Chapter 8
"Opportunity to Re-engage": Alternative Education Programs and Pathways for Youths Who "Don't Fit"

Engagement as an act of commitment brings with it the opportunity to flourish and to grow in positive ways as a result of learning. It is both an outcome and a means to an outcome. In an educational context, students engage by participating in the learning occasions and opportunities that are presented within their school context. This assumes that such occasions and opportunities exist and that they are accessible, as argued in Chap. 3. It also assumes that students have the cognitive, affective, and behavioral wherewithal to recognize and act on what others create and to create opportunities for themselves as a form of agentic engagement (Reeve, 2013). Doing so might be considered as "getting with it" when the "it" that students "get with" captures their grasp of productive potential in the opportunity.

"Getting with it" is engaging. At a face level, it means students become actively involved with the learning of a task in decidedly receptive ways. Students who consistently perform well typically realize what they are doing when strengthening their acumen. They also reinforce the content, procedural, and conditional knowledge gained from the encounter for later reference (Corbett, & Anderson, 1994; Gutman, 2017; Nissim, Weissblueth, Scott-Webber & Amar, 2016; Pintrich, 2002). They are metacognitive. But, when they or their underperfoming peers see tasks as unfamiliar or perplexing, they will need guidance with procedural knowledge if they are to engage productively.

Most students engage easily, often, and usually on the focal "it" that others such as parents, teachers, and acquaintances provide in helping them move forward through zones of proximal development (Wertsch, 1984) to new levels of knowledge, awareness, and skills. Moving oneself along as both the source of engagement and learner in the engaging moment may be a little more complex but is just as important (Blaschke & Hase, 2016). In either case, distraction occurs from time to time, for example, when competing opportunities or fatigue are at play, and we may not always recognize or remember the procedural and conditional operations that have previously helped our progression. But most of us maintain our engagement sufficiently to learn enough of most things in mainstreaming our way through our years at school or at college. We do it well—and so we do well. We flourish. We

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reach, and pass through, the opportunity thresholds by initiating, maintaining, growing, and reaping the personal and social rewards of engagement and the productive involvement that materializes in learning and development opportunities at school (Fitzpatrick & Pagani, 2013; Van Ryzin, 2011). But not all of us do it well. In fact, some of us don't do it at all.

Case Vignette: A Marginalized Learner Engages with Engaging, Learns, and Loves It
(Based on data derived from an Australian Research Council-funded project on alternative education)

Setting: Opportunity time in an alternative education program

Situation: Class about to convene spontaneously with an activity intended as social literacy development

Persons Involved: Focal student, Terry; classmates, notably Franz and Indika; teachers, Paul and Nancy (colleague, Jeff; principal, Mr. Wintour); cleaner, Nick

Background

Terry had his 15th birthday yesterday and enjoyed the cake the class had made and eaten and the singing everyone had done of "Happy Birthday." He hoped that maybe the teasing and name-calling that had dogged him at other schools was over. "Dumb-ass Terry," "no lunch, no books Terry," "tut-tut Terry," and "teary Terry," they'd called him. He hated those names but had come to believe there was some truth to them. He knew he was dumb, and there was never food enough at home to bring for lunch, and he never had owned a book to bring on "bring-your-own-book days." One of his teachers had motivated the "tut-tut" tease with her frequent tut-tutting to what she described as Terry's reluctance to try, failure to listen, or so many of the other put-downs. Her words had lashed his halting attempts to read more fluently or faster, or to explain the meanings behind what he could read, or to write his own thoughts in ways she understood. She was right finally, he thought. He'd stopped trying long ago. Until now.

He was attending an alternative education program run as a flexi-school by a nongovernment organization and had been there for almost a year. He'd been a habitual truant before, running off regularly since Year 3 from the state schools he had attended. Most of the time, he had minimal school attendance during Years 3 and 4. Terry had often been suspended for misbehavior—usually for unexplained nonattendance or fighting in the classroom or playground—and excluded three times before his admission last year to the Glipney Flexible Learning School.

The schools he'd left had constructed a record that Glipney Flexi teachers, Paul and Nancy, had shown to him and discussed with him when he first started at this school. There were no good items on the record. The major items of concern were

his truancy, aggression, bad temper, and lack of self-regulatory behaviors. He still thought truancy had been OK, given what had been happening at home. But, he often thought that he'd missed out on some good teachers, too, teachers who he now understood had been good models for his classmates and would have been so for him, had he been at school. He thought that maybe that difference was why most others always had been able to read better than him.

He knew about aggression and bad-temperedness. His life had been full of it. He also knew that Paul and Nancy thought he couldn't read well when he first met them. Terry figured that was why they were always talking with him and showing him things to read. He appreciated them and what they were doing for him. He was getting the hang of it now, with the papers they were helping him to write and illustrate on keeping the school's bees happy, healthy, and making great honey and money for the school. He drew the charts for the direction the bees turned after taking off from the hives and wrote and illustrated labels for the bottles. He was working on knowing more and more about bees, and Paul had shown him how to make notes of his observations and things that the apiarist had told him. He loved this part of his schooling and had just about decided that he would be an apiarist, too. The principal, Mr. Wintour, arranged for Terry's "bee charts" to be kept in a display cabinet in the library so that everyone could see them and agreed with Nancy and Paul that Terry could take home a bottle of honey each time the apiarist collected and bottled the honey and that he could be a panelist in deciding which student each month should win a bottle of honey as the "True Grit" prize. He was also in charge of selling the honey and was on 10% commission for sales. Nancy and Paul had told him what "self-regulation" meant, too. He was working on that as well.

It wasn't just school. He had run away from home a few times, too. That was before his father, or the man he was told was his father, had been sent to prison for beating up his mother so badly that she was in hospital for many months, and for throwing his older brother against a wall and killing him. That was when he was 10 years old, and his mother was never quite the same again after she returned. His father was still in prison, but Terry, along with his two sisters and his mother, had never been to visit him—and his mother said they never would. That was just as well because none of them wanted him or his drug-addicted friends back in their home.

"Home" was not like the "homes" his classmates had—always neat and always in the same place. His family stayed where they could, often needing to get out before landlords called for their rent. The Salvation Army had looked after them while their mother was in hospital and had found them a small rental house 2 years ago. They had sent some people around to clean it. He'd helped them paint it outside and learned that to be properly painted, a house needed an undercoat as a foundation for overcoat layers. He also knew that with oil-based paint, he needed to stir the paint every time he took off the lid to get a good flow and that it was so much better than water-based paint for the exterior of a house—especially if it was on the rainy side of Glipney, like theirs was. He'd loved what the Salvo man had told him about preparing the old wooded timber before putting on the paint—and preparing the paint before putting it on the timber. He'd told Paul and Nancy all about this, because

he knew he had to say something about something that might be good as he believed he didn't have the ability to do much that was good.

