case study

**SKYS
2FAZE AND YOUNG
PARENTS PROGRAM**

THE
IAN POTTER
FOUNDATION

Putting the jigsaw together:
Innovative learning engagement programs in Australia

**VICTORIA
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MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA

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Please note: All individual names are pseudonyms.

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There is an up-beat busy atmosphere at the St Kilda Youth Service (SKYS) Learning Centre in South Melbourne where the specialised education programs 2Faze and Young Parents are based. Immediately evident here is the young person centred culture. Student art work, photographs of school events and information on young people's rights and responsibilities stand out on the walls. On one huge photo is a statement that captures the ethos of SKYS: "A learning community where people feel respected, safe and supported. A place where we can belong."

This is a vibrant and well-equipped learning environment that is also relaxed, with comfortable couches and shared work areas in every classroom and the main hall. In the morning, a toaster, plates and cups are set up for a DIY breakfast and at lunchtime food is provided from the social enterprise kitchen on site. Each day begins with 'The Gathering', a 5-10 minute get together of all staff and students to share information about the day ahead. Part of the respectful and adult-like environment, the gathering may be led by a staff member or student. Amongst the announcements, there is joking and laughter. The staff and students clearly know each other well and there is a strong camaraderie between them.

After the gathering, staff and students make their way to the 2Faze or Young Parents program classrooms. Each program has a distinct space within the building. The Young Parents' room is identifiable by the children's equipment and toys alongside the teaching and learning materials for the students. Students bring their children with them to class and provide practical and emotional support to each other while they learn. In the rooms used for the 2Faze program, the teacher explains the focus of the session to the group and then works closely with individuals during the class. Students are given space to engage in their own way, some working on computers, another on the sofa. The easy-going and flexible approach supports engagement with learning, as one student sums up: "we do a lot more work here that we ever did in mainstream school".

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INTRODUCTION

This case study is based on research conducted in 2013 by A/Prof Kitty te Riele, Dr Dorothy Bottrell and Dr Vicky Plows from The Victoria Institute at Victoria University, for the project *Putting the jigsaw together: innovative learning engagement programs in Australia.* The project was majority-funded by the Ian Potter Foundation and also supported by Dusseldorp Skills Forum and by The Victoria Institute through the Australian Government's Collaborative Research Network.

The research project explored options for marginalised young people to complete secondary schooling (Year 9-12 or equivalent) through innovative, flexible and/or alternative learning programs.

PHASE 1 - investigated the provision and diversity of such programs across Australia, with the results (listing over 850 sites) available through the Dusseldorp Forum website[1].

PHASE 2 - analysed publicly available documentation from about 20 programs to generate insight in how they work and the outcomes they achieve. Short vignettes of each program are also on the Dusseldorp Forum website[2].

PHASE 3 - involved more in-depth research with eight of those 'vignette' sites. For each program one member of the research team collected additonal documentation and spent 3-4 days on-site to observe activities and interview staff, students, community stakeholders and, where possible, graduates[3].

For this case study of SKYS 2Faze and Young Parents programs, fieldwork was conducted in May 2013. Two researchers were on-site for three consecutive days from Tuesday until Thursday, with an additional phone interview being conducted on the Friday of the same week. Interviews were conducted with six staff members, four students individually, one student and parent combination, three community stakeholders, as well as two graduates.

ABOUT SKYS 2FAZE AND YOUNG PARENTS PROGRAM BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Context

The Port Phillip local government area (LGA) is a council area in Victoria directly to the south of the Melbourne CBD with a total population of about 98,000 people[4]. The Port Phillip LGA is a relatively wealthy socioeconomic area, and contains many highly affluent Melbourne suburbs such as South Melbourne, St Kilda, St Kilda West, Balaclava, Elwood, Ripponlea, Middle Park, Albert Park and Port Melbourne. There are, however, localised pockets of significant social disadvantage within the LGA which do not show up in aggregate Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA) analysis[5]. The Port Phillip Council notes that:

Despite the affluence of Port Phillip, pockets of disadvantage remain. Port Phillip has the second highest amount of community and social housing (8% of homes are social or community housing) and the second highest number of people experiencing homelessness in Victoria[6].

Figure 1: Percentage of total residents by age cohort (2011)
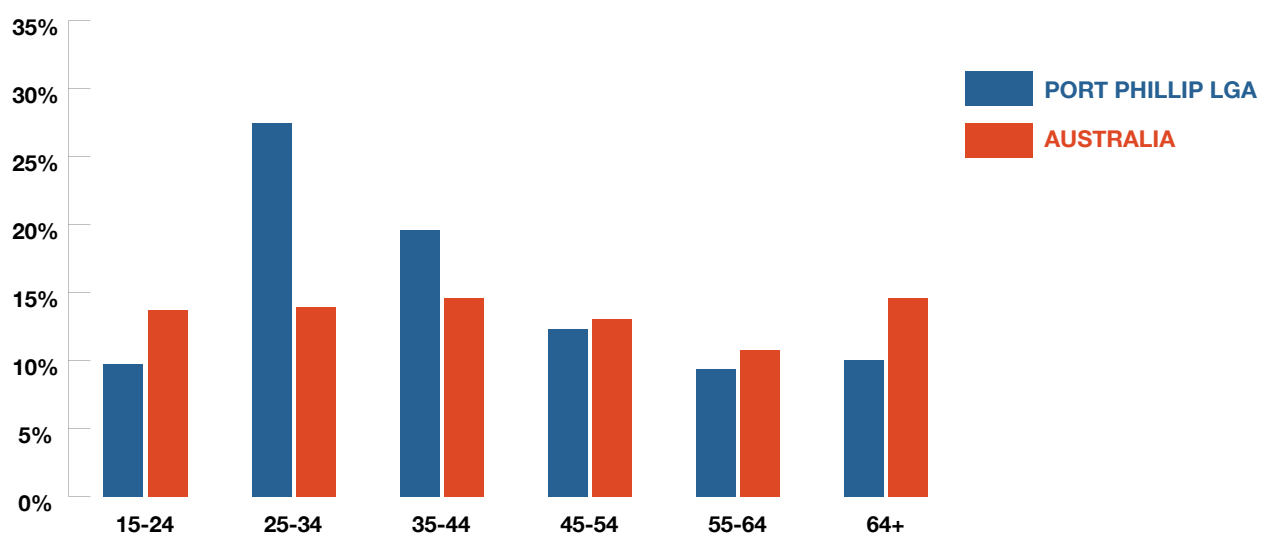
The Port Phillip LGA area contains considerably different patterns of age-cohort demographics when compared to Australia as a whole, with higher percentages of people aged between 25 and 44 years of age and substantially lower percentages of people aged 15-24 years old and over 45 years of age (see Figure 1 below). Only 9.9% of the population of the Port Phillip LGA are aged between 15 and 24 years of age,

compared to 13.3% nationally[7]. The Port Phillip LGA area is heavily dominated by younger adults, while containing a relatively small number of young people.

More than half of employed residents of the Port Phillip LGA are employed in positions relating to professional and managerial work (38% and 18.6% respectively). Few residents of the Port Phillip LGA are 'blue collar' workers, such as labourers (2.9%) or machinery operators and drivers (1.4%)[8]. The Port Phillip LGA has a relatively large proportion of high income households: 37.7% earn $2,000 or more per week. On the other hand, the proportion of low income households (earning less than $600 per week) is also substantial, at 16%[9].

Figure 2: Labour force status, percentage of age group (2011)

The labour market situation in the Port Phillip LGA is better than the Australian average, with lower overall unemployment (4.3% compared to 5.6% nationally). Youth unemployment in the area is also lower than the national youth unemployment average (9.8% compared to 12.1% nationally), but is still over twice as high as the overall unemployment rate[10].

