

THE CHOICES PROGRAM: AN EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR 'AT-RISK' STUDENTS AS THEY ENTER HIGH SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT. This article examines the Choices program, an innovation supported by the Ministry of Education and implemented in 2001 at Colenso High School in Napier, New Zealand. The project consisted of three learning strategies: adventure-based learning, mentoring and academic skills development. The project was run with two cohorts of 10 high school new entrants who were considered to be at risk of failing or leaving school. Those who developed and ran the program felt that although it was a worthy venture, considerable development is required to provide an effective second opportunity for a group of students who have had the poorest educational experiences the system has to offer.

LE PROGRAMME CHOIX : UN MOYEN D'ENSEIGNEMENT ADAPTÉ AUX ÉLÈVES EN DIFFICULTÉ AU DÉBUT DU SECONDAIRE

RÉSUMÉ. Cet article traite du programme Choix, initiative novatrice appuyée par le ministère de l'Éducation et mise en oeuvre en 2001 à l'école secondaire Colenso, à Napier, en Nouvelle-Zélande. Ce projet se fonde sur trois stratégies d'enseignement : l'apprentissage axé sur l'aventure, le mentorat et le développement des aptitudes aux études. Il a été exécuté avec deux cohortes de dix élèves qui entraient à l'école secondaire et que l'on jugeait susceptibles d'échouer ou de décrocher. Les responsables de l'élaboration et de la mise en oeuvre de ce programme estiment que l'entreprise en a valu la peine, mais qu'il reste beaucoup de travail à faire pour offrir une véritable deuxième chance aux étudiants qui ont le plus souffert des lacunes du système éducatif.

INTRODUCTION

Setting the context

A recent comparative international study of students' academic achievement (OECD, 2001) places New Zealand near the top of the tree in a measure of 32 of the world's most developed countries. New Zealand is third in reading and mathematics, and sixth in science. This is an excellent result

and needs to be acknowledged. What is also true, however, is that whereas in previous comparisons the overall spread of results was relatively small, now there is a much wider range. This means that not only do our highest scorers, say the top 5%, outperform their international competitors; but also that those down the bottom of this spread, say a similar 5%, perform very badly. If this is consistent with our other educational statistics, a large contingent of this bottom group is likely to be made up of Maori and Pacific Islands students.

This negative statistic should be of major concern to New Zealand educators. In many school settings, there are students who are getting very little out of their educational opportunities. They are failing badly, and are educationally and socially disaffected and disengaged. They could be described as neglected, marginalised, left behind, 'at risk' or as having 'bad attitudes'. These students' educational experiences, rather than being rewarding and enjoyable, have become increasingly difficult, embarrassing and negative. As they fail to deal effectively with their lack of success, they respond in an accelerating aggressive and anti-social fashion that is distressing for everyone around them. When they are increasingly absent from school, it is to everyone's relief rather than concern. So does this apparent condition exist in all schools or is it more apparent in some than in others?

In recent years in New Zealand, the Education Review Office¹ (ERO) has produced a number of reports that have been critical of poor performance by schools in the Far North, the East Cape and in the South Auckland suburbs of Mangere and Otara (ERO, 1996, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1999). The ERO's criticisms are leveled at low decile schools with large indigenous Maori and immigrant minority Pacific Island and Asian populations. *Improving Schooling in Mangere and Otara* (1996) states that of the 45 schools located in these suburbs:

- 42% are performing very poorly or under-performing;
- 27% are in the highest category of risk of non-performance – that is, they have been subject to at least one follow-up Office review;
- 5% are under-performing, although the level of risk has not been considered sufficient to justify a follow-up review. (p. 3)

The report goes on to argue that although there are a number of clear reasons linked to disadvantage that account for school failure (low incomes, high rates of unemployment, crowded housing and poor child health), a significant proportion of the schools still manage a degree of success:

It is commonly asserted that there is a strong link between school failure and the degree of disadvantage in a socio-economic setting. There are, however, some 20% of the schools in these two districts that provide an effective education for their students. Their boards, principals and teach-

ers have, with various degrees of success, met the challenges of their students' backgrounds and concentrated on teaching and learning to the benefit of their students. (p. 4)

I would maintain that this is a superficial reading of the situation. Even if some schools manage, against the odds, to obtain some degree of success for their students, it does not follow that therefore all is well. More than likely it is the case that their heads are above water while they look around a vast ocean of difficulties for some dry land, as compared to the others whose heads are still submerged. The ERO, however, with its school effectiveness stance,² adopts a deficit response in casting the acceptable 20% as 'successes' and the rest as failures:

[We are concerned about] the poor performance of one or more of the board of trustees, the principal or teaching staff and the effect of this poor performance on the education of their students, ... [and] based on an analysis of why such a high level of poor performance exists, the report recommends ways in which board, management and teaching performance could be improved. (p. 4)

While those schools that have had a degree of success need to be acknowledged and applauded, there are a number of challenges that can be made to the assumptions underlying both the successful schools literature generally and the stance of ERO in its rather glib estimations of poor performance.

