

Using Research Evidence to Validate an Educational Program

The Case of the Doxa School - West Melbourne

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Contents

A.	Introduction.....	3
B.	Review Design and Structure	4
C.	Findings from the Review	6
	<i>Table C1. Review of Best Practice – Mainstream School and School to Doxa Linkage.....</i>	<i>6</i>
	<i>Table C2. Program Logic – Dealing with Students at Risk in the Mainstream School.....</i>	<i>10</i>
	<i>Table C3. Review of Best Practice – Planning to Make the Transition to an Alternative Setting.....</i>	<i>11</i>
	<i>Table C4. Program Logic – Seeking Assistance from Doxa</i>	<i>12</i>
	<i>Table C5. Review of Best Practice – Creating a Transformational Educational Environment....</i>	<i>14</i>
	<i>Table C6. Program Logic – Creating a Learning Environment at Doxa School.....</i>	<i>16</i>
	<i>Table C7. Review of Best Practice – Planning for Transition to a Mainstream Setting</i>	<i>19</i>
	<i>Table C 8. Program Logic – Doxa to Mainstream School Linkage</i>	<i>21</i>
	<i>Table C9. Review of Best Practice – Monitoring Student Placement and Phasing Out Support.....</i>	<i>23</i>
	<i>Table C10. Program Logic – Monitoring Student Placement and Phasing Out Support</i>	<i>25</i>
D.	Summary and Suggestions for the Future	26
E.	Appendix – Biographies of the researchers	28

A. Introduction

This is a report of a study of the Doxa School – West Melbourne Program (hereafter we will use the terms Program or School interchangeably).

The Program can be regarded as unique in terms of its mission, operation and location. Supported by the Doxa Youth Foundation (DYF), its mission is to provide 'a school of peace and healing where spirits can be nurtured and faith restored'. A major aim is to provide supported, alternative education for students between the ages of 11 and 14 who are experiencing difficulties maintaining their place in mainstream education. The School is located in a purpose constructed building in West Melbourne. Students attend the School for six months and are then supported by an outreach strategy in order to give them 'the opportunity to build their future through focussed learning that empowers them to commit to ongoing education'.¹ The School admits two student cohorts a year, each consisting of between 16 and 20 students, and is currently staffed by a principal, three teachers, two youth workers, an administrative assistant and selected volunteers. In addition this Doxa School cooperates closely with its client schools and supports school-based mentors for all students in the Program.

The School has welcomed advice from previous research and its use in decision-making, and as such could be regarded as a learning organisation. The DYF and the School Principal (Ms Megan Moore) have welcomed analyses of the conduct and outcomes of the Program. In December 2004, a review undertaken by Dr Richard Cotter supported the quality of School processes as the School moved its location and changed its name from the Marist Transition School to its present title.

In 2006, the Australian Youth Research Centre (AYRC) at The University of Melbourne undertook an evaluation of student outcomes for students who had been in the Program during the previous six years. The AYRC report pointed to a high level of success for students and concludes that

..... the overwhelming majority of young people who attended the program believes that their lives, skill levels and schooling outcomes have been enhanced through involvement with the program. This is a view that is reiterated by parents, teachers and Principals at other schools as well as by Doxa school personnel.... Significantly, everyone who returned surveys stated that they enjoyed their time at Doxa School and everyone was very proud of something they did at Doxa.....Young people who attend Doxa School were disengaged from education well before they came to Doxa School. Some report ongoing difficulties in staying at school, but also claim that that without Doxa School, they would have been less likely to remain within the education system².

This Review is thus a third study in a short period of time, and is intended to complement findings from these previous studies by concentrating on the **processes** that contribute to the outcomes discussed in the AYRC report.

Commissioned in mid-April 2008 by the DYF the major aim of this Review was to:

Gain an understanding of how different elements of the Doxa Program model of education contribute to keeping young people connected to education.

The Review was undertaken by an evaluation team consisting of Drs John Owen, John McLeod and Ms Pamela Andrew during the April to July period of 2008.

¹ *Doxa School-West Melbourne. Program Information (undated).*

² *Murphy, B and MacLean, S (2006). Doxa School West Melbourne: Outcomes for Students, 2000-2006. Australian Youth Research Centre, Melbourne University.*

B. Review Design and Structure

As indicated, this Review aimed to document the processes that the Program used to achieve outcomes for the students. The Review sought to provide answers to issues such as the following:

- What are the component parts of the Doxa Program?
- How were these determined?
- How is the selection for, and placement of, students in Doxa handled?
- How is the transition from Doxa to the students' original or destination schools handled?
- What type and timing of support does Doxa provide to schools?
- How much do the youth workers from Doxa help change the structures and systems of the destination schools as well as working directly with individuals?
- What other support to the schools are provided by Doxa staff?

It can be seen from this list that we adopted a broad rather than a narrow meaning of processes, including those that involved the schools (and the education system) of the students involved. One could think of this as a systemic approach to understanding how the Program worked because it included links between institutions as well as the functions of these institutions.

Clarification of the Program. From our initial discussions at Doxa, we were aware from the outset that the Program was settled in terms of its curriculum and administration, and so we felt confident that we could capture and describe **the 'ideal' design of the existing intervention**. By ideal, we mean how the Doxa Program has been conceptualised in the minds of key planners, documented in curriculum and administrative statements, and how the school was organised to deliver the curriculum.

The ideal program needs be **contrasted with the delivery of the program** for a given cohort of students. This can be regarded as the implemented program. While we would expect a strong correlation between the (ideal) design and its implementation, it should be noted that there might be differences due to factors such as the nature of the cohort, the ability of staff to translate the design into action, and other restrictions, such as the availability of required facilities and materials.

School records provided extensive information on how the school and the Program operated. A question for the review team was: How could we develop and present findings that did not duplicate this existing documentation, and would aid Program stakeholders in any deliberations about change and improvement?

A key decision related to these issues was to conceptualise the Program in terms of five Stages:

<i>Stage 1</i>	Identifying at-risk students
<i>Stage 2</i>	Seeking assistance from Doxa
<i>Stage 3</i>	Developing and implementing a plan for each student at Doxa
<i>Stage 4</i>	Planning for the transition back to a mainstream setting
<i>Stage 5</i>	Monitoring students' placement after the Doxa experience

This provided a framework to codify Program processes in a way that enabled stakeholders to think of each part of the Program separately as well as to see each part in relation to preceding or subsequent Stages.

A program logic was then developed.³ The end product of this process is a tabular representation of key elements for each Stage. In this study the key elements in the logic were the basic concepts and actions for each Stage. Where possible these were arranged in terms of time and how they were sequenced.

³ For an overview of program logic, see Owen, JM (2006). *Program Evaluation: Forms and Approaches*. Allen and Unwin, Sydney. Chapter 10, pp 191-216.

Data Management. So far we have discussed the Review Design in terms of the products that could flow from the study (program logic statements and evaluative criteria). There is of course a need for data on which to develop these products. The following methods were used:

Program logic statements for each Stage

Interviews were conducted with the Principal, teachers, the senior youth worker and mentor/volunteers which were taped and analysed. The extensive documentation on file at the Doxa School-West Melbourne was read and notes made. Previous evaluative reports were examined. Relevant research on at-risk students and their school settings was undertaken. Logic diagrams for each Stage were developed by one member of the evaluation team and subjected to examination by others in the team.

Evaluative criteria for each Stage

Relevant research related to at-risk students and interventions designed to improve their educational outcomes was analysed. This involved Australian and overseas studies. Findings were allocated and presented as a criterion set for each Stage.