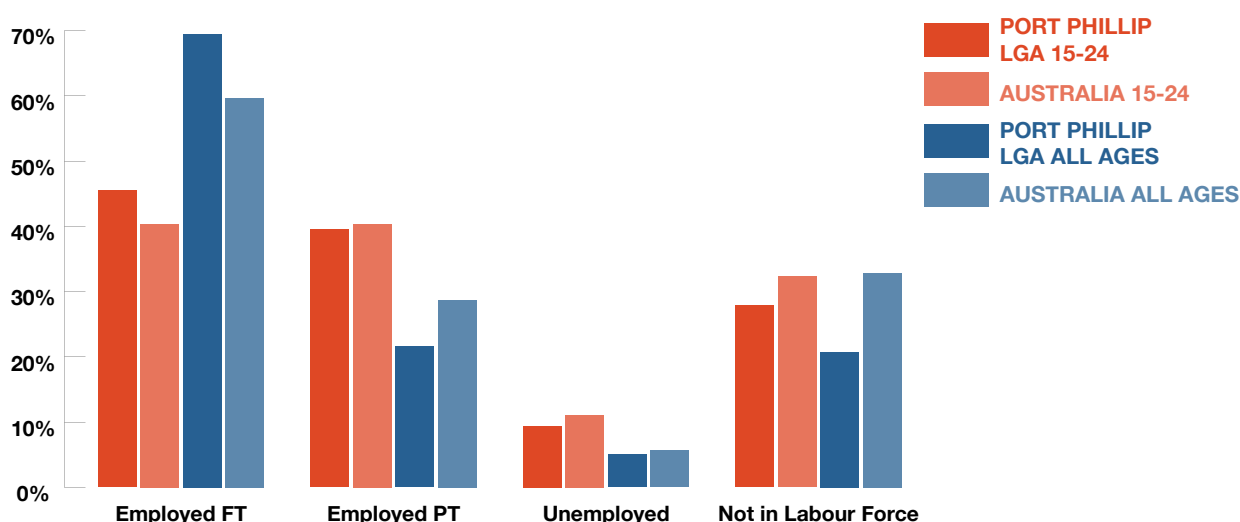The gaps between national and Port Phillip employment rates are slightly smaller for the 15-24 year old age cohort compared to all ages, but unlike national trends young people in Port Philip are more likely to be employed in full-time rather than part-time work (see figure 2). The percentage of young people in full-time employment is 46.6% (compared to 40.4% nationally), while the percentage for part-time employment is 38.6% (compared to 41.3% nationally)[11].

The Port Phillip LGA contains 12 primary schools (6 of which are public), 5 secondary schools (3 public, including a girls' school) and 2 specialist schools for students with intellectual disabilities. Only one coeducational secondary school is located in the northern half of the LGA[12]. There are no TAFE or university campuses in the Port Phillip LGA, but the area is well-serviced by tertiary institutions in the Melbourne CBD to the north. Despite the low number of educational facilities, the rate of Year 12 or equivalent completion for 20-24 year olds in the Port Phillip area is much higher than the national average (81.8% compared to 69.9% nationally)[13]. Conversely, the percentage of young adults whose highest level of schooling is equivalent to Year 11, Year 10, or less than Year 10 is much lower than the national averages for each category (see Figure 3).
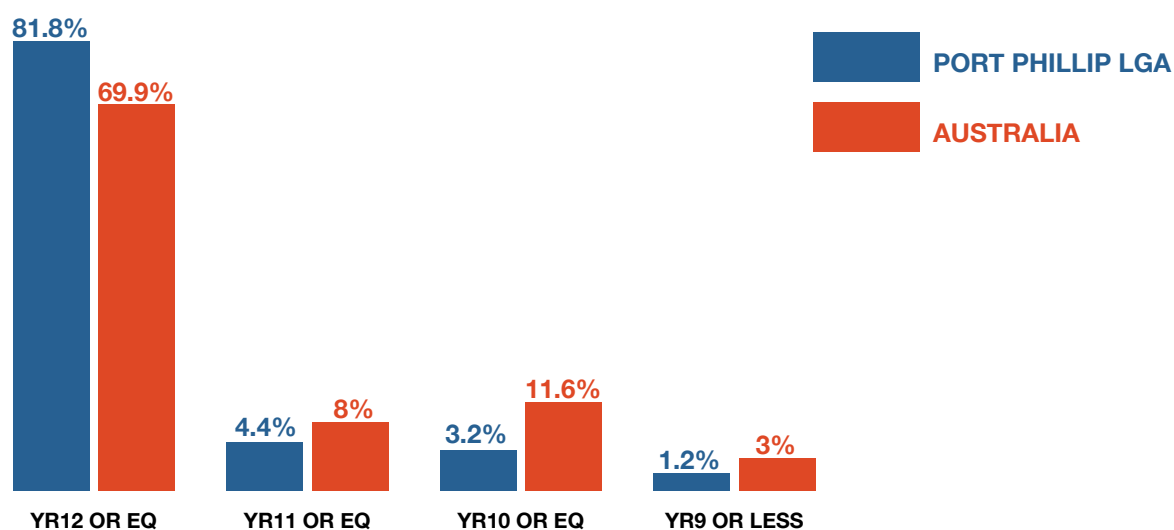
This statistical information gives an overview of the local area in which the SKYS programs are located. In this context of relative privilege the disadvantage of some (including SKYS students) stands out more starkly.

Program governance and aims

The 2Faze and Young Parents Programs are part of St Kilda Youth Service (SKYS), a not-for-profit organisation, which provides a range of specialised education, youth engagement, housing and social service programs for over 600 disadvantaged young people[14]. The SKYS vision "is to help create a community where all young people are recognised and supported to achieve their full potential"[15]. SKYS 2Faze aims to provide a flexible and relevant learning option for young people who have struggled to stay engaged in school, while SKYS Young Parents specifically caters for young parents, offering education in a supportive, child-friendly environment[16]. The two programs aim to cater to different personalities, learning styles and interests of students.

Both SKYS 2Faze and SKYS Young Parents offer the Community-based version of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)[17]. Community VCAL refers to the delivery of the VCAL senior secondary certificate in community settings, for students at risk of disengagement or students who have already disengaged from mainstream education. In Community VCAL, students are enrolled at a government school but the program is delivered by another education provider off campus, external to the school site[18]. SKYS's Community VCAL contract is with Caulfield Park Community School, a recognised government school and an alternative educational setting itself[19]. The three key Victorian sources of funding for SKYS 2Faze and SKYS Young Parents are:

- As a non-school Senior Secondary Provider, with Student Resource Package funding from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) (directed from Caulfield Park Community School to SKYS);
- As a Learn Local by Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE) and
- As a non-TAFE RTO by the Higher Education and Skills Group.

As a charitable organisation, SKYS also benefits from philanthropic funding.

SKYS has additional education delivery partnerships with Melbourne City Mission, the Salvation Army, William Angliss Institute and the Central Australian Youth Link Up Service. Besides the 2Faze and Young Parents programs, SKYS offers several other education programs, including online and outreach programs; and vocational training through two social enterprises (HEAT, for hospitality, and Blue SKYS Media). Those two social enterprises are co-located at the SKYS South Melbourne location with the 2Faze and Young Parents programs and offer beneficial synergies. The focus for this case study, however, is on SKYS 2Faze and SKYS Young Parents.

Students

There were over 90 students enrolled in both the 2Faze and Young Parents programs at SKYS in 2013. Students attend the two programs from all over Melbourne and beyond, some commuting up to two hours to get to the programs in Port Melbourne from areas including Frankston, Reservoir and Geelong[20].

Students attending the programs have experienced disengagement from mainstream schooling for a variety of reasons. In the case of students in the Young Parents program, having children at a young age has often created barriers for staying engaged in the mainstream educational system. Many students have experienced disadvantage or marginalisation through issues such as homelessness, poverty, mental health issues, contact with the juvenile justice system, being subject to protective orders by the State or involvement in problematic drug or alcohol usage. Greg (parent) talks about this diversity among students at SKYS but also their commonalities:

> Yes, I think the thing that struck me first when I came here was the variety of backgrounds of the kids. They'd come from everywhere, all sorts of places and under all sorts of circumstances. They all had their own story. Often it wasn't a pretty story, which has made their education difficult, if not impossible.

For students on the 2Faze program, such as Kayla, this shared experience of marginalisation is important:

> Most of the students that I know that come here like the fact that it's not just one of them that's had a really bad history, like their past and yeah, just being with other students that are like that helps them. The same is true for students participating in the Young Parents program who value their interactions with peers "in the same situation as me, like other young mums" (Hope, student).

Staff

Directly employed for 2Faze and Young Parents are two full-time teachers, two part-time teachers and one full-time youth worker. In addition, SKYS employs a full-time education manager who works across all its education programs and a full-time youth programs manager who runs welfare and youth support across all education programs. All teachers are Victorian Institute of Teachers (VIT) registered with a Bachelors level education qualification with the majority also hold postgraduate qualifications. Teaching staff also hold the Cert IV Training and Assessment which enables Vocational Education and Training (VET) delivery. Most staff have taught with SKYS Education for two or more years.

Staff are supported by three external specialists (for photography, media and music) who are employed on a sessional basis. In addition, up to five volunteers and university student placements help at any time with the 2Faze and Young Mums programs. All staff members are an integral part of the wider SKYS team and attend whole staff meetings as well as smaller Education and Welfare staff meetings.

