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The experience and reflections of parents whose teenagers are excluded from school, with particular attention to the place of counseling.

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Parental voices are rarely heard within international research literature on the issue of student exclusion from school, despite clearly being key players in the situation. This paper reports on the findings from a study undertaken with funding from the New Zealand Families Commission. Eight individuals or couples, all of whom had had a teenager for whom they were responsible excluded from school, were interviewed. Interview transcripts were analysed using a phenomenological methodology. The parents expressed strong feelings about their experiences and the impacts on the family, both practically and emotionally. The views are reported and discussed in the light of current international literature. The paper gives particular attention to the issue of school-family communication, and the part school counselors played or could have played in the exclusion process.

Keywords: exclusion, family, counseling, school.

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While New Zealand government policy guidelines note that exclusion of a student from school “can have far reaching consequences for the student (and for other members of their family)” (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 5), research literature that reports the experience of either students or their families is rare (Brown, 2007; Gordon, 2001; Knipe, Reynolds & Milner, 2007; McDonald & Thomas, 2003). NZ government guidelines around exclusion processes direct schools to ensure that access to good guidance and counseling is made available. As with reports of parental voice, research literature that explores the availability and efficacy of counseling in these situations is minimal. This article reports on the findings of a project undertaken for, and with funding from the New Zealand Families Commission, presenting the experiences of a small group of New Zealand parents of excluded students - giving voice to their thoughts, feelings, hopes and concerns, and giving particular attention to the aspect of counseling in the process.

The findings are linked to the potential of the concept and practice of school-based family counseling (Gerrard, 2008).

The report acknowledges that in this study neither the students nor the school staff involved in the situations described were interviewed. The author is aware that those other parties will have their own, potentially very different, but equally valid perspectives. The report therefore knowingly presents the views of one set of participants in a complex set of circumstances.

The background

Definitions, policy and statistics

Policies, definitions and processes around suspension and exclusion vary slightly between Western nations. Generally, processes fall into two categories: temporary suspension, and long-term or permanent 'exclusion'. Internationally, increasing numbers of suspensions and exclusions through the 1980s and 1990s were reported (Brown, 2007; Gordon, 2001; Lloyd, 2000; Partington, 2001). Within this trend, it seems that rates of exclusion vary significantly both between nations (Parsons, 2005) and also between schools (Cullingford, 1999).

New Zealand has its own definitions as outlined by its Ministry of Education (2008), which closely parallel those of other nations:

Stand-down means the formal removal of a student from school for a specified period. Stand-downs of a particular student can total no more than 5 school days in a term or 10 school days in a year.

Suspension means the formal removal of a student from the school until the Board of Trustees decides the outcome at a suspension meeting.

Exclusion means the formal removal of a student aged under 16 from the school and the requirement that the student enrol elsewhere.

Expulsion means the formal removal of a student aged 16 or over from the school. If the student wishes to continue schooling he or she may enrol elsewhere.

Exclusion and expulsion are for the most serious cases only. (p. 3)

The New Zealand Education Acts (1989, 1998) define a three-fold purpose: to provide a range of responses, to minimise the disruption to school attendance, and to ensure that situations are dealt with in accordance with the principles of natural justice. The MOE (2008) *Guidelines for Principals* clearly set out procedures which are set within principles of a child's right to free education, assisting all students to realize their full potential, ensuring access to good guidance and counseling, and of taking "all reasonable steps" (p. 4) to keep parents informed of students' progress. The Guidelines echo international policy that sees exclusion as a last resort.

New Zealand statistics, as reported on the MOE 'Education Counts' website (*Exclusions and expulsions from school*, 2009) report an incidence of 2.7 students per 1,000 in 2000, and 2.2 / 1,000 in 2008. The graphic representation shows small fluctuations from year to year, suggesting that there has actually been very little change over the seven years.

Both in New Zealand and internationally, boys are excluded more often than girls. Minority ethnic groups, young people from disadvantaged or low socio-economic backgrounds and those in care are consistently over-represented in the statistics (Brodie & Berridge, 1996;

Brown, 2007; *Exclusions and expulsions from school*, 2009; Gordon, 2001; Lloyd, 2000; Munn & Lloyd, 2005; Partington, 2001; *Suspensions from school*, 2009).

