“What’s the alternative? Effective support for young people disengaging from the mainstream“
The research project “What’s the alternative? Effective support for young people disengaging from the mainstream“ was commissioned by The Princes Trust with funding from HSBC. This literature review does not represent the views of either The Princes Trust or HSBC.
ABOUT THIS LITERATURE REVIEW

The context for the literature review

This literature review was written at a particular time and for a particular purpose. It was the first stage of a research project commissioned by The Princes Trust to address changes in the ways in which schools and alternative education providers interact. The purpose of the literature review was to determine questions to guide and reflect on the empirical study.

In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, responsibility for alternative education lies largely with local authorities. In England, responsibility for ensuring the educational entitlements of young people in the compulsory years has been shared between schools and local authorities. Local authorities have been the providers of educational services for young people who are permanently excluded from school or who have particular educational needs due to illness, school phobia and the like. Schools have had responsibility for young people on their rolls, including those who they suspend and exclude on a short-term basis. Schools have been able to call on local authorities to assist them with specialist services, and with transferring students from one site to another, although in some locations this has been taken over by clusters of local schools acting together to ‘manage moves’ (Abdelnoor, 2007, p. 21; Thomson, Harris, Vincent, & Toalster, 2005). The local authority Pupil Referral Units and other support services as well as schools are able to use a range of alternative education providers in order to provide enhanced options for young people.

There has been a range of concerns expressed about these arrangements (Centre for Social Justice, 2011; House of Commons Education Committee, 2011; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2012, 2013; OfSTED, 2011; Ogg & Kail, 2010; Reed, 2005; C. Taylor, 2012). As in Wales (Estyn, 2007; Welsh Assembly Government, 2011) and Scotland (PINS Scotland, 2012), there have been concerns in England about, inter alia: inconsistency in approach across schools and local authorities; variable times out of educational programmes; lack of effective reintegration; costs of provision; and inadequately monitored and sometimes inappropriate provision being offered to young people.

England is now changing the ways in which statutory obligations are to be met. Some funding for specialised support services has already been devolved to schools. Pupil Referral Units, previously run by the Local Authority, are now able to become Academies. The government has trialed the devolution of other statutory responsibilities to schools so that they become responsible for ensuring that permanently excluded young people and others unable to attend school are ensured a full-time education.

The government in England have recently concluded a pilot programme in which schools moved from becoming partial commissioners of alternative education services and programmes to becoming much more responsible for the educational needs of all young people on their rolls. This pilot was...
designed to address multiple policy agendas but the most pertinent to this research is:

(1) the clear intention to address a problem which previous research had highlighted viz. the ways in which some schools had exhibited an ‘out of sight out of mind’ approach to excluded young people with the result that their entitlements to a coherent educational pathway was diminished. Rather than simply sending young people off to an alternative educational programme or full-time placement, the new approach requires schools to develop a greater range of in-school interventions and supports, as well as personalized learning plans for those enrolled students who are not benefitting from their current educational provision.

(2) the promotion of more choice between schools. The development of alternative academies and free schools means that it is now possible for young people and families to exercise their own decision-making capacity, and choose to leave one school in favour of one offering a different and alternative approach. Referral is now not the only way to access alternative provision.

The government commissioned an evaluation of the trial; this highlighted some issues that needed to be addressed if the policy is to extended, as well as good practices in commissioning. The evaluation (Institute of Education (University of London) and the National Foundation for Educational Research ( NFER), 2013, 2014) showed a general willingness on the part of both trial and ‘control group’ schools to do much more within school to cater for young people on the edges of education. The trial also demonstrated that schools were keen to take charge of the commissioning process.

The research, of which this literature review was an integral part, was intended to complement these changes. Written with the interests of alternative education providers in mind, it addresses another problem which has been consistently raised by schools, by OfSTED, researchers and by alternative education providers themselves – How are young people, their parents and/or caregivers, and schools to know what is a quality alternative education provision? There is ample evidence to suggest that what is on offer, in what OfSTED (2011, p. 4) called “an unregulated and largely uninspected sector”, is diverse. OfSTED noted that alternative education providers did not necessarily register with any official body, and there was no consistent arrangement to evaluate quality. They observed that there were various approaches taken by alternative providers to costing, advertising and recruiting, programming, monitoring and assessing progress, communicating with schools and families and evaluating outcomes (c.f. Gutherson, Davies, & Daskiewicz, 2011; Thomson & Russell, 2007). Points of comparison between programmes were thus difficult.

At a time when there is more choice in the system and when the locus of commissioning in some jurisdictions is changing, the question of what counts as a quality alternative education provision is more pertinent than ever. This was the focus for this literature review.
The process used to review the literatures

There is, unsurprisingly, a great deal of literature about alternative educational provision. It is international in scope. It ranges from evaluations of particular programmes, reports of local authorities and school districts, compendia of good practice, investigations of young people’s and staff experiences to conceptual and theoretical work. There is a lot of work which documents best practice which, as will be seen in Section 2 of this review, is remarkably consistent across countries and time. While questions of quality appear in much of this work, there are surprisingly few texts which take quality as the major focus. Of those that exist, most are written from the point of view of state education systems or school districts. There are only a handful of texts which directly address quality frameworks from the point of the alternative providers themselves. This literature review therefore has brought together diverse works which have something to say about quality and the kinds of issues that need to be considered when thinking about what a quality framework might include.

The researcher has an existing set of literatures on alternative education dating from the early 1980s; this corpus has been periodically supplemented. A new search was undertaken in November and December of 2013 to update these existing materials. Four major academic journal and book publishers’ sites were searched, using the terms ‘school exclusion’ and ‘alternative education’, and a web search using both Google and Google Scholar was undertaken using the same terms. The most recent search produced some 200 new items from which points relevant to quality have been extracted.

The texts were not examined using an ‘evidence-based’ protocol. This is a narrative review which sought to find common themes and questions across a range of texts. There was no systematic attempt to find further areas for research, although it is clear that there is considerable research to be undertaken about the question of the outcomes and benefits to young people of participation in alternative education. A deliberate attempt was made to use the literature review to establish questions which could be pursed through the subsequent case study research.

The literatures were categorized under three major headings: definitional issues, best practices and quality issues. These three form the organisers for this text.

It is important to note that many of the literatures reviewed have not been cited in this written text. The decision was made that for ease of reading references have largely been kept to an indicative list.
SECTION ONE: WHAT IS ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION? WHO IS IT FOR? WHAT DOES IT DO?

The first section of the literature review considers some definitions of alternative education that are used in policy contexts in England. It then uses British and international literatures to explore issues related to purpose, target students and expectations. These are the first issues to be probed in relation to quality, as they draw the boundaries about what is included and excluded, as well as establish some major debates in the field.

Defining alternative education

Official guidance to English schools about statutory requirements for the education of children under the school leaving age states that alternative education is

… for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour (Department for Education, 2013a).

Here, alternative education has a particular enrolment – it caters for a specific group of school students who are not attending school - and location – it includes off-site provision.

However, in their survey of alternative education OfSTED (2011) offer a slightly different definition:

… something in which a young person participates as part of their regular timetable, away from the site of the school or the pupil referral unit and not led by school staff. Schools can use such provision to try to prevent exclusions, or to re-engage students in their education. Pupil referral units are themselves a form of alternative provision, but many students who are on the roll of a pupil referral unit also attend additional forms of alternative provision off site.

This takes the off-site location and the emphasis on students not benefiting from their current schooling arrangements, and adds time as another factor. Alternative provision may be full time, as in the case of a Pupil Referral Unit, or part time, as in the case of a course led by non-school staff members, but which is still part of the student’s overall timetable.

The interim evaluation conducted on the trial devolution of responsibility for commission alternative programmes to schools (Institute of Education (University of London) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), 2013) lists fifteen types of alternative provision on offer to those students a school might designate as ‘at risk of permanent exclusion’. These are:
This survey introduces the notion that alternative provision contains many different types of programmes and many different providers.

OfSTED’s (2011) report on the results of their own survey also focuses on diversity of provision and lists seven different types of programmes on offer. But it discriminates between programmes on the basis of the content of the programme and the purpose:

(1) Individual work-related placements. These consisted of extended work experience for one day a week, based on the students’ interests, such as building, retail, childcare, care of the elderly, hairdressing. They were generally not accredited.

(2) Placements focused on learning a specific work-related or trade skills, such as construction, plumbing, electrical, hairdressing, beauty or land-based work. These were generally structured, accredited courses, with part of the time spent on theory and part on practice.

(3) ‘Personal development’ placements, focused on the development of aspects such as self-esteem, confidence, self-management and teamwork, as well as specific elements such as alcohol awareness and the prevention of knife-crime. These sometimes took the form of a time-limited course, for example, for half a term, and often had a strong outdoor element.