Structure of this Report

The next section of this report discusses the findings by Stage. For each Stage, we present:

- Evidence from the relevant literature.
- A description of the current Program, 'Doxa in Action', which represents how the Program is currently operating.
- A discussion of the degree to which 'Doxa in Action' met the criteria developed from research evidence.

This report should enable DYF stakeholders to make claims about the effectiveness of the Program in addition to a heightened understanding of its delivery.

C. Findings from the Review

Stage 1. Focus: Identifying at-risk students

Locus of Action: Original mainstream school

Research on schooling for students at-risk that is currently thought of as 'best practice' is summarised in Table C1. The summary tabulates the concepts, draws out some of the practical implications and cites key references. As indicated earlier, tables have been presented for all Stages of the Program. Following each table are a few paragraphs that summarise the key ideas that are particularly apt to the Doxa context. It should be noted that there is considerable consistency between what Doxa currently does and what is seen as best practice.

Evidence from Best Practice. In the literature, students deemed 'at-risk' are seen not as a single population. They are, by their nature, atypical. They can be at-risk of failing at school, dropping out, chronic truancy, and of persistent and extreme challenging behaviour. They are also at-risk because other reasons which can include their family circumstances, an inability to learn in the dominant and accepted ways demanded in regular schooling, or a diagnosed condition or disability. Regular and mainstream schools as well as specialist settings such as Doxa have a responsibility for these students.⁴

Family circumstances are critical. For example, even young children can be primary carers for a parent with a mental illness or intellectual disability and have to take the role of an adult in organising younger siblings and running the household. Some parents⁵ have insecure accommodation and move constantly and therefore deprive their children of stable and continuous social networks. Others may have limited parenting skills or lack confidence in the skills they do have.

At-risk is not just about individual students. It needs to be seen in a complex context. Each of the various components often inter-relate with many others. Some of the components are beyond the scope of this current investigation and, in fact, the work of the Doxa School. Although the School may not be responsible for addressing these issues, the report will argue that it does play an important role as a catalyst for them to be addressed.

Table C1. Review of Best Practice – Identifying Students At-risk

Stage 1(i)

	Central concepts	Implications for action	References
Identifying at-risk students Location: Original mainstream school			A useful overview of the research literature from the British perspective is: Fletcher-Campbell F & Wilkin A, 2003, <i>Review of the research literature on educational interventions for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties</i> , National Foundation for Educational Research Slough, available at: http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/Products/NATIONAL-REPORT/

⁴ Fletcher-Campbell F & Wilkin A, 2003, *Review of the research literature on educational interventions for pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties*, National Foundation for Educational Research, Slough, available at: <http://www.audit-commission.gov.uk/Products/NATIONAL-REPORT/>

⁵ The term 'parents' is used throughout this report to mean the most significant adult in the students' lives. In some cases this will be a single parent and, in others, it will be their guardian or even the state.

	Central concepts	Implications for action	References
	At-risk behaviour is multi-dimensional and goes beyond the individual student.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervene early rather than waiting until the students' difficulties require exclusion from their school. • Work closely with parents/carers and maintain this contact throughout the following processes. • Link student and their families to other community services for such things as housing, income support, family counselling or food security. • Concentrate on individual student's relationship with schooling, for example their experience of safety within school. 	Schweinhart, Barnes & Weikart, 1993, Pianta R & Walsh D, 1996, <i>High-Risk Children in Schools</i> , Routledge, New York.
	Have a shared understanding and associated criteria of the term: students at-risk or disadvantaged young people.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List criteria. • Undertake professional development for all teachers. • Ensure no student is deemed 'at risk' on the basis of a single teacher's perception. 	Identifying students at risk for violent behaviour: A Checklist of 'Early Warning Signs' Reprinted from <i>A Practical Guide for Crisis Response in Our Schools</i> . © 2003 by The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress.
	Redefine the concept of at-risk.	<p>Have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High expectations for all. • Clear, achievable goals. • Clear rules for behaviour that are fairly enforced • Effective instruction and classroom management. • Careful monitoring of student progress. • An expectation that school is place for learning. 	Rozycki E, 2004, 'At Risk Students: What Exactly is the Threat? How Imminent is it?' <i>Educational Horizons</i> , vol.82, no.3. Spring.
	Gather reliable and consistent information.	<p>Variables for gathering information could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance records. • Numbers of discipline referrals from teachers. • Standardised test results or peer analysis. • Number of suspensions. • Number of referrals to school counsellors. 	Wells S, Bechard S & Hamby J, 1989, 'How To Identify At-Risk Students' <i>A Series of Solutions and Strategies</i> , National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson University.

Stage 1 (ii)

	Central concepts	Implications for action	References
<p>Responding within the school</p> <p>Location: Original mainstream school</p>	Plan for individuals not whole groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Institute a program support group (PSG) for every student deemed at-risk. Such a group is normally comprised of the key teacher(s), the student welfare coordinator, the student's parent and sometimes the student, agencies working with the students, and Develop an individual education plan (IEP). 	
	Changing teacher behaviour to accommodate all children within the school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide teachers professional development to broaden the concept of the 'norm'. Institute individual programs. Understand that curriculum input can be standardised but outcomes will be variable. Accommodate different ways and paces of learning. 	Hawkins JD, Doueck & Lishner D, 1988, 'Changing Teaching Practices in Mainstream Classrooms to Improve Bonding and Behavior of Low Achievers' <i>American Educational Research Journal</i> , 25 (1), Spring, pp 31-50.
	Changing the school environment and organisational structure to accommodate students with individual needs. (This is commonly called an ecological approach.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understand the complicated set of relationships between different components of school systems. Allocate resources to change the school environment. Create flexible structures such as timing, location and content of instruction to suit the strengths, skills and interests of at-risk students. 	Jason L, Danner K & Kurasaki, K (eds), 1993, <i>Prevention and School Transitions</i> , The Hawthorn Press, New York.
	Moving from a deficit-based model to one that emphasises students' strengths.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage students in the management of their own behaviour that may lead to school exclusion. Implement individualised programs based on functional assessment (ie what the students can do rather than what they cannot). Build on their current strengths and interests. Create flexible and different learning environments. 	<p>Chen JQ, 1993, <i>Building on Children's Strengths: Examination of a Project Spectrum Intervention Program for Students at Risk for School Failure</i>. ED357847 Available at: http://eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/custom/portlets/recordDetails/detailmini.jsp?_nfpb=true&_ERICExtSearch_SearchValue_0=E D357847&ERICExtSearch_SearchType_0=eric_accno&accno=E D357847</p> <p>Callahan C, Tomlinson C, Moon, T, Tomhin E, & Plucker, J, 1995, <i>Project START: Using a Multiple Intelligences Model in Identifying and Promoting Talent in High-Risk Students</i> (Research Monograph 95136), The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, available at: http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcg/t/calltomm.html</p> <p>Knapp M, Shields P & Turnbull B, 1995, 'Academic challenge in high-poverty classrooms', <i>Phi Delta Kappan</i>, 76 (10), pp770-777.</p>

Research suggests that all schools have students at-risk. In some schools the concept of the 'mainstream' has been quite narrowly defined. This means that a range of students has been either explicitly or implicitly marginalised. The challenge faced by schools is to develop inclusive practices. If the mainstream is defined more broadly more students are included. Fewer students are therefore deemed as at-risk.⁶

Schools need to be encouraged to be inclusive of all students and cater for a broader range of abilities, learning styles and interests. This does not necessarily obviate the need for an 'at-risk' category, but it does suggest that schools should be pursuing policies and processes that actively accommodate a greater variety of students. For example, this could mean changing the school environment, organisational structures, teaching methods and activities set for students.⁷

Regular schools can be expected to make modifications to their curriculum and teaching practices to include students at-risk. They may need, however, some help to do this, and there is evidence that some education systems have assisted schools to develop individual learning plans for students⁸.