Alongside the statistics sits a range of comment in the international literature. Harrison (2004) and Partington (2001) believe that policy change and greater regulation have had minimal effect on rates of exclusion. Several authors have discussed the significance of school ethos. Munn and Lloyd (2005) have commented that school ethos can be ‘including’ or ‘excluding’ – often reflected in their formal exclusion figures. Berkeley (1999) believes that school ethos is more significant than government policy in determining exclusion rates, and adds that schools are not always consistent in their application of process or response to similar situations.

Experiences of exclusion

The literature comments that students’ voices are infrequently heard in discussion of the issue (Brown, 2007; Gordon, 2001; Knipe, Reynolds & Millar, 2007). Brown (2007) comments, “Effectively addressing these issues requires an understanding of what actually happens to students in the wake of school exclusion, some of which can only be learned from the young people themselves” (p. 434).

Three articles (Gordon, 2001; Munn & Lloyd, 2005; Partington, 2001) from England, Scotland and Australia respectively, report the experiences of students. A brief summary does not do justice to the young people concerned, but there are consistent themes across the studies around a sense of being rejected, an awareness of being responsible, and of awareness of and regret for the longer-term consequences.

Turning to the voices of the families involved, the literature contains both ‘anecdotal’ accounts (*A parent’s story*, 2002) and larger research studies (Brodie & Berridge, 1996; Gordon, 2001; McDonald & Thomas, 2003; Partington, 2001). McDonald and Thomas (2003) describe the parents’ stories as “passionate, painful and poignant” (p. 108) – which would seem an appropriate summation not just of their study, but also of the other reports mentioned. They also comment that the parents’ views communicated a sense of anger and powerlessness. They say that the interviews “offer a picture of a group of parents clearly traumatised by the experience of their children’s exclusion” (p. 111).

Alongside, and contributing to the emotions expressed, were concerns that time-frames for decision-making were lacking, and that little attention was paid to the present or future educational needs of their children, several of whom spent long periods out of school. Parents in the studies by Brodie and Berridge (1996) and Partington (2001) report similar experiences. Gordon (2001) and Vulliamy and Webb (2003) note that parents are not blind to the behaviors of their children, and struggle with managing the behaviors as much as, if not more than, the school.

Another thread that seems consistent across the reports is the sense that parents often feel labelled and treated in the same way as they feel their children are labelled and treated – bad student, bad parent. The consequences of this are that parents “can feel not only confused but actually humiliated, and in turn feel themselves to be psychologically excluded from the school system” (Cullingford, 1999, p. 58).

School and the family – the bigger picture

As has already been mentioned, exclusion from school needs to be seen as part of a bigger picture (Munn & Lloyd, 2005) and the end point of a long sequence of events (Cullingford, 1999).

Several writers have described links between family circumstances and school achievement. Goebert et al. (2004), in the introduction to their Hawaiian study, state that “studies have consistently shown that strong families promote positive school-related outcomes among youth” (p. 194). This point is echoed by Van Hoose and Legrand (2000).

Conversely, the literature indicates that teenagers who are excluded from school are more likely to come from home environments where there are socio-emotional or financial problems, and homes where there is less parental supervision (Stanley, Canham & Cureton, 2006). These writers, along with Gerrard (2008) observe that increased family stress leads to increased vulnerability in a young person, and consequently to an increased likelihood of ‘acting out’ at school. As Cullingford (1999) observes, disaffection is a gradual process, and once authority is questioned and a sense of power experienced, be it at home or school, the consequences flow from one setting to the other.

Two reports challenge schools to be careful in the way they think of both themselves and parents in these debates. Firstly, a UK study (Tett, 2001) states that “a child’s successful schooling *should* depend upon a great deal more than the efficacy of any individual parent” (p. 193 - original author’s italics). She comments that it is too easy for schools to put the blame on parents if education appears unsuccessful. Tett also comments on the tendency of schools to pathologise parents who challenge or disagree with a school’s decision, and to define a ‘good parent’ as one who conforms to school expectations. Secondly, Harrison (2004), in a New Zealand-based discussion, states:

The importance of family background in influencing student performance has been twisted by some New Zealand education academics into a reason for excusing poor performance by some schools. (p. 9)

Harrison (2004) adds that parents don’t always make perfect decisions, but that overall they tend to make better decisions than distant professionals when it comes to the welfare of their children. He also believes that there is little evidence that economically-disadvantaged parents make poor choices in issues of schooling. Dyson and Robson (*Links between...*, 1999) report similar findings.