(4) Music and arts related placement such as digital media projects and learning composition and disc-jockey skills in a music studio

(5) Placements with a therapeutic element such as woodturning and hedge laying, riding and caring for horses, grooming or caring for small animals

(6) Placements which provided a complete full time alternative to attending a school or pupil referral unit. These generally provided a fairly standard curriculum in small groups, with some additional focus on personal development and sometimes on vocational skills.

(7) College placements to take specific courses, which were sometimes taster packages which included various subjects (OfSTED, 2011).

The OfSTED list also includes full time provision which is not a PRU. Alternative academies and free schools can now also be added to this list as part of the full time mix. Until the establishment of these schools, most other
full time and autonomous alternative schools were in the independent sector. But the addition of academies and free schools into the state sector introduces a further complication, whether enrolment in an alternative is voluntary, by choice or whether it is by a referral process and part of an intervention in a student’s educational programme.

It is clear that in the current policy context, what counts as alternative education is not a clear-cut matter. Who enrolls, the location, the time attended, the types of programmes and their purpose and content, the provider, and the path to enrolment are all important. This makes the notion of a quality framework for alternative education a complex matter.

Perhaps the answer lies in creating a typology of alternative provision.

**Making sense of the diversity of alternative provision**

When we come to the challenge of creating some sense of order from the diversity of provision and we go to the wide body of national and international literatures then we find three interesting points:

1. The range of alternative education on offer in the UK is not dissimilar to that found in other places.
2. Alternative education is not a new phenomenon – it has existed alongside mainstream public education since the first half of the nineteenth century (Miller, 2007; Sliwka, 2008).
3. There is general agreement that there is no single definition of alternative education, and that there are significant tensions and differences in the task of imposing some kind of order on the diverse range of alternative education that exists.

In the early 90s the US educational reform scholar Mary Ann Raywid (1990, p. 31) noted

> Programs differ according to their missions (providing a more humane and effective education; segregating, containing and reforming and disruptive population, healing the wounded). They differ as to what to look to and begin working on when education fails (the student’s misbehavior, the student’s psyche, or the school’s environment.) They differ according to the functions formally assigned them, and the expectations and demands of those to whom they report...

In this statement, Raywid identified important and ongoing tensions and debates about alternative education. There are differences between disciplines in the ways that researchers approach their empirical studies of alternative provision, but there are key debates that transcend them. These debates centre on some key questions around enrolment and purpose:

1. whether alternative education is only for those who do not fit into the mainstream,
2. whether the problem for those students is the result of something about them, or something about the schooling system, and
(3) whether the goal of alternative education is to ‘fix’ the student in order that they can re-enter mainstream education and training, or offer a different pathway to outcomes which includes education and training, but also encompasses citizenship, spiritual and aesthetic development and so on.

The answers to these questions are at the heart of the task of making sense of the wide range of what counts as alternative education, as a survey of literature soon shows.

Raywid’s view (1994) was that the most ‘authentic’ alternative education was that which offered a full time and permanent education option to anyone who chose to take a route different from the mainstream. However, she recognized that there were also alternative education options designed specifically for populations of young people who were not faring well in their mainstream schools, and she divided these into two types – those which attempted a ‘quick fix’ and those which offered a more holistic approach. She was clearly in favour of an alternative education which was ‘genuinely transformative’ of both outcomes for young people, and of the practices of schooling. However, she also considered that the holistic approach taken in ‘remedial’ alternatives was potentially of benefit to young people, even if it did not change mainstream schools (see Fig 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of schools</th>
<th>Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type I alternatives make school challenging and fulfilling for all involved. Their efforts have yielded many innovations, a number of which are now widely recommended as improvement measures for all schools. Type I alternatives virtually always reflect organizational and administrative departures from the traditional, as well as programmatic innovations. Type I alternatives are schools of choice and are usually popular. They sometimes resemble magnet schools and in some locales constitute some or all of the options in choice systems. They are likely to reflect programmatic themes or emphases pertaining to content or instructional strategy, or both.”</td>
<td>Cost effective. Successes more pronounced and longer lasting. Small, ownership, chosen not referred, mini-schools within mainstream, free from district interference. Creative engaging pedagogies. These schools generate and sustain community within them, make learning engaging and provide the school organization and structure needed to sustain the first two.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Last-Chance Programs. Type II alternatives are programs to which students are sentenced—usually as one last chance prior to expulsion. They include in-school suspension programs, cool-out rooms, and longer-term placements for the chronically disruptive. They have been likened to “soft jails,” and they have nothing to do with options or choice. Typically, Type II programs focus on behavior modification, and little attention is paid to modifying curriculum or pedagogy. In fact, some of these programs require students to perform the work of the regular classes from which they have been removed. Others simply focus on the basics, emphasizing rote, skills, and drill.”</td>
<td>Yield few benefits to those who attend. Do not change drop out, referral rates, suspension or exclusion,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“Remedial Focus. Type III alternatives are for students who are presumed to need remediation or rehabilitation—academic, social/emotional, or both. The assumption is that after successful treatment students can return to mainstream programs. Therefore, Type III alternatives often focus on remedial work and on stimulating social and emotional growth—often through emphasizing the school itself as a community.”

| Behaviour attendance and academic attainment improves. But costly, and behaviour often returns when students return to school. |

Figure 1. Raywid’s three part typology of alternative schooling.

Other US scholars have sought to add to Raywid’s typology, primarily to cater for the range of alternatives on offer to young people not faring well in mainstream education. Lange and Sletton (2002) for example offered ‘second chance schooling’ as a fourth type. ‘Second chance’ schooling dealt with ‘at risk’ populations and had links to multiple health and welfare agencies which attempted to deal with individual and social issues that young people faced.

There are critiques of Raywid’s typology. Heinrich (2005) for example, a practitioner, suggested that Raywid’s approach worked from an assumption of a student or curricular deficit. Heinrich maintained that success in alternative education could not be achieved by segregating students from their peers in mainstream schools who, he suggested, should also spend time in alternative provision while those from the alternative should maintain contact with the mainstream. He argued for an alternative education which combined a humanistic philosophy, a progressive pedagogy with insistence on behavioural compliance and an overall goal of emancipation. He was most insistent that the notion of ‘second chance’ education was coercive, and that of ‘another chance’ was preferable. Kellermayer (1995, 1998) also takes this position, arguing that most alternative provisions are pseudo-alternatives – ineffective and often punitive, they isolate and segregate students from peers in the mainstream. Kellermayer suggests that ‘genuine’ alternatives are voluntary, distinctive from traditional education and offer a student-centred learning environment and a comprehensive set of objectives.

Some have attempted to both acknowledge and avoid these debates by developing more descriptive typologies of the field. This is the approach taken by Aron (2003, 2006; Aron & Zweig, 2003). Aron rejected Raywid’s three part typology on the grounds that these were not, if they ever had been, clear-cut ‘types’ and that in reality the practice in real alternative education programmes and schools showed blurred and overlapping elements of each of the three. Together with Zweig (2003), she analysed ways of understanding alternative education and concluded that there were a variety of ways of understanding the field, via:

- historical, legal and operational definitions
- defining purposes compared to mainstream schools
- describing schools, programmes, and approaches
- by population and psychological social needs
- by operational setting
by content, qualifications and/or intended outcomes 
using Raywid’s three types or variations on her typology of effectiveness 
by educational needs 
by funding/governance 

Aron (2006, p 6) opted for a definition of alternative education as 

… schools or programmes that are set up by states, school districts or other entities to serve people who are not succeeding in traditional public environments. Alternative education programs offer students who are failing academically or may have learning disabilities, behavioural problems, or poor attendance an opportunity to achieve in a different setting and use different and innovative learning models. While there are many different kinds of alternative schools and programs, they are often characterised by their flexible schedules, smaller teacher-students ratios, and modified curricula.