He was at school early today as usual and had been talking with Nick, one of the cleaners—and helping him with emptying the wastepaper baskets and rubbish bins from the four-room complex. His two mates, Franz and Indika, had joined in and were now joking with Terry about whether he shaved up or down in the mornings. Nick was laughing, too, and explained the joke to Terry.

> See mate, it's a trick question. If you say "up," they'll keep pesterin' until ya say "down" or "down, too"—something like that. And that's the trick—'cause they want ya to say ya' shaving soft whiskers like a duck's soft feathers that they call "down"—like in the eider-down ya mother puts on ya bed in winter.
>
> "Smart, little buggers, aren't they," Nick added.

Terry felt mocked and didn't hesitate. He jumped at Indika, knocking him off his feet, and had time to bloody Franz's nose before Nick and Jeff, one of the teachers arriving for the day, grabbed him.

> "Bastards," Terry spat at his two classmates.
>
> "What the f__k," hissed Franz as blood dripped to the floor.
>
> "S__t, mate," interrupted Nick, "I shudn'na told ya, Terry. Sorry, mate; sorry Franz; you alright, Indy? Here's some paper towel fer ya nose, Franzy."

Jeff settled the group, just as Nancy and Paul arrived having heard the noisy exchanges outside the common room where they'd been chatting with students who'd been munching on the toast and cereals provided by the school. Paul tended to Indy and Franz, subtly moving them a few steps away from Terry and Nick. Nancy held Terry's heaving shoulders, looked him in the eyes and said, "Franz is OK. So is Indy. Are you OK?" Other students gathered and hovered.

Opportunity to Engage, Learn, and Flourish

Nancy looked past Terry to where Paul and Jeff had finished attending to Franz's nose. Nick stood among the gathering throng, muttering about having caused the whole business. In a calm and convincing voice, Nancy said, "Let's do some reading without books or i-Pads and let's do it out here in the sun where we can sit close enough to see each other and in any comfortable place you can find." The recent adversaries sat but exchanged "get you later" glares as they did so. Their classmates sat, some grinning, others bemused—most expecting the scuffle to break out again—and none of them averse to witnessing fisticuffs at close quarters. Jeff apologized saying he had to get to his class group and left. Paul sat, but very close to Franz and Indy. Nick found his cleaner's trolley and sat on its platform. He continued to mutter. They were all participating in the activity developing outside the classroom. Nancy said, "Imagine we are all parts of a house. This is a house that needs some repair—it needs fixing up." Screams of laughter followed when one of the boys said he didn't want to be the toilet. Others began to volunteer what they did

want to be. Nancy waited patiently. When the volunteering stopped, she said, "What are the outside walls made of—what can you see?"

Back came the answer "air," "nothing but air." Nancy continued, "Just imagine that there are walls. See them in your minds, not your eyes. Read what you see. What are they made of, what is the floor made of, what about the roof?" Walls were brick, timber, and metal. Floors were slats, carpet, tiles, or timber. Roofs were metal, tiles, or timber. The variety bought nods and shakes of heads, yeas or nays, and hands raised in accord or discord as agreement and disagreement took hold across different responders. Terry's mind-house was all timber other than its tin roof.

Nancy used the opportunity to point out what mindsets are and how easily a perfectly logical answer or reaction might be very different from another's perfectly logical answer or reaction. She went further by questioning the spontaneously collected group of students (including a few from Jeff's class) about what they had noticed when people came up with different answers. She interrogated their perceptions to frame students' reading of links between perspectives and decisions. The group was enthralled. Showing a deft and dramatic turn from imaginary houses to the morning's reality, Nancy looked at Nick the cleaner, who had long since decided on being part of the lesson rather than wielding the mop. She asked him to read aloud in a "great big voice" what he had in his mind about what he had seen and felt earlier involving Terry, Franz, and Indy.

The crowd of students and teachers crowded closer to the cleaner's trolley. Nick read aloud what he saw in his mind. Nancy turned to Indy and repeated her inquiry. Indy read his mind aloud, and in turn, Franz and Terry did, too, using the same framing that Nancy had provided.

There were similarities across the four accounts. But they were different in one important perception. Franz and Indy did not read what they had done as teasing or provocation and had not contemplated Terry feeling aggressive. Nick read it as teasing for fun, a little risky maybe, but not greatly so. Terry read it as provocation—as if his two classmates were saying he was underdeveloped.

Nancy asked Nick what he would do if he could change what had happened earlier. Nick said that he would not have said anything and felt that if he had not interfered in the boys' fun banter, it would have continued as fun. Nancy repeated her inquiry with Franz and Indy, who volunteered that they could see why Terry had attacked them and that they had not meant to upset him and that they were just having fun and were sorry.

Nancy changed tack once again when turning to Terry. "Terry," she said, "Imagine what happened this morning as a wooden house that needed to be painted. How would you do it?" He didn't answer. She and Paul followed up later in the day in a quiet session with Terry, asking what the undercoat might be if he were to paint the house of a similar event if he wanted the outcome to be different. He replied immediately that he would ask the others why they were asking the question and that he would do this like the bees send out scouts in the morning to see where the swarm should fly to find the best pollen. They showed their delight at this response and worked with him to explain and position the excellence of his metacognition in forming and expressing it. Further, they set him a homework task of imagining how

he might use the picture in his head of "undercoat-and-stirring the paint to get it to flow-and-picking water-based or oil-based paint and preparing the timber before putting on the paint and preparing the paint before putting it on the timber" to make sense of whether people were having fun or being deliberately hurtful.

The following morning, Paul arrived to find Terry chatting with Nick as they emptied wastepaper baskets into the bin on Nick's trolley. They were talking about Terry's homework, and how Terry was going to use it as a yellow traffic signal before responding to worrisome situations. Nick called out to Paul, "Hey—nice homework ya gave the young fella. Next time there's a possible stoush, by the time he works through painting his house, his mates will'av shot through!" All three laughed long and hard. All three had engaged, and Terry had a basis for building this further in work Paul intended doing with Terry and his beekeeping activities.

Nancy and Paul drew similarly from individually relevant ties to personal accounts that Franz and Indy had shared with them previously. These had been about something in the past that each of them had done well. In Franz's case, it was an incident in which he had retrieved a fledgling mynah bird that had fallen from its nest and returned it in a hazardous climb up the tree. In the opportunity created by his teachers to bring his prosocial behavior into communicative language, his analysis yielded information, discussion, and affirmation about the good order in his thinking and action in restoring the baby bird to its nest. The teachers molded the shared discussion to highlight Franz's initial engagement and its sustainability through to completion of the task and the joy and efficacy he experienced. As this unfolded, they identified and helped him put labels on the perception, decision-making, planning, implementation, coping with adversity, positive behavior, and feelings that lay behind his thinking and behavior. They revisited the interaction event with Terry on the previous day and analyzed what had happened in terms of the labels they now were using to describe his own and Terry's likely perspectives. He did this, again apologizing, and again saying he had not intended to upset Terry—but that now he understood why Terry had reacted. The incident had morphed into an opportunity for learning, and the two teachers had helped Franz and Terry to engage with a better social literacy through the scaffolding provided to operationalize and value "being engaged."

