

YOUNG OFFENDERS PILOT PROGRAM: EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS PROGRAM

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EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING AND JUVENILE OFFENDING

Over the years, a mounting body of evidence has demonstrated that early school leaving is a significant concern in relation to juvenile offending. In the evaluation report of the Victorian Early School Leavers Program (ESL) (Stevens, 2001), the literature review discusses issues associated with early school leaving. In particular, early school leaving is related to the propensity to engage in anti-social behaviour (Bond et al., 2000 cited in Stevens, 2001; *House of Representatives Report*, 1996; Withers & Russell, 1998). A recent UK report found that almost two thirds of young people permanently excluded from school were involved in crime (Berridge, Brodie, Pitts, Porteous & Tarling, 2001). The difficulty faced by young people in relation to breaking away from this scenario is well recognised.

RATIONALE FOR THE EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS (ESL) PROGRAM

The target group for the Early School Leavers Program is young people with a history of sporadic school attendance or who have ceased attending school altogether. Development of the program was based on identification of service gaps and the lack of resources and support available to young people in this situation.

The program works with young people in the juvenile justice system, who experience an array of issues other than their lack of involvement in the education system. Many live in family environments with high levels of social and economic disadvantage. Others have experienced traumatic events, including all forms of abuse. In addition, these young people often demonstrate negative responses as a result of these issues, such as alcohol and drug abuse, homelessness and mental/emotional health concerns. Experience has shown that if issues, such as high-level drug use and severe mental illness, appear to be overwhelming in the young person's life, they may need to be addressed before focusing on reconnecting with school. In these cases, the 'door is left open' for referral or re-referral once the issue is not so pressing because otherwise, it can be setting the young person up to fail.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Early School Leavers Program (ESL) is run by the Salvation Army Crossroads and works with young people between the ages of 12-15 years who are subject to supervised court orders. Originally known as the Young Offender Pilot Program (YOPP), it was funded from 1999 to 2001 by the Commonwealth Government. The ESL program has since been funded at a State level by Crime Prevention Victoria. This is for a further period of one year under *Safer Streets and Homes: A Crime and Violence Prevention Strategy for Victoria 2002-2005*.

The program's performance target is relatively small: a minimum of twenty in a 12-month period, with five to six clients at any one time. On average, the program's intervention in the young person's life usually extends from 3-6 months. Given the high proportion of juvenile justice clients that fit the criteria for this program, demand exceeds supply. The financial cost of running the program is quite modest, under \$100,000 a year (ARTD, 2001).

The ESL Program is a single-worker program that is funded to cover the Northern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne. All referrals to the program are made through case managers at the Northern Metropolitan Juvenile Justice Unit (NMJJU). Referrals generally include those with higher barriers to school engagement, for example, behavioural problems or those seriously disenfranchised from the education system. A constructive and supportive relationship has developed between the NMJJU and the ESL Program.

PROGRAM OPERATION

The ESL Program operates on an assertive outreach model. The number of contact hours can initially be very high, over 10 hours per week, and contact is often on a daily basis. The level of contact gradually tapers off as routines become established, and young people settle and take more responsibility for getting themselves to school. It is important to note that tasks of the program worker can involve formal focusing on school-readiness, as well as informal enhancing of social skills and coping mechanisms.

Support offered is provided in a flexible manner tailored to the individual needs of the young person. The aim is to assist young offenders in gaining access to education and training, and supporting them to maintain their choice. This generally involves:

- advocating for the young person's re-entry into a school
- assisting with the development of life skills that support participation in school or an educational setting
- classroom support
- provision of material aid and where appropriate, provision of generalist family support.

As summarised by Stevens (2001), the role of the program worker in reconnecting young people to school includes:

- discovering the young person's interests and aspirations
- identifying the appropriate school setting, be it mainstream or alternative
- enrolling clients at school, in consultation with the Department of Education and Training
- negotiating enrolment, which often involves official contracts and factors like number of days attended, length of days, level of class room support provided by the ESL program, behavioural expectations of the young person and consequences if the contract is not kept
- on occasions, wake-up calls to get young people out of bed as in some households, parents do not or are not capable of doing this
- the worker may pick up the young person and drive them to and from school until a routine is established
- attending school as classroom support/tutor because often young people do not 'act out' if someone is helping them with their work
- assistance with homework
- supporting young people without parental involvement by attending parent/teacher nights, sports days, and school concerts
- encouraging and supporting parental involvement with the school
- following up behavioural problems reported by the school
- providing or negotiating some financial support where necessary to cover educational cost, which may include money for lunch, outings, book, uniform, etc.
- assisting young people with distance education, such as, providing an appropriate place for studying and tutoring.