This definition eliminates students who are coping or even doing well in mainstream schools and who might choose an alternative school or programme simply on the grounds that it is different. It does however begin to delineate something of the pedagogy characteristic of alternative education. Aron’s typology (see figure 2) allowed for the individual characteristics of programmes to be mapped.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Includes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| General type of alternative education         | • Separate school
• Separate program
• Perspective/strategy with a regular K-12 school |
| Target Population                             | • women/girls
• pregnant/parenting teens
• suspended/expelled students
• recovered drop-outs
• delinquent teens
• low-achievers
• all at risk youth |
| Focus/purpose (and mix):                      | • Academic completion/credential
• Career preparation/credential
• Disciplinary
• Transitional (e.g., out of treatment or detention, or back to K-12) Operational setting-proximity to K-12:
• resource rooms
• pull-out programs
• schools-within-a-school
• separate self-contained alternative school |
| Operational setting-location of activity      | • regular school during school hours
• school building during non-school hours
• community or recreation center
• former school building
• juvenile justice corrections or detention center
• store-front neighborhood organization
• public housing project
• homeless shelter (emergency and transitional)
• medical or mental health facility
• community college or other post-secondary campus |
| Educational focus                             | • short-term bridge back to schools for students who are off track
• students prematurely transitioning to adulthood
• accelerated program for students needing a few credits to move on |
• students who are very far behind educationally

Sponsor or administrative entity
• non-profit and community-based organization (CBOs)
• state or local education agency
• charter school
• adult education division or agency
• juvenile justice agency
• K-12 public or private school
• health or mental health agency or institution
• federally-funded program and contractors (e.g., for Job Corps)

Credentials offered
• Regular high school diploma
• General Educational Development (GED) diploma
• Occupational and skills certification
• No credentialing

Funding sources (and mix)
• Federal funds
• State funds
• Local funds
• Private funds

Figure 2: Aron’s typology
One can imagine that this typology might lend itself to a ‘scorecard’ on which providers would be able to tick the point in each category which applied to them.

Thomson and Russell (2007) took a programmatic approach to mapping alternative provision suggesting nine different foci (see Fig 3), an approach which chimes with that taken by OfSTED (2011).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of programme</th>
<th>Type of activity</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vocational</td>
<td>A programme that is specifically gained towards a particular occupation/profession/career. Often offering an actual qualification that will help a young person to enter the ‘world of work’</td>
<td>Construction Motor vehicles Hair and beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work skills</td>
<td>Generic work skills are developed such as ‘being able to follow instructions’</td>
<td>General experience on farms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic skills</td>
<td>English, Maths, Science and IT are offered (not necessarily at GCSE level)</td>
<td>E-Learning sites</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life skills</td>
<td>General skills needed to function in society are developed, such as social skills, cooking, talking without swearing</td>
<td>Team-building exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity based</td>
<td>The programme has an activity/leisure focus</td>
<td>Fishing Cycling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td>The focus is on teaching young people about nature and how to utilise materials in the outdoors and survive outside</td>
<td>Work in forests</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Art
Has a focus on teaching and learning the arts
Dance, media, music and drawing, pottery

Therapeutic
Focuses on offering a remedial option
Anger management
Family therapy

Work experience
Various work placements that form part of a young person’s educational package, some are offered as part of actual programmes

Academic
Has a strong scholastic focus, with an emphasis on known educational qualifications such as GCSE
One-to-one tuition

Figure 3: A programmatic typology (Thomson and Russell, 2007)

A mapping approach was also proposed by Australian scholar Te Riele (2007). Unlike Aron’s more pragmatic stance, she argues that the question of purpose cannot be ignored. In the post-compulsory sector at least, she suggests, programmes must first be differentiated by whether they have a youth at risk (fix the student) or learning choice (expand educational options and horizons) focus. The difference between the two can be determined, according to Te Riele, by examining programmes for: the purpose or objective, target population, educational content and planned outcomes/credentials. But, she suggests, the provenance of the programme also makes a key difference, so it is vital to also consider a programme’s sponsor, duration, and stability (e.g. short term funding or established unit). Alternative programmes can be mapped into four quadrants (see Figure 4), where axis one is the purpose of change (young person or provision) and axis two is the stability of alternative programme.

Figure 4. Te Riele’s (2007) map of educational alternatives

Te Riele’s model has been taken up by an Australian private sector educational charity, the Dusseldorps Skills Foundation, and used as the basis for developing a national mapping of alternative education programmes (Te Riele, 2012).
In the UK, Rix and Twining (2007) also developed a descriptive typology for alternative education. They suggested that one apparently simple way of categorizing alternative education was around a set of basic questions:

- **WHO**: At risk/ School refusers/ Low-achievers/ Excluded young parents
- **WHERE**: In a school/ Alternative school / In a non-school formal setting
- **WHAT**: Therapy/ Discipline/ Regular lessons/ Creative approaches
- **WHEN**: Formal school hours/ Out of school hours/ Short term Long term
- **WHY**: Formal qualifications/ Personal development/ Skills development
- **HOW**: Administrative characteristics (charity, church, state, not-for-profit)/ Funding characteristics
- **WHICH**: Type of school (public/private)/ Programme across or within settings/ Strategies, beliefs, services. (pp. 5-6)

But, having outlined this simple mapping approach, they then reject it arguing that it focuses too much on descriptive organizational matters and not enough on the programmatic and purposeful. They offer a second preferred typology consisting of nine organizational types:

- **Type 1**: Alternative eg A Reggio Emilia school
- **Type 2**: Last chance e.g. In-school suspension programme
- **Type 3**: Remedial e.g. In-school withdrawal programme
- **Type 4**: Special e.g. Special school
- **Type 5**: Home e.g. Home education
- **Type 6**: Selective e.g. Private school
- **Type 7**: Comprehensive e.g. State secondary school
- **Type 8**: Schome e.g. A lifelong learning programme
- **Type 9**: Adult e.g. University

Rix and Twining state that each of the nine types can be further differentiated by descriptors which address: programme title, programme length, dominant educational approach, degree of learner choice, opportunities to access setting, age range, regulation and location. An enormous number of variations are made possible by using this typology.

However, the question in relation to quality of alternative education is not simply one of describing types. As already noted, quality has to do with the locus of the activity, thinking about who is the beneficiary and what are the expectations. The next two elements of this section consider these. As we will see, the same kinds of debates and differences of view that are manifest in the literatures about typologies also appear in relation to attendees and expectations.

**Who attends alternative education programmes?**

Perhaps not surprisingly, it is the literatures that address alternative education as something other than a voluntary choice that also delineate who the provision should serve. These literatures can be divided into policy texts that provide statutory advice or administrative guidelines for practice and those that are grounded in practice and/or research.
Administrative guidelines generally offer a list of those eligible for alternative education including: school refusers and phobics, young parents, those with chronic illness as well as descriptors of those characterised variously as ‘marginalised’, ‘vulnerable’ ‘at risk’ or ‘disengaged’ and/or ‘disruptive. These lists are very specific when attached to funding. Indeed, one of the consequences of directing funding to schools and school districts is the development of relatively tight definitions of who is entitled to access to alternative provision.

New Zealand, for example, which already requires schools and networks of schools to commission alternative education programmes, describes those who attend full time alternative schools as ‘alienated from the mainstream, who drop out or who are excluded’. This is very clearly elaborated as

...13-15 year olds who have either:
- been out of school for two terms or more, or
- had multiple exclusions (from more than one school), or
- a history of dropping out of mainstream school after being reintegrated, or
- dropped out of Correspondence School after enrolment as an ‘at risk’ student, or
- been referred by a school and verified for Alternative Education following a meeting of representatives of the school the students and his or her parents or caregivers, representatives of other agencies involved with the students and the AE Coordinators.

And the Pennsylvania Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013) caters for:

Disruptive students - those who show disregard for school authority, use drugs, carry weapons, engage in violent or threatening behaviour, committed a criminal act on school property, or demonstrate misconduct that would merit suspension or expulsion. Students returning from delinquency placement should be dealt with individually, not automatically placed in AEDY.

These narrower eligibility criteria can be compared to looser criteria for state funded and provided provision e.g. "In Indiana, the programs and models designed to meet the needs of disaffected youth are as diverse as the students themselves”. In Indiana, eligibility includes anyone “who intends to withdraw, or who has withdrawn before graduation. Here, alternative education is seen as a way of avoiding students leaving without their final high school qualification. This is the equivalent of the Australian focus on Early School Leavers, and that of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in the UK.

It is inevitable that those who advocate that authentic alternative education should operate as a choice and without any form of compulsion are perturbed by policies that require diagnosis, intervention by school authorities and the

---

use of referral panels. However, there is also significant disquiet from the practice and research communities about aspects of these kinds of diagnostic and referral processes. This often emerges in debates about terminology.

Alternative education programmes are often seen as ‘other’ to the mainstream or regular school (Gale & Densmore, 2000; Mills & McGregor, 2013). The dominant model operates as the norm, against which any other kind of option is seen as not only different but also somehow lesser, inferior, deviant (Slee, 2011; Valencia, 1997). The stigma of alternative is not just confined to the types of schooling; there are also reports of students who experience stigmatization from being and working in alternative education (e.g. McNulty & Roseboro, 2009).

One way to avoid this kind of ‘othering’ and stigma is to employ a different framing - perhaps that of traditional rather than mainstream schooling - against which alternatives can be seen as innovative (Raywid 1994, Heinrich 2005 and Kellmayer 1995 all opt for this). Some Australian programmes speak not of alternative education but of ‘flexible learning choices’3, a term taken from the distance and open learning field. This terminology places the emphasis on the difference in mode of learning, rather than on any notion of the population served or their prior educational attainment. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (undated) suggest that an educational system should consist of four types of mainstream schools, rather than one which could be called mainstream and alternative. Their four types of schools are:

1. academic – offering discipline based content
2. applied – seeing the student as worker
3. alternative – student centred learning and support
4. affiliated – schools offering a common world view (usually faith-based)

This schema is an attempt to create parity of esteem between all four educational options.