As a response to these ERO reports, the Ministry of Education has developed several initiatives aimed at improving school performance. The response in Mangere and Otara is entitled Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara (SEMO). Several reports have been produced about the implementation and subsequent evaluation of this project (Timperley, Robinson & Bullard, 1999; and Robinson, Timperley & Bullard, 2000), whose main intention seems to be the development of a strong school/community relationship in order to create foundations for educational support and, as a consequence, the improvement of educational outcomes.³

Colenso High School

In many ways, Napier's Colenso High School has a similar profile to the schools just referred to except that, in the context of the ERO critique, it would be seen as an effective school. Colenso is a decile three school with a 30% Maori, 4% Asian, 3% Pacific Island and 63% Pakeha (European New Zealander) population. Academically, the school has achieved some success, having averaged five University Scholarships from three candidates each year for the last decade and excelling in several areas of sport. Although Colenso does very well in its academic performance, it is still a school in a low-SES multiethnic community and, with each new intake, schools like Colenso are often the second (or third) choice of local parents;

in its attraction of 'the best' students, it is a long way behind its higher decile competitor schools.

As government funding is directly related to the number of pupils (equivalent full-time students, or EFTS) the school attracts, it is constantly fighting to keep its head above water. This also means that students who are rejected by other schools often end up at schools like Colenso. The school then has a much larger proportion of students who have experienced failure, are disruptive, and are at risk of failure and of dropping out of school. It is also the case, however, that teachers working under such demanding conditions have often made a conscious decision to be there because they feel it is important to try to make a difference.

Colenso High School's philosophy can be characterised by the Ngati Kahungunu whakatauki that it has adopted:⁴

Ehara taku toa e te toa takitahi engari e te toa takitini.

This can be translated as: 'My strength is not mine alone, it is the strength from those around me'. Cooperation is a cornerstone of Maori culture and it is embodied in the concept of whanaungatanga (extended-family support). It is also indicative of how Colenso works, and its fundamental encouragement of a cooperative and supportive school environment that aims to develop and nurture full and balanced human beings.⁵

During the 2001 school year and as a response to concern about the underperformance of a significant number of its pupils, Colenso High School introduced the Choices program.⁶ This is a creative approach to education designed to meet the needs of third form (year 9) students at risk of failure and of dropping out of school. Although most students at whom the program is aimed have experienced failure and disaffection in large doses, for a short period during their transition to high school, they are often open and hopeful. The Choices program is designed to take advantage of this educational 'window of opportunity'. The idea behind the title, 'Choices', was that at the end of the program, students would have some unaccustomed opportunities to make good choices for themselves.

THE PROGRAM

The Choices team

The Choices team was made up of: Marilyn Wright (Guidance Counsellor), internal coordinator and co-director of the mentoring strand; Phil Kay (Deputy Principal), director of the adventure-based learning component; Dallas Pahiri (Social Studies and Maori) and Gerry Bidwell (Special Education Needs Coordinator), directors of the academic skills development program; and Keith Sullivan, external coordinator, internal evaluator and

The Choices Program

co-director of the mentoring strand. Mark Cleary, Principal, was advisor and overall manager. The school's teacher aides team and a group of 7th form (year 13) students who acted as peer mentors assisted.

The aims and objectives of the program

The question underlying the Choices program was: "How do we create and successfully run a program that meets the needs of at-risk third formers?" With this in mind, we identified a set of general aims, specific objectives and outcomes for the program. They are as follows.

