illustrates broader understandings of responding to schooling disengagement:

School Principal 2:

[In responding to schooling disengagement] it cannot be a cookie cutter solution. Programs that do not make the environment adaptable to [students] have got a short shelf life in schools and always have had. I've been involved, fortunately one way or another, in many versions of additional pathways ... there is still a large number of people in the profession that believe they come here to distribute wisdom from the whiteboard—*sage on the stage*—you know? It's been a tipping point in our profession for a very long time—that people don't feel it's their job to deal with the hardship of kids.

Take out “at risk” and say “naughty” – that's how they are seen and everybody wants those kids to be making less noise inside their school. Putting them back in their schools [from behaviour centres]? It is the most unpopular thing, you have no idea.

Teachers are best suited to talking to other teachers about teaching. My thought is always about how does that person teaching that student figure out what's best if they're not talking to other teachers who may have better ways of working? So [we have to] free up some of those traditional structures in high schools. Like, for example, we went to the multi-faculty space.

So there's stages of this that will still need to be unpacked in a fairly traditional school. I'm not changing [Key Learning Area] structures, I'm just suggesting to people, I want you to talk about problems of practice, not kids. Not behaviour, a problem of practice.

“Problems of practice, not kids”: herein lies the contribution of the YAEL Model, which can be activated by adopting the Education Change Model—both of which are indeed about the reform of practices within schools.

The Educational Change Model

In 2005, Pendergast et al. developed a model of key features and time involved in effecting major change in education settings, naming this the ECM. This was originally developed for reform processes

in Australian middle schooling (Pendergast, 2006; Pendergast et al., 2005). More recently, it has been used to facilitate state-wide reform of the early childhood sector in Victoria, Australia (Garvis, Pendergast, Twigg, Fluckiger, & Kanasa, 2012) and was the underpinning framework adopted for implementing Junior Secondary reform in Queensland across all government schools in Years 7, 8 and 9 (Pendergast et al., 2014). The ECM has value for an individual, a site or setting, and at the systemic level. At the individual level, it can be used to assist people to determine the stage of reform at which they are operating by reflecting on their own understandings and practices, and mapping this to predictable aspects of the reform stage. Similarly, in a specific site, the phase of reform can be determined by auditing the evidence presented across the site. At the systemic level, the components of the phases outlined in the ECM support further progress in implementation. Therefore, the adoption of the ECM is applicable to the innovative change in the whole-of-program reform proposed in this book.

The ECM proposes that programs of reform are typically established in three phases, gradually introducing particular core component changes, and typically spanning five to seven years, depending upon contextual factors. These phases are: the initiation phase, the development phase, and the consolidation phase. Both the ECM and the relevant literature recognise that educational reform often takes longer than expected or than is typically allowed for in reform schedules. The three broad phases can be mapped onto any major reform initiative, and feature indications of time taken to achieve each phase. The time periods associated with each of the three phases are indicative only and can be accelerated through the alignment of contextual enablers. Concomitantly, inhibitors can lead to dips in the progress of the reform program, thus adding extra time to the overall reform process. Table 6.2 provides a summary of the core components of the ECM for each phase.

Importantly, the components found in each phase are intentionally located so that a sequence of reform is scaffolded into a sustainable design. A typical challenge of reform undertaken by educators is

Table 6.2 Core components of Educational Change Model

Initiation phase 1–2 years	Development phase 2–5 years	Consolidation phase 5–10 years
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introducing new language and philosophy; • Focus on transition; • Establish quality teaching model—structures, protocols and practices; • Establish leadership model; • Plan and establish evidence principles; and • Develop knowledge base around initiative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement and refine quality teaching model; • Encourage emerging leadership; • Plan and implement, revise and renew; • Facilitate learning communities for teachers; • Use and extend evidence sources; and • Develop support structures to enable sustainability of reform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refine quality teaching practice; • Lead and support others; and • Build capacity, ownership and sustainable practices

Source Pendergast (2006)

the desire to launch into quality teaching reforms (development phase) without setting in place the antecedents for success outlined in the initiation phase, such as shared philosophy and designing the quality teaching model and the evidence indicators.