There is also considerable debate about the language used to describe the young people for whom alternative education is often designed. Terms such as ‘disaffected’, ‘marginalised’, ‘disadvantaged’, ‘vulnerable’ and ‘at risk’ dominate the field. Critics (e.g. Barone, 1989; Bessant, 1995; Bullen, Kenway, & Hay, 2000; Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; Munns & McFadden, 2000) argue that these terms imply that the young people in question are fundamentally different from those who appear to be coping in their school setting, and that this is not the case. Furthermore, this naming makes it relatively straightforward to suggest that ‘riskiness’ or ‘vulnerability’ is related primarily to factors attached to the young person – their psychological makeup, personal education history and behaviours, and social environment – rather than to the workings of the educational system. Rather than talk about the young person being ‘at risk’, these critics suggest, we should ask what there is about the way in which schooling functions which places them at risk, makes them vulnerable, (Thomson, 2002). Some scholars attempt to find ways to avoid this language completely – for example, using the notion of students ‘at promise’ rather than ‘at risk’ (Swadener, 1995).

---

3 See for example www.learningchoices.org.au
Practitioners are often torn about these kinds of debates. They want to stress the ordinariness of the young people they work with and how much they are like their peers. The young people themselves also very often want this (Smyth & Hattam, 2004; Vincent, 2012). Practitioners want to deal afresh with the young people in their programmes and give them an opportunity to make a fresh start. But they often find themselves faced with young people for whom the long processes of exclusion have been traumatic and/or whose lives are very troubled and troubling (Arnold, Yeomans, & Simpson, 2009; Cullingford, 1999; Lloyd, 2005). They must therefore provide or access the kinds of support and services that are needed in order for young people to get the most from the alternative programme on offer. They do not operate in an either/or world.

Nevertheless, empirical research and government data collections in the UK tell us that the group which participates in programmes for those designated as marginalised, do share certain characteristics:

- Boys are far more likely to be formally excluded than girls (Institute of Education (University of London) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), 2013; McCluskey, Lloyd, Riddell, & Fordyce, 2013). Recent Scottish data for exclusions puts boys at 6.8% of the total school population with girls at 1.8% (PINS Scotland, 2012). However girls and boys truant at roughly equal rates, and girls are often over-represented in data of those missing from school without adequate explanation (Osler & Vincent, 2003; Stanley & Arora, 1998).
- Those who are formally excluded are more likely to be living in poverty (Institute of Education (University of London) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), 2013; Parsons, 2011; PINS Scotland, 2012).
- BME young people are disproportionately excluded in the middle years of schooling, but in the past have also tended to be informally ‘written off’ by some schools (Wright, Standen, John, German, & Patel, 2005). Behaviour and absences of Traveller and Gypsy/Roma young people are often not followed up and truancy can be brushed off as ‘cultural’ inevitabilities (Danaher, Kenny, & Leder, 2012; Derrington & Kendall, 2004).
- Exclusion is generally, but not always, associated with lower levels of formal educational attainment. In Scotland, the exclusion rate is four times higher for those who have an additional support need (PINS Scotland, 2012), while in Wales pupils with special educational needs accounted for just over half of all exclusions in 2011/2012 (McCluskey et al., 2013). There are, however, very academically able young people in the ranks of those in alternative provision (Thomson & Russell, 2007).
- Some students are disengaged from school, rather than formally excluded. As Ross (2009) points out, disengagement from schooling does not mean disengagement from education. This group is more

---

4 See https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statisticspupil-absence
likely to be Black Caribbean and young people of mixed race (Wright, Standen, & Patel, 2009).

The social characteristics appearing in this data do suggest that there may well be a complex combination of social, individual and systemic educational processes at work in the production of ‘at risk-ness’. This data also suggests that simple and quick responses are unlikely to be the ‘answer’. (This issue is taken up in section 2.)

**Expectations of alternative programmes**

What alternative education can achieve is clearly related to: the nature of the programme, the time that young people are engaged in it, and the level of support that they receive. Full time, long-term alternative schools – such as free schools and some alternative academies - clearly intend that the young people who are enrolled are able to undertake an educational programmes leading to the same range of choices and life opportunities as in any other school. But expectations are less clear-cut for shorter term and part time arrangements.

OfSTED (2011) noted that schools gave multiple reasons for referring or offering alternative learning options to enrolled students:
- as part of a continuum of support for ‘challenging or vulnerable’ students, the main aim of which was to secure examination success and suitable destination at end year 11
- to counter disaffection and to capture interest
- to extend types of experiences and learning on offer
- to minimize the impact of some on the majority
- as the end of the line – no alternative left.

The evaluators of the trial of school commissioning of alternative provision (Institute of Education (University of London) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), 2013) also asked schools why they used alternative education. Some two thirds suggested that it was different from school – more personalized and had specialist staff – and thus did offer something else to students. About a quarter said that participation had a positive impact on students who were able to make a fresh start and improved motivation, engagement and their behaviour. The remainder said that they had explored all other avenues, that in-school provision was exhausted and that they needed to reduce disruption within the school. Also included in this latter category were some who said that alternative provision was the choice made by the students/parent.

If schools vary in their expectations of alternative education, then it may be difficult to devise common outcomes that will be satisfactory to all of them. Equally it may be hard to develop a common quality framework that covers this range of expectations.
ISSUES ARISING FROM LITERATURES ON ALTERNATIVE PROVISION WHICH WERE TAKEN INTO THE RESEARCH

(1) What definition of alternative education should be used in a quality framework?
(2) How should the mission of alternative programmes be described, and how might this affect a quality framework?
(3) Does the language used to describe students and alternative programmes matter? What terminology should be used in a quality framework?
(4) Should the same expectations of, and criteria for, quality apply equally to all types of alternative education, or should they be differentiated? If so, on what basis?
SECTION TWO
HOW DOES ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION WORK?

There is a significant body of international research which addresses the question of alternative education. There is remarkable congruence in the research which reports what young people who are in alternative education say about their experiences of traditional schools. There is a similar congruence in the research on what are understood as the ‘best practices’ of alternative education. The consistency of the data spreads over time and place suggesting that these research findings should be taken seriously. These findings are described in the first two parts of this section. The third part of this section focuses on issues often raised in the literatures about practice which are germane to the question of quality.

The experience of traditional schooling

Young people who are on the edges of formal schooling frequently tell researchers that:
- the curriculum on offer is not interesting or relevant
- they are bored
- teachers are disinterested in them
- discipline is unfair
- they have been bullied or ridiculed and the school has done nothing to support them or has been unable to support them
- there is no point in school as there are no jobs anyway.

(e.g. Carlile, 2013; Corrigan, 1977; Eckert, 1989; Hall, 2001; Kaplan, 2013; Smyth & Hattam, 2004; Weis, 1990; Williamson, 2004; Willis, 1977)

Young people from BME heritage also talk about the racism that they have experienced in school (e.g.Dance, 2002; Wright, Weekes, & McGlaughlin, 2000).

Researchers document the ways in which these student experiences are usually not the result of individual, conscious bigotry and callousness. Rather, research shows that these experiences result from policy agendas and systems - of teacher education, of mandated curriculum and pedagogy, of taken for granted school administrative and disciplinary-pastoral practices (e.g. Archer, Hollingworth, & Mendick, 2010; Ball, Maguire, & Braun, 2011; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Researchers suggest a variety of reforms that schools might make in order to become more inclusive of all young people. Some of these solutions require policy change, while others are possible within individual schools. Some are drawn from the practical examples set by alternative schools and programmes (e.g. Kraftl, 2013; Mills & McGregor, 2013; Smyth & McInerney, 2007; Woods & Woods, 2009; Wrigley, 2003).

Best practices in alternative education

A national survey conducted by the US Department of Education (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010) produced a list of findings about the alternative education on offer to American young people (see Figure 5).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Issues</th>
<th>Academic Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding One - Students want respect and acceptance for who they are and what their abilities are.</td>
<td>Finding Five - Students learn at different rates and in different ways. They need staff who are patient with their learning and will persevere with the student until learning has occurred.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding Two - High school students have not outgrown the need to be cared for.</td>
<td>Finding Six - If high expectations are given to students, they will meet them, given necessary and appropriate support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding Three - Students have a life outside of high school. This must be taken into account.</td>
<td>Finding Seven - High expectations translate into high goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding Four - Students will have a life after high school. They need guidance in figuring out what they want to do, what they can do, and how they are going to do it.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**School Issues**

- Finding Eight - Success in the school creates school spirit and a pride of place.