This implies a shift to a more individualised approach that builds on and extends the current strengths and interests of all students. Such an approach also moves away from a 'deficit approach' that emphasises what the students cannot do. A strengths-based approach emphasises what they can do. Such an approach argues that students learn in different ways and is strongly supported in the literature particularly through the work of Howard Gardner at Harvard University and the schools associated with the educational project of Reggio Emilia.⁹

Some schools and teachers will find this difficult and will need professional development and support.

There will, of course, be a small number of students who will still be deemed at-risk. This category should describe the functional characteristics and behaviour of such students by using a common, explicit and accepted set of criteria.¹⁰ Unfortunately the term at-risk can sometimes be used as a 'catch-all' phrase to exclude difficult students because they do not fit the structures of the school or the comfort levels of teachers and school leaders. Labelling students in this way should be a last resort rather than the first response.

Even with major modifications and accommodations, there will be some schools and students who need specialist support within the school or the student may need to be removed from the school and an alternative sought.¹¹

Dealing with Students at Risk. Taking this literature into account, and consulting with key staff at the Doxa School, it is possible to describe an approach to dealing with at-risk students in mainstream schools in the Victorian (and possibly Australian) context. Table C2 provides a summary of the normative or 'ideal' arrangements in schools for providing for students at-risk in the Victorian context from which Doxa draws its students.

⁶ Rozycki E, 2004 'At-risk Students: What Exactly is the Threat? How Imminent is it?' *Educational Horizons*, vol.82, no.3. Spring.

⁷ Hawkins JD, Doueck & Lishner D, 1988, 'Changing Teaching Practices in Mainstream Classrooms to Improve Bonding and Behavior of Low Achievers' *American Educational Research Journal*, 25 (1), Spring, pp. 31-50.

⁸ Owen, J, 2006. *The Professional Learning Development Program: Does the Cluster Pass Muster?* Report to the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria.

⁹ Callahan C, Tomlinson C, Moon, T, Tomhin E, & Plucker, J, 1995, *Project START: Using a Multiple Intelligences Model in Identifying and Promoting Talent in High-Risk Students* (Research Monograph 95136), The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT, available at: <http://www.gifted.uconn.edu/nrcgt/calltomm.html>

¹⁰ Wells S, Bechard S & Hamby J, 1989, 'How To Identify At-Risk Students' *A Series of Solutions and Strategies*, National Dropout Prevention Center, Clemson University.

¹¹ Etscheidt S, 2006, 'Seeking an Interim Alternative Education Placement for Dangerous or Disruptive Students with Disabilities: Four Burdens for the School District to Meet', *American Secondary Education*, 34(2) pp 67-84.

Table C2. Program Logic – Dealing with Students at Risk in the Mainstream School

Concepts	Actions
<p>A school should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identify students at-risk of severe academic failure, dropping out of school or expulsion. Value the inclusion and retention of students as the first and best option. Seek an alternative educational experience for a student as a last resort. 	
1. See students within their particular context.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Document student's background and family circumstances. Avoid global 'disability-specific labels' that can be applied to the student.
2. Focus on the wellbeing of particular students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide tailored pastoral and welfare support. Liase with parents or carers.
3. Focus on the educational setting for change rather than trying to make the student 'fit into' the existing school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modify the curriculum in terms of content, method of instruction, learning and assessment.
4. Avoid 'deficit-based' labels of students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design learning experiences that focus on the student's current strengths, interests and abilities.
5. Commit to mainstreaming students,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek professional input for teachers and, if necessary, students. Provide professional development to regular teachers explicitly and by example.
6. Consider support for students at-risk that cannot be catered for in the school context.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek educational agencies that could provide adequate experiences for students at risk.

We asked experienced Doxa staff to compare this ideal practice with current practice. They believe that there is a discrepancy between the ideal and actual situations in Victorian schools in providing a curriculum that caters for the range of learning and emotional needs of students. In other words the logic presented above often does not apply to mainstream schools.

There are students in our schools who find difficulty in mainstream schools due to a range of factors such as: school structures, priorities related to meeting government imposed standards, and insufficient resources. These students are likely to come from unstable home backgrounds, have had interruptions to previous schooling or exhibit individual learning difficulties.

Government provision to support students at the extreme end of the cognitive spectrum, increases in trained school welfare specialists and more attention to pastoral care have all improved the range of services available to at-risk students. However, there appears to be a number of students who represent a challenge for schools and who do not qualify for specialist assistance. These students may cause disruption to 'normal' classes, become chronic truants, and be candidates for expulsion from school.

It is for these reasons that such students may enrol full-time in a school that provides a program more consistent with the logic in Table C2. This is likely to involve a student moving from a mainstream school to a more conducive and responsive educational setting.

While Doxa cannot directly influence how a school provides for a student at-risk prior to that student being involved at Doxa, familiarity with the range and extent of the problems faced by Victorian schools is important because It provides an assessment of the need for support from programs like Doxa. The DYF currently assists education systems by encouraging the Doxa

principal and others to assist schools to deal more effectively with students at-risk. Such support currently occurs on a small scale but could be strengthened in the future¹².

¹² See for example, the suggestions made regarding potential changes to the existing professional development program outlined in *The Doxa School-Some Future Considerations*. Paper provided to the Review by Megan Moore (undated).

Stage 2

Focus: Seeking assistance from Doxa

Locus of Action: The mainstream and Doxa schools

Transition to Specialist Settings. The literature suggests that alternative schools should not be seen as a 'dumping ground' for students who find it difficult or impossible to remain at their mainstream school. The choice of an alternative setting for a student should be negotiated between the mainstream school, the alternative setting, the student and their parents. This can avoid any perceived convenience of excluding a student from their regular school.

The alternative school should be seen and presented as a 'fresh start' for the student.¹³ Such schools typically have a low ratio of students to teachers, are highly structured with clear behavioural expectations and work on positive rather than punitive interactions.¹⁴

Table C3: Review of best practice – Planning to Move to an Alternative Setting

Stage	Central concepts	Implications for action	References
<p>Planning and implementing transition to specialist settings</p> <p>Location: Original mainstream school and the Doxa school</p>	<p>Actively manage the transition.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan collaboratively with parents who continue involvement with their child's progress. Engage students in the planning activities. Institute an individual transition plan for each student. Actively build relationship between the school, parents and students. Develop a 'learning contract' with key players including the student. Make the processes of placement and the curriculum of the alternative school transparent. Develop partnership arrangements with services the student use. Develop new social networks. 	<p>Sinclair M, Christenson S, Evelo D & Hurley C, 1998, <i>Exceptional Children</i>, vol 65.</p> <p>Rumberger R, 1995, 'Dropping out of middle school: A multilevel analysis of students and schools' <i>American Educational Research Journal</i> 32 (3): 583-625.</p> <p>See: OTIS Expelled and At Risk Support Program. Not currently evaluated.</p> <p>Barone C, Iscoe E, Trickett E & Schmid K, 1998, 'An Ecologically Differentiated, Multifactor Model of Adolescent Network Orientation', <i>American Journal of Community Psychology</i>, 26 (3), June, pp 403–423.</p>

The move from a mainstream school to an alternative is a major transition for students. It has to be managed to assist the chances of success. The management includes collaborative planning between schools, the student and their parents. This enables different perspectives, goals, expectations and concerns to be shared. The student should clearly understand why the move is occurring and what will be expected of them in the new setting.