The *aims* were:

- i. to create accurate criteria to identify who is at risk;
- ii. to be 'inclusive', that is, any program should identify and address the variable 'at-risk' factors for each person who participates;
- iii. to find ways of developing an individual's skills so that he or she is able to deal more effectively with the range of issues that contribute to his or her 'at-riskness';
- iv. to develop and implement strategies that provide effective and on-going in-school support so that changes can be made;
- v. in conjunction with the creation of a supportive and safe school ethos, to create a learning environment that is stable and well-supported but also challenging and stimulating for the at-risk students and their peer group;
- vii. to aim to improve each participant's self-concept/ self-confidence so that they can not only meet their own needs but also contribute positively to the school and the wider community;
- viii. to provide outreach links for the at-risk students with people and organisations in the wider Napier community.

In terms of turning these general aims into *specific objectives*, the following were our intentions:

- i. to provide students with the literacy and numeracy skills to participate academically in the mainstream of education;
- ii. to provide the students with 'people' skills to allow them to participate socially in the educational mainstream;
- iii. to provide support for appropriate behaviour development and self-management;
- iv. to provide a caring and supportive environment to meet the diverse needs of various groups in the school and for the students as individuals;

- v. to identify and remove barriers to learning and achievement;
- vi. to provide opportunities for students to develop and practise leadership skills

Following logically on from the general aims and specific objectives of the program, it was intended that there would be specific *outcomes* for those participating in the Choices program. These would be negotiated with individuals both at the interview before the program started and on an ongoing basis between the students and the school counsellor and/or the student's mentor. As the aims and objectives are long-term intentions, they would vary from person to person. In the spirit of the program, education, training and support were provided, but the intention was not to tell students what to do but to help them to make good choices. The following is a list of possible outcomes:

- i. individual and identifiable improvement as measured against a specific range of nationally recognised achievement standards for literacy and numeracy skills;
- ii. literacy and numeracy skills improvements as measured using school assessment processes;
- iii. the development of effective decision-making skills using reflection and good judgement – this can be monitored using classroom and school yard data;
- iv. the development of a realistic and assertive self-concept, and self-determination promoting in the students active commitment for achieving learning goals (to be measured using self-efficacy measures, e.g. the New Zealand Council for Educational Research self-esteem test);
- v. the gaining of social intelligence and a better understanding of the nature of power relations with peers; specifically, learning empathy with the feelings and needs of others, and development of leadership skills;
- vii. recognition of the advantages of completing the 5-year secondary program and fully engaging in a meaningful course of study;
- viii. being prepared to take advantage of extra-curricular and out-of-school activities;
- ix. the development of a sense of social responsibility and a willingness to contribute to the school and wider community.

The three strategies

Choices is built upon three complementary strategies: adventure-based learning, academic skills development and mentoring.

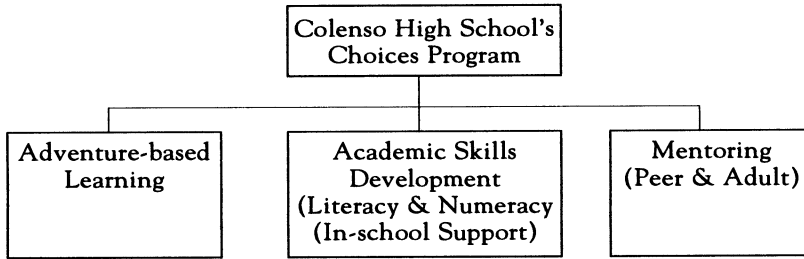


FIGURE 1. The MOE-sponsored innovations scheme

ADVENTURE-BASED LEARNING. Adventure-based learning is intended to take students outside of their comfort zones, to challenge them to develop new attitudes and behaviours for better interpersonal and intrapersonal relations, and to extend their learning experiences.

The Choices program works in parallel with the regular school schedule. Students are usually on the program for 10 weeks, two days of which are on the adventure-based learning component, the other half day a week being dedicated to academic skills development. The school uses the Hillcrest Block system which can accommodate students being on the Choices program while also maintaining attendance in core academic subjects.

Adventure activities include canoeing, caving, a challenge ropes course, kayaking, orienteering, rock climbing and tramping (hiking). The course is shaped so that initially students participate in joint activities designed so they get to know and trust each other. They also learn to co-operate and gradually move on to specific challenges where they are supported and kept safe (for example, kayaking, the ropes course). They are then required to prepare for a trip in the bush (which means that they have to plan cooperatively, use maps and purchase supplies etc.). To do so, they also have to use their literacy and maths skills in a practical fashion. They then go on a three-day trip (the Journey) during which they are required to keep a journal and to reflect on their actions. At the end, they carry out community activities and celebrate their success in finishing the program.