For Indy, the reflective focus was what the teenager remembered he had needed to do to convince the manager of a fast-food store to hire him as a part-time casual staffer. They repeated the opportunity and scaffolding they had created with Franz, helping Indy to describe his engagement, how he had used it, what benefits it had brought, where he might use similar processes to revisit the incident with Terry, and where he might apply it in other social and academic tasks.

The two teachers had skillfully worked the sets of reflection, efficacy, and pride that Terry, Franz, and Indy brought to discussion into important learning for the students in relation to the acting-out event of the previous day and possible alternatives. They also shared a coffee with Nick the following morning and revisited the previous day's incident in much the same way as they had with the three young teenagers.

All six major participants in this vignette had advanced their talk about self-regulation and the role it plays in social behavior, and strategies for cultivating it based on authentic experiences of success. It is unknown at this point what followed in further development of Terry, Franz, and Indy's engagement activity or whether the two teachers arranged for related mind and action activity for all others who had been witness to the event. However, Nancy's spontaneous lesson in situ immediately after the incident and what followed was exemplary. She and Paul had created opportunity from adversity to help Terry, Franz, Indy, and Nick to think and build positively, illustrating how competent educators act to open access and encounter with the concept of engagement.

Despite the prospects of schooling that community, parents, and teachers advocate as bright and advantageous (Brint, 2017), there are students who regularly do not engage in what schools deliver as mainstream education (te Riele, 2014). There are personal, social, and instructional conditions underpinning why this is happening and resounding evidence (Gutherson, Davies, & Daszkiewicz, 2011; Murray, Mitchell, Gale, Edwards, & Zyngier, 2004; Noble, 2017) that some young people characterized as we saw in Anlezark's (2011) account in the previous chapter are marginalized in relation to perceptions of their "fit" with mainstream schooling (Aron, 2003, 2006; Aron & Zweig, 2003; Swain-Bradway, Swoszowski, Boden, & Sprague, 2013). Without special support, these marginalized young people are at risk of missing learning opportunities or of failing to engage and flourish in their time as students and, more generally, throughout their lives. This group may or may not include those young people who, because of numerous suspensions, exclusion, or expulsion from school due to persistent misbehavior threatening the safety, learning, and well-being of others, or the functioning or "good order" of a learning–teaching environment (Department for Education and Child Care, 2016), are referred for special support programs beyond the realm of mainstream education.

What Is Marginalization?

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) International Institute for Educational Planning explained marginalization as "related to but different from inequality" (UNESCO, 2010, p. 5), and while noting that academic definitions vary, its use of the term was "to describe situations of acute and persistent disadvantage in education (as distinct from the overall distribution of education opportunity)" (p. 5) with specific reference to the following potentially marginalized groups, clustered in different categories:

- *Gender-related:* girls (interestingly, although in some countries girls now outperform boys, boys were never mentioned as a disadvantaged or marginalized group)
- *Culture-related:* children belonging to specific castes, ethnic groups or tribes, or religious groups and children speaking specific languages

- *Location-related:* children living in conflict-affected areas, refugees and displaced persons, child soldiers, nomads, rural, (pastoralist, etc.), children living in urban slums, street children
- *Poverty-related:* working children, overaged children, poor/vulnerable children, and single mothers
- *Special groups:* children with disabilities, children identified as gifted, children living with HIV and aids, orphans

In our use of the term, we recognize the UNESCO categories and also include those young people who have been excluded or expelled from school under the umbrella term of "marginalized". Three related factors mediate this inclusion. First, in many systems (Aron, 2006; Swain-Bradway et al., 2013), children with behavioral problems that are serious, persistent, and threatening enough to result in suspension, exclusion, or expulsion from mainstream schools form a major subpopulation of those in alternative education, which is an important discussion point of our chapter. Second, suspension, exclusion, or expulsion associated with a student's irresponsible behavior and applied for the protection of the safety and well-being of other students and good order of his/her school falls under the duty of care that school administrators and their related systems must uphold. Therefore, discriminatory treatment of those who are threatening the learning opportunities of others, or themselves, is a defensible intolerance of such behavior in those settings. Third, most systems have alternatives to accommodate the suspended or excluded students' rights to an education regardless of their miscreant behavior.

How Do Marginalization, Disengagement, and Exclusion Relate?

Much of the risk of disengaging in opportunities that are ostensibly accessible and used by others resides in effects of exclusion (Kieselbach, 2013). Such exclusion effects include youngsters' deepening lag in knowledge and intellectual know-how. Stanovich (1986) described this as an educational Matthew effect due to the persistent gap between good readers and poor readers widening through the years of schooling. Differences and deficiencies in social skill development through poverty of out-of-school opportunities are likely to aggravate the negative effects of exclusion and further inhibit the young people's knowledge and use of appropriate social and academic enablement in school even during the time that they are not excluded. In Chap. 4, we have provided a detailed account of social skills as an engagement enabler.

Any such situation places them at risk of being unable to participate in student roles according to socially accepted norms of the educational system, school, and class and of alienating peer, teacher, and institutional support. This vulnerability is exacerbated when the potential for in-school alienation actualizes or is perceived to occur as apparent in Terry's voice in the vignette. Terry, as a young teenager, realized

that along with the pain of teasing he experienced, he had missed modeling when he was at school that had been enjoyed and accommodated by his classmates who had learned far sooner than he about such operations as reading for understanding and mastery. As Cambourne's experienced teachers tell it (Cambourne, 2001), many otherwise promising students fall foul of never having engaged with appropriate modeling that demonstrates how to engage—or of having engaged only with very inappropriate modeling—and so don't really come to know much about how to comprehend texts. Terry was lucky to now have a late opportunity in his compulsory schooling years where modeling, offered by Nancy and Paul, was accessible, appropriate, and valued for the changes including reading and writing, but much more. However, many marginalized youths are not as fortunate as Terry (Lucariello et al., 2016; Savelsberg, Pignata, & Weckert, 2017).