Timetable and Curriculum

The 2Faze program runs from Monday to Friday between 9.30am and 2.30pm. The Young Parents Program is run on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays only. Weekly and daily timetables for classes are displayed on a whiteboard in the central space of the program. Each day begins with 'The Gathering', a 5-10 minute meeting of staff and students before classes start, and is led by a staff member or student. Staff share information about what is on today, provide practical advice about the routines, highlight events, and raise any issues. The Gathering is also used to introduce and welcome visitors. Following The Gathering, students move into their 2Faze or Young Parents classroom with their teacher. Students also visit external environments as part of their learning. For example, students have undertaken organised trips to the Melbourne CBD for career expos and have worked with a photography teacher doing projects in and around South Melbourne.

The 2Faze program curriculum spans Years 10, 11 and 12 study levels, and combines the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), Vocational Education and Training (VET) and the Certificate of General Education for Adults (CGEA). VCAL certificates can be earned by students at the Foundation (Year 10), Intermediate (Year 11) or Senior (Year 12) levels. The curriculum is focused around students' interests and includes Literacy and Numeracy, Music, Media, Work-related Skills, Personal Development, Recreation, Photography, Street Art, as well as participation in camps and community events.

The Young Parents program offers Foundation, Intermediate and Senior VCAL certificates, options in CGEA and VET in Music and Media, as well as other units related to parenting and early childhood development. Additionally, the program provides links to health care professionals in the wider community. The young parents can bring their children to the program while they learn and access peer support through their interactions with other young parents. Hope (student) describes this as "a bit of day care and school in one".

Facilities

The SKYS Learning Centre in South Melbourne is a former primary school building located on a residential street from which the Melbourne CBD skyline is visible. It is home to the SKYS 2Faze and Young Parents programs as well as the HEAT (Hospitality, Employment and Training) and Blue SKYS Media training, education and social enterprise programs. There is also office space here for the SKYS education program staff and education manager.

The Learning Centre consists of seven rooms (including an industrial kitchen) used for education and training joined together by a large central hall. With high ceilings, dark wooden arches and stained glass windows, this central space includes a staffed reception area, couches, tables and chairs, a breakfast bar (with a barista coffee machine) and a table tennis table. Used for the daily morning meeting, it is also a place where students and staff enjoy a DIY breakfast, lunch and informal conversations in between classes. Student artworks and information posters feature across the walls.

The inside of the classrooms differ depending on their use but all contain computer facilities, whiteboards and workstations as well as couches and tables for students to use as shared work areas. In one of the 2Faze classrooms there are musical instruments for use in the VCAL music class. The Young Parents program has its own dedicated space in a quiet part of the building. This room has all the facilities of the other rooms plus equipment and toys for the young children who come with their parents to the program.

Key Dimensions

The remainder of this case study will report on four key dimensions of the work of alternative or flexible learning programs: Valued Outcomes, Actions, Principles and Conditions. These dimensions are interrelated, which means some specific aspects (eg. curriculum) may appear in several sections. Figure 4 schematically represents the dimensions.

These dimensions address aspects that are or relevance across alternative or flexible learning programs for marginalised young people. The specific detail within each dimension varies for each program and case study. The dimensions are:

- Valued outcomes: this addresses outcomes from the program that count as 'success' in the perspectives of key stakeholders: students, staff, community members and graduates. Evidence is provided for achieving those outcomes, based on interviews, fieldwork observations, and program documentation.

- Actions: this dimension refers to the actions carried out through the program that support the achievement of the valued outcomes. This offers practical insights in how successes are realised.

- Principles: underpinning the program's practices are principles that produce a foundation for actions. These principles together form the (implicit or explicit) philosophy or vision of the program.

- Conditions: this dimension includes various conditions that enable or hinder people in a program to act on its principles and achieve valued outcomes.

The report concludes by summing up the most noteworthy characteristics of the 2Faze and Young Parents programs that help to make them successful.

Figure 4: Key dimensions - SKYS 2Faze and Young Parents Programs

Actions

> Providing strong support
> Developing mututal respect and trust
> Creating a welcoming and
safe environment
> Acknowledging achievement
> Relevant curriculum and
personalised learning
> Reflexivity with curriculum
> Partnerships and community
engagement

Valued Outcomes

> Engaging with learning
> Working towards and gaining accreditations
> Pathways to future work and study
> Confidence and self-worth
> Social gains and benefit
to the community
> Public recognition

Principles

> Inclusive education
> Student-centred approach
> Holistic approach
> Strength-based approach
> Enabling positive transitions

Conditions

> Flexibililty
> The right staff team
> Connection with the whole
SKYS organisation
> Low student-staff ratio
> Consistent and sustainable
funding

Note: This model was developed by Kitty te Riele as Chief Investigator of the project team.
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(see page 2 for citation guidance)

VALUED OUTCOMES

Rather than pre-determining what counts as success, this section is based on the perspectives of students, staff and key stakeholders. For the 2Faze and Young Parents programs, valued outcomes include instrumental, personal and social benefits.

Valued Outcomes

> Engaging with learning
> Working towards and gaining accreditations
> Pathways to future work and study
> Confidence and self-worth
> Social gains and benefit
to the community
> Public recognition

Engaging with learning

As the SKYS education program is an alternative setting targeting disengaged young people, engagement with and motivation for learning was an outcome strongly valued by staff in particular: "We have a sense when kids are doing well when we see them return" (Jason) and "Success here is having a building full of young people" (Michelle). Attending and re-attending the program is highly valued because, as James (staff) sums up, "These young people wouldn't be engaged at all if not for settings like these". Many students were willing to spend hours a day travelling to engage with the SKYS program rather than schooling options closer to home. Mark (community member) offers a suggestion to why this occurs:

> *Some of the young people who are going to the [SKYS] centre, the kids won't go to the secondary school that's maybe across the road, but they'll travel an hour and a half to get to this the place, because they feel that it's connecting and inviting.*

Attendance alone is not enough; David (staff) argues that the success of the program can be seen in both the attendance and the participation of the young people in learning:

> *I think it exists on a couple of different levels. It's engaging, it's about engagement, so if the young people are turning up and not only are they turning up, but they're actually participating in what we're doing.*

Staff agree that "any kind of measure has got to be individualistic" (David). For example, in relation to a specific student Krystal (staff) highlights perseverance as a successful outcome in engaging with learning:

> *So they can be really little things like one particular student who will just pack up and go as soon as she is challenged in any way and I mean like in any way [...] So if she stays, which is really rare but*

when she does it's a really big deal. I'm so happy, I'm so happy for her because I know it's hard for her.

Working towards and gaining accreditations

Engaging with learning is closely related to the next valued outcome which is the importance of students working towards and gaining accreditations. This is important for students and staff alike. James (staff) explains that progress towards, as well as completion of, an accredited qualification is a success:

One of the key measures of success that I use in terms of young people engaging with programs is some level of certification. As opposed to in a secondary setting, or in a mainstream TAFE setting, where the key measure of success would usually be full certification, I look at full or partial certification. So, it might be that a young person gets a satisfactory in one area of the VCAL certificate […] and that shows that during that year they've made some progress towards achieving a certificate.

Many students and graduates saw the completion of Year 12 as the most desired outcome of the program. Even for students who had non-academic pathways in mind, Year 12 was seen as a necessary foundation for a successful future:

I've asked so many mainstream schools to take me because I just want to finish my Year 12. If I don't get into music, Year 12 is my backup plan. You need your Year 12 these days to be able to move on to have a good future. (Kayla, student)

Finishing Year 12 is a major achievement for students who had previously not expected, and not been expected, to complete high school:

I never expected to finish Year 12 myself. Even my parent's didn't. They had no problem in saying "Grace won't go to Year 12". But, at the end of last year, I finished my Year 12 and if it wasn't for SKYS that never would have happened. (Grace, graduate)

However, Year 12 is not the only certificate or achievement of worth to students. As Jason (staff) explains, the program supports and values student achievement in other types of certification as appropriate to a student's interests and talents:

We had a young guy in here who loved playing thrash metal guitar […] and we were able to make musical things happen for him. I remember at our first mid-year graduation that we pushed a Certificate I of Creative Industries into his hand with his name on it. He just stood there looking and said […] "I've never seen my name on a piece of paper that has the word 'excellent' written on it".

Pathways to future work and study

The importance of building on credentials by providing pathways to future work and study opportunities for SKYS students is also valuable. Justin (community member) explains how important the 2Faze program is for career development and pathway planning:

> So 2Faze is mostly set on their high school stuff, but [they also] help them progress towards other learning goals like employability skills, community work [and] a really broad spectrum of different things.

The program continues to monitor students after they've left the program. Jason (staff) argues that many students who have gone through the SKYS program have "essentially avoided some of the pitfalls that might befall other kids" through re-engagement with the mainstream or gaining employment. Students also see employment and further study as a success. Jeremy (student) explains how SKYS helped him to get his first paid job:

> The first job I actually got, they helped me. I went to use one of the people here as a reference, and they helped me fill out my whole resume. I didn't know what a resume was at the time. I had nothing and I'd never applied for a job, and I got the job as well.