---

**Figure 5. US Department of Education survey of alternative education**

These eight findings can be matched to research on best practices which always include most of the following:

1. Young people experience and value relationships with staff who: listen; are patient, prepared to have fun and are less formal; are fair, kind, and firm about rules; are prepared to negotiate; have clear, high and achievable expectations; see them as ‘teachable’ rather than as deficient in some way.

2. The curriculum is: relevant and connected to young people’s experiences, needs, aspirations and interests; has clear goals tailored to each individual; combines experiential learning with opportunities to catch up and accelerate learning; builds knowledge, skills and habits of mind; offers challenging tasks with real world applications; and uses feedback and authentic forms of assessment to build belief in the capacity to learn. There is flexibility, choice and routine; adult learning principles are used rather than didactic instructional methods. Students’ learning is carefully monitored and progress is celebrated.

3. Agency and independence are built through an offer to be and become someone different. All young people are able to have a say in their own learning, and about the overall programme and its operations.

4. While the focus is always on learning, health and welfare services support those young people who might benefit from them. There is a family atmosphere in which young people are encouraged to discuss problems and issues, to resolve conflicts and build resources to deal with potential and actual life challenges.

5. The alternative education on offer is smaller and more human than most traditional schools. There are smaller class sizes and lower teacher-student ratios. The facilities are generally good; ICTs are used to facilitate learning, not substitute for teaching, mentoring and coaching.
Families/parents/carers are encouraged to become involved where feasible.

(6) staff are committed and highly skilled. They are well trained and engage in ongoing professional development. They have a positive orientation to behaviour and to participatory processes, are concerned that young people feel safe and secure and are well versed in wholistic learning and teaching.  

These kinds of ‘best practices’ can be expressed as procedural principles such as those developed by KPMG for the Victorian Department for Education (see Figure 6).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good practice principles:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Inclusive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Developmentally responsive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Comprehensive, wrap around approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Timely and accessible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mentoring relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Engage families and support networks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approaches to education provision:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• personalized learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• targeted supports</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• flexible learning options</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: KPMG good practice principles

Much of the work on best practice has been generated from case studies and surveys of providers, young people and associated stake-holders in schools and school districts/LAs. While there is little that might meet the test of an RCT, the consistency across time and place does suggest the trustworthiness of the findings. However, the key issue is that there is very little research evidence which ties these practices to outcomes for students. This is because there is relatively little research on outcomes per se; this is discussed further in the next and last sections.

**Issues in alternative education provision**

It is not only important to consider what alternative education does well. It is also important, particularly when thinking about effectiveness and quality, to examine some of the concerns and critiques that appear in the literatures.

---

Many of these concerns and critiques relate to issues already raised in the first section. Those canvassed here are: (1) enrolment, (2) the academic programme, (3) communication with schools, (4) reintegration into school, (5) monitoring and evaluation, and (6) selection and training of staff.

(1) Enrolment

There are three issues related to enrolment – (a) who is on the roll, (b) referral processes and (c) barriers to access.

(a) Who is on the roll.
There is concern that particular groups of young people are not well served by alternative education. The dominant enrolment in the UK is white working class boys.
Working class girls in particular drift away from school (Osler & Vincent, 2003). BME youth and Traveller/Gypsy/Roma apparently achieve less school success than other peers (as represented in achievement and attendance data) and are also disproportionately present in exclusion figures. One study (Parsons et al., 2004) found that Black Caribbean students were 2.6 times more likely to be excluded than any other pupils. Recent exclusion data in England (Department for Education, 2013b) suggests that Black Caribbean young people are three times more likely to be excluded, both permanently and for a fixed term, than the school population as a whole. However, all of these young people appear much less regularly in data on alternative programmes (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2006; Derrington & Kendall, 2004; Osler, 2006; Wright et al., 2005). This raises questions about the reasons for this anomaly, in particular whether the ‘problem’ lies primarily in the school referral processes and/or in the young peoples’ perceptions of the ‘offer’ and/or in the actual operation of alternative education providers and services.

(b) Referral processes
Young people and their families often feel powerless in, and alienated from, the administrative and organizational processes that are used to manage referrals, transfers and monitoring progress. This is often in stark contrast to the agency they feel within alternative education programmes. (Foley & Pang, 2006; Franklin, 2002). There is however very little detailed study of actual school referral processes.

(c) Barriers to access
Access and affordability to public transport, the willingness of young people to leave familiar locations and the relative scarcity of alternative provision in rural communities are all issues which affect who can actually take up alternative education (Clark et al., 2010; Forlin & Tierney, 2006; Foster, 2006; Johnston, Cooch, & Pollard, 2004).
(2) Academic programmes

There is some tension in the literatures on best practices about the degree to which conforming to mandated curriculum standards is important. Clearly, for bodies such as OfSTED, achieving the full number of GCSEs is of critical importance. However, these are also important to young people in a situation where employers and further education providers look for this qualification.

Some researchers worry about this focus on this kind of qualification. They (e.g. Bullis, Moran, Benz, Todus, & Johnson, 2002; Burton, 2007; Clegg, Stackhouse, Finch, Murphy, & Nicholls, 2009; Kerka, 2007; Lloyd, Stead, & Kendrick, 2001; Munn, Lloyd, & Cullen, 2000) stress the importance of ensuring that young people have

- literacy and numeracy competencies such that they can make viable choices about what kind of educational pathway they wish to follow
- emotional wellbeing in order to manage their wider life context
- social ‘life skills’ that underpin not only educational progress but also everyday tasks.

Others (e.g. McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1986; Sunderman, Kim, & Orfield, 2005) also worry about valuing most what is measured. They have long warned that ‘standards agendas’ can be very off-putting to young people ‘at risk’ if it is only the formal curriculum is seen as important. They remind us that if pedagogies and school practices are not changed then the result is likely to be the same or greater, inequity.

One group of researchers (e.g. Ecclestone & Hayes, 2008; Mills, McGregor, & Muspratt, 2012) have been concerned about ‘dumbing down’ in alternative education. They are concerned about assumptions that all young people in alternative education are in need of remedial support, vocational options and/or a largely practical approach to learning. There is some evidence in the UK that young people in alternative education are often offered a menu of Level 1 courses, rather than level 2 or beyond (Institute of Education (University of London) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), 2013). Thomson and Russell (2007) met numbers of young people with portfolios of achievement certificates from a plethora of credentialing agencies: these did not translate either into GCSE or into access to further education. They also found, as did OfSTED (2011), that young people in full time alternative provision were offered narrow, rather than comprehensive, GCSE options. The vocational education on offer was also highly gender-specific with girls either being offered hair and beauty or childcare, or the opportunity to be a tiny minority in male-dominated bricklaying, construction, engineering and outdoor courses (Kilpatrick, McCarten, & McKeown, 2007; Russell & Thomson, 2011).

We can conclude from these literatures that the question of achieving the educational entitlement of students in alternative education is vexed. It is not as simple as requiring particular standards to be met. Re-engaging those who are seriously disenchanted with learning and with formal education systems and meeting their health and welfare needs, as well – and at the same time –
as supporting them to achieve the kinds of educational qualification that matter, is a far from straightforward task.

(3) Communication with schools

Alternative education providers might need/want to communicate with schools:
- If they are receiving students via referral procedures
- If they are offering part-time learning options for students who attend school for the remainder of the time
- If they offer short-term placements from which students are intended to return to their schools
- If they are a medium to long-term placement from which students can go directly to sixth form colleges or further education programmes.

The communication referred to here is two-way, with alternative providers both receiving and giving information.

There is not a great deal in the research literatures about school-alternative provider communication, although many official reports make recommendations (e.g. Centre for Social Justice, 2011; Davies, 2012; House of Commons Education Committee, 2011). Jurisdictional guidelines on the provision of alternative education offer quite specific protocols for communication. What research there is suggests that there are both mixed views and mixed practices in communication between schools and alternative providers (e.g. Institute of Education (University of London) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), 2013; Thomson & Russell, 2007). McCluskey recently led an evaluation of EOTAS in Wales (McCluskey et al., 2013) and developed some recommended principles for enhanced communication and reintegration (Figure 7).

- Clear protocols agreed between mainstream school and EOTAS setting, that specify responsibilities both of EOTAS setting and of mainstream school.
- Comprehensive assessment information provided by mainstream school and by EOTAS on return.
- Pre-specified length of time in EOTAS (in one authority there was a built-in flexibility to support one further attempt at reintegration if the first attempt was unsuccessful).
- Contact maintained with mainstream school, often one day a week, so pupil does not lose touch with their peer group and teachers.
- Specific help for students with literacy/numeracy and or/ maintenance of subjects from mainstream.
- Recognition within mainstream schools that reintegration would involve changes in their approaches as well as changes on the part of the pupil.
- Flexibility by schools in making arrangements for pupils on their return.

