Helping Alienated Students

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St Augustine's Special School¹, Geelong, is a special school for adolescents with severe behaviour disorders. It has a maximum enrolment of 12 students, boys and girls. There is a total staff of five, two general area teachers, one physical education and outdoor education teacher, one vocational preparation teacher and the Principal.

The school is housed in a converted house on the site occupied by the Administrative Headquarters of St Augustine's Adolescent and Family Services, Barwon. It is intentionally different in appearance and operation from the students' previous experience of schooling.

The Students

The students are referred to the school from the Ministry of Education, Community Services Victoria, local paediatricians, or other welfare agencies. The students have long histories of an inability to handle conventional schooling. Their behaviour patterns range from the violent aggressive adolescent to the neurotically withdrawn one.

The average student has most or all of the following qualities:

- male;
- single parent family, below the poverty line;
- long history of school suspension, expulsion, disruption and truanting;
- verbal IQ about 80, performance IQ about 100;
- 3-4 years behind in language skills;
- 4-5 years behind in maths skills;
- very low self-esteem as measured on Coopersmith Self-Esteem inventory;
- sees education as worthless;
- wants to get a job, while not demonstrating any job retention skills;

¹ It is important to note that the 'special' nature of the school is related to 'behaviour'. The school does not cater for the adolescent with mild mental impairment, the psychotic adolescent, or the physically disabled adolescent. However some of these conditions are present in the school as the condition has been uncovered during the school's assessment.
• will leave school at, or before, 15 years devoid of any employment skills;
• at high risk of being a 'feral adolescent'.

What has alienated them?

Life experiences, family and school issues have affected them.

School issues: inadequate assessment; irrelevant curriculum; alienating school structures; and staff attitudes.

How do we help alienated Students?

Through people: the school staff are our most valuable resource. Other factors are: different education structures; due process; thorough assessment; and curriculum.

School Mission Statement

The school seeks to educate those adolescents who are unable to participate in regular schooling due to major behavioural problems. It addresses the needs of the whole person.

Goals of the School

The goals of the school are: to have the child physically present; to develop a peaceful and enjoyable educational environment; to develop an individualised educational environment for the child; and to implement, monitor and evaluate the program.

Programs of the School (in order of priority)

• Behaviour Management
• Therapeutic Interventions
• Program Enjoyment
• Self-Esteem Development
• Academic Maintenance
• Preparation for Transition

Problems

One problem is the gap after school, and before work. These students cannot cope with local unemployment programs. They cannot manage the social demands. Something else is needed. The school needs to undertake again the socialisation task of years 1 and 2 of life, perhaps through a long-term low stimulus wilderness program.

We agree with the research by Safer 1982 (USA), Topping 1983 (UK), and Slee 1988 (Australia), that while our school copes and maintains many young people in an educational environment, we do not provide a long-term educational environment.
The Future

The school must develop a post-school pre-vocational program and possibly a long-term wilderness program.

References