Hope (student) is clear that her time at SKYS is a stepping stone so that she can graduate with VCAL and go to university to study health science, aiming to get into dentistry. Kayla (student) wishes to have a successful music career and highly values the support and opportunities to pursue this career (such as the completion of a Cert III in Music) while also being able to finish Year 12 at SKYS.

Bound up in the creation of pathways to further education and employment is the students' development in critical skills areas and their ability to apply their learning to improve their future outcomes:

> At some point throughout that journey, when you see stuff happen, for it to be meaningful we'll know that things are happening if you're applying the skills and knowledge we're providing to you. If you then are able to re-order that knowledge and produce other outputs from it, things that you couldn't otherwise do before – you couldn't previously make a presentation in front of a group of people, to write a script, to organise some sort of static presentation […] and to participate in the exchange of information. So when we look at it we can identify skills development and expand it in a sense of knowledge. (Jason, staff)

Confidence and self-worth

Increased confidence and building a sense of self-worth amongst students on the 2FAZE and Young Parents program is in James' (staff) words "a really key measure of success". David (staff) explains that changes in emotional wellbeing are noticed over time: "a kid comes in and their shoulders are down and their heads are down, and within a couple of months they're walking with their head up", making eye contact and initiating conversations. He provides an example:

> A student, who used to keep herself very separate from everybody; she wouldn't hang out with the other students and usually at lunch would just kind of sit on her own, playing with her mobile phone. She would speak to the teachers, but only when she was spoken to. Eventually, she just started to make friends with the other kids, talking to them a bit, hanging out with them at lunchtime, and then she'd be more proactive in talking to us as well.

This outcome is also recognised by students and their parents. For example, Greg (parent) explains how the 2Faze program helped his son build the confidence to succeed in his academic work:

> *It's halfway through the year, and he's still hanging in there, and he's delivering. He's got some good scores and he's got some average scores, but he's got scores. Two years ago he would have got zeroes. He wouldn't have even gone to class […] This year, he took to it like that, and it's all because he gained a bit of confidence that he could do more than he thought.*

Graduates identified positive changes in their "confidence" (Grace) and "social skills" (Francis) through their participation in the program. Current students talk about emotional gains in terms of a sense of belonging "this is the only school where I feel welcome" (Kayla) and expanding their social network and developing friendships: "Before I came here, into SKYS, I didn't actually really know anyone, just my family. So yeah it was good" (Hope, student). This is an important outcome for the staff as well, who refer to helping students "feel loved and accepted" (James).

Social gains and benefit to the community

Immediate social gains for students of the SKYS program are highly valued. These "welfare outcomes are really critical measures of success" (James, staff). Such social gains encompass a broad spectrum of "personal progress" outcomes that staff can identify such as when students:

> *[…] do things like get their housing sorted out, or get off drugs, or they seem to present better, or their punctuality [and] attendance improves. So those are indicators that something is working.* (Jason, staff)

One student explains how being at SKYS helped her to re-engage with learning while alleviating personal drug problems:

> *When I first started coming here, I was on drugs. Like it wasn't much but I was still on drugs and now I'm drug free and they support us. They support us in every way they need or we need. It's so good and now I feel so much better about myself being drug free.* (Kayla)

Other students talk about cutting down their smoking, drug and alcohol use since coming to the program.

Similarly, for two community members, a major success of the program is its ability to help prevent or reduce illegal behaviours among students:

> If they're highly disengaged, and haven't been attending school or education or anything for some time, the aim might be just to get them enrolled into VCAL or 2Faze so they're engaged in something, which means that they're less at risk of offending or re-offending, or being in trouble with drugs and alcohol. (Justin, community member)

> Kids that would've potentially spent many years in the justice system, we've been able to divert them away from that by connecting them to something that they genuinely love.
> (Martha, community member)

Grace (graduate) confirms this positive impact in relation to her education at SKYS:

> Having the 2Faze program helps a lot of communities because before I was at SKYS, I was running around the streets of South Melbourne and Port Melbourne causing trouble every day. Once you get into SKYS, you go there and you want to go there on a daily basis. You want to be there so you stop being a goose around the area.

Interviewees talked at length about the impact the SKYS program has on the immediate families of the students and the larger community. Martha (community member) and David (staff) provided examples of how the program has improved connections between students and their families, and helped to alleviate stress within those families:

> I contacted [a student's] mother just to have a check in and see how things are going. She said "you've given me my son back. He didn't speak to us; he didn't speak to his brothers or sisters. He's now coming home and he's engaging with the family". (Martha, community member)

> I was telling you a story about a mum this morning who isn't scared their kid is going to hang himself. It's almost impossible to gauge the extent of what you're doing really […] because she reckons that we saved his life, which is massive. (David, staff)

For students at the Young Parents program the social gains for their children are also valued, as Hope (student) argued: "Well usually there's other kids here as well, so it's good for the boys. They get to interact with other kids and stuff, because they don't go to day care".

Having students re-connect with the community is also seen as important. Martha (community member) argues that "we've seen kids that have been completely disconnected from family and from the community", and that SKYS enables them "to engage with a learning style and be connected to the community again". Students, through the encouragement of staff members, have an impact on the larger community by investing time and effort in projects out in those communities:

> The 2Faze program encourages them to be out and be part of the community, so to invest back into the community […] the better the community, the happier the general community is. (Justin, community member)

> We do a lot of community service, which obviously benefits the wider community. We put up pieces of art in local cafés. We do community service in Year 11 and Year 12. They have classes where we

go and do apprenticeships and community service in kindergartens and things like that to help us get our VCAL. They're obviously doing their job for the wider community. (Francis, graduate)

Public recognition

Receiving positive feedback and recognition from the larger community is an important outcome for both the individual students and the program as whole. Jason (staff) explains how valuable it is for students to have their achievements recognised in a public manner:

For a Certificate I it's like 120 hours of training. It's really small but for [a] particular young man it was really a powerful motivator because it was this community witnessed acknowledgment – I think we had the mayor or someone from the civic office come and help award these things and get a photo taken […] so there's the work itself and then there's the acknowledgment of effort and achievement which is done in a public way. It's very important.

Having a good reputation is also an important aspect of public recognition. The program's existing reputation is valued for encouraging student participation. As David (staff) states, "a lot of kids come to us because they've heard from other kids what it's like". But it is also important in fostering community understanding of the young people and community support for the program. Two community members explain why this is important and what SKYS does to achieve this outcome:

They encourage the young people to be proactive and be part of that, and that rubs off from student to student. But it also means that the community is more welcoming of the service […] to keep providing the service. (Justin)

[SKYS] is such a heavy player in the St Kilda Youth Festival each year, and that engages the community and helps people to understand some of the difficulties that maybe our young people have. (Martha)

ACTIONS

To achieve these valued outcomes, SKYS staff members perform a range of actions that are familiar from across many alternative and flexible learning programs, although each of these is given its own shape within the program These are discussed in detail below.

Actions

> Providing strong support
> Developing mututal respect and trust
> Creating a welcoming and
safe environment
> Acknowledging achievement
> Relevant curriculum and
personalised learning
> Reflexivity with curriculum
> Partnerships and community
engagement

Providing strong support

To enable the young people at SKYS to engage and continue to engage with their education, the program provides strong systems of support to promote personal wellbeing, to ease students back into education and to re-engage with their learning. As Justin (community member) argues the program is "bridging the gap and trying to make things as easy as possible for the young person to continue attending the school". Krystal (staff) explains the intensity of practical support offered to students studying at SKYS:

On a kind of broader perspective what the organisation offers them – the links with community and resources – really enables them to get on, whether it's clothes that they need; whether its food; whether they're needing support with transport or housing. It's just endless what support we can offer and I'm astounded all the time at what support we can offer them.

The following interviewees highlight the range of support offered to students to help them engage with learning from the provision of food to financial support and the holistic support provided to connect students with mental health and housing services:

I've always lived with my parents and they've always been in my life. But for people that weren't so well off, there was food there they could take, they helped with housing, counselling, all that. (Hannah, graduate)

The HEAT [program people would] cook something up and the kids would get a chance if they wanted to eat it at lunchtime. There's the coffee machine, which is free. Everything was free – there are no books, there are no school fees. I don't think I paid that much at all. (Greg, parent)

If I say I need a house, they would go and organise it – they won't go home until it's done. They make sure you have somewhere to stay. (Jeremy, student)

Assisting students with transport is also important, both between home and SKYS and between SKYS and other important appointments:

Michelle is a great support for us. She's just amazing with the young people. She takes them to all of their appointments. I've got a young parent at the moment whose got a sick child […] and she takes her to all of his appointments and does all the running around for her and has just been incredible. (Krystal, staff)

Because I catch public transport, they helped me get a concession card and given me day passes to get between here and home. (Hope, student)

Additionally, students can access a program called L2P where a young person is matched with a volunteer who is trained to help the students get their driving licence. SKYS have vehicles the students can access and for the young parents, staff members in that program take care of their young children while the students go for their driving lesson[21].