The role of the educator as an active agent of reform and development is crucial. Providing opportunities for individuals to work together and have collective responsibility to improve practice is a positive, whereas a lack of agency has been recognised as a problem in reform. In order to achieve collaborative practices, educators need time to reach a common understanding and establish a shared commitment, thereby setting up the conditions for embedding a shift in the fabric of the teaching and learning. Providing time for effective professional learning and agentive engagement of educators is therefore crucial.

The ECM is effective for the implementation of the YAEL Model's three components of provision, namely, *five core elements for young adolescent engagement*, *flexible learning provision support*, and *alternative provision*. These components of provision each require careful design and concurrent development. Table 6.3 maps the proposed actions required to implement the components of provision against the ECM.

Table 6.3 Implementing the YAEL model in alignment with the ECM

Proposed actions	ECM phase and focus for the components of provision of the YAEL Model
<i>Initiation phase</i>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Commit to resourcing reform for minimum of five years; 2. Conduct professional learning sessions for school leaders with a focus on leading reform specifically for the components of the Initiation Phase; 3. Establish a community of practice for teachers of young adolescent learners (may be virtual); 4. Engage parents/family and the community in information sharing sessions focussing on adolescent learning and engagement; 5. Conduct professional learning sessions for teachers with a focus on teaching young adolescent learners; and 6. Establish coaching program to support whole school adoption of the YAEL Model in the context of the school culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce new philosophy and language; • Focus on transition; • Establish quality teaching model—structures, protocols and practices; • Establish leadership model; • Plan and establish evidence principles; and • Develop knowledge base around initiative
<i>Development phase</i>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 7. Implement coaching program built around action learning approach and commence whole school reform (this builds a reflexive process into the changes so they are constantly reviewed and refined); 8. Transition existing practices and implement Development Phase features of the YAEL Model; 9. Share exemplary practice through teacher-led showcases and community of practice, communicated also to the wider school community; and 10. Continue to provide resourcing for professional learning and refinement of practices in order to establish structures to achieve sustainability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement and refine quality teaching model; • Encourage emerging leadership; • Plan and implement, revise and renew; • Facilitate learning communities for teachers; • Use and extend evidence sources; and • Develop support structures to enable sustainability of reform

(continued)

Table 6.3 (continued)

Proposed actions	ECM phase and focus for the components of provision of the YAEL Model
<i>Consolidation phase</i>	
11. Focus on refining practices to reflect strengths and school culture, alongside other priorities; 12. Incorporate policy decisions informed by the YAEL Model; and 13. Build leadership to ensure continuity and sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Refine quality teaching practice; • Lead and support others; and • Build capacity, ownership and sustainable practices

Sustaining Change

The changes associated with the implementation of the YAEL Model are profound and will change the schooling of young adolescents. It will take several years for change to be normalised into the system, and by utilising the ECM, it is apparent that sustained change is achieved only in the final phase of reform, that is, at the phase of consolidation. Thus, the core components in each prior phase of reform—initiating and developing—must be successfully achieved before a strong focus on building capacity, ownership and sustainable practices is embedded into the system, and genuine consolidation can be achieved.

In their report, Mourshed et al. (2010) suggest that for a “system’s improvement journey to be sustained over the long term, the improvements have to be integrated into the very fabric of the system pedagogy” (p. 71). The report identified that improving systems do this in three ways: establishing collaborative practices; developing a mediating layer between the schools and the centre; and architecting tomorrow’s leadership. Each of these aspects of sustaining improvement is interconnected and an integral part of the system pedagogy (Mourshed et al., 2010). In the sections below, we focus particularly on teachers and the key role they play in sustaining changed practices.

Teachers at the Centre of the Change

It is apparent that quality teaching is very much at the core of young adolescent learning. Main and Bryer (2005) identified acceptance, effectiveness and sustainability as key to the staged process for the successful implementation of Australian middle school/junior secondary initiatives and reform or change efforts, especially with regard to teachers and their work. In light of implementing the YAEL Model, the following need to be considered:

- Acceptance—*informed acceptance by all stakeholders including administrators (local, district, state, national), teachers, students and the wider community as part of the planning process;*
- Effectiveness—*strengthen the effectiveness of recommended teacher practice through professional learning for teachers intending to work in this area, and continuing and targeted in-service professional learning/development for experienced teachers; and*
- Sustainability—*clarify policy issues such as professional learning, certification, placement, and staffing that affect sustainability, as part of evaluating alternative practice in each of these areas.*

Teachers' acceptance, effective practice, professional learning and enhanced theoretical understanding highlight the need to focus on building the human capital as the subject of change. Acceptance and assumed responsibility for the reform among all stakeholders could be viewed as the single most important factor for the implementation and success of the YAEL Model. This focus also aligns with the empirical evidence that points to the teacher as the key determinant of student engagement, motivation and progress during the critical developmental years of early adolescence (Dinham & Rowe, 2007).