Lucariello et al. (2016) reminded us that students' beliefs about their ability affect their cognitive functioning and learning. They pointed to two adversative mindsets operating as students configure their approaches to performance goals. Many see ability as a fixed commodity, and those who do are likely to believe that "they need to continually demonstrate and prove their intelligence. Such makes them more hesitant to take on highly challenging tasks and more vulnerable to negative feedback than students holding an incremental view" (p. 57). In contrast, those with an incremental or growth mindset generally "are more willing to take on challenging tasks in an effort to test and expand their intelligence or ability. Hence, they rebound more easily from negative feedback and failure and perform better on a variety of cognitive tasks and in problem-solving situations" (Lucariello et al., 2016, p. 57). Seemingly, students with fixed commodity mindsets would be even more hesitant in their approaches to performance goals if they believed their levels to be unchangeably low—and this is part of the "risk" that Anlezark (2011) foreshadowed for young people from low socioeconomic, rural, and Indigenous home and community circumstances, poor family environments, and negatively mediating connections with schooling.

It is not difficult to imagine which of the two mindsets Terry was developing during his school years as name-calling and teasing from his peers plagued his beliefs about his ability to "get with" the performance goals set by his teachers or to engage with growth trajectories and experiences that might lead to further failure just as easily as to success. If Terry's account of how peers and some teachers regarded him is accurate, he was typically seen as disconnected from, disinterested in, or incapable of class activities, as well as being perceived as aggressive and troublesome in the playground. Such repeated negative evaluation would have affected his "governmentality"—a term Foucault (1991) used to account for people's self-regulation or capacity to monitor and control their own thinking and action. It is a feature strongly influenced by the discourses in which we are configured in particular contexts (Rose, 1998).

The effect of truancy and of an unhappy environment when in attendance at school, on Terry's governmentality may have helped him to rationalize disengaging as an inevitable behavior, if not an appropriate one, and reinforced attitudes and behaviors more consistent with failure than success in accessing and participating in

the academic and social opportunities of his schooling. However, his remarkable insights, progress, and awareness in his mid-teens while in an enterprising program of self-discovery and learning around beekeeping suggest a very different control, strength, and purpose in his approach to opportunity. At Glipney Flexible Learning School, he sought ongoing engagement in work-based learning following some early success. He persisted in his engagement, displaying metacognitive monitoring, discernment, and control with what began to work well and not so well for him during learning encounters. He was flourishing. His reflections on his years at school provide a retrospective that his governmentality had turned him toward negative behaviors such as avoidance, hostility, or oppositionalism (Archambault, Vandenbossche-Makombo, & Fraser, 2017; Robinson, 2016; Skinner, 2016) that he now regretted as a teenager for its associated loss of opportunities. He was in the process of reversing them as part of his positive self-discovery at Glipney Flexible Learning School. The deliberate motivation he attributed to his action both then and now suggests that governmentality as a surrender to failure during his early and middle-school years was likely to have been an avoidable mistake rather than an inevitable one, if appropriate engagement support had been provided and targeted specifically at areas that he had found difficult.

Combinations of such oppositional thinking, valuing, and behaving are emphatic barriers to consistent engagement with school and schooling and to experiencing success—particularly for so many of our young people predisposed to failure. Where this happens, young people disengage from schooling opportunities in very noticeable ways through truancy and absences. They do so also in less noticeable ways such as inattentive, inconsistent, or deceptive commitment to routine classroom, extracurricular, and homework tasks. Such disengagement diminishes opportunities to flourish. The loss affects prospects and achievement not only of academic development but also of social and well-being advances, an attenuation that highlights the reach of disengagement as "failure" (De Castella, Byrne, & Covington, 2013) that we outlined in Chap. 1.

Alternative Education Programs and Pathways

As societies have become more aware of the many children and young people who struggle to engage with mainstream opportunities (Mills, McGregor, Baroutsis, te Riele, & Hayes, 2016; Te Riele, 2014), parents and concerned community members, including educational policy-makers, have wrestled with how to remodel schooling structures so as to better provide for all. Alternative arrangements have resulted through programs both within, and external to, mainstream settings to better accommodate young people who seem to have been consistently at odds with mainstream schooling, as well as those who educate them, in the pursuit of accessible and actionable opportunities for young people to flourish in education. Swain-Bradway et al. (2013), when noting positive behavior programs in alternative

education settings in the United States, described the purpose and genesis of this development:

> Alternative educational (AE) settings are designed to address the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of youth that cannot be reasonably met within the general public school (Aron, 2006). Youth who are enrolled in AE settings are considered at risk for educational and/or community failure, and often display a range of behaviors incongruent with public school settings (e.g. drug use, delinquency, mental health problems). (p. 31–32)

Theirs is a clear comment that some students need viable alternatives in the delivery of education. They identified two problem areas underlying this dilemma—students' ranging needs often exhibited in behaviors incongruent with public school settings and public schools' incapacity to meet these students' needs. Both issues acknowledge Aron's (2006) observation a decade earlier of incongruence between what many policy-makers and educators acting conventionally in conventional settings are able to do with students who do not fit those settings. We agree with Aron's (2006) contention, and, having seen the rapidity of growth in the alternative education sector and particular application of the sector in attempts to redress the disadvantages of marginalized young people (Mills et al., 2016; te Riele, 2014), we consider that engagement is a useful construct to help explore such incongruity and progress with its resolution.

Homeschooling as an Example of Alternative Education

Homeschooling is a form of alternative education. Typically, parents make the decision not to have their children participate in government or private schooling for a variety of reasons, choosing either to not enroll them or to withdraw them at some time following an enrolment. Recent estimates from US census data (Redford, Battle, & Bielick, 2016; Zeise, 2017) represented by state (Fig. 8.1) indicate that close to two million US children (aged 5–17) are homeschooled.

In terms relative to respective estimates for 2014 of full-time equivalent students in the United States, approximately 75 million (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), the numbers of students being homeschooled in Australia (762,244) are very high (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), representing 1.7% in Australia, compared to 0.2% in the United States. Data reported in Table 8.1 are indicative, i.e., 12,784 of Australia's 762,244 students were homeschooled, and this number did not include unregistered homeschoolers. Additionally, Queensland (QLD) and Western Australia's (WA) data do not represent the high proportion of those who were homeschooled using a distance education program most typically supplied by the state.

Why "Homeschooling"?