Embedded in practical support mechanisms for students is the 'soft entry' approach adopted by staff towards new students. This involves gradually easing highly disengaged young people back into learning, without exerting pressure on them, to prevent further disengagement. David (staff) provides an example of this process:

I was telling you about the girl that sat here on the couch for three months putting her makeup on in the morning, and eventually started to do work. I've worked in mainstream schools and that just wouldn't happen. She'd have been out. She'd have gone through the whole rigmarole of being taken up, disciplined, suspended then expelled, and that would have reinforced her negative experience of school.

Francis (graduate) also recognises how the school helps students to re-engage step-by-step:

You see some people who come here and struggle, because they're just not ready for it, and they come back the next year and they do better. Or some people who just come and just do their best, and just get back into it […] I think eventually it comes out helping everybody in their own way to just get back into it.

Students at SKYS also have access to high levels of support for learning. Students recognise and value the supportive nature of program staff in helping them with challenging work and in providing reassurance:

*Some of the work is a bit hard [...] but David helps you. He's like the dad. You don't even have to get help from your teacher. You can get it from any of the other teachers.* (Jeremy, student)

They're there to support us. We don't have that extra pressure of, "am I going to pass school? Am I going to mess school up?" As long as you do your best, they'll help you get through it. (Grace, graduate)

This support is visible in the interactions between staff and the students. Staff use knowledge of the students' lives and interests to engage them in conversations about their learning. While teaching happens in a small group context, the teaching staff are able to provide individual support to students during the group session[22].

Support from staff members extends beyond practical and learning issues that arise in the present to include support for the desired future pathways and outcomes of students:

> *We're being proactive in setting a path in front of you, and encouraging and supporting you in any way we possibly can to get you on that path so that you get the thing that you want to achieve […] if you want to go and become a bricklayer, we're going to help you get there. If you want to get into university, we're going to help you get there.* (James, staff)

Everything might not be perfect now, but one day it will all become how we want it.
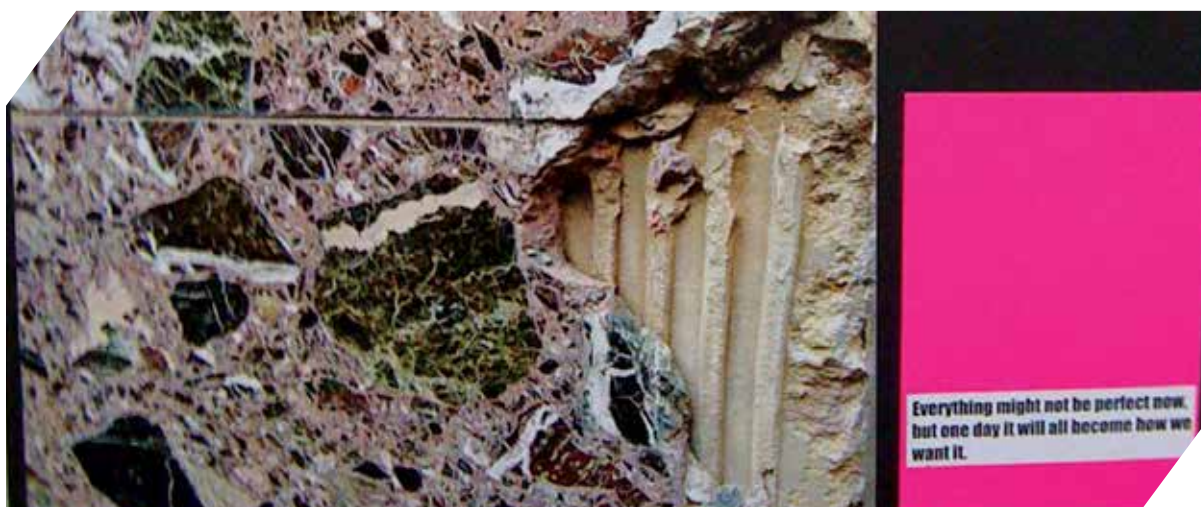
Developing mutual respect and trust

The staff at SKYS endeavour to create mutually respectful and trustful relationships between staff and students in an effort to break down traditional teacher-student classroom dynamics that may have contributed to students' previous disengagement with schooling. As Ashley (staff) explains, it takes time to gain the necessary respect and trust of the students so that they work openly with staff:

> *You have to almost win over everybody's trust and respect. You're not going to get it as a given nor should you expect it, so it takes a long time to actually win over the students so that they trust you enough to take risks with you.*

Students value this process. Kayla (student) highlights how staff "welcome everyone and treat us like we're normal people" while Francis (graduate) talks about the way staff "grew a relationship in the way you build up a friendship". Kenny (student) elaborates on mutual respect and trust between students and staff:

> *They speak to us as a friend. They don't just teach us. We see them as a mate and they teach us at the same time. It's like having a friendship inside of school […] we talk to them about anything and everything and they understand […] they speak to us as a person; not as a child or a student [but] as a friend.* (Kenny, student)

From a parent perspective, Greg is impressed at the informal nature of addressing one another, where "you call them by their first name – you don't say Mr this or Mrs that". Relationships of mutual respect do not just benefit the students, but can also help staff members when they are feeling upset or under pressure:

We had some boys in a fight recently and I got very upset […] it was very stressful. I started to cry, and I was saying "guys, I'm trying to hold it together but it's really difficult". They all apologised to me. That's amazing. (Ashley, staff)

Staff members aim to build trustful relationships with students by working hard to gain their respect, especially the respect of students who previously have had negative relationships with teachers. James (staff) explains why this is a key action:

Young people will tend to accept or reject you as a whole package. So they're not usually interested in the curriculum, but if they like you, then they'll learn from you and they'll engage with what you have to put on offer. I think the sorts of young people that tend to be attracted to these settings in the main are pretty good at spotting bullshit, and they're not particularly respecters of authority 'just because' […] and so that trust has to be earned with the young people.

The importance of staff consistently responding positively to students and giving students the time and space to test their relationship with them is highlighted by Kenny (student):

At first, we didn't like the teachers very much, and we'd give them a hard time, and then the way they responded, that's what we like about them. They didn't respond with negativity. They were laughing back with us making jokes. So it wasn't just us bagging them. A lot of the time they were joking around with us as well.

Treating students as young adults, rather than as children, is a key aspect of this and runs throughout everything the staff members do. This action involves listening to students and acting as a positive adult role model, reconfiguring the kinds of relationships the students can have with adults:

We treat people here as adults. We give them the chance to have their word and to listen. I feel that a lot of young people haven't had that opportunity. They've been shut down very quickly. They've been dismissed. They've lost trust in adults. It's about nurturing that relationship again and giving them a positive role model; that adults are good people. (Michelle, staff)

Being treated like an adult is seen by Francis (graduate) as key to the process of re-engagement with learning and ability to take responsibility for that learning:

They treated you well. They didn't treat you like you're a kid and they didn't treat you strict […] so you went, you got a bit of schooling in, it wasn't a huge amount [but] you did a little bit every day. They treated you like adults, you grew up, and as the year travelled on you got more disciplined.

There are some rules that students at SKYS still need to abide by, but even here students are consulted and the rules are negotiated:

Our code of conduct reflects what we do, so it doesn't make us – we make the code of conduct. It's done in collaboration, so we consult with our young people around the rules that we have here and make them a part of it. (Michelle, staff)

Processes of negotiation are also important in teaching and learning at SKYS. In the classrooms the authority of the teacher is clear in the way that they provide guidance and assistance but students have choices within this in terms of being able to follow their interests. An example of negotiated work is provided in the photography project where the project facilitator brought in a range of photographs the students had taken for this project and an idea for how to design an exhibition of these but the whole time she spoke in 'maybes' – leaving it up to the students to collaboratively make decisions, adapt it and take it further[23].

