University of
Southern
Queensland

STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL SETTING

FOR ADOLESCENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS,

TO ACHIEVE ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIOURAL GROWTH

A Thesis submitted by

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for the award of

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a case study focussed on a co-educational alternative secondary school in an Inner West suburb of Sydney, NSW, which caters to adolescents in Years 7 – 10 who are diagnosed with one or more of the following special needs: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, autism spectrum disorder, learning difficulties and mental health complexities. The researcher identified, across the literature, twelve good practice strategies which should be included in alternative school settings in order to achieve a level of behavioural and academic success for adolescents. Four staff members employed in this alternative school setting were interviewed individually and were required to rank the twelve good practice strategies in order of effectiveness, based on their professional knowledge and experience in this school. Three themes emerged from the interviews, which highlighted the effectiveness of building relationships, positive approaches, and flexibility as the strategies that achieve academic and behavioural success for students in alternative school settings.

CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

I Nicole Arathoon declare that this thesis entitled *Strategies employed in an alternative school setting for adolescents with special needs, to achieve academic and behavioural growth*. is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes.

This Thesis is the work of Nicole Arathoon except where otherwise acknowledged, with the majority of the contribution to the papers presented as a Thesis by Publication undertaken by the student. The work is original and has not previously been submitted for any other award, except where acknowledged.

Date: 1st March, 2023

Endorsed by:

Professor Karen Trimmer
Principal Supervisor

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Student and supervisors' signatures of endorsement are held at the University.

STATEMENT OF CONTRIBUTION

Paper 1:

Arathoon, N., Trimmer, K., & Rensburg van, H. (2023). Strategies employed in an alternative school setting for adolescents with special needs, to achieve academic and behavioural growth. (To be submitted to journal]

[Student contributed 80% to this paper. Collectively Karen Trimmer and Henriette van Rensburg contributed the remainder.]

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1. School Principal

2. Stage 5 Coordinator

3. School Psychologist

4. Literacy Coordinator

The researcher would like to acknowledge, in great appreciation, the support, guidance and wisdom of the USQ supervisors, Professor Karen Trimmer and Associate Professor Henriette van Rensburg. Without your patience, professionalism and humour this research study would not have happened, for it was with your great support that the researcher continued on this academic journey instead of abandoning it altogether.

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Finally, the researcher would like to acknowledge, in great appreciation, the love and patience of her partner and daughter who were always present and were a driving force in supporting the researcher to continue without giving up.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Position statement

Alternative school settings offer a substitute for mainstream education to the 'unwanted student' (Hadar et al., 2018) or 'at risk' student. It is important to define an 'at risk' student as one who is in danger of not completing their education therefore they may be enrolled in an alternative school setting (Lexico, n.d). Also referred to as 'last chance schools', they promote organisational, pedagogical or programmatic departures from mainstream schools. Across the literature there is identification of key strategies for alternative school settings, which collectively create a list of the following twelve good practice strategies: smaller class sizes, positive classroom environment, flexible structures, positive reinforcement, student performance, teacher expectations, building positive relationships, positive behaviour management strategies, social skills programs, parental involvement, volunteer inclusion, and trades included in the curriculum.

1.2 Structure of the study

This study investigated the strategies employed in an alternative school setting for adolescents transferred from a mainstream school setting due to their special needs requirements. Qualitative data was collected through 1:1 interviews with four staff members employed at an alternative school setting and the interview transcripts were then analysed to determine three emergent themes. The study highlighted how these three themes are crucial strategies that should be featured in alternative school settings in order to support adolescents to achieve academic and behavioural growth.

At the end of the thesis is the publishable article, which includes the literature review, the three key themes which emerged from the collected data and the discussion of the themes with recommendations for mainstream and alternative educational settings.

As this study is for the award of Masters of Professional Studies (Research) within the University of Southern Queensland's Professional Studies program, it will also provide a chapter outlining contributions to theory and practice, limitations, and opportunities for further research.

1.3 Background of the study

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2020), 16.4% of Years 7 - 12 students in Australian schools disengaged from their education in 2020. Disengagement from education and not completing secondary school limit employment options, which can lead to severe levels of disadvantage, and an increased burden on welfare and healthcare systems, especially for those who are diagnosed with special needs, mental health concerns or learning difficulties (Bowman et al., 2017). They are also more likely to face a life of crime, delinquency, anti-social behaviours, and engage in alcohol and drug use according to Hemphill et al. (2012). Engaging adolescents in their education is crucial as a means of ensuring their trajectory is a positive one. Therefore, the importance of this study lies in identifying strategies, employed by staff at this alternative school setting, which support students to engage in and complete their education.