The program is intended to involve pupils who are 'turned off' and hard to stimulate in the normal school setting by taking them into situations where their physical and mental participation is required. These situations are

unfamiliar and unknown, and involve a sense of risk and disequilibrium. In these settings, the students learn to appreciate support, cooperation and trust. They are also challenged to use their problem-solving skills to accomplish the tasks they are set (mapping out a route using a map, deciding what to take in preparation for a three-day wilderness trip, spending an allocated sum to purchase food etc.). The program assists them to develop an understanding of what they have done, to be more reflective and to understand better how they can use their skills in other situations (generalisation and transfer) (for further details, see Luckner & Reldon, 1997).

THE SKILLS DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM. For a variety of complex and inter-related reasons, 'at-risk' students have gaps (often massive) in their learning (see Chapman & Tumner, and Fraser & Moltzen, both 2001). The skills development program works in a complementary fashion to the adventure-based learning program. The point is for students to be able to have some degree of academic success and to function at least at the level of their peer group. For this section of the program, it is intended that the increased self-concept, confidence, and cooperative, social and other skills are transferred across into a learning situation. The purpose of this component is to identify what students are missing in terms of basic literacy and numeracy skills through an individualised program, and to rectify this.

Three types of students took part in the programs:

- i. some were very able and had great potential as learners but things that were happening in their lives made learning hard;
- ii. some had limited ability and needed to learn as much as they were able, to feel good about it and to be acknowledged for their achievement;
- iii. some had particular disabilities that stopped them from learning.

A major issue was that the years of failure and poor self-concept needed to be acknowledged and addressed as part of the program. This component took two forms. For phase one, Dallas took the Choices students on Friday afternoons. With the support of the peer mentoring group and the teacher aides, she spent time working on maths and reading. Gerry took over this assignment for the second phase. In the meantime, many of the students who were candidates for Choices had been placed in a special class for which Gerry was the teacher so the program was taught within this setting on Friday mornings.

MENTORING. Mentoring was intended to provide support for students on an ongoing basis both during the adventure-based learning and skills development times and separately in its own right. Mentoring was developed and used differently for the two cohorts. For cohort one, peer mentors were

The Choices Program

chosen from 7th form students who had successfully undertaken the leadership program the previous year. This meant that they were familiar with the philosophy and activities of the adventure-based learning program. They participated in the program with the Choices students and acted as role models and support people as the Choices students went through the program. They also participated in the academic support sessions and it was intended that they give some support to student learning. Teacher aides were also involved with this in an adult mentoring role.

For the second cohort of students, a peer mentoring program was developed and run. It was decided that the general support provided by the mentors in phase one was too diffuse and undirected, that they were not sure what their role was and that it was unclear if their assistance was useful. The peer support for phase two was intended to be one-on-one where a person of the same 'culture' was assigned to provide support, feedback and advice on an ongoing basis in a sort of tuakana/ teina (younger/older sibling) fashion. In practice, this worked more loosely than was intended, and the 7th formers were less able to be fully committed to their role as peer mentors as they had end-of-year exams to prepare for.

Criteria for selection

The team of Dallas, Gerry, Marilyn and Phil met to select the students for the first phase of the Choices program approximately a month and a half after school had started. Both quantitative and qualitative information was gathered. PAT reading age data, attendance data (it was noted if a student had more than a 20% absence record), and the number of offence points (for smoking, insolent behaviour etc.) to date were gathered, as was other relevant information the school had about the students. The Colenso Diploma was created as a way of charting individual progress and defining for the students the expectations of the school. Every term, each subject teacher provides a mark for each student for attendance/punctuality (4), having the right equipment (2), social cooperation (4), classwork (4) and academic credit (16-25). Year 9 teachers were asked to classify all students into one of three categories in relation to the Diploma: highly likely to pass, could go either way or at risk of failing. Students identified by at least two teachers as at risk of failing the Colenso Diploma were noted as possible participants for Choices, and for reasons of equity and balance, ethnicity and gender were also considered in the selection process.⁷

During the first term of 2001, data were collected on the third form intake of 130 pupils. Of these students, 35 were seen as potential candidates for the program. Students whose behaviour was considered extreme and who would be likely to be removed to the Community High School or alternate education were discounted (four students). Twenty students were selected

and a short-list of others was also made up. Two programs were to be run, the first (phase one) in term two, both as a full program in its own right, but also as a pilot for the next program. Consequently, with the information derived from the first cohort, improvements were made before the second program (phase two) was run in term 3 for a further 10 students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To evaluate or not to evaluate? Should that really be the question?