Creating a welcoming and safe environment

Related to the development of mutual trust and respect is the creation of a welcoming and safe environment reflected in Ashley's (staff) comment that "it's a very close-knit community". Being welcoming and supportive and providing somewhere where the young people feel they "fit in" is an important action as it "gives kids the confidence to get on with their lives" (Greg, parent). The students talk about feeling welcomed in the school by staff but also about the friends they have made here, which for Jeremy (student) means "you have a reason to come to school". Kenny (student) explains:

> *We're all friends here and we all see each other every day if we can, because it's not really a school for us. It's more somewhere we always see each other. We also do work, but we have a good time […] there's no enemies here.*

Creating a program where students "can feel a sense of connection", feel understood and bond with others is an important part of how the program works to help students to socially get themselves "back on track" (Mark, community member). Ashley (staff) argues that being able to be flexible and acting in a non-authoritarian manner is an important part of creating a welcoming environment:

> *You're not worrying - having worked in the mainstream - about people being late, and having to say "Well, you can't enter the classroom". Can you imagine, in a place like this, if you have a door locked and the students can't access [the classroom], how alienating that would be for them? […] I wouldn't have a class if I did that here.*

Feeling welcome is also crucially about feeling safe. David (staff) illustrates how the staff team carefully work to balance flexibility with stability to create a safe space:

> *It's all about being flexible and adaptable, but at the same time providing a stable environment for them, because a lot of them have got really chaotic lifestyles, so we try to have this as a safe space.*

The ability of staff to convey that this is a safe space to students is in Martha's (community member) view down to the relationship between staff and students:

> *It is the innovation that all of these teachers are able to show. It's about the connection that they're able to create with the young people; the understanding that regardless of what's going on for you, this is a safe place to turn up to.*

Acknowledging achievement

Integral to building relationships are strong caring and nurturing practices. The relatively small numbers of Staff members at SKYS acknowledge any and all of the achievements of students, from constant appraisals and positive feedback through to award ceremonies. Kayla (student) states that "there's so many different ways for them to say 'you're doing well'", and that "if there isn't something we've done well, they remind us what we have to do". Two staff members explain that the achievements celebrated by staff members are individualised and vary from student to student:

> We are able in different ways to measure and also congratulate students; "that's your achievement, you're not meant to measure yourself against everybody else's different skills sets." you just measure "where was I last year or two years ago, and have I moved on from that?". If you've moved on then you've succeeded. (Ashley, staff)

> It's about consistency at the level that they're kind of hitting. You'll often see students hitting certain levels on certain days, and the more consistent they are with that [the better], because it's not like a liner progression – it's a spiral progression really. So it's important to always show them whenever they've made that leap. (David, staff)

As Krystal (staff) explains, achievement at SKYS encompasses a broad range of aspects and improvements that are acknowledged at various points along a student's educational journey:

> There's the success that I measure and that I see; what they come in ultimately to achieve which is their High School Certificate. So for them, obtaining that is the achievement they're aiming for, but along the way I feel like it's my job to point out every achievement that they make, and just rolling in here, to me is an enormous achievement [...] there's like a million goals that they achieve every day. I just really clearly want them to see daily achievements, because sometimes the end achievement can be really long.

Individual and group achievements of the students are also formally and publicly recognised in the form of award ceremonies. Francis (graduate) appreciated this aspect of the program and notes that the acknowledgement of his achievement felt genuine:

> At the end of the year they gave out awards, which is nice […] people patted me on the back when I did well. If you actually did something, it wasn't just a pat on the back for the sake of patting you on the back.

Jason (staff) explains why this celebration of success matters to student development and education:

> For me, [ceremonies are] very powerful because they're a way of making a mark in time saying "okay, we've been together for X amount of weeks and we're going to complete that body of work now and we're going to recognise it. It's going to be recognised publicly so we're going to stop and just reflect, acknowledge and celebrate what you've done […] That kind of very public celebration of group effort is powerful, and we think that builds a strong foundation for moving into individual self-directed work.

Relevant curriculum and personalised learning

SKYS staff members create and continuously re-negotiate relevant curriculum tailored to individual students and to the overall student cohort for each program. In doing so they purposefully seek out ways to find the key or pathway to engaging each student with the program:

> We're adapting constantly; literally one to the next we will go "What's this connection point with this person? I've got to find it. If I haven't found it yet I've got to just keep trying because there's going to be something, I just haven't found it yet". You just don't throw up your hand and go "oh, well I don't know". You just can't do that here. (Ashley, staff)

Staff members try to draw out relevant aspects of students' lives to incorporate into their individual learning and curriculum study. Jeremy (student) points out that "for some assignments, we get to choose our own stuff", and found that the learning is "more hands-on" and "fun". Staff and community members provide examples of individualising projects and making study relevant for students:

> Any assignment that they do, they have the opportunity to draw on anything that they want, and I always highlight the fact that "because you are a parent, and you have these skills, would you like to share that if we do something that might be an information poster?" At the moment one of the students is doing a poster with a social activist or a social message, and so she's doing the results of smoking while you're pregnant. (Krystal, staff member)

> We developed individual projects for those kids. [One] young person, he was doing stuff around graffiti. It started off just watching graffiti videos, then it extended to finding street artists around the world he was interested in. it was about producing pieces himself, and then it was about doing a budget – what sort of material would he need? We took him up to an arts supplies place and he was able to purchase those and create pieces for broader exhibition here. (Martha, community member)

An important aspect of this is the time staff members spend with each student to construct individual learning plans that are negotiated with that student:

When students are first enrolled, one of the things we do is go through a pathway plan with them. We have this multiple page document, and basically the whole point of it is I get to sit down with that young person one on one and work through it to find out what they liked about school – Was there anything they liked? Have they had their own successes? Have they had problems with numeracy or literacy? What are they into? What type of person they are? What are their preferred learning styles? (Ashley, staff)

Staff members draw up a matrix to record the goals and progress for each student. This is shared with students regularly to review and acknowledge the work done by students, keeping them engaged with their learning. As Krystal (staff) explains:

I think that's a really great way of motivating them. Sometimes they think "I haven't been here, I've missed too much, I've stuff it up. There's no point in me coming". If I can get them in to have a look and see all of the work they have completed, they sort of go "oh, I didn't know I'd done all that".

This is recognised by the students. Grace (graduate) states that the matrix system helped students to know "what learning outcomes you've achieved so far, and what you've still got to achieve".

Staff members also explicitly share with students the purpose of any activities and how they relate to the curriculum or their future employment:

For a lot of them, it's to try to get them work ready […] We'll often be really explicit about why we're doing stuff […] everything we do with the kids, we fit into the curriculum, even if it's taking them out for a day trip. (David, staff)

Related to this, staff spend time working with students to develop short, medium and long term goals. This "pathway planning" is, as Krystal (staff) suggests, about "where they're heading and what they wanted to achieve"; it is about creating a plan to make an imagined future a reality focusing on the education, practical and employment knowledge and skills needed.

Reflexivity with curriculum

SKYS' staff members are continuously reflexive with individual and overall curriculum, and nothing is ever set entirely in stone. Kayla (student) provides an example of how this flexibility is helping her get to where she wants to go:

> [I'm doing] Year 12 and my Cert III in Music. So far I'm the only one doing a Cert III. Everyone is doing Cert II so that's pretty good. They did adjust it for me because I asked, and my career, hopefully, is going to be in music. I love music, always have. I wish to be successful in my music career. (Kayla, student)

This innovative approach to curriculum delivery means staff are always keen to try out something new:

> We all love it when we get something that works, but we all know that nothing's completely perfect. To be honest, if we found the perfect way to deliver VCAL, we'd all be really bored. But there's never any chance of working out the perfect way to deliver any curriculum. We enjoy changing and doing different things. (David, staff)

This innovation and ability to develop a curriculum around the needs and interests of the students is recognised by community member Mark who states:

> They are innovative, and they're in the best capacity to know what the needs of their local constituents are […] They're always looking to be creative and innovative, having full-time, part-time, short course, online, different cohorts. All those are interesting and alternative options on the table, so people have a choice of not just one program that they have to do.

Trying out different methods can sometimes come as a result of student feedback. Ashley (staff) provides an example of this in action:

> I must have been talking to the class and saying "this is what you do". [A student] has gone "what's the point of this […] I want to work. I want to get into the workplace, and I don't see how this is relevant", which is a really fair point. So I went back and that night went "I'm going to get more concrete on what we're doing this activity for […] I really have to re-work how I'm going to work with this student. He's given me a very clear signal that this is not engaging him". Then I went back and I made it more work-related […] when I'd gone back to him about it, he started to engage. "Well, this is more concrete, this I can say I can use". It was good having him tell me that.

Staff members are also reflexive with the curriculum depending on changing needs and issues external of the program, such as changing needs in local industries:

> We are actively involved in broadening participation with different industry areas. We would use any support that came to us. For instance, we've got a pot of money at the moment to develop the transport and logistics training scope, so we're looking at Certificate I and II in Transport Logistics. We've hired an expert curriculum writer with a transport background, and we'll be looking to build that into our scope of registration. (Jason, staff)

This reflexivity is an important action because it fosters student engagement with their learning and supports their transition to further study and employment.

