

Flexible Learning Centres as they could apply to a New Zealand Context.

To visit flexible learning centres in Australia looking for areas of
innovation that will lead to alternative approaches to teaching and
learning for disengaged students.

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Acknowledgements

Youth Guarantees New Zealand
Edmund Rice Education Australia- Melbourne
Flexi Learning Centre (Salesians) - Learn to Live Project Cape Town
St Joseph's Flexible Learning Centre North Melbourne
St Joseph's Flexible Learning Centre Alice Springs
St Kevin's College [2 campuses]- Toorak, Melbourne
Christian Brothers College [2 campuses] - St Kilda, Melbourne
St Dominic's College - Penrith, Sydney
Savio Flexible Learning Centre- Penrith, Sydney
Scotch Oakburn College [3 campuses]- Launceston, Tasmania
Heretaunga College - Upper Hutt, Wellington
Otaki College- Otaki, Wellington
St Kevin's College - Oamaru

(d) executive summary

I visited a number of traditional schools [NZ, Australia and South Africa] and then a number of flexible learning centres [FLCs] across Australia and South Africa. I was exposed to the full range of delivery systems and developed a firm idea as to the potential models that may work in NZ and systems that maybe of use to NZ educators to support flexible learning option for students in today's education environment.

(e) purpose

Three years ago while at a Deputy Principal's Conference run by EREA (Edmund Rice Education Australia) I had the opportunity to visit Albert Park Flexible Learning Centre in Brisbane, Australia . This opened up an interest in my own learning regarding non-traditional options for students that still allowed them to engage with schooling and look towards achieving goals for a pathway that led them to a chosen career. I became keen to explore possibilities that would work in our school's setting and support the current concept of Youth Guarantees. Hopefully I could add to it in a wider context and consider how we can develop learning in a 21st century environment through the development of a more flexible curriculum that supports our students to leave school with skills so that they can continue to develop as lifelong learners contributing to society. I was also excited by the possibility of ownership of the learning pathway that was co-designed by the learner with educators rather than the learning be built around a set pathway already designed and mapped out.

(f) background and rationale

In the July 2013 National ERO Report - Secondary Schools: Pathways for future education, training and employment *there is a call for innovation from secondary schools in their response to creating individual pathways for each of their students with particular reference to adapting programmes to meet the aspirations, strengths, culture and needs of the students. (Page 1)*

In 2013 and 2014 St Kevin's College embraced the Vocational Pathways Programme as per Youth Guarantees. The school has strong links with Aoraki Polytechnic and the local business community. In 2014 the Senior Management following extensive planning realigned a permanent teaching staff member to hold responsibility as the Dean of Vocational Guidance and a support staff member as a Vocational Coordinator to recognise the importance of providing a broader and more flexible curriculum with the construction of bespoke courses around students with diverse learning needs and students who have predetermined career aspirations. This work has continued throughout 2015.

In the past four years the school's Pasifika student population has grown requiring the school to establish stronger links so that we can better serve this community's expectations for their school leavers and levels of achievement. While the wider Pasifika community is values based with a substantial leaning towards gaining academic qualifications it is noted that there is a strong preference for local employment which may not always suit the learner and the school would like to look for innovative solutions.

The school has a strong restorative practice programme PB4L and culture enabling students to stay in the school system. Pastoral issues are now combined with Professional Learning Groups across the school and discussed alongside curriculum and achievement. The school elected to join the local Learning and Change Network and all schools are working on student engagement through student agency.

Oamaru is a provincial town similar to other areas of New Zealand with few options for students who choose not to take the pathway to University. While there is an outreach programme through Aoraki Polytechnic the courses can be restricted in choices. Some students due to community and family/whanau perceptions of what an acceptable work future is, will chose to go to local employment e.g. meat works, farm work, local roading company or retail. This does not always meet the students' expectations and therefore can contribute with local youth disaffection and unemployment. Education doesn't finish with school. Also increasingly we are faced with students who simply do not want to come and engage with traditional schooling. There is a small but intensive group of disengaged youth

who refuse for a variety of reasons to attend school. This is what keyed my interest in flexible learning. While Oamaru may only have a small group who have faced upheavals such as relocation with the Christchurch earthquake there are much larger groups of disengaged groups to be found in other centers. My work and observations over the course of my sabbatical could help inform thinking and planning in these areas.