Alternative settings offer a substitute for mainstream education to the 'unwanted student' (Hadar et al., 2018). Also referred to as 'last chance schools', they promote organisational, pedagogical or programmatic departures from mainstream schools.

Across the literature there is identification of key strategies of alternative school settings, which collectively create a list of twelve good practice strategies: smaller class sizes, positive classroom environment, flexible structures, positive reinforcement, student performance, teacher expectations, building positive relationships, positive behaviour management strategies, social skills programs, parental involvement, volunteer inclusion, and trades included in the curriculum.

Setting: This study was facilitated in a co-educational alternative secondary school in an Inner West suburb of Sydney, New South Wales. It is an independent, faith based school that caters to adolescents in Years 7 – 10, with a maximum enrolment number of 45 and class sizes of 6 - 8 students in each classroom with one educator. To be enrolled students need to be diagnosed with one or more of the following special needs: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, autism spectrum disorder, learning difficulties, and mental health complexities. Due to their special needs, these adolescents have transferred (by choice or by referral) to the alternative school setting from a mainstream school setting, as their needs were not being met.

1.4 Purpose of the study

The alternative school setting has been in existence for many decades yet there is still limited data available to identify why young people disengage from mainstream schooling before the age of 15 in the first place, and how alternative schools make a difference (Wilson et al., 2011). Given the inconsistency around a definition and characteristics, the purpose of this study is to examine the literature to determine what is currently known about good practice strategies in an alternative school setting, and to then interview staff employed in an alternative school setting to determine if these strategies are employed, and how effective they are in achieving academic and

behavioural growth for the adolescents enrolled. It is important to define a strategy as a plan of action designed to achieve a long-term or overall aim (Lexico, n.d); therefore, the following list identifies strategies of the alternative school setting, designed to achieve an overall aim of success for the adolescents:

1. catering to student needs by having low student to teacher ratios

2. implementing highly structured positive classroom environments

3. flexible structures

4. instilling positive reinforcement to encourage appropriate behaviour

5. student performance

6. teacher expectations and standards

7. building positive relationships between students and all staff in the school

8. positive behaviour management strategies

9. implementing social skills programs

10. parental involvement

11. volunteer inclusion

12. curriculum to include trades.

1.5 Aim of the study

Flower et al. (2011) has asserted that the 12 good practice strategies, whilst a key to success for 'at risk' students, are only effective if their quality is of the highest standard. The aim of this study is to provide mainstream and alternative school settings with a list of good practice strategies which have proven to be of a high standard and most effective for adolescents with

special needs, in supporting them to achieve academic and behavioural growth. This list may support schools to be better equipped to assist their students with special needs to engage in their education through effective programs and strategies, instead of referring them to alternative school settings. At the same time, alternative school settings should be in a better position to ensure their school engages with strategies that are effective in achieving success for their cohort, instead of employing strategies that are of little or no benefit to the students.

1.6 Work-based project objectives

In order to achieve the aim of this study, which is " to provide mainstream and alternative school settings with a list of good practice strategies which have proven to be of a hgh standard and most effective for adolescents with special needs, in supporting them to achieve academic and behavioural growth", a learning objective was devised that focusses on analytical skill development:

To identify and analyse the most effective and least effective strategies employed to support adolescents, in order to implement new initiatives to improve their behaviour and their academic engagement.

To further break down the structure of the study, this learning objective was collapsed into three learning objectives which outline how the study was approached and organised as follows:

1. To identify good practice strategies across the literature for alternative school settings, in order to determine which strategies are employed to support adolescents with challenging behaviours in this alternative school setting.

2. To analyse staff responses to the question of which good practice strategies they believe are the most and least effective for supporting adolescents with challenging

behaviours in this alternative school setting, in order to identify which strategies instill academic and behavioural growth and change.

3. To evaluate those strategies identified by staff as most and least effective for adolescents with challenging behaviours in this alternative school setting, in order to conclude which strategies need to keep being facilitated well and which strategies need greater attention.

In order to achieve the learning objectives the study followed these twelve steps in order:

Learning Objective 1: To identify good practice strategies across the literature for alternative school settings, in order to determine which practices are employed to support adolescents with challenging behaviours in this alternative school setting.

1. Examined the literature on good practice strategies in alternative school settings.
2. Identified the common good practice strategies and included any additional strategies.
3. Determined how many good practice strategies there are and compiled a list.