There is value in developing and implementing a clear plan that is designed and agreed to by the key stakeholders.¹⁵ This plan could include, for example, a 'learning contract' that operationalises what is expected of the student. This builds a sense of certainty and clarity for the student.

Joint planning also provides a further opportunity to locate the student's circumstances and those of their parents within a wider network of community services. The student is therefore not seen as 'the' problem. The context in which they live has a major impact on their behaviour.¹⁶

¹³ Franklin C, Streeter C, Kim J & Tripodi S, 2007, 'The Effectiveness of a Solution-Focused, Public Alternative School for Dropout Prevention and Retrieval', *Children & Schools*, 29 (3) pp 133–144

¹⁴ Raywid M, 1998, 'Small schools: A reform that works', *Educational Leadership*, 55(4), 34–39.

¹⁵ Rumberger R, 1995, 'Dropping out of middle school: A multilevel analysis of students and schools' *American Educational Research Journal* 32 (3): 583-625.

Principles Underlying the School to Doxa Linkage. The discussion below describes how the Doxa School - West Melbourne provides an alternative model to a permanent move to a full-time enrolment in a specialist school. This involves student transitions to and from a specialist setting for a short period. The model is based on a set of well-developed principles for working with schools to select students for transition and to plan an individual program for each student. These are outlined in Table C3.

Table C4. Program Logic – Seeking Assistance from Doxa

Concepts	Actions
A Doxa student cohort should be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selected on the basis that each student can instigate a process of effective change within a six month period. • Based on how well they will be able to function as a cohesive group. 	
1. Forge a working partnership between Doxa and a limited number of schools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure schools have a clear understanding about what Doxa does and how this links with what the school is able to do.
2. Ensure any decision includes significant stakeholders.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview stakeholders. • Include the student, parents, school welfare officer, Doxa principal, senior teacher and senior youth worker. • Provide opportunities for stakeholders to speak as a group and individually so that they can speak confidentially.
3. Gauge whether a student is willing to change and there is parental support for this change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write to the school about the result of the interview and the student's request to attend Doxa. • Write to the student to explain the outcome of their application to Doxa.
4. Estimate the likelihood that the selected students will form a cohesive group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer professional development for staff to supplement and codify intuitive responses. • Manage responses of those applicants who do not get into Doxa. • Ensure each cohort is comprised of multi-ability and multi-aged students.
5. Ensure the school focuses on fulfilling the goals for a student rather than the Doxa experience being used as a 'break' for that school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commit schools to take the student back at conclusion of Doxa two-term experience.
6. Actively manage the proposed transition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interview stakeholders extensively. • Use the opportunity to describe how Doxa works. • Avoid rushing the process.

The Doxa approach emphasises the need for cooperative and synergistic arrangements involving the contributing schools, parents and a consenting student. There is a concentration on building a cohort that is likely to 'gel' together and to benefit from their Doxa experiences. Involved schools are reminded that students are expected to return to mainstream education and to provide a school-based mentor who is integral to the intervention.

This Stage is a time consuming, yet an essential aspect of the Program. The key selection criteria are: student willingness to attend, parent support and the school's attitude and effort to assist the student. The Principal involves Doxa teachers and youth workers in group and one-on-one interviews with key School staff which are central to decisions about an individual student and the make up of a given cohort. Selection is not based on previous school testing. Such information is seen to prejudice the professional decisions of the Doxa team.

¹⁶ Barone C, Iscoe E, Trickett E & Schmid K, 1998, 'An Ecologically Differentiated, Multifactor Model of Adolescent Network Orientation' *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 26 (3), June, pp 403–423.

Demand for the Program means that some students are rejected. The Doxa Principal provides extensive feedback to schools on un-successful candidates. This is consistent with a philosophy of assisting all schools to deal with at-risk students.

Doxa realises that student welfare support in schools is overstretched, and while a student place cannot be reserved, schools are encouraged to apply again in future intakes. Over time, Doxa has built up a strong relationship with a group of schools. This has been valuable particularly as it has been used by Doxa staff as an informal opportunity for professional development with mainstream schools.

Selection of students involved extensive staff time in the middle of the previous semester. This often includes 'getting to know' new applicant schools.

Feedback to non-successful schools does, however, have the advantage of allowing the expert knowledge of Doxa staff to find its way into schools. The need for school based professional development around this knowledge is extensive. There are arguments for a more systematic strategy by which Doxa could become a kernel of professional development for schools.

Comparing the Doxa Program with Best Practice. The Doxa approach in this Stage can be compared with the best practice literature by comparing Tables C1 and C3.

It is important to reiterate that much of this Stage is outside the current remit of the Doxa school. It has been included because there is considerable overlap between the evidence and what this report is implying should properly be common practice within regular schools. However, many schools have difficulty in accommodating the sorts of students who potentially would end up at Doxa. The philosophical underpinnings and the actions being promoted here, therefore, characterise, by necessity, the Doxa experience. The best practices suggested for the school level are currently built into the everyday interactions of Doxa.

One area that is not addressed in the literature and is characteristic of Doxa is the selection of students not only as individuals but also in terms of their perceived ability to form a coherent and workable group. Decisions about the composition of the group are often by consensus made on the basis of intuition and a 'gut feel'. There is an extraordinary amount of this implicit, experiential and practical knowledge available within Doxa that is used to the advantage of the Program.

Knowledge of the situations in schools has been built up over time as new cohorts of students are assessed to come into the Program. In addition, the Principal and other staff are constantly in schools during the implementation of other Program Stages. Doxa has supported the dissemination of knowledge about students at-risk through individualised professional development of teachers and by welcoming trainee teachers to act as volunteers. However, and not surprisingly, the influence of the school on the educational systems from which students are drawn is small.

Such intuitive and practical knowledge can become inextricable from particular staff or groups. A program can, therefore, be undermined by the over-reliance on the skills of existing staff. Turnover of staff can lead to institutional forgetting. Doxa has been fortunate to have had a highly competent long-serving leader for a period of over seven years. Two of the current teaching staff have been in place for less than two years and one youth worker has just commenced work at Doxa. The fact that they have had support from more experienced staff means that the staff as a whole are clear about how the Program should be implemented.

While there is a certain inevitability and value in using this practical knowledge, efforts to find a language to express it is important and is an objective of this study. Articulating the criteria on which decisions are made also strengthens the argument that there is a Doxa 'model' rather than simply a happy coincidence of remarkable teachers.

Stage 3.