The availability of counseling services within schools varies not only between schools but also shows national trends. Fox and Butler (2009) describe the ebbing and flowing of attitudes and provision of school-based counseling within the UK. They cite a 2006 survey which reported that “71% of schools now claim to offer ‘therapeutic individual counseling’ and comment that “provision at present is rather patchy, ad hoc and demand-led” (p.1). Fox and Butler contrast the UK picture with that of the USA, in which school-based counseling is a more accepted and available service.

In recent years greater attention has been paid to school-family-community agency collaboration. Various reports from both the UK (*Inter-agency working*, 2001; Milbourne, 2005; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003) and the US (Van Hoose & Legrand, 2000) describe programs targeted at disadvantaged communities, and communities in which school exclusion has been a problem. Features that contributed to the generally positive outcomes were the presence of people who provided independent support such as social workers within a school, the ability of parents to negotiate roles rather than having expectations and processes imposed on them, the involvement of people who genuinely cared, and processes that were flexible, equitable, and non-judgmental. Of particular relevance to this study is a statement by Vulliamy and Webb (2003):

...an emphasis upon the subjective experiences of key participants is warranted in order to counter criticisms...that the evaluations of many projects addressing social exclusion are only concerned with measurable outcomes and fail to document the views and changing attitudes of those involved which are vital to eventual and sustainable success. (p. 276)

Of particular interest to this study is the increasing interest, especially in the USA, in school-based family counseling (SBFC). Gerrard (2008) describes SBFC as an integration of “school counseling and family counseling models within a broad based systems meta-model” (p.1). Gerrard roots SBFC in the work of Alfred Adler, and details the growing literature since the late 1970s.

The research process

Theoretical perspectives

A project which desires to have “a glimpse of the lives behind some of the statistics” (Munn & Lloyd, 2005, p. 211) lends itself, methodologically, to a phenomenological approach. This approach is concerned primarily with seeking to see as others see, and to understand the meaning that others make of their experience, rather than overlaying the interpretations of the researcher (Kvale, 1996). Whilst lived experience is the ‘raw material’ being worked with, it has already been processed to some degree by the interviewee (Cole & Knowles, 2001). In inviting participants to describe experience, they are recounting incomplete memories and subjective perceptions rather than objective reality. In this project, in keeping with Gadamer’s (as cited in Sharkey, 2001) caution around reliance on pre-set standardized methods of interpretation, no formal analytical tool was used. Rather, reading and re-reading interview transcripts served to highlight themes.

The participants

The alternative education system in New Zealand is a network of specialized service providers who offer a diverse range of programs for young people who are unable to be maintained within mainstream education for a variety of reasons. Funding is provided by the MOE via local area consortia of secondary schools. For this project an approach was made to one alternative education provider (from here on referred to as AEP). The positive response from the director resulted in AEP becoming the source of the participants. AEP, at the time of the study, had between 15 and 20 young people on its roll, referred from several different high schools.

Contact was established with the parents of teenagers who had been excluded from school, and interviews arranged. Eight interviews were conducted, lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and the transcripts sent back to the interviewees for checking and correction if desired. The interviews used a semi-structured format, based around questions that had been included in the participant letter:

- *What were the events and time frames around your child's exclusion?*
- *How did the suspension affect your family? – How did you feel about what was happening? – What were the practical consequences for your family?*
- *Were there support agencies involved?*
- *As you reflect on what happened, how would you describe your sense of being involved in the process?*
- *Do you have any suggestions concerning the process which would have made it more helpful for you as a family?*

These questions were used as discussion-starters and the conversations allowed to unfold, clarifying and developing responses as they emerged. In the report the parents have been given pseudonyms; their children are referred to by their relationship to the parent. All other names have been omitted. The interviewees comprised:

- 4 natural mothers (Linda, Anne-Marie, Michelle and Pam), who have partners (one of whom was part of the interview – Anne-Marie's partner, Seth)
- 1 step-mother (Carol), whose partner is the natural father - who at the last minute was unable to be present
- 3 natural solo parents (Jessica, Terri [female] and Will).