6 See for example ICAN in South Australia [http://www.ican.sa.edu.au].
Alternative education providers may well have concerns about receiving extensive dossiers on young people which provide pre-determined judgments about problems and proposed solutions. Some providers prefer to treat each young person as a ‘fresh start’ rather than someone who arrives as an already well-documented ‘case’. On the other hand, other providers do want to know as much as possible about the young people for whom they will be responsible.

Alternative education providers may be very happy to provide schools with detailed reports about students’ progress and achievement, or they may see that their obligation for reporting is primarily to the student and their parent/carer, or they may see that giving the kinds of information that schools request is an encroachment on their autonomy. And of course, schools that operate with an ‘out of sight out of mind’ attitude may not be easy to communicate with. OfSTED (2011) not only found this to be the case, but also that when schools did receive information about students’ achievements, this wasn’t necessarily taken into account in school reporting processes or in school decisions about the student’s future. We can speculate that while service contracts may resolve some communication issues between providers and schools, there may also be continuing tensions.

(4) Reintegration into school

One of the alternative education pathways in use is short to medium term full-time alternatives. These aim to provide: a break in long-term patterns of disengagement, disruption and/or failure; a new experience of success and an opportunity to be and become someone else; health and welfare support to address needs; and either remedial or accelerated support for learning. In this kind of provision the return to school or the transition to another option is crucial.

The research literatures are mixed on the success of young people returning to the schools that referred them to alternative education. In a few instances reintegration failed because providers and students have not been able to access relevant services (OfSTED, 2011), in others because schools have been unable to implement new appropriate supports into their programmes (Jolivette, McDaniel, Sprague, Swain-Bradbury, & Parks Ennis, 2012; Lumby, 2013). Some studies note that schools have been largely unable to match the quality of relationships so valued by pupils in alternative education settings (Hilton, 2006; Lown, 2005, 2007). The response of peers to students re-entering school is also very important. Peer issues range from lack of support for the young person being ‘someone different’ to harassment and bullying (Lloyd & Padfield, 1996).

An older UK study on reintegration (GHK Consulting, Holden McAllister Patrtnership, & IPSOS Public Affairs, 2004) noted three kinds of barriers to reintegration:
school reluctance, limited awareness of students’ needs, insufficient resources, negative aspects of the school environment and the lack of alternative options within the national curriculum

(2) poor contact and communication and some role confusion between individuals, agencies and schools, as well as a lack of continuity of contact

(3) external barriers, including lack of support from parent/carers, ineffective assessment procedures, poorly planned/timed reintegration and limited access to and/or continuity of provision of external services.

(p. 7)

These findings contrast with early ‘managed moves’ schemes which were characterised by a full service provision, preparation of a detailed development plan for each student, and allocation of designated teachers responsible for the student and the overall implementation of the plan and for liaison between agencies and individuals (Thavarajah, 2010; Vincent, Harris, Thomson, & Toalster, 2007). This kind of ‘wrap around’ organisation now often appears in recommendations about ‘good practice’. Some researchers (e.g. Milbourne, 2005) warn that this kind of individualized multiagency approach can neglect structural and organizational issues which contribute to the difficulties experienced by young people and their families.

The notion of reintegration is difficult to separate from the important debate about whether returning to mainstream education is the major purpose of alternative provision (see previous section), with some evidence that some young people benefit from long-term alternative education, and that others can successfully move from alternative education to further education and training and/or work (see following section).

(5) Monitoring and evaluation

Evaluation and monitoring are organised around the goals and expectations of providers. National and international researchers (e.g. Aron, 2006; Gutherson et al., 2011; Thomson & Russell, 2009; White et al., 2012) suggest that alternative providers are not always good at stating what are their programme goals, their expectations for students, and how these will be monitored and measured.

OfSTED (2011) were particularly concerned about the variable nature of evaluation practices and the lack of information available to schools about the ‘track record’ of alternative education providers. Thomson and Russell (2007) observed that most providers in their study did undertake evaluation, generally that required by funders. They noted that busy workers often found it difficult to find the time to collect and analyse anything but the most basic data, but many were interested in evaluation. They were particularly keen on possibilities of evaluation that might track young people after they left their programmes: they had no resources to do this kind of longitudinal work. Thomson and Russell argued that the lack of any common evaluative framework or foci for alternative education meant that aggregating and
comparing data across provisions was impossible, and was also a hindrance
to ensuring that statutory entitlements were being met.

But a solution to the monitoring and evaluation problem is not simple.
Because alternative programmes have a wide range of educational, social,
cultural, therapeutic and vocational offers and expectations, it is not a
straightforward matter to design an evaluative framework that allows for
difference as well as for common issues. It is worth noting however that in
many US school districts, and in some Australian locations that programmes
that do not contribute to a common database cannot be funded and/or
commissioned. In England OfSTED (2011) state that all alternative provision
should be inspected.

There is of course a question about whether evaluation should always be
designed from the point of the provider, or the school. There is very little
research which examines what young people want from their involvement in
alternative education, and what their aspirations might mean for evaluation.
Some providers do encourage young people to set goals, but this is not the
same as asking them about their expectations of what providers will do.

(6) Selecting and training staff

Some US school districts require staff who work in alternative provision to
possess the highest levels of teacher qualifications as well as additional
training in relevant areas such as counseling, special education and
therapeutic approaches (Foley & Pang, 2006). However, many US states
also face chronic shortages of staff and have developed a range of
responses, many of which are variations of on-the-job training (McLeskey,
Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). This is much more like the situation in England and
Northern Ireland where alternative education providers may employ teachers,
youth workers, social workers and/or health workers and then offer some kind
of on-site CPD support.

There is very little research which focuses directly on staff in alternative
education provision, other than the copious examinations of their practice.
One exception is the study by McGregor and Mills (2012) who were told by
staff working in alternative provision that moving into the sector had reignited
their sense of vocation and commitment. Both OfSTED (2011) and Thomson
and Russell (2007) noted that professional development was an issue for
many staff. Thomson and Russell also reported that small providers in
particular found it very difficult to run and/or pay for staff professional
development and that there were few opportunities for staff across
programmes and providers to get together to share experience and expertise.
Kilpatrick et al (2007) also noted issues of stigma and uncertainty of
employment despite the commitment of staff to their work.

There appears to be no systematic UK study of the employment processes or
conditions of staff across alternative education services. Given the critical
importance of staff to the success of programmes, this is clearly an area for
further investigation.
(7) Funding stability

While there has been some examination in England of the very different cost structures of alternative education (see OfSTED 2011), there is less discussion of the ways in which costs impact on what is on offer and who has access.

Some research (e.g. Aron 2003, 2006, Te Riele, 2012) emphasises the importance of funding sources; they see this as an indicator of the stability of programmes. Uncertainty about funding can lead to undesirable consequences:

- the pressure to find ongoing sources of funds can impact on the time that staff in alternative programmes have to actually undertake their core mission
- providers cannot advertise their programmes if they are not sure of their funding
- if staff are not sure that their employment will continue they may start to look for other work
- schools cannot schedule alternative education options if they cannot rely on providers.

Finding for charities is a particular issue in the UK at present. The current evaluation of the trial of commissioning in eleven local authorities (Institute of Education (University of London) and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), 2013) reports that there are currently instances of alternative education provision having to close at short notice, leaving schools and students without planned-for services. They, together with OfSTED (2011) register unease at the potential for schools to choose alternative education on the basis of cost (c.f. Thomson and Russell, 2007).

ISSUES ARISING FROM THE LITERATURES ON ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION MAKING A DIFFERENCE TAKEN INTO THE RESEARCH

(1) Should a quality framework use a common list of best practices?
(2) If so, which are most important to include?
(3) Should concerns about alternative education practice also inform a quality framework?
(4) Are any of these issues of concern more important than others?

---

See the blog maintained by New Philanthropy Capital for ongoing discussion of funding issues, including a report of the merger of two major alternative education providers, Fairbridge and The Princes Trust.
SECTION THREE
QUALITY IN ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

The questions that educators, young people and their families and policy makers all ask about alternative education inevitably go to quality. Is what is on offer any good? How do we know it will ‘work’? What will it achieve?

As already noted, there is not yet a great deal that research tells us in answer to these questions. This section canvasses what it is we might learn from research, and then goes on to consider how the quality question might become part of the work of the alternative education sector itself.