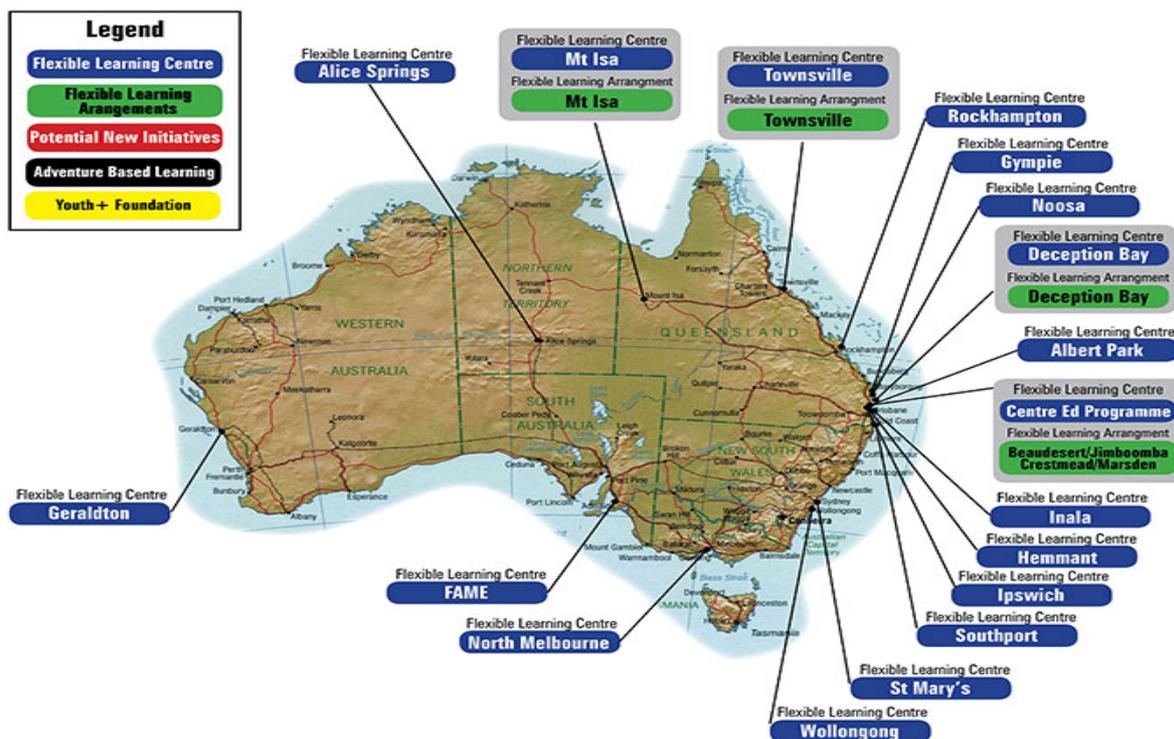
My school seeks to strengthen and implement innovative practice so as to support the learning pathways and success levels of priority learners, particularly of Maori, Pasifika and students from low socio-economic groups. We seek to work more with local business and support networks to see the innovative practice that can support transition points for students and develop them as contributing citizens to community and society.

The FLCs promote 21st century learning opportunities which supports our current 2014-16 Charter which aims to use inquiry methods to review current curriculum plans and align it towards the development of a curriculum with a vision for 21st century education that is flexible and responsive to the needs of the learner. The learner will be supported by the school and the community. So with that in mind it is time for schools to move out of their confines and start to wrap themselves around students. Even those students who can't for whatever reason engage with school.

Flexible Learning Centres:

Currently the Edmund Rice Network of schools in Australia has been commissioned by the Australian national government to enfranchise young people through inclusive learning communities. By establishing and developing this model it is hoped that these centres can be developed across the country therein meeting the needs of each community.

St Kevin's College is a full Edmund Rice School, one of two in New Zealand, there are two other affiliates. St Kevin's is a partner school to the Australian Network, I therefore had ready and strong access to these schools (approximately 65 across Australia).



Youth Plus is the arm of Edmund Rice Education Australia EREA that runs the FLCs.

Youth Plus seeks to respond to the needs of young people disenfranchised and disengaged from education. They provide a place and an opportunity to re-engage in a suitable, flexible learning environment.

Youth Plus seeks to build honest and authentic relationships with young people, their families and communities, supporting and celebrating the uniqueness and dignity of each person.

Youth Plus is guided by the vision of Edmund Rice about the empowering service of education, to achieve personal and community liberation through educational experiences that enable transformation.

ref: <http://www.youthplus.edu.au/about-us/foundation-statement.html>

(g) methodology

Each Flexible learning Centre was different but it did have underlying principles upon which its local flavour was laid.

The four common ground principles utilised are:

RESPECT,
PARTICIPATION
SAFE and LEGAL,
and HONESTY

I choose my visits carefully and in consultation with the Head Office EREA. I wanted to see flexible learning in operation and to interface with students and staff. I needed to stay for extended periods in the communities so I could assess the individual needs of each community. The very nature of these institutions and the type of disengaged youth who come to the FLC made my time challenging eg North Melbourne for example deals with 70-80% of its youth coming out of the Youth Justice system, while Alice Springs is primarily disengaged indigenous youth. I had to quickly build some trust to understand and gain some perception of what was going on within the centres for some of the students.