The young people concerned were five girls and three boys, all 14 or 15 at the time their parent/s were interviewed, who had come from four different schools to AEP.

Themes from the interviews

The intention in this section is to report on themes from the interviews. Firstly, general aspects will be considered. Subsequently, participants' experiences and comments more specifically related to the role of counseling and counselors will be addressed in greater detail. It is important to note that the parents spoke about the events in ways that communicated thoughtfulness, realism and care. All of them were aware that their teenagers were exhibiting challenging behavior. While strong feelings were articulated, none of the parents appeared to be using the opportunity to 'get at' a school or individual.

Exclusion and positioning

In summary, one teenager had been formally excluded - Michelle's daughter. One parent had removed her daughter because she could see exclusion was inevitable and did not want her daughter to have that. Four students were 'sidelined' into alternative education following periods of stand-down, but prior to formal exclusion. Two young people were effectively barred from acceptance into a high school when they moved to the area on the basis of reputation or record. While there had only been one formal exclusion, all parents felt as if their child had been

excluded. These routes to exclusion are diverse and do not neatly follow the MOE (2008) guidelines. They are, as Berkeley (1999) says, “Stories about not fitting in, stories which stubbornly refuse to fit in” (p. 19). Assuming that the MOE statistics (*Exclusions and expulsions from school*, 2009) are based on formal exclusions, these accounts cast doubt on whether the true extent of exclusion is appreciated. Parents reported that the teenagers had had significant time out of school, and that often the school had not provided support or resources for schoolwork to be carried on at home.

The language used by the parents seems to reflect an adversarial view of the school-parent interaction - a perception of ‘them and us’:

I got a phone call to say ... that she was going up against the board. (Michelle) – author’s emphasis

The language used in the Ministry of Education Guidelines (2008) seems to reinforce this way of seeing the process: “It is preferable that the Board gives the direction in writing so that it can defend its position if challenged” (p. 3).

The parents experienced the school acting not only as prosecutor, but also as judge and jury. While the Board of Trustees may nominally act as an impartial ‘judge’, when it was involved, the parents were unable to see the board members as being anything other than an extension of the school hierarchy. Not only did the parents report a feeling of ‘them and us’, but many had experienced a sense of being labeled by the schools in a negative way. Several parents talked about their feelings of powerlessness, of being talked down to, criticized, and blamed, and expressed varying levels of anger, frustration and grief. Jessica was very clear about her sense of being punished, and Linda had felt “*bullied*”.

In contrast, several of the parents commented that stand-downs and exclusion are often not seen as punishment by their teenagers:

Well, what did your mates say about that?” and she said, “They reckon I’m lucky” - and I actually heard one of them - “Oh, you’re at home again, you lucky pig!”... (Jessica)

It was evident that both attitude and environment contributed to the sense of being powerless. There were common threads of not being able to stand up to or disagree with the school view or decision, or of not really having much choice other than to acquiesce:

I feel really intimidated at schools, I always have done, I feel like - they probably don’t even realize, but you feel like you’re getting spoken down to... (Terri)

Impact on the family

The parents reported significant repercussions for the family from the exclusion process. They were aware of the complexity of the situations, and not blind to the challenges presented by their teenagers. It is obviously impossible to isolate the specific contribution of the school to that

stress. However, their reports suggested that the exclusion process had exacerbated rather than alleviated an already stressful situation. The effects on the family were both emotional and practical. The emotional impact of feeling powerless and bullied has already been referred to. Disappointingly, these parents report many of the negative experiences recorded in the international literature already discussed.

Many of the group had experienced difficulties associated with work and/or the financial repercussions of exclusion:

I'm self-employed, I had to have all that time off work ... (Michelle)

The disruption is not just about being at home for anticipated longer periods of time when a child is stood-down or excluded, but also about the intermittent and more immediate demands of responding when a student is sent home, or a meeting is called. Will and Jessica were appreciative of empathetic and flexible employers – and would obviously have been much more affected by a ‘harder line’ response. While Prime Ministers (*Parents of...*, 2005) or principals (Partington, 2001) might feel parents should stay at home to look after their children, this is easier said than done. Many parents are working in order to survive financially and to cover the basics, not the luxuries – and the financial burden is increased in situations where the time out of school is for an extended period.