Gauging the success of a venture like the Choices program is problematic, both from a measurement perspective and more generally. If a project deals with a group of several thousand students and half of them are placed under control conditions and the other half under experimental conditions, and differences between the two groups are controlled for, so they are essentially the same, then the foundations exist for viable evaluation. If a pre-test is run, then the program, then a post-test of the two groups, and comparisons are made between the post-test scores of the two groups, there may be generalisable results. Based on these results, it may be possible to identify definite improvements or to conclude that there are no improvements. (If the MIDYIS test was used, for instance, comparisons could be made in terms of their four categories of vocabulary, maths, and what are called non-verbal and skills.) It would be possible to make generalisations about any of these four areas and to make comparisons between boys and girls and between ethnic groups.

For the Choices program, however, there are few certainties and a structure that does not lend itself readily to quantitative measurement.

- i. There is a numerical difficulty – we were dealing with a group of only 20 students.
- ii. Two very different programs were run for the two cohorts (phase 1 was a pilot, phase 2 took into account what had been learned from phase 1).
- iii. The students were academically impoverished and socially unskilled. We were working on creating social and educational structures that are arguably outside the framework of tests like MIDYIS (although such a test could show improvement in some of the students).
- iv. The most developed skill of these students was their ability to manipulate, lie and divert teachers from the business of teaching them anything. This was the first (time- consuming) obstacle that had to be overcome.

- v. These students largely disliked written tests because this underlined their illiteracy and they were as likely to subvert such tests as to cooperate.

In other words, in order to get a sense of progress with these students, it was important to throw away the book and to improvise. Our results are qualitative and impressionistic and are based on our interpretation of what happened from personal experience, observation and discussion. On a day-to-day basis, there were ongoing successes and failures. With all the ups and downs of the program, it became very difficult to see if we were achieving anything, let alone achieving anything that was measurable.

One of our jobs was to collect data for the outside evaluators who had been hired by the Ministry regarding reading age, self-esteem measures and classroom behaviour. But everything seemed to need a story to go with it, and this created great anxiety for Marilyn, the school guidance counsellor and our resident mathematics/ statistics expert. She felt that the measures were too crude to work with. We were looking for big changes or at least measurable changes that could be attributed to a student's having taken part in the program. There was clearly this type of expectation from the Ministry and to some extent this is what we expected also.

So were there any measurable results? Although there can be no claim of statistical significance, there was some level of success in terms of end of year results in the Colenso Diploma. There were two levels of pass for the Diploma: graduated (receiving 450 credits or more from a possible maximum of 870) and qualified for year 10 study (receiving between 370 and 449 credits).

In the first cohort of ten students, there were four girls and six boys. Five of the students were Maori, two were of Pacific Island origin and three were Pakeha. At the end of the school year, four of these students had left the school, and three were still at school but had failed the Colenso Diploma and had not qualified to go on to year 10 study. One student had graduated and two were qualified for year 10 study.

In the cohort of phase two, there were six boys and four girls (seven of the students were Maori, one was of Pacific Island origin and two were Pakeha). Two of these students left school before the end of the year, and of those who remained and participated in the course, two graduated, three qualified for year 10 study and three failed the Colenso Diploma.

Although three out of ten positive results for phase one would seem poor in a regular school program, it is possible and even probable that without Choices, at least two out of these three would have failed the Diploma. Similarly, of the 10 students 'at risk' of failing in phase two, five got through

the Colenso Diploma. This was much better than what was expected, which was zero.

In fact, although this in itself could be said to justify the running of the program, I would argue that the subtle changes were more telling. We have needed time for reflection on the nature and degree of these subtle changes and what this has meant for these students and their families. The following examples illustrate what we found.

When the Choices students were asked to answer questionnaires towards the end of the current school year, this was problematic as it made some of them very angry. Most of them had literacy problems, and although we were starting to address these, the problems were long-standing and the students did not enjoy any written tasks, especially ones that had no tangible purpose as far as the students were concerned. Some found ways to sabotage the questionnaire process. Rather than filling the questionnaire in, one student shaded in all the right hand answer boxes with no attempt to answer the questions. Another boy ran away three times to avoid the task.

The problem was that many of the questions were written in language too complex for many of the students to understand and even if they did, beyond a point, they chose not to cooperate. This invalidated their particular questionnaires. Similarly, a questionnaire returned by a parent (most parents were not very literate and did not return their questionnaires) was very positive about the program but gave the same answer to every question, even though the questionnaire focussed on a range of topics.