Teachers as Subjects and Agents of Change

Many of the reform efforts for young adolescent schooling in Australia have been imposed through a top-down reform process. This approach

has seen school leaders and administrators set up the physical structures that align with the notion of ‘middle schools’ (e.g., teams, block scheduling, small communities of learners), with the expectation that ‘middle schooling’ will take place. Stevens (2004) noted that “teachers tend to implement in their classrooms what they know and understand, in spite of whatever innovation may be adopted by the school” (p. 389). With this in mind, for the implementation of the YAEL Model to be accepted, effective and sustained, teachers working in this area must “know and understand” (Stevens, 2004, p. 389) practices for engaging and teaching young adolescent learners.

With strong evidence that the quality of teaching far outweighs other associated factors in influencing student achievement outcomes (Dinham & Rowe, 2007), teachers working within this age group are faced with tension points between the acceptance, effectiveness and sustainability of a suite of practices that are often foreign to their professional learning and work histories. The breadth of teachers’ knowledge of the curriculum, effective pedagogical skills, and interpersonal and communication skills affects other practice indicators for effective junior secondary schools, such as building small communities of learners and delivering a challenging, integrated and negotiated curriculum. Ongoing professional learning may improve teachers’ acceptance and sense of efficacy in these areas. This, in turn, may augment their practice effectiveness and may increase its sustainability from one year to the next. As the expectant agents of change, there is also a need for teachers to be subject to change. Thus, for reforms to be effective, change is firmly positioned in the classroom.

According to Bowen, Buck, Deck, Mills, and Shuls (2015), teachers, in general, are considered to be “relatively risk averse” (p. 470), suggesting less amenability to some reforms, with relatively low tolerance for educational change; this may mean moderating expectations for change. This is where the ECM can be used to understand and develop teachers’, school leaders’ and other stakeholders’ capacity to facilitate a consistent approach to applying changes needed for implementation of the Model to support at-risk and disengaged students to re-engage in their education.

The ECM recommended in this chapter echoes many aspects of Hargreaves and Shirley’s (2009) “Fourth Way” of creating and

sustaining educational change that has been implemented in Wales and Finland. According to their definition of earlier attempts at educational reform, “First Way” related to the extension of funding and social service provision; “Second Way” was the now familiar regimes of standardisation and accountability; and “Third Way” equated to a combination of these former measures. In contrast, Hargreaves and Shirley’s (2009) “Fourth Way”:

The Fourth Way brings about change through democracy and professionalism rather than through bureaucracy and the market. It transfers trust and confidence back from the discredited free market of competition among schools and reinvests them in the expertise of highly trained and actively trusted professionals. At the same time, it reduces political bureaucracy while energizing public democracy. This means a fundamental shift in teachers’ professionalism that restores greater autonomy from government and introduces more openness to and engagement with parents and communities. (p. 72)

Central to the YAEL Model and the implementation process described in this chapter are the fundamental principles of professionalism and community which have been documented in the Welsh educational reform process derived from “Fourth Way” values:

The Welsh reform process is infused with the strong belief that schools contain committed professionals who have enormous skills and knowledge to contribute to school improvement. Professional respect is central to the success of the approach to change in Wales as well as coherence and alignment through national and local partnerships. In this respect, the reform process underway in Wales reflects the three principles of professionalism that underpin the Fourth Way—first, high-quality teachers; second, positive and powerful professional associations; and third, lively learning communities. (Harris, 2011, p. 166)

Like many jurisdictions, Wales is continuing on its journey towards effective systemic educational change. It joins others who have tried and

failed despite increases in funding. One key to success lies in recognising the need to examine the contexts within which change will occur, identify *enablers* and *inhibitors* and above all, build “adequate *capacity* for change” (Harris, 2011, p. 160).