Learning Objective 2: To analyse staff responses to which good practice strategies they believe are the most and least effective for supporting adolescents with challenging behaviours in this alternative school setting, in order to identify which strategies instill academic and behavioural growth and change.

4. Qualitative data collection - Interviewed four staff at the alternative school setting.
5. Questions were based on the nine good practice strategies identified across the literature plus three additional strategies:
   - catering to student needs by having low student to teacher ratios
   - implementing highly structured positive classroom environments

6

- flexible structures

- instilling positive reinforcement to encourage appropriate behaviour

- student performance

- teacher expectations and standards

- building positive relationships between students and all staff in the school

- positive behaviour management strategies

- implementing social skills programs

- Additional three - parent involvement, volunteer inclusion, curriculum to include trades.

6. Questions in the interview focussed on which of the twelve good practice strategies were the most and least effective in the alternative school setting for instilling academic and behavioural growth in the students.

7. Collated the interview transcripts and determined themes between the responses.

8. From the data, determined which were the most effective strategies in the alternative school setting for growth, based on staff professional opinion.

9. From the data, determined which were the least effective strategies in the alternative school setting for growth, based on staff professional opinion.

Learning Objective 3: To evaluate the strategies identified by staff as most and least effective for adolescents with challenging behaviours in this alternative school setting, in order to conclude which strategies need to keep being facilitated well and which strategies need greater attention.

10. Used the data collected and evaluated why the most effective good practice strategies present in the alternative school setting (identified by the staff who were interviewed) were chosen.

11. Used the data collected and evaluated why the least effective good practice strategies present in the alternative school setting (identified by the staff who were interviewed) were chosen.

12. Concluded why these were the most effective strategies and the others were the least effective strategies for this alternative school setting.

1.7 Research questions

To achieve these objectives, the researcher needed to compile a list of questions which would be guiding the study. The primary goal of the research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies implemented in this alternative school setting which supported the students to engage in their education, change their behaviours, and complete their Year 10 education. It was anticipated that the research questions would be answered by the data gathered from the interviews; therefore, the interview questions were open-ended, providing an opportunity for in-depth answers and insight into the good practice features instilled in an alternative school setting.

Based on the literature review, there are five research questions posed:

1. There are twelve good practice strategies for alternative school settings as identified across the literature. Which of these strategies are instilled by staff in the alternative school setting in question?

2. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which are the most effective in supporting the students to achieve academically and complete their education, and why?

3. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which are the least effective in supporting the students to achieve academically and complete their education, and why?

4. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which are the most effective in supporting the students to improve their behaviour and engage appropriately, and why?

5. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which are the least effective in supporting the students to improve their behaviour and engage appropriately, and why?

Refer to Appendix B: In this table there is a list of specific and open-ended interview questions designed to answer the research questions.

1.8 About the researcher - Statement of prior learning

The researchers' prior learning has predominantly been in the education industry. Spanning 28 years, the learning profile begins with a Bachelor of Education university degree completed in 1994, followed by a Masters of Special Education, completed in 2013. The researchers' teaching career began in mainstream primary schools in Sydney and continued for ten years teaching all grades from kindergarten to Year 6. This also included teaching experiences in The Kimberley, Western Australia in Aboriginal communities for three years and then on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait for one year. This exposure to 'at risk' learners instilled a love in the researcher for special needs. Therefore, on return to Sydney, the researcher began a special needs role in mainstream primary Schools, one of which predominantly targeted Aboriginal learners. Three years in this role led to the researcher's current role as curriculum coordinator/stage coordinator in the alternative secondary school setting (as previously mentioned). The researcher has been in this role for the past 15 years, which has also included time spent abroad volunteering in special needs schools in Zambia

and Cambodia and mainstream secondary schools in East Timor and Papua New Guinea. These were much loved experiences, which have continued to instill in the researcher a passion for learners who need extra support, encouragement and care.

The motivation behind this study lies in the curiosity and burning desire of the researcher to understand how the alternative school setting supports 'at risk' students, yet mainstream school settings somehow 'fail' them. What exactly is it about this alternative school setting that helps the 'at risk' student engage and complete their education where the mainstream school setting, with all its resources, could not?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is included in the publishable article.

Introduction

Whilst alternative schools have been in existence for many decades, there is very little understanding of their characteristics or evidence of their effectiveness (Jordan et al., 2017). Many educators endorse them as an important solution to the educational issues 'at risk' youth face; however, there is inconsistency around a definition and the characteristics of an alternative school setting. Therefore, it is important to examine the literature to determine what is currently known about the good practice strategies of an alternative school setting.

