Youth+

Accredited Flexible Education Services | **Research Advocacy Partnership** | **Youth Transitions** | **Non School Initiatives**

EDMUND RICE EDUCATION
AUSTRALIA

Foundation Document

"I see no value in a centre of learning, which churns out numberless school leavers each year and is passively part of a society torn apart by divisions of race and partisan politics…

Our schools exist to challenge popular beliefs and dominant cultural values, to ask the difficult question, to look at life from the standpoint of the minority, the victim, the outcast, and the stranger. *

* Congregational Leader of the Christian Brother, Br Phillip Pinto. New York 2002

Occasional Paper Two

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Rationale

The development of Youth+ portfolio activities and responses arise from inter-related ideological, social, economic and cultural influences, all of which contribute to a unique and socially inclusive educational culture embedded in the Edmund Rice tradition of presence, liberation and compassion.

1.1 Foundations

Edmund Rice, the founder of the Christian Brothers, articulated an ethos for education that was inclusive, just, and relevant to its time. Centred in the Christian tradition, it is based on the model and message of Christ.

The vision of the Brothers is formed and reformed in response to "the sign of the times". Catholic Schools and services in the Edmund Rice tradition promote a personal spirituality, provide a holistic education that attends to the individual needs of young people and develop strong links with their communities. This is underpinned by a strong ethic of care, socially just practices, service to others and compassion. Central to the Edmund Rice ethos is the need to stand in solidarity with those who are powerless or marginalized (*The Charter*).

1.2 Government Policy Setting

Government education policy at national and state level is influenced by global shifts towards economic rationalism. In particular, policies focus on the growth of vocational skills, giving emphasis to literacy and numeracy and promoted learning for the workplace. Young people who do not have employability skills are therefore identified as being "at risk" of not engaging in the nation's productivity. Specifically, Commonwealth and State programs are driven by data sets from national benchmark testing, and the desire for inclusion; particularly for indigenous young people and young people form low SES communities who consistently and significantly score lower on literacy and numeracy benchmark testing than the non-indigenous and wealthy populations of youth.

A key aspect of government policy setting is to support flexible and socially inclusive education services (Special Assistance Schools) and the desirability of partnerships between schools, home and community. Government identifies a range of young people who would be targeted through flexible programs to become engaged with either "learning and/or earning".

1.3 Established Experience

The Christian Brothers and associated staff have had a very long history of moving to the margins and working with young people who are, for a variety of complex reasons, disenfranchised from education. The Brothers have, through their involvement in such services, learned much, both from those that were not sustainable, and from those that have thrived. This knowledge and expertise now informs practice in the maintenance of current services, and in the planning for new initiatives.

The Strategic Plan of Edmund Rice Education Australia allows for the exploration of flexible educational initiatives under the governance and administrative structure of Youth+. With the model of the Edmund Rice Education Australia Flexible Learning Centre Network in Queensland experiencing profound growth over the past ten years it is thought that appropriate expertise and experience can be offered to new and emerging services nationally. Consultation is always offered to inter-agency interest groups and support by way of sharing experiences is considered the norm. Central to growth is the desire to operate in partnership with other providers while recognising that solutions are often whole of community, inter-agency and whole of person focused. Where possible, and appropriate, EREA Youth + will offer support as lead agency in consultation and participation in new and existing services.

1.4 Youth+

Youth+ has four key areas.

1. National Accredited Educational Pathways.
- Flexible Learning Centres (Registered Non State Special Assistance Schools - Catholic Schools)

2. Non School Initiatives
- The Bridge Program
- Life without Barriers
- Young People in Care

3. Youth Training and Transition
- R.T.O.
- Youth Connections

4. Research, Advocacy, Partnerships

The Education Model

For approximately twenty five years EREA Flexible Learning Centres have provided young people disenfranchised from mainstream education, a place to re-engage with a holistic learning experience. The Centres at their heart have an ethos that is inclusive, just, relevant to its time and centred in the social justice framework of the Catholic Church. For many who attend it is the sole connection with community and becomes a place to participate in the acquisition of common global values based on four principles of operation.