The effect on the working situation, however, is not just about the financial implications. It is also about the person's sense of integrity and their reputation and credibility. Michelle commented:

People couldn't rely on me to turn up because, just randomly I'd have to say, "Look sorry, I can't make it" and so that wasn't very good...

Another less obvious financial impact – to the community rather than the individual - is the cost of health care. Both Linda, and Pam's partner had suffered significant health issues and hospitalization during the exclusion process, which would dramatically affect the hidden costs of exclusion.

One final consequence noted by the parents interviewed was the impact of parental experience on both the excluded teenager and also on younger siblings. As Cullingford (1999) points out, teenagers are not blind to the way their parents are treated by their school, and what they see is likely to influence their own view of, and response to school staff. Both Pam and Terri had been through the experience of an excluded child twice – and felt that the younger sibling had been influenced by watching the experience of the older teenager. Carol mentioned the hero-worship by her eight-year old of his older sibling. Michelle commented on how her younger child "...was worried that he was going to say or do something wrong that would add to the stress."

These next sections will focus more specifically on the part counseling and counselors played in the parents' experience. Firstly, attention is given to the provision (or otherwise) of

support. Secondly, issues of communication between school and family and other agencies are reported on.

Counseling support

The parents' experiences of the provision of counseling differed widely. The availability of counseling was not unfamiliar to some of the parents - sometimes the counseling was within the school, and sometimes from an external agency.

Pam's daughter had been to counseling in the past, but in Pam's view, "...that wasn't really working for her."

Parents commented on their own response to the possibility of counseling:

Nine times out of ten I would try and deal with it myself...I wouldn't go to counselors or something like that... (Will)

Other parents reported that no counseling support had been offered. Some had taken the initiative themselves to seek help:

There's just no offer of any help, like counseling or anything ...I actually took my kids to family counseling. (Terri)

Communication between school and family

I think they could meet with the parents ...explain that this is a difficult situation...they need someone at the school that is going to stand up and say, "We are here to help you parents with these difficult kids..." (Linda)

Several of the parents interviewed commented that they would have hoped for, if not expected, a greater level of communication from the school prior to the situation of a stand-down being implemented – they wanted to know what was happening. Communication can be viewed both in terms of the passing on of factual information and also in terms of relationship. At the point where the school instituted a stand-down process, many of the parents, even in situations where they felt the school had communicated reasonably, did not seem particularly well-informed about how the process worked. Of concern is that several of them commented that either what they had discovered had been the result of their initiative, or that they really had no idea where to go to find information. Several had used family members or other families in similar situations, as a resource. I asked each parent if they were aware of the existence of the MOE website that is designed to aid parents and caregivers. None of them, including those who had explored the Internet, were aware of the site. (Note: the website has changed in the two years since the interviews were conducted. For the current website information, see: *Information for parents: Suspension...*, 2010). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that one of the recurring suggestions made in the interviews related to communication, not only in the form of ongoing dialogue, but also communication of information:

I think there should be an information pack that goes out to all parents... about how if anything happens, what they can do, who they can turn to... (Michelle)

Looking at communication from a relational perspective, three parents spoke about the importance of a consistent point of contact:

They said I could have a meeting with the guidance counselor but every time I tried to ring him to get an appointment, the guidance counselor wasn't available ...it's like a business, you press button this and button ...I wanted one person at the school... ...the sort of support I wanted would have been more than meetings... ...some allowance made for my situation... (Jessica)

Michelle had had experience at previous schools of developing action plans to support her daughter, but her more recent experience had not been so positive:

The school didn't get in contact with any of the services that they said they would, the school didn't do anything.

Michelle, however, still retained faith in the possibilities:

Having all the services that can be involved work together and come up with one action plan and I think that if there was someone in the schools doing that, talking with parents, the student and perhaps bringing in services that would assist with that student and how to keep that student in school...