2.1 Twelve good practice strategies

The researcher facilitated a search online for articles and journals using the keywords : alternative school setting, special needs, adolescents, good practice strategies, flexible pedagogical approach. From this search a collection of appropriate articles was compiled and examined for strategies which should be in place to support students in alternative school settings, A table was created by the researcher (Appendix A) with the strategies from each article and a colour coding system was implemented to highlight the commonalities between each article. Once the table was created the researcher was then able to compile a list of the most commonly endorsed strategies which equalled a list of 12 good practice strategies as identified across the literature as follows:

1. smaller class sizes

2. positive classroom environment

3. flexible structures

4. positive reinforcement

5. student performance

6. teacher expectations

7. building positive relationships

8. positive behaviour management strategies

9. social skills

10. parental involvement

11. volunteer inclusion

12. trades included in the curriculum

This research is designed with this list as the focus. The questions used in the interviews, asked for the participants' understanding of the 12 good practice strategies and how effective each strategy is in supporting students in an alternative school setting. The responses were then examined to identify themes.

CHAPTER 3: PUBLISHABLE ARTICLE

STRATEGIES EMPLOYED IN AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL SETTING

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Nicole Arathoon, Karen Trimmer, Henriette van Rensburg

Abstract:

This paper reports a case study in a co-educational alternative secondary school in an Inner West suburb of Sydney, New South Wales for adolescents in Years 7 – 10 diagnosed with one or more of the following special needs: attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, autism spectrum disorder, learning difficulties, and mental health complexities. The researcher identified, across the literature, twelve good practice strategies which should be included in alternative school settings in order to achieve a level of behavioural and academic success for adolescents. Four staff members employed in this alternative school setting were interviewed individually and were required to rank the twelve good practice strategies in order of effectiveness, based on their professional knowledge and experience in this school. Three themes emerged from the interviews which highlighted building relationships, positive approaches, and flexibility as strategies which achieve academic and behavioural success in alternative school settings.

Key words: alternative school setting, special needs, adolescents, good practice strategies, flexible pedagogical approach.

3.1 Introductory Paragraph:

Alternative school settings offer a substitute for mainstream education to the 'unwanted student' (Hadar et al., 2018). Also referred to as last chance schools, they promote

organisational, pedagogical or programmatic departures from mainstream schools. Across the literature, there is identification of key strategies in alternative school settings, which collectively provide a list of twelve good practice strategies, including smaller class sizes, positive classroom environment, flexible structures, positive reinforcement, student performance, teacher expectations, building positive relationships, positive behaviour management strategies, social skills programs, parental involvement, volunteer inclusion, and trades included in the curriculum.

The researcher facilitated a search online for articles and journals using the keywords : alternative school setting, special needs, adolescents, good practice strategies, flexible pedagogical approach. From this search a collection of appropriate articles was compiled and examined for strategies which should be in place to support students in alternative school settings A table was created by the researcher (Appendix A) with the strategies from each article and a colour coding system was implemented to highlight the commonalities between each article. Once the table was created the researcher was then able to compile a list of the most commonly endorsed strategies which equalled a list of 12 good practice strategies as identified across the literature as follows:

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12. trades included in the curriculum

This research is designed with this list as the focus. The questions used in the interviews, asked for the participants understanding of the 12 good practice strategies and how effective each strategy is in supporting students in an alternative school setting. The responses were then examined to identify themes.

3.2 Manuscript (including references)

Literature review

Whilst the alternative school settings have existed for many decades, there is very little understanding of their characteristics or evidence of their effectiveness (Jordan et al., 2017). Many educators endorse them as an important solution to the educational issues 'at risk' youth face; however, there is inconsistency around the definition and the characteristics of alternative school settings. Therefore, it is important to examine the literature to determine what is currently known about good practice strategies in alternative school settings.

Alternative school settings are designed to accommodate behavioural, educational, and/or medical needs of adolescents that may not be adequately addressed in mainstream school settings (Frances, 2018). According to Frances (2018), alternative school settings may be a special needs school, an emotional growth boarding school, an independent private school, a residential facility, an at-risk program, a charter school, a magnet

school, or a therapeutic wilderness program. In general, alternative school settings facilitate more programs than mainstream schools, with educational and developmental objectives focused on improving student self-esteem, fostering individuality, and enhancing social skills. Alternative school settings are also more flexible in their approach than mainstream schools, which allows for a greater variety of programs (Frances, 2018). Previously, alternative school settings primarily catered to disruptive students and those at risk of dropping out of mainstream schools; however, alternative school settings currently cater more broadly to adolescents who may not learn successfully in a mainstream school setting. For adolescents with mental health concerns and diagnosed behaviour disorders, alternative school settings provide a safer environment, with more individualised attention and easier access to the curriculum, than mainstream school settings (Frances, 2018).