Reseaching the outcomes of alternative education

Many researchers have lamented the lack of available data on the outcomes of alternative education. There is a great deal of case study research across alternative education programmes - this largely focuses on best practices. There is also research which evaluates individual programmes, and a little of this is longitudinal (e.g. Carswell, Hanlon, O’Grady, Watts, & Pothong, 2009; Hallam, Rogers, Rhamie, & Shaw, 2007; Russell, Simmons, & Thompson, 2011). However, there are very few large-scale systematic studies on the outcomes for cohorts of young people who participate in alternative education. One of the reasons for this is the sheer difficulty of tracking young people who have attended alternative education programmes. While it is possible to ascertain what their intentions are at the point when they leave a programme it is often difficult to maintain contact with them.

There is potential for the use of large longitudinal data sets in tracking young people in alternative education. One Australian study (Polidano, Tabasso, & Tseng, 2012) used the Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth (LSAY) data set to examine three cohorts of early school leavers and their post-school trajectories. These findings are also potentially pertinent to a younger age group; they noted that “programs that encourage an early return to study and programs that develop post-school career plans may be more effective than programs that concentrate on improving numeracy and literacy scores” (p.2).

What data there is about outcomes largely suggests that alternative education is good at changing patterns of attendance, engagement and behaviour, perhaps because wellbeing is a precursor to improvements in academic attainment (Clark et al., 2010; de Velasco et al., 2008; Nichols & Steffy, 1999; Nichols & Utches, 2010; Te Riele, 2012). Aron (2006) cites one study which suggests that non-school academically oriented youth programmes were able to improve some overall educational outcomes, but were better able to affect academic-related outcomes e.g. skills, attendance, goals, and credits. Students from programmes that had the strongest academic focus were better at achieving stronger academic outcomes in the longer term. Aron concluded from her meta-analysis that longer periods of participation in alternative education and more frequent participation have longer lasting effects. In a rare comparative study, Mainwaring (2010) suggests that PRUs are not as
able to provide young people with a robust sense of ‘possible selves’ as mainstream schools.

Outcomes are of course clearly related to the quality of provision and the support for young people as they make a transition from alternative education either back to a school, or into other education or training (Lumby, 2013). The evaluation of the Back on Track pilots in England (White et al., 2012) suggests a range of outcomes from efforts to provide better coordination between schools, alternative education and destination providers:

...increased contentment and the emergence of more positive outlooks; increased self-confidence and self-esteem; the development of a greater sense of responsibility and maturity and other behavioural improvements. Changes have also been observed in many of the young people … manifest in their interactions with others, including their improved capacity to communicate effectively and appropriately with a wide range of people, including parents/carers, peers, alternative provision staff, school staff and adults in general. Young people have experienced a range of positive post-pilot progressions, including re-integration to mainstream school, progression to further education and training and employment. However, retention at subsequent destinations in some cases remains an area for development and across the pilots, not all young people secured positive destinations. (p. iv)

Young people’s attitudes and external support are also important in determining outcomes. Daniels and his team (Daniels et al., 2003) examined the trajectories of 193 young people permanently excluded between the ages of 13-16. After two years, 50% of them were engaged in education, training or employment. These young people: believed in their own abilities; had ongoing support from a key worker; had supportive family members/friends who helped them to ‘network’; and felt that their permanent exclusion was unjustified. Daniels et al note that “where young people consistently refused to engage with or proved themselves unable to avail themselves of the services offered, then post-exclusion outcomes were disappointing” (p.vi).

In Northern Ireland, Kilpatrick, McCarten and McKeown (2007) conducted a longitudinal study of young people, in both compulsory and post-compulsory years of schooling, enrolled in alternative secondary education provision. Their initial sample was 318. The researchers worked with paid ‘peer’ researchers over a two and a half year period, and conducted three ‘swoops’ to find out what the cohort of young people were doing. After six months, they were able to contact about half of the original group, but this dropped by the third follow-up to about a third. However, the findings did suggest some success for the group that they were able to contact. After six months, well over three quarters were engaged in employment, training or further education but this fell by 12% some six months later. Eighteen months later about a third of the remaining group were unemployed. Like the Daniel’s (2003) study, the results in Northern Ireland also suggest that family support, or replacement support, is important, as is the young person’s sense of agency. This study also showed that the minority of girls in alternative education were significantly more likely become ‘inactive’ than boys; some become parents and unavailable for work, education or further training.
Outcomes also differ by group of young people. It is not reasonable to insist that all young people achieve the same outcomes. A DCFS commissioned study in 2009 (Pirrie, Macleod, Cullen, & McCluskey, 2009) investigated the histories and destinations of 24 young people permanently excluded from alternative provision. These young people had long histories of difficulties in education, had ‘statemented’ special needs and were involved with a range of health and welfare agencies. While this was only a small study in which overall destination statistics are too small to be significant, the careful life history analysis conducted by the researchers points not only to considerable gaps in provision, time delays and fault lines between providers, it also indicates the importance of achieving “a balance … between improving performance in external examinations and enhancing young people’s social and emotional well-being” (p. 62). It is perhaps for this reason that Pink suggests that it is important to look for the ways in which alternative education ‘contributes to building a positive or negative biography’ (Pink, 2012, p. 21).

Outcomes may also change over time. There is some evidence that some alternative programmes do assist young people in the short term but that changes are not maintained when they return to the unchanged context in which they previously experienced conflict and/or lack of success (Bowey & McLaughlin, 2006; Carswell, Hanlon, Watts, & O’Grady, 2012; Cox, 1999). In the case of vocational programmes, it may be external contextual factors which hinder achievement of programme goals (Russell, Simmons, & Thompson, 2010). There are also often powerful ‘pull’ factors on young people which schools and alternative education providers find difficult to counteract (Scott & Spencer, 2013). However, these longitudinal studies also show patchy and ineffective reintegration strategies (Kilpatrick et al., 2007).

It is also important to look for unintended outcomes. There is some evidence that alternative education programmes - contra their mission, student expectations and staff beliefs - can actually increase exclusion and segregation (Joniak, 2005; Meo & Parker, 2004). Both Joniak and the Meo and Parker studies show that the use of withdrawal, silencing and non-engagement are counter-productive methods of punishment which further alienated young people, rather than assisted their re-engagement.

The overall lack of research data on outcomes makes it difficult for education systems, schools and alternative education providers to think about the quality of provision. It is certainly further inducement to embed robust evaluation and quality measures into existing provision.

**Monitoring and measuring quality**

In education, there are generally three approaches to quality –
(1) a standards approach: this works with a set of benchmarks developed by the purchaser/commissioner, to be applied universally
(2) a fit for purpose framework: this uses criteria for quality, defined by the provider and user groups in relation to the purpose of the programme
(3) a value for money approach: Audit Commissions typically measure inputs against outputs of comparable services.

Judgments about quality are made through: accreditation processes such as kite mark and ISO schemes; assessment conducted internally/externally to arrive at a score of effectiveness; and an audit approach which provides external verification of the internal quality assurance processes used (e.g. International Institute for Educational Planning, 2011; Kis, 2005). Accreditation processes typically use a fit for purpose approach while assessment can use either a standards approach or fit for purpose, although it is more typically the former.

In order to develop both a standards or fit for purpose quality approach it is necessary to arrive at a statement about desired outcomes. This section considers outcomes further and then goes on to look at the two different quality approaches as they might apply to alternative education.

What outcomes matter?

In general, when the success of alternative education is discussed in the policy and research literatures, a mix of educational attainment, destinations, well-being and social competencies are nominated. For example, the Victorian Education Department Australia (KPMG, 2009) uses three broad outcome areas: student learning; student engagement and well being; and student pathways and transition.

In its guidance for English schools, the Department for Education (2013a) places heavier emphasis on academic achievement and destinations than on other areas; the weighting of the academic is also a feature of quality frameworks in many US states. The DfE states that alternative education must achieve the following outcomes for young people:

- good academic attainment on par with mainstream schools – particularly in English, Maths and Science (including IT) – with appropriate accreditation and qualifications
- proper identification of specific personal, social and academic needs of pupils that are then met, in order that they can overcome any specific barriers to attainment
- improved pupil motivation, self-confidence attendance and engagement with education
- clearly defined objectives, including the next steps following the placement such as reintegration into mainstream education, further education, training or employment.

When alternative education programmes register with local authorities, they generally nominate what academic programmes they offer. Other outcomes that organisations might find equally important are often not foregrounded.
(1) A quality standards approach

In England and Wales, quality in schools is monitored and evaluated through a standards-based approach. National attainment data and other nationally determined data such as attendance are combined with various benchmarks of organizational process to provide a framework for internal assessment. This is then subject to external assessment via OfSTED/ESTYN inspection. At present some alternative education provision is inspected, while some is not. The new devolved school commissioning process in England may bring further changes.

The English approach is similar to the process used in some US states where there are state mandated standards that all educational organisations must meet, including alternative education.