The ESL Program has an advisory group to support ongoing direction and monitoring. This group consists of representatives from a range of government departments and non-government personnel. Under the new funding arrangements, Crime Prevention Victoria, from the Department of Justice, will be involved in the advisory group. Current representatives are from:

- the Northern Metropolitan Juvenile Justice Unit (chair)
- the Victorian Department of Education and Training
- the Salvation Army, and
- Juvenile Justice Section, Department of Human Services.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Consistent with the Victorian Government's commitment to better coordination of services for young people, the Early School Leavers Program has demonstrated the capacity to work effectively across government departments and funding bodies:

The objectives, approach and achievement of the Early School Leavers Program are consistent with the aims and objectives of government strategies and initiatives in the areas of education, juvenile justice, crime prevention, community care and community building ... The policy context shows a clear recognition by the Government of the need to effectively support young people through transition points on their pathway to adulthood. Pathways to future offending are increasingly understood and programs are offering young people, particularly those at high risk, individual support to reconnect with the community in a positive way (Stevens, 2001, p.39).

The significant achievements of the program in multiple aspects of these young peoples' lives has been recognised in program evaluations: both the recently released Evaluation of the Young Offenders Pilot Programme Final Report (ARTD, 2001) and an evaluation prepared for the Salvation Army Crossroads ESL Program (Stevens, 2001). It is acknowledged that these young people are often the most challenging juvenile justice clients, with known learning difficulties, drug misuse, mental health problems and/or difficult or unstable home environments. Demonstrated achievements of the ESL Program are in the following areas:

Community Development

- Participation in local and regional youth networks
- Ongoing visits to services and agencies accessed by clients of the program
- Involvement with local youth groups, sports clubs and recreational programs
- Inclusion of family members and significant adults to support the young person
- Establishment of an advisory group.

Coordinated, Intensive Support

- Participation in Juvenile Justice case planning meetings
- Supporting young people with their statutory involvement with the Juvenile Justice system
- Supported referral process when linking to other agencies and services
- Close liaison with the young person's juvenile justice case manager and other supports.

Education, Training and Employment Placement

- Department of Education and Training representative on advisory group
- Advocacy for client re-entry in both mainstream and alternative education
- Provision of support directly to school during client re-engagement
- Provision of material aid where required
- Liaison with Job Placement Education and Training program (JPET) and local training and employment providers.

Proportion of Clients Participating in Education and Training

The ARTD Evaluation of the ESL Program highlighted the success of the program in placing young people in education and training. Based on client numbers from January 1999 to March 2001, a

total of 54 clients, participation rates increased by 2.5 to 3 times. Those who did not participate either chose not to continue with the program or were in detention. Client outcomes are:

EDUCATION On entry - 24 percent participation
 On exit - 63 percent participation

TRAINING On entry - 2 per cent participation
 On exit - 6 per cent participation.

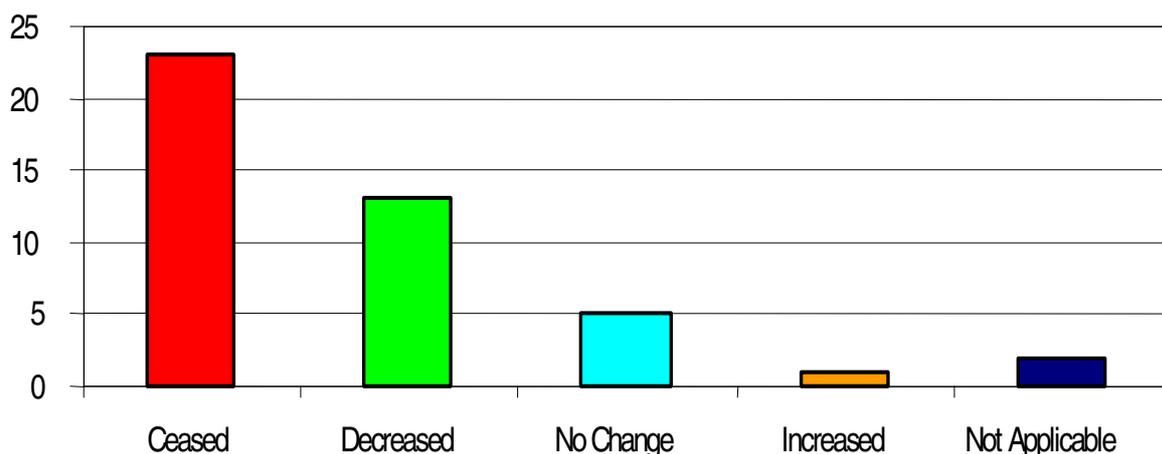
Reducing Reoffending

In addition to the ESL Program's remarkable success in re-engaging young people in school or alternative education, the reduction - and in some cases, cessation - of offending behaviour has prevented a number of young people from becoming further entrenched in the juvenile justice system, including detention. Figure 1 shows the change in offending behaviour over a 21-month period for 44 clients.