Focus: Developing and implementing a plan for each student at Doxa

Locus of Action: Doxa School – West Melbourne

Table C5. Review of Best Practice – Creating a Transformational Educational Environment

Stage	Central concepts	Implications for action	References
Creating a transformative educational environment	The approaches recommended in the school of origin detailed in Stage 1 should also characterise the work in the Doxa school. There are though extra features that should be addressed.		
	Move the debate from self-esteem to self-efficacy. The emphasis should be on what students can do rather than who they are. Esteem is the result of doing things well rather than the other way round.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure student choices are a large part of the curriculum. • Encourage effort and persistence at difficult tasks. • Set practical tasks within specific contexts and domains linked to a particular goal. 	Pajares F, 'Current Directions in Self-efficacy Research' in Maehr M & Pintrich (eds), 1993, <i>Advances in motivation and achievement</i> , Vol 10, JAI Press Greenwich, CT, pp 1–49. Available at: http://www.des.emory.edu/mfp/efchapter.html
	Build trust and respect for students.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to students. • Validate and normalise the students' feelings as opposed to accepting inappropriate behaviour. • Assist students to solve their own problems. • Make interactions positive and honest. • Foster hope among students that they can achieve their goals. 	Brown D & Skinner D, 2007, 'Brown-Skinner Model for Building trust with at-Risk Students', <i>National forum of Applied Educational Research Journal</i> , 20 (3).
	Student centred schooling.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a positive personal relationship with an adult who can model appropriate social interactions and responsibilities. • Develop an explicit learning pathway in consultation with the student that ensures academic and vocational progression and success. • Build in the opportunity for constructive leisure activities. • Model appropriate behaviours. 	McCombs B & Whisler J, 1997, <i>The learner-centered classroom and school</i> , Jossey-Bass, San Francisco. Kinder K & Wilkin A, 1998, <i>With All Respect: Reviewing Disaffection Strategies</i> . NFER, Slough.
	Decision needed about dominant mode of instruction: behaviourist or constructionist.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pursue a balanced approach that carefully considers what should be taught explicitly, yet also consider how to capitalise on life experiences and discovery. 	Research is inconclusive but success can be seen in a combination of the two: McIntyre E, 1995, 'Teaching and learning writing skills in a low-SES, urban primary classroom', <i>Journal of Reading Behavior</i> , 27(2), 213–242.

Stage	Central concepts	Implications for action	References
	Cognitive oriented instruction in which students are explicitly taught and practise thinking skills across a variety of domains.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage the cognitive skills required for learning regardless of content. • Use a variety of language skills including reading, paraphrasing, hypothesising and problem solving, peer review of work, analysing tasks and planning appropriate strategies. 	<p>Pressley M & Harris, K, 1990, 'What we really know about strategy instruction' <i>Educational Leadership</i>, 48(1), 31-34.</p> <p>Pressley M, Woloshyn V, & Associates, 1995, <i>Cognitively oriented instruction that really improves children's academic performance</i> (2nd ed.), Brookline Books. Cambridge, MA.</p>
	Cooperative learning structures in which students can learn from each other.	<p>Cooperative structures are successful with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small groups in which everyone can work together on well-defined problems. • Mixed ability groupings. • Clear instructions and problems. 	Repman J, 1993, 'Collaborative, computer-based learning: Cognitive and affective outcomes' <i>Journal of Educational Computing Research</i> , 9(2), 149–163.
	Individual 1:1 tutoring.	<p>This can occur as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A teaching arrangement. • A volunteer program. • Peer-to-peer instruction. <p>Effectiveness relies on tutor training, a clear understanding of purpose, highly structured and close monitoring of progress and a willingness to adapt quickly. Formal mentoring programs have also been shown as effective.</p>	<p>Elbaum B, Vaughn S, Hughes M, & Moody S, 2000, 'How effective are one-to-one tutoring programs in reading for elementary students at risk for reading failure? A meta-analysis of the intervention research', <i>Journal of Educational Psychology</i>, 92(4), 605–619.</p> <p>Reglin G, 1998, <i>Mentoring students at risk: An underutilized alternative education strategy for K-12 teachers</i>. Springfield, IL, Charles C. Thomas.</p>
	Build individual self-efficacy and responsibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with students to manage the reason they have been or have sought exclusion from regular schooling. • Set clear goals and measures to gauge success. • Review goals regularly. 	<p>Obiakor F, 2006, 'Managing Anger of At-Risk Students Using a Comprehensive Support Model' <i>Multicultural Learning and Teaching</i>, 1(2), 3-12.</p> <p>Wheldall K & Panagopoloustamatelatu A, 1991, 'The effects of pupil self-recording on on-task behaviour on primary school children', <i>British Educational Research Journal</i>, 17(2) pp 113-120.</p>

The literature shows that over-arching experiences of schooling for students at-risk should be one of trust and respect.¹⁷ This can be achieved by listening to students and engaging them in those decisions that have an impact on them. Trust and respect builds positive working relations. The students' feelings can be recognised and validated by teachers but not necessarily accepted. Anger, for example, can be named and the focus can be transferred to the reason for its expression rather than accepting the behaviour or ignoring it.¹⁸

Creating an environment of trust is dependent on the skills of the staff and the ways in which they relate to the students. Schools, though, can be organised in a way to foster this trust. For example, placing students at the centre of the educational experience where negotiation, student decision-

¹⁷ Brown D & Skinner D, 2007, 'Brown-Skinner Model for Building trust with at-Risk Students', *National forum of Applied Educational Research Journal*, 20 (3).

¹⁸ Obiakor F, 2006, 'Managing Anger of At-Risk Students Using a Comprehensive Support Model' *Multicultural Learning and Teaching*, 1(2), 3-12.

making and dealing with consequence of choices can be part of everyday interactions within the school.¹⁹

Also, there may be more formal times when students present their work and reflect on their academic as well as their social progress within the school.²⁰ This so-called 'metacognition' helps students to step outside themselves and comment on their own development and change.²¹

Modes of instruction, student grouping, content, and the ways in which evidence of learning can be demonstrated need to be flexible to accommodate each of the student's various strengths. A personal 'portfolio' of each student's work which they compile and control has been found useful with all types of students including those at-risk.²²

Finally, there are debates about the promotion of self-esteem or self-efficacy. The latter focuses on what students can do. The former emphasises who they are. Self-efficacy seems to be more successful in building on and extending the functional skills of students.

Principles Underlying the Learning Environment at Doxa. Key principles that underlie the creation of an effective environment for learning are summarised in Table C5 below. As indicated earlier, the logic is based on information collected from a variety of sources based at the Doxa School.

Table C6. Program Logic – Creating a Learning Environment at Doxa School

Concepts	Actions
Decisions should be based on the assumption that a student can change. Delivery incorporates: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • positive reinforcement and student success • respect for each other • ownership of behaviour • safe and supporting space for learning • content that is central to future academic achievement. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use all the approaches that have been suggested to make the mainstream school inclusive, particularly emphasising building on the strengths of students. [PD] Train volunteers and implement an explanatory manual for reference.
1. Create a safe and inclusive space for learning.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure the day tightly. • Ensure consistency. • Make explicit the structures. • Strengthen the students' relationships with youth workers. • Ensure consistency among all staff.
2. Develop a strong sense and experience of community while avoiding dependence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rotate volunteers to avoid over-dependence or permanently segregating students from the group. • Undertake whole group activities such as those that are based on home groups and individual work.
3. Focus on literacy, numeracy and the study of society and the environment because these are central to successful community participation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailor problems to the individual students. • Set challenging problems that also ensure success.
4. Acknowledge that students learn, present their work and should be assessed in different ways.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a variety of media such as photography, art or computer graphics as a form of communication and expression.

¹⁹ Kinder K & Wilkin A, 1998, *With All Respect: Reviewing Disaffection Strategies*. Slough, NFER.

²⁰ Biggs J, 1988, 'The role of metacognition in enhancing learning', *Australian Journal of Education*, 32 (2), pp 127-138.

²¹ Commander N & Valeri-Gold M, 2001, 'The learning portfolio: A valuable tool for increasing metacognitive awareness', *The Learning Assistance Review* 6(2), 5-18.

²² Seidel S, Walters J, Kirby E, Olf N, Powell K & Veenema S, 1997, *Portfolio Practices: Thinking through the assessment of children's work..* NEA Professional Library Washington, D.C.