Redford et al. (2016) reported that, in the 2011–2012 school year, "91% of homeschooled students had parents who said that a concern about the environment of other schools was an important reason for homeschooling their child, which was a

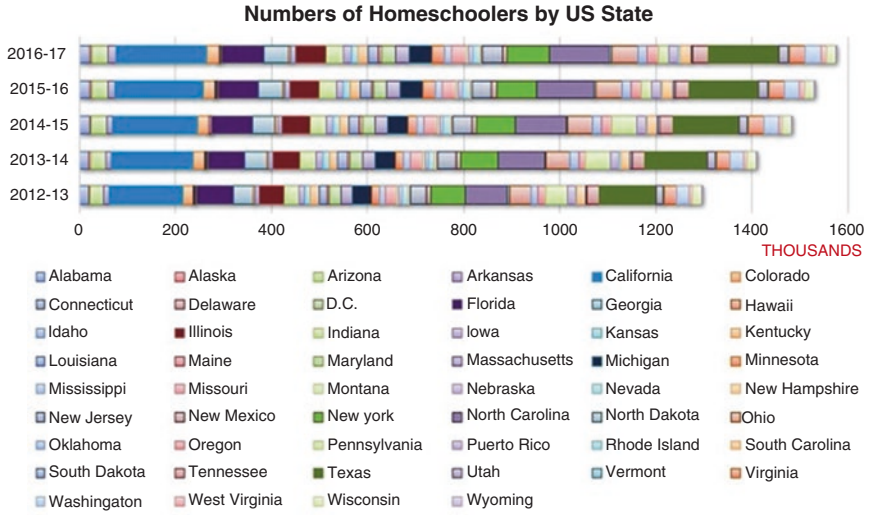

Fig. 8.1 Demographic state comparison of numbers of US students who are homeschooled (Source: Zeise, 2007)

Table 8.1 Demographic state comparison of numbers of Australian students registered as homeschooled in 2014 (Source: Homeschooling Downunder (2016)

State and territories	Registered 2014	Distribution (%)
New South Wales	3327	26.0
Queensland	1379[a]	11.0
Western Australia	2477[a]	20.0
Victoria	3582	28.0
Tasmania	660[b]	5.0
South Australia	1075	8.0
Northern Territory	85	0.5
Australian Capital Territory	199	1.5
Total	12,784	100.0

[a]Indicates likely underestimate
[b]Indicates 2012 stats

higher percentage than other reasons listed" (p. 11). The nature of such concern is suggested in a case study of parents of homeschooled children by Kendall and Taylor (2016), albeit that the sample of cases is small and each of the seven children involved had been diagnosed with special education needs, six of the seven with autism. Their findings revealed three major themes.

First, teachers and principals were seen as lacking proper understandings of the social, emotional, and learning needs of the respondents' sons and daughters. If correct, any inadequate conceptual base would have been a delimiting factor in what and how the teachers themselves might engage with these children in setting up

access, models, practices, and opportunities as students and in the principals' leadership in establishing and successfully nurturing an inclusive environment. Any such effects may have projected images to these students that their teachers and principals were out-of-touch and insensitive, and irrelevant or ineffective in what they were perceived to be doing—thus sapping students' willingness to engage genuinely in classroom and school-related academic, social, and personal learning.

Second, parents perceived educators as being reluctant to recognize and use parents' potential input and partnership in developing better understandings of their children and their children's needs. Again, if this were so, it would have further limited what might otherwise have been done by the school for these children and help them flourish as young people in relation to achievement and developments in thinking, behaviors, and motivation. The parents believed themselves to have lacked the access and contributory participation that in our understanding of engagement (see Chap. 1) is so necessary for its optimal occurrence and benefit.

Failure to flourish is reflected in parents' perceptions of the deleterious impact the schools were having on the health and well-being of their sons and daughters—the third of the themes that Kendall and Taylor (2016) reported. The parents cited effects accumulated over time that were so devastating that they could no longer leave their children at their mainstream school or classes, e.g.:

> He's got into such a bad stress phobia kind of state about school, he had a nervous breakdown … we said, look this is not working, it's not going to work, we can't make him fit into the system, so we're going to have to look into home education. *Parent D.* (Kendall & Taylor, 2016, p. 303)

Kendall and Taylor's (2016) small-scale study illuminated findings from larger research earlier (e.g., Granite & Graham, 2012; Kidd & Kaczmarek, 2010; Parsons & Lewis, 2010; Tissot, 2013) that echoed Aron's (2006) observation of incongruence of needs and provision for some students. They also shadow what Corner (2017) recently reported in that many teachers regarded their professional capacities as inadequate in their attempts to cope with difficulties arising when students consistently acted in ways Aron had described as "a range of behaviors incongruent with public school settings" (Aron, 2006, p. 32). While Kendall and Taylor's (2016) research with parents had been concentrated on those of students with autism spectrum disorders, similar findings of concern have been noted regarding the suitability of mainstream schools for students with speech, language, or communication difficulties (Archbold et al., 2015), gifted children (Yuen et al., 2016), and culturally diverse children, particularly those from minority cultures (McIntosh, 2016).

Certainly, research such as that reported previously has informed us that mainstream education alone has not yet functioned as the universal panacea we would like it to be. In a schooling context, students' academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs require recognition and professional accommodation (Archambault et al., 2017; Finn, 1989; Jolivette, Stichter, Nelson, Scott, & Liaupsin, 2000) if young people are to flourish in their schooling engagements. This is a requirement at the face-front levels—the lessons, routines, and tasks of daily scholarship—and in the know-how of "getting with it" if engagement is to be part of students' unrestricted personal and social repertoire.

What Are Alternative Education Programs and Whom Do They Serve?

Alternative education programs are diverse and range from attempted accommodations within mainstream schools to those in many different types of settings outside traditional schools. External settings range from homeschooling through to alternative schools with various names suggesting the program adaptations on offer such as flexible learning centers or positive learning centers, to custodial or institutional locations such as juvenile detention educational units and hospital schools. In its statement on Alternative Schools and Programs for Public School Students at Risk of Educational Failure, 2007–2008, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010) used the following description to determine what alternative provision had developed across the nation:

> Alternative schools and programs are designed to address the needs of students that typically cannot be met in regular schools. The students who attend alternative schools and programs are typically at risk of educational failure as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behaviors, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school. (p. 1)

The NCES study recorded 10,300 district-administered alternative schools and programs operating in the school year. Of these, 37% were sited within mainstream schools. A year later, Gutherson et al. (2011) noted the extraordinary breadth of focus and range of facilities that parents, communities, nongovernment organizations, and governments had established as alternative education—along with what schools themselves had attempted to do to reconnect these youngsters to mainstream schooling.

In Australia, by 2014 there were about 900 alternative education programs (AEPs) serving about 70,000 young people (te Riele, 2014). More than 97% of these programs provided for students at risk of non-completion of schooling and for early school leavers. Other substantial categories were for those suspended, excluded, or expelled as students from school and young people who were neither employed nor attending school. Similar to the US alternative education offerings, these Australian programs were varied but shared a mission to provide critical educational opportunities for young people otherwise missed due to their nonattendance at school or through dysfunctionality in their connection with the school. In noting the variation and commonality of mission in Australian alternative education programs, te Riele (2014) remarked that:

> In some ways, this is the closest we come to a definition of flexible learning programs. Many programs catered for (almost) all categories listed, but some had a more specialised focus, for example, on Indigenous young people, homeless young people, or pregnant and parenting young people. (p. 39)

What Are the Characteristics of AEPs?