One student from the first intake had five negative behaviour points for Terms 1 & 2 and 40 for Terms 3 & 4. It could be said that his behaviour became worse after he had participated in Choices, but the teacher aides who worked with this boy stated that his confidence improved hugely and his poor behaviour was really to do with his finding the courage to try things out. In this case, the 'result' could be characterised as self-esteem up, confidence up, behaviour down. Do we call this success?

Another observation was that many of the Choices intake came in with a long history of 'training' their teachers (and other adults) to leave them alone. If they had attention paid to them, they became disruptive, so teachers preferred just to leave them alone, and they became successful at becoming 'invisible'. They tried to continue on this path at high school with lots of truancy, or if in class they either did nothing (invisible) or behaved badly so the teacher did not worry too much if they were not there the next time. The really successful ones managed to get suspended – becoming totally invisible.

A major success of the program is that the adequate to good results in the Colenso Diploma notwithstanding, 20 students were not allowed to become invisible. They did not get forgotten when they failed to turn up for an activity. Even when the program was finished, program staff still knew all of the students and their parents. These students knew that interest had been shown in them. Even the student who ran away from the questionnaire three times came back a fourth time to fill it in.

From an accountability point of view, evaluation is usually an important part of any process where public money is used. It serves to make sure that time frames are created and kept to, and that there are measurable outcomes to show that the money has been well spent. At this stage of the process, our concern has been to provide a useful experience for the first two cohorts of students and to develop a process that works.

We will not get a sense of specific improvements until mid-2002 when students re-sit the MIDYIS test. However, we expect that the changes will not be that great. Because of the nature of the students, we are sowing seeds and assume that the results may not come through for some time, if ever. In the mean time, the following telling quotations emerged from interviews and questionnaires that were administered to students from the two cohorts, and to parents and a social worker:

Scenario 1

There were 9 people on the course, but virtually only 8 people turned up, one was probably wagging [playing truant]! We met new people and made new friends. It was exciting. It was enjoyable. It was pretty darn good.
(Boy, Phase One)

This boy had been very isolated and alone. He expressed his aloneness by never coming to school. In fact, after having participated in the Choices program he made friends with one boy in particular (they helped each other on one of the tramps). He now feels welcome and safe enough that he comes to school most of the time. He also appears happier and more confident and does his school work. Such things would be taken for granted with some of his more successful peers. For him this is a massive improvement, but in terms of evaluation, such results are usually below the threshold of what is measured.

Scenario 2

It has made me want to settle down and do school work.
Dallas taught me to read. (Boy, Phase One)

Although testing this student would not necessarily show progress in reading ability, he is convinced this is the case and as a result is engaging in reading. So the seed has been sown and the potential to improve further has been established.

Scenario 3

I want to be a teacher in the caving and kayaking and teach how to use it and do it. (Boy, Phase Two)

This boy with little previous enthusiasm and lots of resistance ended up not only enjoying and fully participating in the adventure activities but he also now has aspiration.

Scenario 4

I prefer to be at school because all my friends were and because I only had two friends with me when I would have liked five or six of my friends there with me. (Girl, Phase Two)

This girl did not dislike the experience, but would have preferred having her friends along.

Scenario 5

One boy stated that taking the course was the best thing he had ever done.

He comes home all happy with the program and he's always looking forward to the next day and he never stops talking about it, he's always telling his brother to join the program, and it's given my son experience. (Mother of boy, Phase One)

Scenario 6

He has an increased awareness of others and is more thoughtful and honest. It is as though he realizes that someone put a bet on him. He hasn't even decided yet if he's in the race, but he knows that someone put a bet on him. (Social worker for boy on Phase Two)

This student felt that no one had ever really given him credit or support in his life and that for the first time someone had consciously decided to give him something, which his social worker equated with 'putting a bet on him'.

Why the program is important

In discussing the project at this stage, we have found that there are more issues raised than questions answered. This is because we did not know what we would find or need to deal with. Essentially, we have a sense of frustration because we feel we are at the beginning of a process that could produce a very fine program for teaching students who are at risk of failing not only in education but also in life. We would argue that if we allow this to happen without putting up a good fight, we are not only letting these individual students down, we are also potentially contributing to a large group of disaffected and anti-social adults who may have a negative effect on the Aotearoa-New Zealand of tomorrow. Except for a small amount of funding that we have applied for from the Ministry of Education in competition with

other projects, the Choices project will cease unless Colenso decides to continue with it anyway or the Ministry decides to use it as an exemplar for other schools with a similar educational context.⁸ So what are the issues?