Postscript

While their interaction with mainstream schools had largely been challenging and stressful, it is worthy of note that all the parents interviewed spoke positively about AEP – some in glowing terms:

I love [AEP], they're just great and he really enjoys it, he comes home happy and in a really good mood ...I think they're a lot more understanding and they don't take no crap... (Terri)

Although Anne-Marie felt that her daughter's behavior had deteriorated since being at AEP, the rest of the parents felt that their teenagers were making progress educationally and behaviorally. This suggests that it is possible for a school to relate positively and constructively to students who present a challenge. It would also seem that these students have the capacity both to relate well and to learn, and that they are not beyond 'salvaging' as suggested by one of the Board of Trustee members whom Michelle encountered.

It could be argued that some teenagers cope better and achieve more in the environment provided by alternative education, and that therefore they should be quite appropriately channeled in that direction. While that may be true, the route by which a student arrives at alternative education must be important in considering the overall picture. The teenagers represented in this study arrived by a process of 'exclusion'. The term itself flies in the face of current advocacy of ways of being that promote social inclusion (Bromell & Hyland, 2007).

Discussion

The study raises many issues around the topic of student exclusion which would be worthy of pursuit. This paper selectively focuses on the aspect of the role that counseling might play in the situation.

The parents who were interviewed are clearly under no illusions that these are easy situations to resolve or that it is only a case of finding the appropriate magic wand to 'make it all better'. However, the parents challenge the commonly-held discourse that it is the family situation that is to blame for student behavioral difficulties - and that problem children come from problem parents.

There is much in the interviews to advocate not simply relating to parents as people, but rather moving towards accepting them as partners. These parents communicate care and commitment, linked with a long-term knowledge and understanding of their children:

I know my son - I know he's a mouthy little shit and he does your head in, but he's not a bad, bad kid... (Terri)

The situations in which these families find themselves clearly overwhelm the resources of the family itself. A school is generally not equipped as a social service agency to deal with complex, often long-standing, situations. Traditionally, school counselors often do not have the time, expertise or resources to respond adequately to the situations exemplified by the families in this study. However, for schools to simply wash their hands of the situation or seek to pass the responsibility for involvement elsewhere is not a response calculated to improve the long-term well-being of family, student, or, for that matter, the school itself.

Serious attention therefore must be given to broader-based systems-oriented multidisciplinary involvement. Such approaches need to be clearly conceptualized, cooperative, and coordinated and consistent.

1. Clearly conceptualized: as previously mentioned, discourses that inherently problematize parents and apportion blame on the family are unhelpful. There is need for objective assessment. The challenge obviously is to be able to provide and communicate such assessment without creating defensive position-taking. Also required are strategies that overcome the resistance to counseling illustrated by participants Will and Pam.

2. Cooperation: building on the potential of parents as partners, there would appear to be a significant body of international empirical research that demonstrates the positive outcomes for all concerned arising from cooperative, multi-agency approaches (e.g., Milbourne, 2005; Stanley, Canham & Cureton, 2006; Van Hoose & Legrand, 2000; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003).

Admittedly, in the current study, some of the families accessed other agencies for assistance. However, this seems to have been at the initiative of the families themselves and to have happened in a somewhat random fashion, with little evidence of collaboration or inter-agency communication. Gerrard (2008) has discussed School Based Family Counseling (SBFC)

as a means of working with such situations. Gerrard reports multiple benefits of SBFC, both in relation to process and outcomes.

Gerrard (2008) discusses the issue of the potential development of triangulation between family, school and counselor. With respect to this issue, writers (as cited in Gerrard, 2008) have seen SBFC as having potential advantages over other patterns of multi-external-agency involvement. SBFC is suggested as being less liable to triangulation “because the school-based family counselor is not seen as a “third party” but rather viewed as part of the school system” (p. 2). However, if parents see the school system as inherently antagonistic and dominating, this “being part of the system” is inherently problematic. Further exploration of such dynamics is called for.

3. As mentioned by Michelle and Anne-Marie, whatever form these multi-disciplinary approaches take, there is a need for Coordination and Consistency. These ways of working endeavour to reduce overlap, confusion and poor communication. Inevitably staff leave and are replaced, and policies and processes evolve over time, but such changes somehow need to keep the well-being of the student at the centre of the picture.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that the parents interviewed communicated a sense of hope - a belief that both the systems they had encountered could be different and also that their teenagers, through alternative education if not in mainstream schooling, could make something of their lives. The challenge for schools, counselors and other involved agencies is to relate and work in ways that, rather than quashing constructive possibilities, create positive reality out of that hope.

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