Enablers and Inhibitors to the Reform Process

There are a number of factors that can contribute to those involved being overwhelmed and discouraged or developing a sense that they will “lose” either personally or professionally from a reform effort. Understanding some of the factors that may cause people to be resistant to change should enable school leaders to plan and monitor the process in such a way as to minimise difficulties and maximise success when implementing the YAEL Model. That is, there are a number of predictable enablers and inhibitors to the reform process.

Enablers to reform include:

- clarity of vision and philosophy;
- existence of a risk-taking culture;
- leadership at systemic, school and teacher levels of operation;
- encouraging a collaborative culture with an emphasis on teachers as members of a learning community;
- provision of support for teacher professional learning; and
- resource commitment, including time and finances.

Inhibitors to reform leading to downward dips in progress include:

- lack of recognition of local context;
- lack of leadership;
- lack of funding;
- lack of vision and philosophy;
- poor evidence base; and
- lack of commitment.

Recommendations for Implementing the YAEL Model

1. The YAEL Model provides an opening for visionary systemic educational change that could serve as a template for other jurisdictions. While there will be challenges and hard work involved, we recommend that the Model be viewed through forward-looking lenses as providing positive opportunities for all stakeholders;
2. It is recommended that the enactment of the Model is underpinned by a school by school-designed conceptual and implementation strategy emanating from visionary school leadership in partnership with local education districts;
3. In order to coordinate the implementation of the Model, each school should establish a dedicated position, equivalent to a Head of Department, to take responsibility for engagement strategies across the continuum of provision, and lead whole-of-school reform to: support and mentor staff; form teams; and develop whole-of-school strategies for student options, pathways and wellbeing;
4. The ECM should be employed to enable optimal implementation of the Model. The three-phase ECM guides the sequence of reform, setting the antecedents for success and ensuring that enablers are in place and inhibitors are minimised. Targeted professional learning and effective leadership are crucial to the implementation of the Model;
5. Issues of disengagement and engagement need to be looked at across the whole school sector, from Kindergarten through to Year 12, particularly as there is evidence that disengagement begins in primary school. Disengagement ranges in complexity from behavioural to emotional and to the cognitive domain. It is recommended that the focus on engagement be inclusive of all three domains, with the intent of achieving cognitive engagement;
6. Each school should take responsibility for its own at-risk and disengaged students and set up their own flexible learning options and/or on-site alternative provision;

7. Individual high schools should work with their education districts to assess their particular needs in terms of facilities, personnel, community support and access to flexible learning options. Thus, it is envisaged that, in the implementation of the in-school elements of the Model, schools will have different needs; and
8. Sufficient flexibility in implementation of the Model is required to enable students to transition in and out of mainstream classes, flexible options and on-site alternative provision.

Conclusion

There are a number of implications for the successful implementation of the YAEL Model. The Model should be underpinned by a school by school-designed conceptual and implementation strategy, emanating from visionary school leadership in partnership with education regional offices. Emerging clearly from this research, and from what has been demonstrated in other similar contexts, it would be highly beneficial for each school to take responsibility for its own at-risk and disengaged students, including setting up their own on-site flexible learning and alternative education options. Other implications arising from this project include the following:

- Issues of dis/engagement need to be considered across the whole school sector, from Kindergarten through to Year 12, particularly as there is evidence that disengagement begins in primary school;
- In response to frequently raised concerns about disengaged students who are no longer attending school, and problems of reaching these students, the establishment of an outreach program would appear to support re-engagement in learning, and is thus recommended; and
- Showcasing of best practice currently occurring in schools in relation to at-risk and disengaged students would be advantageous for all schools, and we recommend that a showcasing initiative be formally endorsed and supported.

Research Implications

Throughout this book, we have emphasised the need for intentional, evidence-based and contextually-relevant approaches to promoting student engagement in learning. In addition to researching the educational benefit derived from implementing the YAEL Model across diverse contexts, there is also significant scope to investigate the outcomes for students, teachers, leaders and other stakeholders in embedding the Model within a targeted school reform model, such as the ECM. Research of this nature has the potential to contribute in powerful ways to the evidence base of how young adolescent learners can be most effectively re/engaged in learning.