The NCES description of what constituted alternative education had provided an operational extension of Aron's (2006) earlier delineation to specify those "typically at risk of educational failure (as indicated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy, or similar factors associated with temporary or permanent withdrawal from school)." This development was taken a little further by Porowski, O'Conner, and Luo (2014) after examining how 43 US states and the District of Columbia had explained their policies in providing alternative education for those of their students who were failing at school or were at risk of doing so. They considered that programs this had engendered might be defined broadly as:

> educational activities that fall outside the traditional K–12 curriculum—[and] frequently serve students who are at risk of school failure. Because individual states or school districts define and determine the features of their alternative education programs, programs may differ in key characteristics, such as target population, setting, services, and structure. (Porowski, O'Conner, & Passa, 2014, p. 1)

They noted that characteristics of these programs, while varied, traversed four key dimensions, *whom the program serves, where the program operates, what the program offers,* and *how the program is structured*, specifically:

- *Whom the program serves* (grade levels and ages and target population). In most states, alternative education programs target secondary school students. Maryland may want to focus its definition of alternative education on secondary school students to comply with Senate Bill 362, but the definition should cover all grades because Maryland programs serve students from pre-K to grade 12. While it may be appropriate to target students with behavioral problems, as most states do, other target populations to consider include students with academic challenges, students with attendance problems, students at risk of dropping out or who have already dropped out, and students who are pregnant or parenting. Some states define the target population for alternative education as students who are unable to benefit from a regular school environment.
- *Where the program operates*. Alternative programs can operate within a school, outside the school (e.g., in a juvenile detention center or hospital), or as a standalone school. Some states include homeschooling in their definition of alternative programs.
- *What the program offers*. If the definition specifies services to be offered, it should recognize their variety, including regular academic instruction, counseling, social skills and life skills training, workplace and job readiness, and behavioral interventions.
- *How the program is structured*. Some alternative programs operate on weekends, on evenings, or during the summer. The definition should specify how much instruction is needed for an alternative program to exempt students from compulsory attendance (Porowski, O'Conner, & Luo, 2014, p. 17–18).

Gutherson et al. (2011) drew together research across several countries to identify characteristics of alternative education that "are key to achieving positive outcomes." His assertion is that four characteristics are fundamental, notably that the provision is:

- Flexible and individually tailored.
- Addressing a breadth of needs.
- Based on accurate assessment of need.
- Delivered by caring and knowledgeable staff and supported by continuity of strong relationships (Gutherson et al., 2011, p. 7).

Are AEP Practices Effective?

Alternative education is not so much concerned with the geography of the sites of schooling, as with the options available both within and beyond mainstream settings for alternative programs to be developed and delivered in a multi-optioned, multi-pathway, and multi-transition conceptualization. Students not fitting well with mainstreaming are seemingly better placed with more options and pathways accessible through alternative education to engage with schooling successfully. Porowski, O'Conner, and Luo's (2014) account of "whom the program serves" widened description of disengagement risk from the problem-behavior emphasis of earlier definition to include academic challenge, dropout and other attendance issues, and pregnancy and caring responsibilities. This opened issues of social justice that appeared inherent in Aron's (2006) observation that some students' needs were incongruent with mainstream's capacity to provide for them. These are important issues that have been taken up elsewhere (e.g., Mills et al., 2016) to remind us that the students Aron had in mind had rights to fulsome access and help in engaging opportunities to learn and flourish irrespective of breakdowns in their participation and fit with mainstream schooling.

The key question is whether alternative education is effective in meeting the needs of these diverse student groups who have experienced marginalization and exclusion and are facing difficulties in different arenas of life. Having examined several of these settings, McGregor and Mills (2012) concluded that young people were indeed receiving practical support at the AEPs. In their observation, school structures, curricula, and pedagogy had been constructed that:

> made the school attractive ... students felt like equal partners in the teacher- learning relationship. The curricula provided sought to support students obtaining part-time work ... whilst also providing students with opportunities to obtain Year 12 matriculation, university entry, vocational qualifications and life skills. ... a 'full service' philosophy of education was clearly evident at our research sites. Also fundamental to this philosophy was the supportive web of relationships amongst staff and students. (p. 859)

McGregor and Mills' account (2012) is reflected in the voice data of AEP students elsewhere. For example, in research for the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition

(AYAC), Lampas' (Lamas, 2012) respondents who had moved voluntarily or been shifted into alternative education programs gave very positive accounts of their AEPs. They saw as highlights of their AEP experience the flexibility of the school environment, benefits in working with adults who saw them as having potential rather than as troublemakers or underachievers, and relief and pleasure in experiencing respect and a sense of belonging in their school (AEP) contexts.

McKeown (2011) reported similar positive accounts through 2 themes that emerged during interviews with 12 young people attending an Australian nongovernment AEP. These young people believed that they had ready access to one-on-one support and they were joyful about being involved with the AEP's learning programs—the availability and participation reflecting the essential properties of engagement that we have mentioned throughout this book. Helpful staff and a holistic approach that included a parenting program were also recognized, valued, and similar to what Lampas (Lamas, 2012) had reported of student views and what parents in Kendall and Taylor's (2016) study had seen as missing for their children with special needs while in mainstream schooling. The common thread to these studies is that the young people believed that AEPs had provided them with a positive experience of education—albeit that sustainability and longer-term implications had not been part of the evaluations and that parents' participation is an appreciated addition.

In relation to outcomes across different settings, Labyer (2004) completed a comparative study of two alternative education settings in Southwest Oklahoma and differences recounted for these locations and traditional schools for educationally disengaged students. One setting operated to provide AEPs for students from five high schools, while the other was an on-location site for similar students established as an extension of a high school. Both provided individualized, ability level instruction and a counseling component in their programs. Both were considered effective as intervention programs for students who had left high school early or were at risk of doing so.

More widely, evidence from Australian studies (Baroutsis, McGregor, & Mills, 2016; McKeown, 2011; Mills & McGregor, 2010; Mills et al., 2016; Plows, Bottrell, & Te Riele, 2017; Smyth, McInerney, & Fish, 2013; te Riele, 2014; te Riele, Wilson, Wallace, McGinty, & Lewthwaite, 2017; Thomas, McGinty, te Riele, & Wilson, 2017) and international studies (Gutherson et al., 2011; Morrissette, 2011; Yuen et al., 2016; Zolkoski, Bullock, & Gable, 2016) of AEPs indicate that a common purpose is to provide opportunities offering new start and third-space thinking that are better suited to circumventing lingering negativity that many AEP students carry into their learning and growth from personal and previous school experience histories. For example, te Riele (2014), in her review of Australian AEPs, stated that AEP practices are responsive in ways suggestive of engagement toward valued outcomes that she considered are "at the heart of successful flexible learning programs" (p. 48). Specifically, Australian AEP practices are contributory to significant student outcomes as outlined below:

(1) "Better futures" such as "recognized credentials [that] form a key to open doors to future opportunities for work or further study

(2) Successful learning including academic achievement and engagement with learning as a process
(3) Personal growth and well-being
(4) Recognition from community
(5) Contribution to the community (te Riele, 2014, p. 48)

How Are AEP Practices Related to Engagement?