2.1 Young People

The Centres offer a socially inclusive educational environment to young people disenfranchised from mainstream education because of complex multiple factors associated with personal, family, social and community alienation. The Centres cater for the following young people:
- Those who have had contact with the juvenile justice system;
- Those in the care of the Department of Child Safety;
- Those with a history of extended periods of unexplained absences;
- Those who are indigenous;
- Those who are highly mobile;
- Those who have had repeated difficulty conforming to the behaviour requirements of mainstream education and training;
- Those with mental illness or at risk of engaging in self harming behaviours or substance abuse;
- Those with chronic illness leading to extended absences;
- Those who have been excluded from school;
- Those who are homeless;
- Those who are young parents;
- Those who have repeatedly suffered from severe negative schooling experiences;
- Those with a generational history of early school leaving;
- Those with a generational history of unemployment; and
- Those searching for a different educational experience.

2.2　Principles of Operation

__Respect, Safe & Legal, Honesty, Participation__

- **Common Ground Philosophy**

At one extreme there is a method of group management that has an ever increasing number of rules. This style of running a group requires that there are enough rules to cover every situation or potential situation. If conflict occurs a rule is imposed or a new rule is invented to deal with the situation. This means of management leads to the creation of an ever increasing number of rules and, in turn creates issues associated with enforcing the new set of rules. At the other extreme of group management is the proposition that there are no rules or boundaries for group functioning. This implies that conflict is generally not anticipated, and therefore, rules are not needed to promote group harmony.

In this light the spectrum of Group Management incorporates two extremes: an authoritarian leadership model driven by rules as against a leadership approach where the group manages itself largely in an unregulated way. Neither of these approaches is fully useful, as neither promotes democracy and equality of participation nor does each meet the demands typically associated with lived experience within groups.　A third alternative therefore, is to determine an approach whereby principles are embedded in the strategic and operational practice of the service.

__Principles__

The establishment of '**common ground'**: an agreed set of operational principles, is paramount for the effective operation of groups, particularly for those where the constituents possess diverse and significant needs.

Youth + has adopted the principles of **RESPECT, SAFE and LEGAL, PARTICIPATION and HONESTY** to guide their group relationships. These principles represent broad directions and as such are useful in that they do not totally define what should happen in any particular situation, but rather establish a common ethical framework which promotes relationships between people.　In this way all members of the group; adults and young people, are asked to relate within the same standards, based on the group's understanding of these principles.

The consequences of operating within a common ground set of principles are that adults and young people are both accountable for their behaviour. Within this approach emphasis is placed on providing opportunities for articulation of issues that arise. Meetings become important as all are shaped and influenced by the same principles.

__Process and Outcomes__

The processes used to uphold the principles require all who attend the program to commit to the belief that freedom, independence and self-reliance/self responsibility can only be realized through individuals owning their behaviour.　Resolution of conflict, negotiation about learning, recognition of rights and responsibilities and acceptance of consequences are modelled and explored both within the group and individually. This process is expected to occur equally for adults and young people. The skills necessary to engage in this process are:

- Active listening (demonstrating you have heard another);
- Open questioning (inviting people to speak - to tell their story);
- Problem solving and decision making (being strategic and conclusive); and
- Negotiation skills (agreeing on consequences).

There are a variety of meeting environments where this process takes place:

- Whole group meetings;
- Sounding board "issues" meetings;
- Pastoral care group meetings;
- Class meetings;

- Individual meetings;
- Informal meetings;
- Staff meetings;
- Community meetings;
- Support group meetings
- Board meetings;
- Restorative Justice meetings.

The development of authentic relationships through the use of meetings is the key to operation by principles. All who participate are asked to take part in the development and maintenance of relationships through this process of continued negotiation and resolution. Staff and young people are challenged to invest time and trust in the process to develop the skills that will ensure they can successfully manage family, school, work and social relationships. Each time members enter into this process skills are further developed and learning is reinforced. Internalisation of this process, itself a powerful learning outcome, empowers young people to confidently negotiate outcomes and accept responsibility for their behaviour and journey in life.

2.3   Flexible Pedagogy

Flexible Learning Centres strive for authenticity in their teaching, learning, and assessment practice. Flexible pedagogy is characterised by approaches which reflect individual young person needs, approaches that give emphasis to a learning community, learning which is critically reflective in confronting cultural and social barriers. Learning which can be used to promote a culture of success and build a vision for a better world.