(2) A fit for purpose approach

Some US states use a fit-for-purpose approach to alternative education. It is thus possible to find in the research literatures material that has been generated to help alternative education providers determine for themselves what their anticipated outcomes and ideal processes might be. For example, Martin and Halperin (2006), US based researchers, opt for a series of questions as a guide:

- Do the schools and community programs help youth and young adults see themselves as successful learners?
- Do they support the positive development of youth who have previously experienced school failure?
- Do they move out-of-school and disconnected youth into a position where they can better compete for good jobs with decent wages that can support a family?
- Do they offer learners the tools to cope with a rapidly changing economy and to take advantage of opportunities to continue their education beyond high school?
- Do they help their graduates avoid self-destructive and antisocial behaviors?
- Do graduates understand and exercise their responsibilities, not only as good workers and parents, but also as citizens in a democratic society? (p. 163)

Martin and Halperin’s questions require both summative answers, as well as process descriptions. Such process descriptions might be benchmarked against ‘best practice’ or against the judgment of the organisation about what ‘good’ might be.

Some US school districts and alternative education providers have worked a fit for purpose approach into a set of quality indicators. For example, the Iowa Association of Alternative Education provides its members with an extensive checklist of process and outcome quality indicators divided into several categories: Philosophy; Administration; Students; Parents/Guardians; Staff; Curriculum and Instruction; Vocational/Technical/Career; Assessment; Personal/Social/Lifeskills; Community and Social services; Facilities; and
Signals that the learning alternative/s may not be successful. See figure 8 for a sample of one category of indicators.

**FACILITIES**

1. Physical facilities adequately accommodate the needs of staff and students to accomplish the established goals with high quality.
2. Adequate space is available to accommodate group activities without interfering with individualized learning.
3. Provisions are made for technology to complement the management of learning.
4. Accommodations are made for “privacy areas” for counseling and the delivery of community support services.
5. Facilities meet state and local fire and safety regulations.
6. Facilities are accessible to all and meet accessibility requirements as prescribed by law.
7. Food services are provided near or within the facilities. Food services reflect high quality nutrition and accommodate personal student needs and desires for nutrition.
8. Facilities accommodate student fitness development, or alternatives for fitness development are organized within the community/ies to complement the learning alternative/s.

Figure 8: Iowa Alternative Education Association quality indicators

The UK educational charity CfBT has taken an interest in a fit for purpose approach. Thinking in particular of the range of alternative education providers within the country, and the current policy context in England, they conducted an international literature review (Gutherson et al., 2011) of publicly available documents. Their aim was to generate a quality framework which had the potential to underpin accreditation, via a kite-mark approach. Both charities and state-funded organisations could apply for the kite mark.

The CfBT approach to quality combines criteria about inputs/processes with a range of outcome measures (See fig 9). Organisations seeking kite-mark accreditation would be asked to provide evidence about how they met each criteria in the same way that schools now apply for Arts Mark, Healthy Schools status and the like.

**INPUTS:**

- High standards and expectations – an ethos of achievement
- Small schools. Small group sizes and high staff/learner ratios
- Appropriate needs assessment of child/young person
- Clearly identified goals within a challenging and flexible curriculum
- Highly trained staff able to deliver programme fidelity
- ‘Caring and knowledgeable’ staff with ongoing professional development and support for staff
- Strong and effective partnerships
- Strong active participation of families and community
- Effective leadership and professional autonomy
- Positive environment
- Appropriate and accessible location
- Support beyond the lifetime of the intervention
- Monitoring and assessment
- Voluntary participation
- Incentives and rewards
• Integration of research and practice

YOUNG PERSON OUTCOMES
• Attitudinal: attendance; confidence; motivation; reduction in offending behaviours;
• Positive contribution to school or community life
• Personal and social development: self esteem; emotional well-being; health awareness; developing and sustaining relationships
• Life skills: the capacity to act upon the world, exercise judgment and to make constructive contributions; communication; coping with authority; working with others; leadership and organizational skills; improved ability to develop and maintain relationships; reducing in need for ongoing support
• Academic development: a sense of accomplishment accompanied by recognition and valuation by others; recognition of success; accreditation
• Employability
• Progression: sense of direction; positive destination

COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL OUTCOMES
• Reduction in criminal activity
• Improved relationships
• Reduction in social exclusion
• Improvements in partnerships

Figure 9: CfBT Quality framework

The CfBT approach does imply that a set of benchmarks or indicators sit behind each of the categories; this would be needed in order to decide whether the process and evidence provided was sufficient and suitable.

Issues in monitoring and measuring the quality of alternative education

Regardless of what approach to quality is taken, there are still difficulties in evaluating quality in alternative education which require additional consideration. These include:

(1) **Who decides what counts as a valuable outcome?**

Most of the literature on the outcomes of alternative education offers strongly futures-oriented goals of the kind that policy-makers, education systems and schools prefer - educational achievement, wellbeing, access to further education and training. However, reports from young people about their experiences in alternative education stress everyday differences – relationships, a sense of agency and identity, activities that are both enjoyable – things that are in the present. Staff are also often able to talk about the differences between the young person when they arrive, and observable changes that have happened during their time in the programme (Callwood, 2013; Goodley & Clough, 2004; Mills et al., 2012; Ogg, 2012; Short, 2011; Te Riele, 2006). The difference between these official and professional-participant perspectives suggests that there may be some mileage in thinking about immediate, medium term and longer term outcomes, as well as making sure that what counts as an outcome is inclusive of the full range of stakeholder views.
(2) When is an outcome achieved?
Some outcomes of alternative education may be immediate. Others may take time to be revealed, while some ‘effects’ may be apparent in the short term but not ‘hold’ over longer periods.

Variation in outcomes can perhaps be understood through a lens of the agency of the young person. Young people change in part because they simply grow up, but change is always in response to context. Education provides resources which can be, and are, used in specific contexts at specific times. This varies, it is not uniform across all young people. Imagine a young person who does not go onto further education when they leave an alternative provision, but returns to graduate at a much later stage; they attribute this decision to their experience in alternative education but also ‘the time being right’\(^8\). At what point would we ‘find’ this outcome? The connection between time and context makes the point at which outcomes can be measured relatively difficult.

(3) Who decides if an outcome is reasonable and achievable?
As noted in the previous section, schools sometimes want alternative programmes to offer a quick fix; this is often not possible with identities, behaviours and dispositions which have been a long time in the making (Hlady, 2013). Funders can also be unrealistic about what they expect programmes to achieve – health and well-being from short-term community arts projects, remedial literacy and numeracy from a few weeks involvement in environmental and vocational education for example. It is important for anticipated outcomes to be tailored to the achievable goals of the specific programme.

(4) Should all young people be expected to achieve the same outcomes?
Despite the apparent homogeneity of young people currently in alternative provision (a majority of white working class boys), this enrolment pattern may not always be the case. And even with this population, they still have vastly different interests, needs, knowledge and skills, aspirations and contexts. Any homogeneous set of outcomes across this population is likely to miss the mark for many. The issue is how to allow for difference and common entitlement at the same time (Gutherson et al., 2011).

(5) Should all alternative programmes be expected to achieve the same outcomes regardless of duration or offer?
The same argument applies to programmes. With so much variation of time, place and offer, it seems unreasonable to assume that all programmes will achieve the same thing. Nevertheless, they might all operate according to common principles and/or some common processes.

(6) Can alternative education be held solely responsible for outcomes?
How can what happens in alternative education be separated from other factors? How can outcomes be attributed to one educational experience when

\(^8\) Unpublished data from author’s work in progress
students often have multiple ongoing educational experiences and complex life pathways?

All of these issues make the development of a quality framework, regardless of type, very difficult.

**ISSUES ARISING FROM LITERATURES ON THE QUALITY OF ALTERNATIVE PROVISION TAKEN INTO THE RESEARCH**

(1) What outcomes should be expected of alternative programmes? Should these be common to all?
(2) How should they be measured and assessed?
(3) Should there be a quality framework for alternative education?
(4) What kind of quality approach should be used – standards, audit or fit for purpose?
(5) Who should be involved in developing it?
(6) Would a kite-mark approach be useful for the sector and for schools? How would it work?
REFERENCES


Callwood, E. L. (2013). The possible selves of young people who have experienced exclusion from school: Hopes and future aspirations. (Ed D), University of Sheffield, Sheffield.


De Jong, T., & Griffiths, C. (2006). The role of alternative education programs in meeting the needs of adolescent students with challenging


Lown, J. (2007). What works in reintegration following exclusion: supporting the parts only peers can reach. In K. Pomerantz, M. Hughes & D. Thompson (Eds.), How to reach ‘hard to reach’ children: Improving access, participation and outcomes (pp. 97-111). Brighton: John Wiley & Sons Ltd.


Thavarajah, R. (2010). An exploration of the factors supporting sustained reintegration following permanent exclusion or a managed move through the young person's perspective. (PhD), University of Bristol.


