Achieving successful outcomes through Alternative Education Provision: an international literature review

Research synthesis

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About the authors

Paul Gutherson
Paul is a research consultant for TAC, a part of CfBT Education Trust. He has worked on a range of national and local programmes within children's, young people's and adult services. His career has focused on developing high quality evidence-based programmes supporting children, young people and adults as well as contributing to the evidence base through rigorous research studies.

He has a great deal of knowledge and expertise related to integrated working and multi-agency approaches to improving outcomes for children and young people, and other stakeholders working within the policy context of the Every Child Matters: Change for Children agenda, as well as related policy areas such as Youth Matters, Care Matters and wider social and regeneration policy.

Helen Davies
Helen is a highly skilled trainer and consultant with extensive experience across the children's workforce. She has worked closely with the Department for Education (DfE), the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA), the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) and the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) on national professional development and change management projects. Helen also works with local authorities across England to support their implementation of the Every Child Matters agenda.

Ted Daszkiewicz
Ted is a training and development consultant for TAC, with broad experience in working across the children's workforce. He has a psychology background and around 15 years of experience in working directly with young people and practitioners in a variety of settings, as well as a number of years of senior management experience in young people's services. This has included working within the areas of substance misuse, behaviour change and management, careers and education. His experience also covers a number of different approaches to working with children and young people, including Transactional Analysis, NLP, Brief/Solution focused therapy and Motivational Interviewing. He co-developed the Motivational Dialogue approach to behaviour change in young people and families.

Research synthesis

Introduction

Alternative Education Provision (AEP) is designed to serve young people whose needs are not being met and who, for a variety of reasons, are not succeeding in a traditional learning environment.

Current AEP provision is highly diverse and there is no one single AEP delivery model, purpose or beneficiary group. Provision varies between public, private and third sector initiatives, including online provision, work-based learning and vocational education.

It is important to have a clear picture of effective AEP – not only the *what* but also the *how* and *why* – as the costs of failing young people are significant, not just for the young person and their family but in terms of the wider cost for society.

There is also an inherent political, social and economic tension between the need to make effective alternative provision for disengaged young people and the imperative for a clear return on investment in what remains a minority of learners.
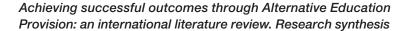
Right learner, right programme

Young people may be in AEP for one or more of a range of reasons, any of which may put them 'at risk' of educational, economic or social exclusion. These range from learning and/or behavioural difficulties and attendance issues to complex social and emotional needs, care responsibilities, health problems, history of offending, disadvantaged family backgrounds or challenging personal histories.

Effective and comprehensive assessment is fundamental to making AEP work for individual young people. Familiarity with the different approaches to assessment should be matched by competence in choosing the most appropriate methods for particular situations and groups of young people. Effective assessment of need is holistic and balances levels of need against risk factors, identifying potential barriers to engagement in terms of maturity of thinking, literacy skills and lifestyle issues, all of which should influence how, where and when work is undertaken.

As part of a holistic assessment, it may be appropriate to involve family members as well as the young person, during – or after – the initial assessment process, so that parents/carers can provide support for the young person in engaging with their programme.

Assessment should not be a 'one off' or 'top and tail' activity – it must be ongoing, so that 'distance travelled' can be assessed accurately at any stage of the programme. Ongoing assessment engages young people as it reviews and rewards progress, highlights areas of further or ongoing need, and is based upon a sustained relationship with the young person (and their parents/carers).

Programmes that… are rooted in a culture of empowerment, collaboration and support are more effective than blame based or aversion therapy approaches…

What works?

There is no standard blueprint for an effective intervention. No single approach is manifestly more effective than any other, and many could arguably be characteristics or components of effective education in any setting or context.

Effective AEP typically demonstrates high expectations and aspirations, within an environment that fosters education, emotional well-being and a sense of pride and safety.

Small class sizes and high staff/learner ratios support flexible 'can do' programmes that are usually person centred, and can be customised to individual needs, but are also purposeful, with a firm and transparent emphasis on goals and outcomes.

Key to success is a stable group of caring, knowledgeable and committed staff, supported by ongoing professional development, within a wider 'safety net' of links to multiple agencies, partners and community organisations. This enables them to foster relationships based on respect, with careful and thoughtful use of appropriate incentives and rewards, and to cultivate a sense of 'community' among students and between students, families and teachers. This in turn ensures that students have the support they need to persevere and make progress, characterised by listening, caring and respectful relationships, with teachers perceived as honest, sensitive and understanding.

The young person at the centre

Programmes that give young people a voice and are rooted in a culture of empowerment, collaboration and support are more effective than blame based or aversion therapy approaches, such as Restorative Justice, Boot Camp and 'Scared Straight'. Programmes around leadership, physical activity or physical challenge are particularly successful in building self-esteem and promoting positive social relationships.