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Glossary

Glossary of terms

The glossary of terms defines key terms and acronyms used in this book. Asterisked terms denote particular features of the Student Engagement Continuum (SEC) study (see Chapter 3), most of which have been anonymised in the interest of non-identification of the study context and participants.

Term	Meaning
Alternative provision/ alternative education programs	Often off-site, they provide a variety of behavioural and educational experiences that attempt to respond to the learning and personal needs of the student
At-risk students	Students who are at risk of disengaging from education due to personal, family, health-related, educational and/or societal issues
Attainment Centres*	Aim to re-engage students in Years 7–8 who are demonstrating low achievement in literacy and numeracy, and who are disengaged, or at risk of disengaging from education
Compulsory education age*	In the SEC case study jurisdiction, children are of compulsory education age from six years old until they complete Year 12 or turn 17, whichever happens first

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Term	Meaning
Contact for Learning (CfL)*	An alternative medium to long-term program for Year 9 and 10 students who are disengaged from education, which is designed to re-engage students in learning and training and transition to future pathways
Department of Education	Has policy oversight of government schools in a particular jurisdiction
Disengaged students	Students who are completely disengaged emotionally, behaviourally and cognitively from their education
Educational Change Model	A model of key features and time involved in effecting major change in education settings
Engagement (in education)	Students need to be engaged in the three main dimensions of educational engagement: behavioural, emotional and cognitive
Exclusion from school	The process of excluding a student from continuing enrolment or re-enrolment at a school
Five core elements for young adolescent learner engagement	Intended to create an effective learning environment for all students, the core elements are an intentional focus on: adolescent centredness; transition; social and emotional wellbeing; quality teaching; and, parental and community involvement
Flexible learning support	Provided within the context of early interventions (social, emotional, psychological, and physical) through tailored pedagogies and targeted programs
Focus group	Research interviews undertaken with a group of people together, guided by discussion questions facilitated by an interviewer
Inclusion	Schools cater to the needs of all students, often through making reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of children with specific learning needs
Individual Education Plan (IEP)	An individualised learning plan developed by the school in conjunction with: parents; the student; carers and families; teachers; and, other people who support the student. The plan links a student's needs to the curriculum
Kindergarten	First year of compulsory schooling in the SEC study context

Term	Meaning
Middle Schooling	An intentional approach to teaching and learning that is responsive and appropriate to the full range of needs, interests and achievements of middle years students in formal and informal schooling contexts
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy, conducted in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 in all Australian schools
Off-site alternative provision	Off-site educational option reserved only for the very small number of students whose behaviour can no longer be appropriately dealt with in a mainstream high school (e.g., students displaying violent behaviour)
On-site alternative provision	Alternative education site designed to meet the needs of students who are showing signs of being at risk of disengaging from their education
Personalised learning	Learning that is individualised and tailored to each student
School districts*	The SEC case study government education system is based on four geographical regional districts
Semi-structured interview	Interviews conducted with guiding questions
Stakeholders	People who have been identified by educational authorities as having an interest in the engagement of at-risk and disengaged students
Student Engagement and Learning Teams (SELT) leaders*	SELT leaders are assigned to each district and have line management responsibilities for each principal in the district and each school's improvement agenda
Student Engagement and Learning Teams (SELT)*	Each school district has a multidisciplinary team who provide support to schools on a referral basis to work with schools and their staff to build their capacity to engage students in meaningful relevant learning. This work often involves students who are at greater risk of poor engagement with their education
Student Engagement Continuum (SEC) study	Contextualised in one large Australian educational jurisdiction, the study sample comprised a cross-section of all government high schools in the jurisdiction, with participants drawn from across the schools and school communities

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Term	Meaning
Suspension from school	The process of temporarily withdrawing a student from attending school if they display certain anti-social behaviours
Transition	Moving from one year level to another but particularly the transition from primary school to high school, or secondary schooling
Year levels	In Australia, schooling is generally across 13 years and comprises: primary school (kindergarten/preparatory to Year 6); secondary/high school (Years 7 to 10); and senior secondary school/college (Years 11 and 12)
Young Adolescent Engagement in Learning (YAEL) Model	Provides a framework for best practice approaches to the learning engagement of all young adolescents

*Denotes a feature of the SEC study, which informed the development of the YAEL Model

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