As Beken et al. (2010) have determined, much of what is pursued in mainstream school settings, such as smaller class sizes, positive classroom environments, flexible structures, positive reinforcement, student performance, teacher expectations, building positive relationships, positive behaviour management strategies, social skills, and the additional features of parental involvement, volunteer inclusion, and trades included in the curriculum, are good practice strategies pioneered in alternative school settings. These 12 good practice strategies, whilst identified in some literature, have not been uniformly identified or acknowledged.

The first of these good practice strategies in alternative school settings is small class sizes. A lower student-to-teacher ratio means fewer students in the classroom for the teacher to support, and the teacher is therefore better positioned to support each student individually with individualised instruction, thus providing for their specific needs.

Flower et al. (2011), Anh and Simpson (2013), and Beken et al. (2010) have all endorsed the need for alternative school settings to cater to their students, with environments that are smaller than their mainstream environments. McGregor et al. (2015) supports this perspective by explaining how small class sizes allows the teacher time to get to know the students as individuals in order to cater to their personal needs and interests. Cumming et al., (2014) and Maillet (2017) have not mentioned small class sizes or lower student-to-teacher ratios as a priority or strategy of importance in alternative school settings. Instead, they have both focused on the classroom atmosphere in regards to a quiet classroom or a sense of belonging, as more important when supporting 'at risk' students.

The classroom environment is the second good practice strategy in an alternative school setting. The classroom should embody an active and creative approach to instruction, according to Maillet (2017), with tasks that encourage participation and hands-on activities. These types of activities are designed to support special needs students who will engage well in tasks that involve movement and creative thinking. Whilst Cumming et al. (2014) have also endorsed the classroom environment as one of the priorities in the alternative school setting, the focus is more on clear, well defined expectations in order to allow the students to know the classroom boundaries and to anticipate the consequences if these boundaries are not adhered to. In sum, Flower et al. (2011) have promoted the implementation of a highly structured classroom as a good practice strategy, which should be included in an effective alternative school setting in order to achieve results for 'at risk' students.

The third good practice strategy in an alternative school setting is a flexible structure, as identified in the literature by Maillet (2017), Ahn and Simpson (2013)

and Beken et al. (2010). A flexible schedule and structure for students with special needs helps staff to change the plan of the day as the need arises. Adapting the day according to the mood, needs and behaviour of students is vital; especially when Plan A does not work, then Plan B is an option and even Plan C. Whilst these three pieces of literature have identified a flexible structure as a good practice strategy, Flower et al. (2011) and Cumming et al. (2014) did not include flexibility as important. Instead, they both endorsed the fourth good practice strategy: instilling practices which encourage appropriate behaviours. Whilst Flower et al. (2011) have deemed positive reinforcement as a crucial inclusion in good practice strategies, Cummings et al. (2014) prefer specific praise to recognise student improved behaviour, coupled with the use of a token economy. Token economies can be an effective tool to encourage achievement for students in alternative school settings, as the extrinsic reward feeds into their self-esteem and inadvertently helps them feel like they have achieved something, which then encourages them to continue to achieve. For students in an alternative school setting who have been asked to leave their mainstream school setting, praise for achievements is vital to building their sense of self, as they may be feeling a sense of rejection.

The fifth good practice strategy of an alternative school setting is a focus on student performance. Mailett (2017) has identified student learning as crucial, particularly for 'at risk' students who need to accelerate their learning so they can 'catch up' on the knowledge and skills they may have missed through earlier years. Those gaps in their education can exacerbate feelings of inadequacy in the classroom, which often leads to poor behaviours to mask it. Connected to student performance as a good practice strategy is maximising student participation, as acknowledged by Cummings et al. (2014), which involves ensuring 'at risk' students are participating in class and

engaging in their classwork as a means to fill in the gaps of their learning and achieve better results academically. Another consideration for alternative school settings is the inclusion of UDL (Universal Design for Learning) as an instructional design framework, which can be applied to instructional activities to support students to access the curriculum through interaction, adapted stories, perceptions, and inclusive general education (Rao et al., 2017). Focusing on student performance as a good practice strategy in an alternative school setting acknowledges that students are at the core of the school and satisfying their academic needs is vital to their growth and development (Beken et al., 2010).