2.4   Relevant and Responsive Learning Choices

Learning begins with awareness of people's circumstances and an ability to create a learning framework which is relevant and responsive. As well, a responsive learning framework will incorporate the necessary challenge for transformation and development of the person. Learning Choices within a Flexible Learning Centre are constructed. It emerges from openness, negotiation, experimentation and the interaction of mindsets which seek the common good of the young person within a context of individual skills and potential. Learning Choices are designed and implemented not to disadvantage young people but to build upon and pay respect to the capitals young people bring to the learning community. The Learning Choice framework must also be congruent with professional practice and community expectations. Learning Choices encompass literacy and numeracy skills, rich humanity key learning areas, vocational and employment focused outcomes, sport and recreation activities, relationship development and community participation. Therefore an appropriate skill base to enable the individual to take part meaningfully with social and employment situations will be fostered. This model correlates with the Australian Core Skills Framework where content covers key learning areas and is credentialed against National VET standards and State/Territory based accreditations.

Best Practice Guidelines

Youth + identifies a number of best practice guidelines supportive of meaningful socially inclusive educational experiences. While not exhaustive, the following provide a basis for continuing and new initiatives.

3.1 Individualised Education Program

Education programs need to be attuned to the individual young person by an assessment of need and delivery within a supportive environment that will re-engage the young person with learning and encourage a sense of community.

3.2 Negotiated and Articulated Goals

Education programs will negotiate goals and the methods of achieving those goals. Such goals will be tailored to the identified needs of the individual.

3.3 Professional and Community Driven

Education programs should be characterised by a high degree of professionalism, and supported by a close relationship with communities in which they are located.

3.4 Young Person Support

Young People are encouraged to make a commitment to the program and its principles. Young Person achievement is valued and celebrated with appropriate recognition given to the uniqueness of adolescent development.

3.5 Family/Carer Involvement

Families are viewed as partners in their children's educational experience. While family circumstances may be related to student alienation, the importance of building positive family relationships is a priority.

3.6 Learning Choices

Diagnostic assessment is important to provide guidance in planning individualised programs. Effective programs will engage young people in learning toward defined literacy and numeracy outcomes and other areas of knowledge relevant to real life situations. Young people experiencing risk will be provided with programs that cater for their spiritual, physical, social, psychological and intellectual development. As well, they will be provided with learning choices both in and beyond the school and with programs that are effectively linked to community agencies and vocational pathways.

3.7 Multi Professional and Multi Disciplinary Teams

Team members use a multidisciplinary, multi -professional approach to provide health, educational, social and emotional support for young people. Multi professionals are encouraged to develop supportive relationships with young people, and assist them with their basic life needs. Multi-professionals are encouraged to develop links with external support agencies (e.g. Child and Youth Mental Health Services, Drug & Alcohol services, accommodation services, counselling services). Staff selection processes should identify staff members who are flexible, are able to relate to young people, are willing to negotiate, be clear about operation by principles, as well as being clear about the responsibilities and the rights of all.

Sustainable Futures

The success of Youth + portfolio services in providing quality educational experiences is not only dependent upon internal (best practice) activities but is also influenced by wider levels of engagement, particularly at a community level. These more externalised practices involve three inter-related activities. Within a context of education undergoing continuous change, the implementation of these three parameters are central to a sustainable future for flexible learning centres.

4.1 Community Needs Assessment

The establishment of environmental ethnographic scans, together with utilisation of substantial research to determine needs is an early step in service provision. Central to the prediction of need is the determination of two data sets: young person profiling and extent of service provision.

1. Young person needs profiling incorporates general population information (e.g. age, gender, population, disengagement and location), learning needs (e.g. literacy, numeracy) relationship development, vocational experiences and social and psychological profiling (abilities, social and cultural circumstances, levels of motivation, health and welfare factors.)

2. The second inquiry in relation to an assessment of community needs is the determination of current service provision and the particular relationship this has with the needs identified. Not only is it important to identify particular agencies that support disenfranchised young people, but it is valuable to assess the extent of cooperative effort that can be brought to bear in terms of meeting identified needs.

4.2 Multi Agency – Multi Disciplinary Interventions

Responding to identified needs which are complex and long standing, require networks and support from a cross-section of agencies. Professional partnerships based on an understanding of responsibilities together with recognition of multiple skills will underpin this multi agency, multi disciplinary approach.

4.3 Sustainable Planning

This will entail a detailed set of tasks and associated responsibilities inclusive of: service establishment, service nature, location of delivery, resourcing, legal and industrial coverage, centre operation and organisational structure, evaluative and renewal practices, human resource requirements and professional development, financing, administrative and governance relationships. The results of planning activity will be reflected in Youth+ reports which will require review and endorsement from EREA and appropriate multi-agency personnel and structures.