Partnerships and community engagement

SKYS 2Faze and Young Parents staff members actively build partnerships within the overarching SKYS organisation as well as externally into the community. Justin (community member) explains the benefits of being linked to a larger youth organisation for improving engagement and flexibility of services for students:

They might be able to do another community-based project for a year or something else might come up. They can get it through the HEAT program […]. They can get ticked off by doing the HEAT café […] through 2Faze they can be linked in with different programs running at SKYS. So that's another huge flexibility thing that keeps them engaged.

Partnerships between different youth service providers and the local council also help to support the two SKYS learning programs:

I try to have a lot of engagement between the teachers from a range of programs and the youth workers from a range of programs. Partnerships are really the key. We're linked up strongly with Melbourne City Mission; we're linking up more closely with the Brotherhood of St. Laurence and the Salvation Army around education and youth work delivery […] in terms of professional support within Victoria, VALA [Victoria Applied Learning Association] is brilliant […] Community schools [such as] Lynall Hall and Kensington do a conference every two years. We're going to that shortly […] I think we're fortunate in having Port Phillip [Council]. They have a very inclusive and supportive role and they take it very seriously. (Jason, staff)

PRINCIPLES

The outcomes that are valued and actions taken by SKYS for their 2Faze and Young Parents programs are underpinned by several principles. These principles are discernible mostly in comments from staff and community. Some are explicitly formulated in interviews; others were determined through our analysis of the data.

Principles

> Inclusive education
> Student-centred approach
> Holistic approach
> Strength-based approach
> Enabling positive transitions

Inclusive education

Staff members at SKYS work on the principle that education needs to be inclusive of disadvantaged young people, as everyone has the right to education. Jason (staff) explains "we want to be able to extend an offer of education and training to young people who otherwise would not be able to participate in the mainstream", or simply put by Mark (community member), "it's about providing opportunities to kids who otherwise wouldn't have had one".

James (staff) is especially vocal about this principle, because he has "a very strong belief that all young people have the right to a good quality education and that it's a highly protective factor against a whole lot of stuff going wrong in life". This "key philosophy" as he describes it, indicates the commitment to use education to mitigate against some of the social and economic disadvantages the young people at SKYS are experiencing. This principle is also reflected in the way that the program tries to communicate with the community about its work: "the great thing that 2Faze does it try to put a lot of information out there to people" (Ashley, staff). In doing this, there is an attempt to change the perception within the community of these traditionally marginalised young people so that wider society starts to see these students as "a class of young adults who want to go on and have careers and opportunities for them" (Greg, community member).

Student-centred approach

Staff members at SKYS are guided by a student-centred approach to learning. The education program is "truly student focused" (Martha, community member) and this means that the individual educational and welfare needs of every student are taken as the starting point:

The young people that come in here, we can't put in a little box; we've got young people from all different types of boxes. So we try and suit the needs for all types of young people and the trends of what they want to do as well. (Michelle, staff)

It's completely student-centred, so we actually look at the kid, we look at what they're interested in, as much as we can gauge, where they're at right now and where they want to be or where they could be, and then we fit the curriculum in around all that. (David, staff)

This vision is reflected in the ways in which success is personalised to each student "because any kind of measurement of success has got to be individualistic" (David, staff). Ashley (staff) explains how this principle works in practice by shifting the meaning of success from an external agenda to a more student-centred one:

One of the things I really like about 2Faze is that it's not measured simply by academic success. […] It's changing those parameters of what success is from a very narrow understanding of what success is to a very broad one based on that individual.

Holistic approach

Related to the student-centred principle is the holistic approach that underpins the work at SKYS. The program offers an integrated approach to wellbeing, welfare and education. Mark (community member) describes the range of services and aspects that is required in a holistic approach to help improve future outcomes for disengaged young people:

You need that marriage of education – school-based stuff, and opportunities to apply their knowledge – married with the support, with the drug and alcohol counselling, working through social and emotional stuff.

This makes the 2Faze and Young Parents program more than education programs. The principle reflects a commitment to removing "barriers and issues" (Justin, community member) that are preventing or making it difficult for a young person to engage with learning. This commitment is clearly visible across key actions (such as providing strong support and creating a welcoming and safe environment) and in valued outcomes (such as confidence and self-worth).

Strength-based approach

Importantly, staff do not only attend to problems in young people's lives, but also recognise that the students have talents and capacities. Staff at SKYS work from a strength-based approach, which includes finding the skills that young people already possess and adapting those identified skills to advantage their learning. As Ashley (staff) argues "just because you're not interested in going to university, or you don't see academia as being your thing, doesn't mean you haven't actually got skills that are incredibly useful". Assisting students to recognise any well-developed skills sets is important:

> I just think that something I can do for them is to help them realise that they have this fountain of experience, and they're developing a real wealth of experience that they can draw on that they don't recognise themselves. […] we look at people's resumes and they list skills that they use every day. So it's kind of learning the language of putting together the skills that you've got that they don't even consciously recognise as a skill, and showing them how that's valued in the employment sector. (Krystal, staff)

Krystal further explains that many young people who are often perceived as 'dropouts' can often actually just be people who have put their learning 'on hold'. As an example, she argues that the students in the Young Parents program "are highly intelligent women who have just had their education interrupted".

Enabling positive transitions

A further principle underpinning the educational philosophy at SKYS 2Faze and Young Parents is the focus on the "long term transition picture" (Jason, staff). There is a strong commitment to ensuring students are well set up for the future. James (staff) is clear that engagement with alternative education programs such as SKYS should lead to better long term transitions for young people into life post-school. For him this means supporting students to gain qualifications:

> For me, in these alternative settings, I think that achieving a certificate is really crucial. I've got sort of a philosophy that if you move young people one step closer to 20 or 21 without helping them get some kind of accreditation, then in lots of ways you're doing them a disservice.

This principle is not just about gaining qualifications. It includes enabling students to develop and assert their own independence and responsibility for learning and life. So while the program staff are very welcoming and supportive towards students, they avoid creating a dependency on them by students. As Michelle (staff) explains, "What I think is very important with our practice is that we're constantly informing our kids of their independence and responsibility that the ownership is always with them and it isn't with us". This is visible in the way staff treat students like adults and in the negotiated processes involved in student learning and behaviour.

CONDITIONS

Several conditions enable (and/or constrain) the ability of SKYS, in their 2Faze and Young Parents programs, to undertake the actions outlined above, in order to meet the outcomes that are valued within the programs. Many of these conditions are similar to conditions that enable the success of other alternative learning programs.

Conditions

> Flexibililty
> The right staff team
> Connection with the whole SKYS organisation
> Low student-staff ratio
> Consistent and sustainable funding

Flexibility

The SKYS programs require considerable flexibility with curriculum at all times due to individual student needs, changing partnership arrangements and funding levels. One aspect that allows the programs to be flexible with its curriculum is the VCAL Certificate system itself:

> *We enjoy changing and doing different things, and that's actually one of the really cool things. It's just that the VCAL curriculum is really good, because I taught lots of re-engagement curricula […] and VCAL's incredibly brilliant for it. It's such a good curriculum, because you can basically do what you want with it.* (David, staff)

Equally as important for staff members is the flexibility for students to be able to achieve those certificates and accreditations in a time period that suits them, without 'falling behind'. As James (staff) points out, "a good thing with the VCAL is you can do one certificate over three years, so there's not a need to move young people on if they're not passing".

The right staff team

Recruiting the right staff, "really highly skilled people" (James, staff), for the two SKYS programs is necessary to be able to achieve the desired valued outcomes. James offers a summary of the range of skills, knowledge, experience and personal qualities that staff need to have:

> *People who have a teaching degree preferably; people who have their Cert IV training and assessment so they can deliver vocational training; people who know bits and pieces about media and music preferably, so they can do those sort of integrated bits; people who have got some demonstrated ability to work with disengaged young people. Primary [education] experience is really highly valued. There might be a general feeling that teaching in these setting is sort of easier, but it's not. It's really challenging. So you usually get people who are very passionate around social justice issues.*

Within the SKYS programs the multi-professional nature of the staff team is an important aspect of this condition. Jason (staff) explains the importance of teachers working with staff members who are highly trained in youth work "You've got to be able to remove what I call the 'mantle of the expert', take that off and actually the thing that really works here is relationship building and the youth workers are the best at it". For Krystal (staff) the "partnership between the education team and the welfare team is really beautiful". Michelle (staff) expands on this to discuss the importance of striking the right dynamic and mutual respect between the teachers and the youth workers:

> *I don't want to take away the credit from the teachers and everything they do, but the combination of the two makes it this power team. I don't mean power in a negative way. I mean it in a positive manner of professional backgrounds and developing people's different expertise. It's great to have the diversity within people's backgrounds in their education here.* (Michelle, staff)

As important as finding the right staff is, retaining them is just as crucial. James (staff) highlights issues surrounding teacher 'burnout' in alternative education programs:

> *I think it can be quite professionally isolating working in these sorts of settings, and that's often where I think they can fall over is where you don't have enough of that crossover and collegiate professional development opportunities. Where one or two teachers in a setting get burnt out and move on, all the professional knowledge is lost.*

James suggests that the capacity of SKYS to bring in sessional staff with different expertise such as musicians, photographers and artists can promote staff professional development and morale, helping to prevent staff burnout. Jason (staff) acknowledges the way that SKYS as a whole "invests really well in its people" and "is very good at supporting the professional and personal development of its people".