Given the important contribution to student outcomes that AEPs can make in helping students recover connection with schooling, relating to others, and finding a purposeful personal future, it is essential that programs are evaluated to determine their effectiveness, and specifically, how engagement is considered, cultivated, and enacted. Currently, there is a paucity of research examining the engagement issue beyond identifying effective practices as opposed to conditions underpinning such effectiveness. There are challenges in doing so, perhaps due in part to the variation in programs that are offered. As noted by te Riele (2007):

> The multitude of programs has led to confusion and inefficiency. Finding the right program can be difficult for young people, and their parents and youth workers. Communication between programs, to develop better pathways and to share expertise, is hindered by lack of stability or lack of knowledge about other programs. Communication between practitioners and scholars with an interest in alternative education is hindered by lack of a shared framework for understanding the variety of educational alternatives. (p. 53)

This difficulty was also identified by Bloom (2010) within an American context in relation to alternative, second-chance programs for young people who leave mainstream education before completing a qualification. Bloom asserted that the majority of such programs had not been formally evaluated for effectiveness. He ventured that rigorous evaluation methods may not always be appropriate yet he disparaged the "gap between the strongly held views of practitioners who believe they know what constitutes 'best practice' in youth programming" and "the knowledge base researchers have built from rigorous evaluations" (Bloom, 2010, p. 94).

Evaluation reviews that have been completed tend to focus on how AEPs function, and on identifying effective practices without giving due attention to their link to student engagement. An example of such an evaluation review is Gutherson et al.'s (2011) report. This review provided evidence regarding characteristics of effective AEPs, including quality relationships, person-centered approaches, flexibility and accessibility, effective assessment of need, appropriate curriculum, delivery by skilled staff that had been monitored and assessed as effective, as well as wider support from families and communities. From an engagement perspective, these effective practices can be understood as social and institutional facilitators that re-engage marginalized youths in meaningful learning that leads to the expected outcomes, as identified by Gutherson et al. (2011), though this engagement link was not elaborated in the report. These expected outcomes included students' improved academic attainment; school attendance; sense of direction; well-being and

relationships with staff, families, and peers; as well as their positive progression routes and reductions in their disruptive, violent, or offending behaviors.

Given these outcomes, it is important to understand why alternative education works from an engagement perspective. This is important as past review reports, such as Gutherson et al. (2011), seldom explain clearly why, and in what ways, these effective practices promote engagement or how engagement has led to desired outcomes. Engagement in AEPs is of particular concern to marginalized and disengaged students who are struggling in the midst of a complex period of change during adolescence to emerging adulthood. Youth in AEPs in this transitional life stage may have additional developmental challenges due to poverty-related logistic barriers, a lack of conducive affect, and knowledge about how to deal with instability. Any of these factors likely would hinder their experiential learning about socialization and socializing, and of how to move beyond reproductive habitus into more active engagement in explorations of their identities, aspirations, and possible future life spaces.

In the context of student engagement, we highlight four important considerations. First, attendance is not a guarantee of engagement in opportunities that raise educational attainment, or of doing so productively. It is a necessary but insufficient condition. Second, it is questionable whether a successful transition should be measured by a single move from one institution to another, for example, an AEP to an apprenticeship or employment. Any such move suggests initial engagement, but it is a single snapshot in time and does not necessarily mean that long-term goals such as sustainable employment will be reached. Third, further knowledge is needed around the disengagement and engagement processes that occur throughout developmental trajectories as youth move toward emerging adulthood. As noted by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), "disengagement is often framed as an individual problem"; however, "structural factors play a significant part in exposing or protecting young people against risk factors" (ARACY, 2008, p. 3) which can then contribute to disengagement and lead to fewer opportunities to access education, employment, and sustainable welfare. In reverse, enabling structural influences can lead to sustained engagement. Finally, a lack of parental involvement in alternative settings was noted. However, Labyer (2004) acknowledged that this did not necessarily indicate a lack of parental support for their sons and daughters outside the school setting, given the positive assertions which had featured during the schools' intake interviews with parents. It does, however, suggest in light of McKeown (2011), and Kendall and Taylor's (2016) subsequent evidence, that these two AEP structures were yet to recognise an important ally.

More importantly, as Lamas (2012) noted, many young people in AEPs are "facing the most serious and significant barriers to engagement" (p. 5) such as needing to escape violence or bullying or dealing with mental health issues, social problems, and self-confidence issues and tend to have lower levels of family support. Under such circumstances, these young people would be vulnerable in education settings. They would need teachers who recognized vulnerability and its differing factors and triggers to its various manifestations across their student groups. They would need teachers who could, and would, operationalize this recognition as they planned,

resourced, implemented, highlighted, monitored, assessed, and provided feedback on learning opportunities in their programs for these young people. They would need teachers whose flexibility would act as a visible and present core enablement to helping students to attend school and to "get with it" in recognizing and participating in learning opportunities, to celebrate successes no matter how small, and to value learning, and to see learning as opportunity for recognition, participation, success, and celebration.

This pedagogical emphasis is evident in AEP reviews in Australia and internationally (e.g., Gutherson et al., 2011; te Riele et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2017). Operations of the AEPs observed included the re-engagement and retention of young people into education and training, flexibility of approach, and support in multiple areas of well-being and functioning along educational pathways that would lead to positive outcomes. While no test data were available to substantiate the claims of academic improvement reported in the Bartlett, Ng, Jackson, and Hwang (2015) study, indices such as better attendance and behavior records do support the positive outcomes of behavioral engagement clearly represented in student, teacher, and parent voice data. These AEPs had presented opportunities to recognize, and to support, the personal and social needs of young people involved, as well as their academic and behavioral ones.