1. Two phases of the Choices program have shown us that it is a program with great potential but that all components need further development.

The project needs to be continued and developed further. The strongest part of the program was the adventure-based learning component. This was because Phil Kay had an extensive background in adventure-based learning and knew how to make the program work. However, even here, because of the low motivation levels of many of the students, progress was very slow. More intensive work with ongoing support is needed.

We were only starting to get a good understanding of the academic skills development component. We need to develop this part of the program to a higher level, building on what we have learned to date. Perhaps the most important issue is having a teacher who is able to work effectively with the students in a cohort both at the group level and also in an individualised way. This component has had the benefit of the most important ingredients required, that is, two teachers, Gerry and Dallas, who are challenging, inspiring and excellent at what they have chosen to do.

2. How do we give the project the full support of the whole school?

Whenever a school tries to tackle a difficult problem that has social as well as educational ramifications (such as bullying, disaffection, failure), it is apparent that the school as a whole needs to espouse and support any strategy or program that is developed (see Sullivan, 2000). It could be argued that the Choices program had an ambivalent relationship with the school. While the school largely supported the program, sometimes students on the program were not given time to adjust when they returned from the program or were in transition between Choices activities and those of the normal school day. Some teachers seemed to resent the spending of money on 'difficult kids' (as if bad behaviour was being rewarded). There was also a sense that, although the staff were given information about the program on several occasions, it was not 'owned' by all staff. It is clear that more linking and groundwork needs to be done on behalf of the project. From the point of view of those running Choices, a bad reception back at school would seem to undo much of the good work of the program.

For such a project to work properly, it needs to have good structural arrangements and a full-time staff dedicated to the project with clear guidelines about expectations and responsibilities and back-up administrative support.

3. How best to proceed?

If the program were to continue, how should it be constructed? I would argue that it needs refinement as follows:

- i. An enrichment class of 24 students needs to be established for the full third form year.
- ii. The students should be rotated in groups of eight in each of the three components during the first three terms.
- iii. The class should be encouraged to develop a set of ground rules that are based on respect and cooperation, and about which the students have a sense of ownership.
- v. After each time out of class and after each rotation, efforts should be made to reintegrate the class.
- vi. The whole process must be seen as positive for the participants and supported by the rest of the school.
- vii. The program needs to be fully maintained and encouraged within a constant culture of efficacy and positivity. For this group of students who often lack structure and commitment, this is essential.

4. Too much to do, too little time?

One of the issues in the increasingly demanding job of teaching is a sense that because teachers care so much, they may take on too much. This could mean that teachers burn out, that resources are stretched too thinly and that justice is not done to all programs. This is not meant as a criticism either of teachers or this school in particular, because the school and its administration cannot be faulted for not caring and not doing enough. It may be that they are doing too much and need either to be more selective or to find ways to increase their resources so that stress burn-out and ill health are not the result.

5. It is important to continue to look for ways to stimulate the students and to create strategies that work.

The program in its two iterations worked best for a group of boys of varying academic potentials and abilities. It did not seem to work for a group of Maori girls, some of whom, according to various tests, had academic potential that was being squandered. There were several events in the school year that gelled with the students. The first was an itinerant Maori drama group that played out scenarios that celebrated Maori culture and was in tune with young people's issues. The other was the visit of Footnote Dance Company, a professional contemporary dance troupe which tours schools and engages students in various dance activities. Using these and other similar events

and activities as a way of involving and catching the interest of students should be encouraged.

6. Addressing Maori issues.

Another important issue is how best to address Maori issues in the project. The school has a large Maori population and it is important both for Maori and for non-Maori to address issues of tikanga and te reo (cultural matters and language) within a context that values these and is safe.

CONCLUSION

When creating a program such as Choices, it is important to realise the difficulty of the task. The experience of running an adventure-based learning program with a group of ten motivated students who see the opportunity of spending school time abseiling, kayaking or exploring wilderness areas of New Zealand as challenging and enjoyable is one thing. The experience of running such a program with a cohort of ten students who have been failures for most of their school careers, who are turned-off, unmotivated, marginalised and left behind is absolutely another.