Concepts	Actions
5. Promote student centred schooling through fostering student choice and negotiation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design individual programs for each student. • Keep learning groups small and staff/adult ratios high. • Ensure each student has an individual work plan based on a definable, negotiated goal. • Support students through trained and competent volunteers. • Vary learning interactions by having 1:1, small group and whole group activities. • Reduce student competitiveness. • Review students' progress regularly and fine-tune teaching methods and content. • Devote time to electives which the students choose. • Ensure electives are structured but are in media that demand personal student choice such as the current art (photography), drama and drumming. • Promote physical and fitness activities that could be pursued in later life but are not reliant on teams.
6. Avoid an accumulation of the students' failures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set achievable problems and tasks. • Acknowledge and publicly celebrate individuals' success. • Provide weekly awards that work towards rewards that are individualised and desirable for the particular student.
7. Promote an environment of 'meta-analysis' in which students reflect on their own behaviour and its consequences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for students to present their work and achievements to their peers. • Be explicit about unacceptable behaviour and structure individual counselling on an 'as needed' basis.

Creating individualised plans for each student is a key strength of the Program. These are planned around the assessments made in the transition Stage and also attempt to keep students on track to resume specific content studies when they return to their mainstream school. Nevertheless, there are common principles that form the basis for action and have stood the test of experience of many cohorts. The school has learnt from some early failures, consistent with the truism that cutting-edge complex innovatory interventions such as this Doxa Program take time to consolidate.

Students take part in three major elements involving: literacy, numeracy and studies about society (SOSE in the Victorian curriculum). This is undertaken every morning. An afternoon component involves skill acquisition and healthy living. While teachers take the morning sessions, youth workers coordinate the less formal aspects offered in the afternoon. Contact with youth workers at this time is designed to facilitate outreach when students return to their schools.

The emphasis in all components is on student success, and individual accountability. Anti-social behaviour is confronted by reference to an explicit code of conduct and individual internal counselling.

The experience of the staff and careful selection of volunteers allows a considerable degree of individual support. At the same time, there is an attempt to build cohesion within the group. Rewards are used to emphasise positive achievements and student products (such as art pieces) are displayed. Fortnightly meetings of staff monitor progress and identify students who need different emphases in their learning programs. Occasionally students receive external therapeutic assistance. The fact that the Principal does not have a formal teaching load enables her to coordinate the Program and to facilitate these adjustments.

An indicator of the success of this Stage of the Program is the high attendance rate of the students, some of whom travel long distances or for long periods (compared to the situations in their original schools) to attend the school.

Comparing the Doxa Program with Best Practice. The Doxa approach in this Stage can be compared with the best practice literature by comparing Tables C6 and C5.

There is obviously considerable synergy between best practice as defined in the literature and the work of Doxa, particularly in the focus on trust and respect of students and placing them at the centre of the learning experience. Many schools often claim student-centred learning; however, the reality can be quite different. This is not always the fault of regular schools. Large number of students in a class, traditional teaching arrangements and the demands from government and the community for common and pre-defined standards can all mitigate student-centred schooling.

Doxa does an exemplary job in turning the rhetoric of a student-centred curriculum into a reality while maintaining some acknowledgement of the demands of regular schools. The structural features of the Program particularly curriculum freedom, small group sizes and the fact it is a relatively short and sharp intervention helps considerably.

Doxa extends beyond the literature by having a keen understanding of group dynamics and how these can contribute to positive learning outcomes. For example, actions to create a cohesive group, while simultaneously avoiding dependency on a particular staff member or activity, is an important feature. Students are encouraged and given the skills to form interdependent, rather than dependent or unrealistic independent, relationships.

Stage 4.

Planning for the transition to a mainstream setting

Locus of Action: Doxa School and destination school, training or employment agency

Evidence from Best Practice. The literature summarised in Table C6 reveals that transition to a new school for students at-risk needs to be carefully and actively managed. It takes time. Similarly, the transition from a specialist setting back to a regular school requires equal care.

As argued previously, transition needs to be a joint activity that occurs over time. It is a **process** rather than a single event. Given the number of players that would be involved with students at-risk and their parents, strong partnerships, rather than those that are ad hoc, opportunistic or merely serendipitous, need to be developed.

Partnerships are a way of sharing information and processes, avoiding duplication, creating a more seamless service system and achieving better outcomes for students. *VicHealth*, for example, has developed a short tool based on the current research to develop and monitor partnerships between community organisations which could easily be adapted for the Program.²³

Although there has been little formal research on the reintegration of at-risk students into mainstream schools, there are a number of key principles that are regarded as best practice:

- Negotiate the destination school or workplace with the students and key stakeholders.
- Work with the students so that they are familiar with their new school or workplace. This will normally involve site visits or 'trial runs'.
- Involve the destination school or work site so they are aware of the support the student may require and how such support can be provided.
- Specify existing and new contacts for the student so they do not feel isolated within the new environment.

Table C7. Review of Best Practice – Planning for Transition to a Mainstream Setting

Stage	Central Concepts	Implications for action	References
<p><i>Planning for the transition to a normalised setting</i></p> <p><i>Location: Doxa school and destination school, training or employment agency</i></p>	Actively manage the process.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share excluded students equitably across schools and training institutions to avoid concentrating these students in a single location. • Develop a reintegration plan for each student. This is a cooperative effort between alternative school staff, those of the destination school, parents and normally the student. • Focus on the 'desired outcome' for the student and interim targets or 'milestones'. • Endeavour to address any external issues that led to the student being excluded in the first place eg ensuring parents have access to needed services. • Work with the destination site to prepare it for the reintegrating student dealing with any concerns and/or any special provisions that might be necessary such as initial dual enrolment or the provision of AuStudy. • See transition as a process rather than a single event. 	<p>This is described as best practice (rather than formal research.)</p> <p>See: http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/management/atoz/p/permanentlyexcludedchildren/ http://www3.lancashire.gov.uk/corporate/vacancies/viewDoc.asp?id=38473</p>

²³ VicHealth, 2003, The Partnerships Analysis Tool, Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, Melbourne, available at: www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/assets/contentFiles/VHP%20part.%20tool_low%20res.pdf

- Familiarise students with destination institution prior to the formal transition.
- Support each reintegrated student through youth worker visits. The length of time for this varies. The support can also be achieved through electronic communications.

Principles Underlying the Doxa to Mainstream School²⁴ Linkage. Doxa is a short-term intervention. Students and their original schools are of course aware of this. However, for the student, the contrast between the Doxa experience and that of being in a regular school is marked. For example, Doxa's effort to build the sense of being part of a successful community of learners is usually vastly different from their experiences in regular schooling. One response is for students to want to continue their success at Doxa and stay on longer than the six months.

Doxa tries to avoid this type of dependence through the outreach strategy. The roles of youth workers on the staff are critical in determining success. Ways of achieving this are to clarify expectations among students, keeping the idea of 'moving on' at the forefront of the curriculum and starting the formal transition early.

Mentors in the mainstream schools are also an integral part of the transition process as they will be the agents who effectively carry the primary responsibility for the day-to-day integration of the student back into the school, or into an alternative one.

Transition is a key issue and requires an up-to-date knowledge of the alternatives that do exist and to build relationships with schools to ensure that the Doxa placement has a good chance of success. A range of alternatives needs to be developed. First, a single destination will not suit all Doxa students. Second, placing Doxa students disproportionately in a single school would have the effect of distorting the population in that school. Making students aware of alternatives also engenders within students the idea that change, reintegration and success are possible.

The synergy between the strengths of a particular student, and the destination school needs to be obvious to all stakeholders. Often this will be a tacit 'hunch' that the placement will be successful. There is value though in trying to articulate this with each student as part of their ongoing awareness of the changes they are making.