Based on observations, document examination, interviews with staff, and surveys of students, Labyer (2004) highlighted the presence and importance for at-risk students at AEPs to have an "adult support system committed to them on an individual and personal basis, as well as a curriculum related basis" (p. 145). This research-informed statement offers important insights for understanding student engagement in alternative education. Students told Labyer that they had received more positive feedback from their AEP teachers, though it is unclear whether this was related to indicators of their outright performance alone, or pointers to its enablers such as the nature, function, and strength of attention and engagement in academic and social opportunities. However, students also spoke of the value of having high-efficacy teachers, together with individualized programs that these teachers prepared for each student, and of belief that these teachers helped students recognize that they were able to learn. Ascribing these characteristics to their teachers suggests that respondents were critically analytic not only about what was happening in their schooling but also about what aspects of teaching approaches were conducive to learner-based development programs. Their commentary speaks to engagement. For example, a telling statement was that they were more likely to attend school when in AEP classes than they had been previously, indicating their own perception of better engagement, at least of behavioral engagement in being there at school. Of course, there is an assumption about students' willingness and readiness to be open and active in engaging in educational opportunities, but the greater attendance, academic, and well-being outcomes already reported for students in alternative settings (Gutherson et al., 2011; te Riele et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2017) speak positively to the conjecture that their educational engagement, too, would be better. It may be that students' voice regarding their needs and progress is an important part of the pedagogical mix to foster such willingness and

readiness to engage, particularly where options exist for small-step successes and better fit between students' developing self-awareness and efficacy across time.

In reviewing Australian AEPs, te Riele (2014) stated that valued outcomes should be aligned with:

> … the actions taken, and the principles that provide the foundation for the program. This need for alignment is also signalled by the enabling condition of having a shared vision. When all staff are 'on the same page' the program is more likely to achieve successfully the outcomes it is aiming for. A shared vision is supported by opportunities for carrying out ongoing reflection. (te Riele, 2014, p. 79)

From her perception of the alignment of these four dimensions, te Riele (2014) captured a basis for framing what constitutes quality flexible learning programs (Table 8.2) that undoubtedly promote and sustain engagement.

Hylands (2010) offered another perspective to understand student engagement, especially in AEPs where part of the schooling plan is focused on helping students find employment. Seeing the possibility of finding a job can be an important outcome-focused motivator to sustain engagement for students in AEPs where this happens. Hylands (2010) wrote of the importance of providing alternative settings and pathways for disadvantaged youth after investigating concerns held by the Gateway Learning and Employment Network, an Australian group attempting to improve outcomes for young people. The group's concerns were that, in their experience, disadvantaged students were facing increasing difficulty in accessing transition pathways from education settings to sustainable employment, especially when difficult economic circumstances are present. Hylands (2010) concluded that alter-

Table 8.2 Four dimensions of quality flexible learning programs (Source: Te Riele, 2014)

Principles	Actions	Conditions	Valued outcomes
Commit to each student's needs, interests, and rights	Create "meaningful learning opportunities"	Provide flexibility	Build "better futures"
Recognize and build on every student's strengths	Provide "significant support for learning"	Provide "systemic support and resources"	Enable "successful learning"
Value "life and learning as meaningfully connected"	Build "genuine and caring relationships"	Provide "engaged and knowledgeable staff"	Enable "personal growth and well-being"
Provide "an education that is genuinely enabling"	Provide "practical support for living"	Ensure that there is a "shared vision"	Program and student "recognition from [the] community"
	Engage with the community	Establish "productive partnerships" with businesses and service providers	Students "contribute to [the] community"
	Staff reflect, innovate, and continually improve the program		

native educational settings and pathways provided youth with easier, and additional, access to courses that had enabled them to progress through the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning at their own pace, and to vocational training and sustainable employment. It is likely that this outcome provided significant impetus to sustaining students' ongoing engagement as we had seen similarly in Chap. 7 in Jacob's self-report as a once-disengaged adolescent who had successfully learned horticultural knowledge and skills through opportunities presented in a social enterprise engagement.

Conclusion

We have outlined positive indications that "not fitting easily" into mainstream education may be seen in engagement–disengagement terms and that those who have such engagement issues have alternative conduits of opportunity in AEPs that many seem to have accessed to their advantage. Paradoxically, there is need also to ensure that any such provision does not compromise access and participation opportunities by imposing narrow training for low-level employment options.

Mills and Gale (2011) called on teachers to create educational opportunities wherein the nature of access and participation would "transform the life experiences of and open up opportunities for all young people, especially those disadvantaged by poverty and marginalized by difference" (p. 90). This suggestion followed their reflection on the influence of habitus and specifically on how those with a reproductive habitus are constrained by social conditions and conditioning that impact how they see themselves and confine "possibilities to those they see to be suitable for the social group to which they belong" (p. 90). The constraining selectivity involved in this predisposition is a matter of engagement. Where social conditions and conditioning are of poor quality, their influence on how well students see and engage in accessible opportunities to learn and flourish is curtailed. As we have seen, many of those who have become students in AEPs had been subjected to such constraints.

In comparison, support from an alternative source toward more transformative habitus may help students to "recognise the capacity for improvisation" and "look for opportunities for action" (Mills & Gale, 2011, p. 90) potentially opening up previously unconsidered pathways and prospects for personal development and benefit. If teachers succeed in providing access to such support and mentoring students in using it, then students' capabilities and aspirations are likely to widen. We have shown in Chap. 5 how this empowering process is possible when disadvantaged students' voices were utilized to promote reading engagement. Similarly, AEP teachers who adopt authentic approaches to education that are mindful of marginalized students' views and perspectives will better promote and sustain their learning engagement. This undoubtedly will contribute to re-envisaging futures that reflect what Freire (1998) had championed as a basis for liberation of individuals from oppressive and depressing social and personal circumstances.

But does this liberation occur within the education that is happening in AEPs? There is evidence that children and young people are in happier places, are attending more regularly, and are accruing academic and behavioral benefits and improved well-being in comparison with their performances in their previous educational setting. We consider this to be the result of the greater incidence, quality, and consistency of their engagement. Nonetheless, while acknowledging that supportive environments and engaging pedagogies are evident, Smyth et al. (2013) raised a question of whether youth who attend AEPs are further marginalized, rather than liberated by curriculum choices accessible to them. They observed that AEPs they had investigated had narrower curriculum choices with greater focus on vocational certificates than most mainstream schools and that, at times, what was offered was misaligned with students' interests and talents. They concluded that this narrowing logically resulted in missed opportunities. They argued further that AEPs should provide rigorous curriculum to avoid limiting youth into low-skilled, low-income job pathways.

Their contention reflects Mills and McGregor's (2010) earlier warning that more supportive, warm learning environments may in fact hide the reproduction of academic disadvantage unless AEPs' curriculum is intellectually challenging and pathways toward work and additional education are present and accessible. Rigorous curriculum is intended as an additional option to, rather than a replacement of, what Mills and McGregor (2010) had seen in the flexible outlook, provision, and operation of AEPs. However, changing what a program currently offers so successfully for so many will need careful planning and monitoring to safeguard the growth of those for whom this option is intended without contorting the context of progress within which others are doing so well.

We think Terry would join us in advocating for further longitudinal research to explore engagement as a phenomenon in the learning and well-being of young people who, like him, are attending AEPs, both during schooling and in their post-school destinations and lives. This may be particularly important in relation to better understanding the affordances of alternative education in providing stability, effectiveness, flourishing, and valued outcomes to an increasingly diverse student body.