Connection with the whole SKYS organisation

Providing education programs under the ethos and support of St Kilda Youth Service (SKYS) is also an important condition recognized by the 2Faze and Young Parents program staff. Being part of a larger organisation offers more opportunity for collaboration. For example, Michelle (staff) discusses how staff members across SKYS often meet together and in her view a strength of SKYS is this "community collaboration". Jason (staff) emphasises how the driving force of the organisation as a "youth support agency first" provides an important context within which the education programs operate. This means

that education staff are focused on students' need and "once you're within that context then you're really looking to build relationships that allow young people to explore things they might not have explored before" (Jason, staff).

Low student-staff ratio

Having a low student-staff ratio is also necessary for giving students adequate access to teacher and staff support for their learning or wellbeing. Kenny (student) states that, at public schools, "you don't have enough attention per student because there are not enough teachers, but here there's plenty of teachers and less students". David (staff) explains the importance of having the same teachers all the time, as well as having more access to those teachers:

> Generally speaking, they're maybe only dealing with [a few] teachers as well, which I think is a strong point. It does remind me a lot of primary school […] even though it's operating on a very different level. But, it's got that advantage of us knowing them really well. We're not just seeing them for 40 minutes maybe twice a week. (David, staff)

Krystal (staff) speaks of the benefits of small class sizes for the Young Parents program:

> Having a small class allows me to work really effectively with each of them for where they are at, so no one is kind of left waiting. I spend a lot of time just writing work all the time for all of them who are at different points, and I couldn't probably do that as effectively if it was being pushed solely for numbers.

In the Young Parents program the small class size also enables students to have the option of bringing their children with them to the program. A small class size facilitates the students' supervision and care for their children whilst they are also re-engaging with learning. It also means the students can access support from the teacher in a responsive and flexible way that is attuned to both the needs of the students and to their young children.

Consistent and sustainable funding

For SKYS to keep delivering the Young Parents and 2Faze programs and to provide meaningful opportunities for their students the consistency and sustainability of funding is essential. As Michelle (staff) notes, "I can't dictate the funding", and that "funding contributes to consistency within contracts, which then dictates delivery and what teachers we can have based here and how for how long". James elaborates on the issues surrounding inconsistent funding and the fear of funding cuts for these kinds of programs:

Funding is always an issue. Funding is a killer. It's hard to run these programs financially [...] the VET cuts – that affected us. We had the VCAL co-ordination fund cut – that affected us. So even with this existing funding, even when it's at full tilt, you're still not receiving the same kind of funding a secondary school receives, while working with people who need much higher levels of resources. We do breakfasts and lunches and camps at no cost. We do not have student fees. We do everything to increase access and equity to education, and it costs a lot.

Kayla (student) puts into perspective how losing funding can directly affect the likelihood of access to education for disadvantaged young people:

I've been told that the government is trying to cut us off – not give us any money. This is a free school. This is for students that can't afford mainstream, or can't go to mainstream.

Staff members at SKYS are constantly aiming to innovate and expand connections and partnerships to produce different avenues for funding. Jason (staff) argues that changes to funding and industry "forces us to innovate and ultimately that's a good thing" but that any innovation and expansion has to be carefully managed to ensure sustainable provision:

It's a juggling act a lot of the time to try and get the numbers right and not over-reach the programs and run out of money. I think all the programs are fairly mature now in what they're doing, but we need scale […] the budgets are very tight, and if the kids don't attend we're under more regulatory pressure to seek other funding. (Jason, staff)

For Martha (community member) this condition partly relies on the ability to consolidate and promote the good practice at SKYS externally "to really talk about best practice and what is genuinely going to work; maybe influence and inform how policy is written at a higher governmental level."

SUMMING UP: REMARKABLE AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

The core of each case study report (including this one) focuses on four dimensions that emerged from analysis of all the vignettes and case studies. The starting point is the outcomes that are valued and achieved by alternative learning programs. In order to achieve these outcomes, specific work is done and actions are taken. Underpinning the aims (valued outcomes) and approach (actions) we can discern principles that inform each program. Finally, certain (external and internal) conditions help or hinder the actions and the achievement of outcomes.

This framework is effective for understanding 'what works and why' and resonates with practitioners in alternative learning programs. It helps to highlight commonalities across programs but also permits sensitivity to distinctive features. Some aspects of central significance to a program may be relevant across more than one dimension. A drawback of our framework is that, by discussing these aspects under several headings, this importance may have been concealed. This final section, therefore, sums up the most noteworthy characteristics of the program that help to make it successful.

For SKYS 2Faze and Young Parents programs, the following features are particularly remarkable:

1) Safe environment for student engagement. The SKYS program is effective in supporting disengaged young people from across Melbourne to engage with some form of learning. This is largely due to the fact that students often feel safe and secure in the program, surrounded by teachers and students they respect, often referring to the group as 'a family'. The small community atmosphere of the SKYS centre enables strong relations to develop. Many students have disengaged because of their lack of connection to their previous schools, not to learning per se. Providing a safe environment that is consistent and respectful of all those who are in it is the key to SKYS staff members achieving some of the successes of re-engagement with their students.

2) The connection between wellbeing and learning. Creating a safe environment is just one aspect of the overarching endeavour by SKYS staff members to provide as much support for student wellbeing as is possible. Achieving adequate wellbeing is a pre-requisite for many students before they can actively re-engage with learning. The program thoroughly addresses many facets of student wellbeing that can hinder learning and engagement, and this outcome is regarded as just as important as more narrowly defined learning outcomes. Support for wellbeing is facilitated within the SKYS education program by the close and mutually respectful relationship of the teaching staff with the youth workers and other professionals that are part of the wider SKYS organisation. A holistic youth-centred, rather than singular education-centred, approach is fundamental. The programs seek to address wellbeing and learning together with the two seen as interrelated aspects of a young person's life and development.

3) Personalised learning and markers of success. The 2Faze and Young Parents programs are essentially student-centred. This is demonstrated in the drawing up of individual learning plans and the continual monitoring of student needs, desires and progress with their education and future plans. Students enter the program with varying levels of academic skill and knowledge and are all supported to work towards an accreditation yet the achievement of an accreditation is not the sole marker of success in these

programs. The broad spectrum of achievements and successes acknowledged and celebrated by staff, students, graduates and the community is important for not only individual wellbeing but for the inclusion of all students in the program – everyone ¬¬has achievements and successes that are recognised and celebrated.

4) Being part of a larger youth services organisation. Having the 2Faze and Young Parents programs run at a larger youth services organisation provides many advantages for staff members and students alike. As the programs seek to address wellbeing as much as learning, more support can be offered to staff members for dealing with difficult student wellbeing issues and, if necessary or advantageous, can provide other alternative program options for students who might achieve better successes in a different program. Benefits of this for students include the expanded options for training and wellbeing external to either the 2Faze or Young Parents program, such as the HEAT program, which can often be taken at the same time as completing or working towards accreditations in the 2Faze and Young Parents programs.

ENDNOTES

[1] http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/program-database/

[2] http://dusseldorp.org.au/priorities/alternative-learning/case-studies/

[3] This phase of the research was approved by the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee (HRE13-038) and permission was given by each of the programs. All programs agreed to be named.

[4] http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/COPP10057-factsheet-FINAL-web.pdf

[5] City of Port Phillip Economic Development Strategy 2012-2016

[6] http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/8._Some_facts_about_Port_Phillip_v2.pdf

[7] ABS 2011 census, community profiles

[8] http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/5._Some_facts_about_Qualifications_and_Employment_v2.pdf

[9] http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/COPP10057-factsheet-FINAL-web.pdf

[10] ABS 2011 census, community profiles

[11] ABS 2011 census, community profiles

[12] http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/school-directory.htm

[13] ABS 2011 census, community profiles

[14] http://www.skys.org.au/skys2013/about-us

[15] http://www.skys.org.au/skys2013/about-us

[16] http://www.skys.org.au/skys2013/home.html

[17] http://www.skys.org.au/skys2013/home.html

[18] DEECD Guidelines for the delivery of Community VCAL Revised Edition September 2011

[19] http://www.cpcs.vic.edu.au

[20] Staff interviews

[21] Staff interview

[22] Fieldnotes

[23] Fieldnotes