The second meeting with the first cohort of students was redolent at first with abusive language and a general culture of put down amongst the kids. Cooperative learning looked a very long way off. An ability to listen without sabotage and disaffection was elusive at best and the students' presentation of themselves was generally surly and uncooperative. But as the day progressed, there were some changes. The next time the group met, it felt like starting from scratch again, although subtle changes were starting to happen for some of the students.

When writing *The Anti Bullying Handbook* (2000), I developed a way of understanding the processes involved in chronic bullying which I called the spiral of decline. This representation allows people to understand that stopping bullying from taking place is just the first step in creating a sense of normalcy for a bullied person. If a person has been bullied for a period of time, then it is likely that their ability to function normally will have been gradually undermined and this will have affected them in all kinds of ways. They may feel socially inept, be performing academically far below their capabilities, be generally fearful of the world and in other ways display inadequacy and unhappiness. In other words, the effect of the chronic bullying has traumatised them. If this is understood to be the case, that in terms of the model they have spiralled downwards, then strategies can be developed to help them climb the spiral back to a normal psychological state.

If the body has been traumatised, any wounds need to be cleaned and treated and time is required for healing. Psychological wounds are not as easy to detect but they similarly need a course of treatment and the passage of time to aid recovery.

My argument here is that for a number of diverse reasons the students who meet the criteria of selection for the Choices program can be classified as at risk and educationally traumatised. This fact should be a major theme running through the development of all these strategies.

When a theoretical construct is re-created in the real world, the results can be both challenging and interesting. This is the reality of working in a low decile school with all of the disadvantages this entails. Although the problems to be solved are hard, they are usually concrete rather than abstract and something positive will be dragged out of them. Although this is often tiring for a team of people who were already working at a level beyond the call of duty, the results we are hoping to achieve may be beneficial for this school both now and in future years. What is more, the possibilities the project offers inspire project participants to respond in energetic and creative ways.

In terms of potential outcomes, this project is an investment not only in the future of those selected for the program but also for the well-being of the school and the wider community. We also hope that the innovation may be of use to other schools.

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Carrying out initiatives in difficult situations with no guarantees of success requires commitment and faith. The staff of Colenso High School and specifically those who participated in this project need to be commended and applauded for their generous spirit and their ongoing positivity towards the project. Thanks very much to you all: Gerry Bidwell, Phil Kay, Dallas Pahiri and Marilyn Wright who made the project work, and Mark Cleary for his vision in getting it funded and up and running.

NOTES

1. The Education Review Office is a government agency that audits and reviews the performance of every New Zealand school once every three years.
2. Supporters of the school effectiveness movement argue that if effective management systems are in place, then schools will run well and produce better outcomes. Schools that are seen as successful in this way are often cited as examples of good practice, as the ERO does here. The theory, however, is often not met by the practice. Things are usually more complex and nested within a mass of social and cultural issues. See Ball & Thrupp, 2001, for example.
3. On a positive note, in Mangere and Otara, and in response to these concerns, Stuart McNaughton, Gwenneth Phillips and Shelley McDonald developed and delivered a program (reported in *Picking up the pace*) which focussed on the transition between the end of early childhood and the beginning of primary schooling. They were able to accelerate the reading abilities of children in decile one schools so that they were at the same level as children in decile five schools (McCarthy, 2001).

The Choices Program

4. Ngati Kahungunu is one of the original Maori canoes and its tribal area extends from Wellington up to Gisborne (encapsulating Napier and Colenso High School). A whakatauki is a Maori proverb.
5. Colenso is also a school with a history of standing up against the bureaucracy on behalf of its teachers. It has been innovative in a number of ways, in terms of encouraging community involvement through setting up training for teachers' aides, and through developing a teenage parent unit, and anti-bullying and leadership programs. The Colenso Diploma was developed to provide a tangible record of student achievement during the course of the school year, and as an indicator for determining progression from year to year (see Sullivan, 2001).
6. Colenso was one of 15 schools that made it through two rounds of bidding to receive support from the Ministry of Education's Innovations scheme.
7. Two other sources of useful information were available later in the year to provide background information for the target students and the whole third form but were not available for use in the selection process. These were the MIDYIS (providing measures in vocabulary, maths, non-verbal and skills) and SATIS which gives a profile of student attitudes for the Year 9 cohort and a comparison with Year 9 students throughout New Zealand (both administered by the Centre for Educational Measurement at the University of Canterbury).
8. The author has applied for funding with a group of researchers with expertise in literacy, numeracy, students at risk, youth issues and Maori education in order to develop this model further.

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