(h) findings

Over the course of my investigations I visited the full range of FLCs - North Melbourne with approximately 370 learners enrolled to Savio attached to St Dominic's College Penrith only having 15 students. Some deal with a full range of ages from approximately 13 through to the early 20s. Others such as Savio FLC aimed at early intervention and was only dealing with boys who had approximate ages around 12.

It can be a very confronting experience for an educator coming from a standard decile 7 relatively conservative school in New Zealand to a FLC campus. Rules around language smoking and dress codes step far away from 'normal' however, the name as I was constantly reminded is 'flexible'. The centre wraps around the student not the other way. It is common for the centres to pick up students from home, to feed them breakfast and lunch. Some send food home with the learner. The learners attend the centre because they want to be there, not because they are made to be there. The four principles above are understood by the students and constantly referred to by staff in the centres. Learners are often referred to the FLCs by word of mouth, brought to the centre by existing learners or referred by organisations working with the disengaged youth in the local communities. What was very clear is that the success of FLCs is based squarely in the establishment of and maintenance of relationships; for learner and support organisations.

(i) implications

It was instructional for me to visit such a range of FLCs and while a number are completely stand alone schools that have a Director of Campus and all the attendant structures needed to run an autonomous school I was taken by the ease and utility of the annex centres such as Savio in Penrith. They exist on a separate site or area but gain from the larger school's presence for facilities and support. A Deputy Principal from the larger school works alongside the staff of the FLC and assists with planning and strategic view.

It is this model I see as working effectively in NZ. We already have an alternate education system but this is used as a means of removing a student from the mainstream system. FLCs on the other hand function to re engage a student back into education, continuing to build the value around education and to help them start taking responsibility for their own learning.

They are staffed by dedicated teachers, social workers and youth workers. The ratio I generally observed was 1 member of staff to approximately 7 students. Considering the amount of 'wrap around' needed for these learners this ratio seemed reasonable. The staff spent a large amount of their time connecting outside the school through family, social services and legal institutions. Police presence on site was common but relationships were strong and benefited all parties. FLCs would often advocate for the learner and it was a place of safety eg students choosing to sleep in the FLC over the weekend. The emotional involvement of staff with these learners clearly takes its toll. The staff generally met twice a day: goal setting and clarification first thing and reflection and progress reported back to the team in the afternoon. All needed time to write and catalogue the day as most administration could not be done while learners were in the centre.

(j) benefits

A flexible model of learning that discovers the strengths and attributes of learners and guides them towards meaningful integration into the workforce or offers transition back into a schooling system that can provide for diverse circumstances and learning needs.

Family and whanau engagement and/or support outside of the FLC model is important for ongoing success of integration. Some learners come to the centres later and will stay at them for extended periods as their main educational platform eg Alice Springs. While other transit relatively quickly through eg Savio about a year. The staff working within these centres are aware of the direct engagement necessary. There are many support groups and agencies who could help and contribute to the success of this venture in a NZ context. I feel we are well down the path that would enable integration of this model into New Zealand.

(k) conclusions

NZ needs to explore the possibilities of this model that I have observed. It fits well with the NZ national curriculum in that we already have a very flexible senior assessment qualification NCEA and we are well placed with BOT that control schools directly and so can respond quickly and appropriately to community need. Our curriculum is based upon values and principles. State integrated schools would be obvious hub schools for annex FLCs because of their well established holistic approach to education.

NZ is well ahead in terms of our growing understanding of pedagogical approaches and links back to meaningful education that should see us develop this model to suit our own needs.

The strongest pedagogical approach I saw existed in the Savio Education Centre that applied curriculum objectives, strong values and principles e.g. attitudes to learning and based on a challenge inspired programme that sought to include the Arts and PE/EOTC into all aspects of the day. This was well articulated to students and highly visible. Dealing with older or very disengaged students in the other centres and making objectives clear required more work but use of modern communication devices and apps could assist greatly eg an app specially designed for FLCs would have great appeal.

A special kind of educator is needed who is both accepting and flexible but with a high level of professional understanding to support expected growth of students and wrap around process that either provides a pathway back to the larger school based environment or ease into the workforce. Both need to apply high expectations and support that meets the needs of the learners as they transition.

We have access to an active flexible learning network just across the Tasman sea as a good example.

(l) references.

<http://www.youthplus.edu.au/>

<http://youthguarantee.net.nz/vocational-pathways/>

<http://www.ero.govt.nz/National-Reports/Secondary-Tertiary-Programmes-Trades-Academies-What-works-and-next-steps-June-2015>

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