When the student decides to return to their original school, the reasons for their original exclusion should be addressed directly. The student needs to understand the changes they have achieved. Similarly, the school should be able to articulate how it has changed to accommodate this student more productively in the future.

Beginning the transition early is important because the demands of the new environment can be used to shape the student's goals and work at Doxa. This would normally require site visits and a 'trial run' for students. Such trials might go for three or four days. This is a two-way process. The student gets used to the new environment. The new school gets to know the student. Both can make a judgment on how successful this school is likely to be.

²⁴ The term 'school' is used throughout these stages even though some students will proceed to a variety of organisations including TAFE colleges, apprenticeships and employment.

Table C8. Program logic – Doxa to Mainstream School Linkage

Concepts	Actions
1. Maintain connection with original school.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for ways to keep the student connected with their previous school and friends if this is important to the student. • Acknowledge some students may have 'burnt their bridges' in this school that would make reintegration impossible.
2. Plan transition.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Start early. • Involve students and parents in the transition decision. • Maintain key characteristics of curriculum practice in the transition phase such as student choice and decision making. • Match the transitioning environment to the student's strengths and interests. • Build on the relationship with the appropriate youth worker as they will facilitate the transition. • Negotiate expected outcomes with the student. • Familiarise the student with the new environment before the formal transition occurs. • Give the student social experience in the 'new' school. • Reflect on these first hand experiences back at Doxa. • Meet with the 'new' school, Doxa staff, the student and their parents.
3. Build a partnership with the destination agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain a good understanding of the options that are available. • Familiarise the 'new' school with the philosophy and practice of Doxa by stressing such things as a belief in all students' potential. • Build a partnership between the two organisations including accepted protocols and ways of working together.
4. Select a committed mentor.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the school-based mentor for the student. • Require the mentor to visit Doxa at least four times before the transition occurs. • Ensure the mentor has a formal role within the school.
5. Round off the Doxa experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assist students to prepare a portfolio on what they have learnt at Doxa. • Encourage students to use a variety of ways to present their information. • Celebrate successes as individuals and as a group. • Implement a graduation ceremony for students and is attended by the students and their parents. • Assure the students that as graduands they are still connected to Doxa.

Comparing the Doxa Program with Best Practice. The Doxa approach can be compared with the best practice literature by comparing Tables C8 and C7.

A comparison between the literature and the logic in the actions of Doxa demonstrates a considerable overlap. Some features, however, could be strengthened. For example partnerships between Doxa and the destination schools could be made a little more formal. A more structural approach canvassed in the literature would be helpful.

It is extremely difficult to maintain viable partnerships when students come from such geographically diverse areas. The most appropriate destination might not be realistic for students because of its location. Local solutions are nearly always more effective.

There would be some value for Doxa to work with government and independent school authorities to find ways of extending the range of options for young people who have passed through the Doxa Program. This, of course, needs to be a long-term strategy, but even in the short term, there would be some value in making contact with a range of agencies within the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

Doxa provides a model that could be adopted or adapted by educational systems. The model is one of a dedicated centre for at-risk students that would serve the needs of a small cluster of schools. This is in contrast to a model where an individual school provides a 'special' program for students at-risk. Anecdotal evidence about such programs shows that they have a high risk of alienating parents and reducing 'mainstream' enrolments. A cluster model might be more acceptable to a community because it locates the resources for at-risk students out of an individual school.

Stage 5

Monitoring students' placement

Locus of Action: Doxa School and destination school, training or employment agency

Evidence from Best Practice. There is scant specific research on reintegration and the monitoring of students' progress²⁵. However, a number of critical ideas emerge from, or are implied by, the existing literature. Positive outcomes for the student are more likely if there is a high level of synergy between the specialist setting and the destination school. Such positive outcomes include student retention, engagement and participation. There needs to be clear continuity between the two placements. For example staff need to understand their roles and the expectations they have of others.²⁶

Table C9. Review of Best Practice – Monitoring Student Placement and Phasing Out Support

Stage	Central Concepts	Implications for action	References
<p><i>Monitoring students' placement and phasing out support</i></p> <p><i>Doxa school and destination school, training or employment agency</i></p>	<p>Involvement of Doxa staff or internal mentors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appoint school-based mentors to work with individuals. • Ensure such mentors receive professional development on how they should work. • Set goals and monitor achievement. • Review adequacy of goals and measures used. 	<p>Slicker E & Palmer D, 1993, 'Mentoring At-Risk High School Students: Evaluation of a School-Based Program', <i>School Counsellor</i>, 40(5) pp 327-34, May.</p> <p>Compared to controls, mentored students were no less likely to drop out of school and did not raise self-concept or academic achievement. Comparisons between effectively and ineffectively mentored students revealed differences that suggest the need for professional development.</p> <p>Similar inconclusive results or those showing mentors from the community have little impact on at-risk student performance have been shown in McPartland J & Nettles S, 1991, Using Community Adults as Advocates or Mentors for At-Risk Middle School Students, <i>American Journal of Education</i>.</p>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure a consistent relationship between student and Doxa staff. • Schedule higher level contact in the first few weeks at the destination site. • Support a site-based mentor for the student. • Fade the support from Doxa staff eg replace personal visits with telephone calls. • Work with mentor to ensure any other services and agencies to support the family are put in place. 	

²⁵ Shinn M, Powell-Smith K, Good R & Baker S, 1997, 'The effects of reintegration into general education reading instruction for students with mild disabilities', *Exceptional Children*, 64.

²⁶ JustChildren, 2004, *A Summary of Best Practices of School Reentry for Incarcerated Youth Returning Home*, JustChildren, Legal Aid Justice Center.

Another theme that emerges in the literature is the positive impact of school attachment.²⁷ The student's sense of belonging, safety and commitment to the destination school have all been shown as markers of attachment. These are often hard to measure and rely sometimes purely on intuitive responses and the practical knowledge that teachers and youth workers have accrued over many years.²⁸

Reintegration has been shown to fail when the destination school is exactly the same as the student's original school, or the original school has not changed. The model of a specialist setting is not so much about 'making good' at-risk students; rather it is about changing the experience of schooling so that these students can succeed.

Principles underlying the post-Doxa monitoring student placement and phasing out support. The reason the Program exists is to support students who have found it difficult, if not impossible, to succeed in regular schooling. This report has argued that mainstream schooling needs to change to accommodate these students more effectively. However, such change is beyond the scope and reach of Doxa. However, Doxa can help and support schools if they wish to become more inclusive of these students.

Consequently many regular schools will find it difficult to make the necessary changes. To some extent students need also to modify their previous, unsuccessful behaviour and expectations. One of the assumptions underlying the Program is that valuing and building on every student's strengths and reinforcing their self-efficacy, **and** helping schools to modify current practices will lead to more successful reintegration. Successful reintegration is a process of 'dialogue'.

Doxa takes a role in this through the continued involvement of youth workers and the designation of school-based mentors. There needs to be a gradual handover of responsibility for the student's welfare from Doxa to the destination school. This will take a little time. Typically, at the beginning, there will be high support, and this will fade as the student becomes more productive in their new situation.

A role for Doxa is to reassure employers and teachers in mainstream schools that help is available if necessary. Assistance can take a variety of forms and could range from listening to their narrative about what is happening, to developing a plan to get over a particular crisis. Students, too, need to be reassured that they are not being abandoned by Doxa.