The ARTD Final Evaluation (2001) notes that while participating in the program, most clients either were in the process of completing their court order (63 percent) or had completed them (20 percent). In contrast, only 3 percent had their orders breached for non-compliance with reporting or special conditions, and 13 percent for re-offending.

Local Magistrates have a high regard for the ESL Program and ESL Program involvement is a significant consideration when young people appear in court. This makes the program an effective strategy in terms of diversion for crime prevention. This element of the program was recognised when the ESL Program was awarded a Victorian Community Safety and Crime Prevention Award in December 2001 in the 'Programs that Focus on Young People, Children and Student' category.

Figure 1: Change in Offending Behaviour



(Stevens, 2001, p.31)

Note: This figure indicates numbers of young people. Statistics are based on numbers from January 1999 to September 2001, a total of 44 cases.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS OF THE ESL PROGRAM

The ESL Program works with young people to build resilience by reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors at the individual, family and school and community level. This holistic approach increases the likelihood of successfully supporting a young person back into education as the effects of intervention at different levels interact and accumulate to increase the young person's capacity to make positive changes (Stevens, 2001, p.33).

In the evaluation report prepared for the Salvation Army Crossroads, the literature review indicates that previous research identified the importance of staff attributes in achieving successful outcomes (Brooks et al., 1997; James et al., 2001; Batten & Russell 1995, cited in Stevens, 2001). Young people, management, schools and juvenile justice staff have identified staff skills, commitment and personal attributes as an essential element of the program's success to date. According to Stevens (2001), these attributes include:

- the capacity to relate easily with young people and their families, as well as effective professional interaction with schools, counsellors, Child Protection and Juvenile Justice
- the capacity to develop trusting relationships with young people
- caring, non-judgement and respectful attitudes to young people
- belief in the young person's potential.

Other attributes that contribute to the ESL Program's effectiveness are:

- the ability to work in collaboration with family and significant others
- flexibility and not based on appointments
- responsiveness
- youth-friendly
- individualised care plans
- the program operates within the young person's context and environment
- the program is strength-based and solution-focused
- the program is non-statutory, that is, external to the Department of Human Services, and participation is voluntary.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In Victoria, there are few alternative programs that specifically target the client group supported by the ESL Program. Other programs that may offer some support to the broader ESL Program target group, such as JPET or generalist support programs, do not appear to have the capacity, resources nor the mandate to respond to the specific needs of the young people aged between 12 and 15 years involved in the juvenile justice system in a manner the ESL program currently does. In essence, this element of the program distinguishes it from other YOPP pilots and the broader service community, making it a unique response for a high risk group of educationally disadvantaged young offenders.

The program approach has the potential to benefit a broader group of young people by offering early intervention if the potential referral sources were expanded, and the geographical coverage widened. Additionally, there is potential to explore linking the program with other schemes following exit from the program.

CONCLUSION

The ESL Program has developed a model that has been effective in reconnecting young offenders with school in accordance with aims and objectives of government strategies and initiatives. The

approach of the ESL Program demonstrates good practice in working with young people, some of whom are arguably the most 'at risk' young people in the system. The program's preventative approach of working with young, sometimes first, offenders to reduce risk factors and build resilience was recognised in 2001 by a *Victorian Community Safety and Crime Prevention Award*.

The ESL Program not only relies heavily on the ongoing commitment of the current provider, the Salvation Army Crossroads, but also commitment from the Department of Education and Training, teachers, Juvenile Justice, clients' families, and the clients themselves, to maintain these highly successful outcomes. Funding by Crime Prevention Victoria acknowledges a commitment to maintaining the ESL Program in terms of a strategic response to crime prevention.

In its current form, the ESL Program in the Northern Metropolitan Region will continue. Under *Safer Streets and Homes: A Crime and Violence Prevention Strategy for Victoria 2002-2005*, it is proposed that the model will be replicated in the Southern and Western Metropolitan Regions of Melbourne to examine its transferability across regions and settings.

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