Effective use of the curriculum is characterised by flexibility and the use of appropriate strategies to address issues such as anger management, team building, personal safety, self-esteem, sexual health and opportunities for peer instruction.

Approaches that avoid stigmatising or demonising challenging young people, focusing instead on interpersonal, cognitive and social skills, give young people the confidence to manage relationships, complete their education, and live and work independently.

Return to success?

Where reintegration to mainstream is the stated aim of provision, the evidence endorses reaching out proactively to young people – physically, emotionally and repeatedly – through named contacts or key workers and flexible options in terms of curriculum, delivery and timetabling.

Keeping young people on the school roll and/or maintaining contact through collaboration between the alternative programme and mainstream provision creates an expectation of a return to education and increases ownership by schools of a successful re-engagement and longer-term positive outcomes.

AEP models for reconnecting and re-engaging young people may be equally valid in the mainstream setting.

Effective re-engagement requires a whole school philosophy and approach, built on shared staff awareness and understanding, and the establishment of credible relationships of trust with young people, parents and carers.

Is it worth the effort?

Some potential outcomes are difficult to measure, may not emerge until some time after the intervention or cannot be attributed solely to AEP. Disengaged young people are not a homogeneous group; no single set of outcomes is equally relevant and meaningful to all young people, or to the other key stakeholders – parents/carers, funders, providers and assessors.

Typically, one would expect one or more of a range of 'hard' and 'soft' outcomes. 'Hard' outcomes may include: improved school attendance, academic attainment; reduction in disruptive, violent or offending behaviours; fewer exclusions or suspensions.

'Soft' outcomes may include greater self-esteem, confidence, motivation and health awareness; increased ability to work collaboratively; ability to cope with authority and develop and sustain relationships (family, project staff, and peers).

Recommendations

Ongoing research
The review has identified evidence of key characteristics of successful AEP, including the outcomes that could reasonably be expected and how they can be measured. The ongoing sustainability of these programmes will require detailed evidence of a direct causal link between the characteristics of successful AEP and positive outcomes. A key area for further development would be **rigorous evaluation research** to document the effectiveness of Alternative Education Programmes in ways that could more closely **link *specific* programme characteristics with *specific* student outcomes**. This would be an essential prerequisite for the potential development of a formal Framework that could be used as a stand-alone assessment tool and/or as part of a Quality Badge/Kitemark process.

AEP Framework and Differentiated Model
Combining effective 'inputs' and outcomes drawn from the literature provides an opportunity to develop an **AEP Framework** that could be applied equally across alternative and mainstream settings.

The Framework would identify the appropriate tools and evidence for measuring or assessing the effectiveness of both inputs and outcomes. It would include robust methodologies for involving young people in monitoring, evaluating and reviewing their own behaviours and identifying the impacts and outcomes that are relevant and meaningful from their point of view.

AEP models for reconnecting and re-engaging young people may be equally valid in the mainstream setting. This would create possibilities for developing and extending a **differentiated AEP methodology** into mainstream provision.

This approach would fit with the increasing trend in some local authorities to support troubled or challenging young people within mainstream schools, rather than risk marginalisation in special units or programmes.

The AEP Framework… could underpin any potential development of an accredited Quality Badge/Kitemark…

Ensuring high quality in AEP

There is some support for an accountability system for AEP that captures a richer idea of 'success in education', as well as a 'Quality Kitemark' scheme.

The review supports this and aims to build a clearer picture of what any such accountability system or Kitemark scheme could capture, in order to evidence the effectiveness of AEP appropriately.

The AEP Framework, once developed and validated, could underpin any potential development of an accredited **Quality Badge/Kitemark**, as part of a wider accountability system for AEP. This would be available to all providers of learning that comes within the definitions of AEP and that has been judged to offer good quality teaching and learning experiences, within a safe environment, where risk is assessed and managed effectively.

The research

The central research question for the literature review was 'How are successful outcomes achieved for different client groups through Alternative Education Provision?'

This central question was broken down further into a number of sub-questions that were used to inform the development of inclusion and exclusion criteria:

- What characteristics of AEP are thought to be important to achieve successful outcomes?

- What forms of AEP have been found to have a measurable impact on children, young people and their families?

- What are the most effective ways of measuring outcomes for young people?

The authors designed a search strategy that expanded the search to incorporate the wider body of evidence, for example from work-based learning or the outcomes of wider youth programmes. This was necessary to ensure that enough potentially relevant research was identified from which robust conclusions and recommendations could be drawn.

Whilst the methodology employed for the literature review was similar to that used in formal systematic reviewing, the commissioners also wished to find examples of promising practice. For this reason, the search included inspection and regulatory bodies, think-tank publications, practice guides and government guidance where examples of evaluated practice might be found.

The full research report is available free from www.cfbt.com/evidenceforeducation.