For some of Doxa's students, any change is always going to be difficult. There will be some regression to previous patterns of behaviour. Such patterns are known and familiar and these students often draw comfort from them. If such behaviour does emerge, it should not be seen as a failure of the Doxa Program or the School. Regressive behaviour, in most cases, is an effort by the student to communicate a level of discomfort they feel in their new environment.

For some students, return to their original school is deemed to be not appropriate, and an option is a school that operates on the logic outlined in Table C2. There are but a small number of schools in Victoria that work extremely well with at-risk students. In these schools, students are likely to integrate successfully with a minimum of concern for youth workers and mentors and progress to TAFE or employment or even back to their schools of origin.

²⁷ Hill L & Werner N, 2006, 'Affiliative motivation, school attachment, and aggression in school', *Psychology in the Schools*, 43 (2) pp 231–246.

²⁸ Blum R, 2005, 'A Case for School Connectedness', *The Adolescent Learner*, 62(7), pp 16-20.

Table C10. Program logic – Monitoring Student Placement and Phasing Out of Support

Concepts	Actions
1. Maintaining contact and monitor progress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assure destination schools that integration or re-integration of the Doxa student will be monitored. • Emphasise help will be provided if serious problems arise. • Continue to be in contact with students that have left their educational setting.
2. See all former students as part of the 'Doxa family'.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage and celebrate ex-student contacts with Doxa.

Comparing the Doxa Program with Best Practice. The Doxa approach in this Stage can be compared with the best practice literature by comparing Tables C10 and C9.

There is scant literature on the use of mentors with students-at risk. What is available tends to show that mentors could have a greater impact. The literature, though, does not really reflect the approach Doxa takes. Mentors in the literature are normally taken to mean people from the community who come into the school.

Doxa, in contrast, designates a permanent person from within the school who can act as an ongoing reference point and contact for the student. This approach to mentorship emphasises the permanent and consistent nature of the relationship rather than something that is temporary and ad hoc.

Mentors in the Doxa model may be student welfare coordinators. However, this person is just as likely to be a classroom teacher. The point is not the role, but the quality of the relationship that develops 'naturally' on the basis of contact and over time.

Section D. Summary and Suggestions for the Future

Overall, this report reveals a high consistency between the relevant best practice about educating students at-risk, and principles underlying the design of the existing Doxa School - West Melbourne. These conclusions complement previous research because they provide an enhanced conceptualisation of **what** takes place in the Program that leads to strong and positive outcomes for the students who are selected for the Program²⁹. It is remarkable that a small school that is on the edge of the educational mainstream could provide an intervention regarded as exemplary; a lighthouse to be emulated in other settings.

While there are many factors that have led to this positive outcome, there is no doubt that those involved with the Program have learnt from their experiences over past years. The Program can now be thought of as a mature innovation, well funded and well specified, so that staff responsible for implementation are in possession of a clear practical understanding of how the Program is meant to be delivered and why. Individual staff know their roles and how they complement what others contribute. The Program requires highly dedicated professionals who must work in a constantly demanding environment. These elements, taken together, help to explain the current success of the West Melbourne Program. The Program is valued by the education communities it serves, and by those who support the students who have been fortunate enough to gain entry and to benefit by the Doxa experience.

There are several factors that contribute to the current situation. A dominant one has been the drive of the Principal. Not only has she a personal grasp of much of the literature presented in this report but has also been the prime mover in translating this knowledge into a workable intervention.

DYF must now consider how it should support such interventions in the future. We believe that the Program is of high quality and meets a need; a need that is likely to increase. DYF could assist by providing some additional support in the form of a youth worker to support students and families, once the existing outreach period is completed. The consolidation of clusters of current schools linked to a Doxa School should be supported.

It would seem important for the combined effectiveness of the DYF commitment to education, to provide formal avenues whereby the two Doxa schools could share their experiences and learn from each other. The DYF should encourage such links between staff at West Melbourne and Bendigo, which were initially strong, but seem to have fallen away due to pressures caused by implementing their programs at each site.

A broader view is to use DYF resources to influence the quality of education for students at-risk across the State, and to work across cross-sectoral boundaries including the government sector. As mentioned there are few educational organisations that are similar to Doxa.

At a still broader level, there is ample evidence that mainstream schools require assistance to cater for at-risk students. This assistance is needed to enable schools to understand problems that at-risk students bring with them to schools and to devise strategies for dealing with these students at the school and classroom levels. Some schools seem to offer mainstream programs that take into account the needs of the set of students classed as being at-risk, one example is Fitzroy Secondary College. Others have offered 'special' programs for this group of students, but, as indicated earlier in this report, schools that have implemented such programs find that they run a risk of alienating parents and others concerned with reputation and the diversion of resources to alternative programs within the school. The study has argued that the model offered by Doxa has more potential than one in which individual schools offer specialist programs for students at-risk.

The extension of this model will require additional support from the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, given the majority of students of this age cohort are enrolled in government schools. DYF could, however, influence the future of mainstream policy based on the Doxa model by initiating discussions with relevant government departments

²⁹ The combined findings from this study and those of the Australian Youth Research Centre investigation can be regarded as an process-outcomes approach to evaluation.

about the worth of the model it currently underwrites. One could imagine in the long term a series of Doxa like clusters linked to a set of proximate schools across the State.

This would also assist the current Program. The Program appears to have the most chance of success if Doxa can maintain a relationship with a small group of schools, in which the youth workers and mentors can establish sustainable relationships. A concentration on already known schools would considerably reduce the resources applied to selection processes in addition to improving Program outcomes.

While such an expansion would require significant government (and non-government) resources, an immediate need that DYF could fund is to act as a kernel of information about educating students at risk and the application of the Doxa (and similar) models. This would be based on the existing expertise located in the Doxa schools but could also include the experiences and expertise of similar schools in Australia and elsewhere. The availability of electronic dissemination avenues would complement personalised methods of communication to schools and school systems. This already happens in ad-hoc ways, through informal channels and by individual staff from the Doxa School providing professional development to schools.

The creation of clearinghouse by the DYF (or in conjunction with a related section of a government department) would provide a significant input to the increase of quality of outcomes for students at-risk. This would contribute to a long-term goal to reduce the variance in student performance of Australian students. International comparisons of student performance have commented on the fact that, while mean performance of our students compares well with other countries, we do not do so well in terms of the variation of performance. Thus the Doxa model could be supported on the basis of an argument that is likely to resonate with those who value national educational comparisons.

It would be of course necessary to staff such a clearinghouse with appropriate expertise. While we are not in the position to be directive about such matters, it should be noted that the present School Principal at the Doxa School - West Melbourne has impressive credentials to become centrally involved in such a venture. In a sense she has made her mark on the existing Program. We have commented earlier that this Program is mature, runs well and achieves commendable outcomes. It is unlikely that the Program would fall away if the Principal agreed to an expansion of her role. DYF might consider a central role for her if they see their way clear to expanding their influence across educational systems in this State.

E. Appendix

Biographies of the researchers

Dr John Owen

John Owen was Director, Centre for Program Evaluation at The University of Melbourne for ten years from 1992. He has undertaken a range of evaluation work over three decades and has a particular interest in the use of new knowledge for organisational decision-making and improvement. He is the author of a well-known resource text on program evaluation.

Dr John McLeod

John McLeod has been an independent consultant evaluator since 1990. He has evaluated many programs in the human services, public health, education and disability. This work has been commissioned from state and Australian governments and community-based organisations.

Ms Pamela Andrew

Pamela Andrew has been a teacher and lecturer in science education and information technology, and has undertaken a range of educational evaluation studies. She is particularly interested in social science methods and the appropriate use of electronic methods of data capture and analysis.