The sixth good practice strategy of an alternative school setting is teacher expectations and the standards they set for their students, according to Maillet (2017) and Ahn and Simpson (2013) who are both aligned. Identifying the teacher as someone who can have an impact on an 'at risk' student, when they ensure their expectations are realistic and their standards are high, is important. McGregor et al. (2015) supports this perspective by also explaining how keeping expectations high instills in the students an understanding that their education is meaningful and authentic. Expectations may sound unreasonable to students who may have low self-esteem about their abilities, and being with a teacher who is raising their standards may feel unachievable to the 'at risk' student and it may feel to them as yet another failure. However, keeping expectations high may also encourage students to reach higher instead of being complacent and comfortable. Encouraging students to keep striving higher and higher may just be the key to succeeding.

The seventh good practice strategy of an alternative school setting is only addressed by Maillet (2017) and Flower et al. (2011), and involves building positive relationships.

Students enrolled in alternative school settings typically have experienced a wide variety of life trauma or obstacles that have impacted their previous ability to complete school, and this may include mental health issues, learning problems, school failure, and family problems (Te Riele, 2007). Experiencing trauma impacts a student's relationship building, well-being, and academic and social success in schools, and building positive relationships can therefore have a significant impact on these students. Authentic and positive relationships between all staff and students is crucial to ensuring students feel a sense of belonging in their school environment (Flower et al., 2011). McGregor et al. (2015) supports this perspective by explaining how building positive relationships through spending time with students in alternative school settings, demonstrates to the student that their teacher cares for them and wants to get to know them. Feeling connected to others in the school community can have an impact on 'at risk' students' desire to engage in their learning, their attendance levels, and the value they place on themselves. Building positive relationships through positivity, exhibiting enthusiasm, getting to know the students as individuals, humour, and showing an interest in their lives are just some ways to demonstrate to 'at risk' students they are important and accepted (Maillet, 2017). According to Thomas et al. (2017), when 'at risk' students feel safe and connected, they are open to forming attachments and building relationships which is crucial to then providing a scope for skill development and many other possibilities. Relationship building therefore can be a catalyst to further growth and development for students in alternative school settings who are disengaged

The eighth good practice strategy of an alternative school setting is positive behaviour management strategies as identified by Flower et al. (2011). Promoting a positive behaviour management system for the classroom instills in 'at risk' students an understanding of expectations and behaviours that will or will not be tolerated. The extent

of this work can be achieved with the school psychologist, whereby students engage in a robust school-based intervention program, such as CBT (Cognitive Behaviour Therapy), to support their development of emotional regulation and understanding of positive ways to behave in the classroom (Creed et al., 2016). Whilst the work of the school psychologist is crucial in supporting students with behavioural disorders and mental health complexities, it is equally important to include a system in the classroom which encourages the student to choose positive behaviours over negative ones, so attaching a positive edge to the system ensures the measures are not punitive but constructive and respectful of their developmental needs. Enforcing positive behavioural interventions and assessments on functional behaviour are an added level of support endorsed by Flower et al. (2011), and they attempt to identify behaviours and support students in breaking old habits and encourage students to look at new ways of behaving. In agreement with this, Ahn and Simpson (2013) believe in fostering a positive emotional climate in the classroom through behaviour management guidelines, which instill the school's values and support students in making better choices about their behaviour. Providing these opportunities for voice and choice in regards to behaviour management is supported by Cumming et al. (2014), who discuss examples of students being explicitly taught to make better choices and to see better ways to manage their own behaviour. Research-based classroom management strategies for students with challenging behaviours is strongly encouraged by Cumming et al. (2014), yet Maillet (2017) and Beken et al. (2010) do not include behaviour management in their good practice strategies of alternative school settings.

The ninth good practice strategy of an alternative school setting is a focus on social skills for the 'at risk' student which Mailett (2017), Cumming et al. (2014) and Beken et al. (2010) do not include. Flower et al. (2011) endorse implementing social skills

programs which explicitly teach students how to behave in public, respond respectfully when challenged, listening skills, appropriate manners, and ways to behave in different situations. These are all crucial for their development as a young person, and they are particularly relevant for their journey into the workforce and their understanding of how to work with a variety of people and personalities. Ahn and Simpson (2013) take this a step further and encourage extensive social services and support programs to be instilled in the school structure in order to ensure all students in the cohort are catered for and all ground is covered.

Whilst these nine good practice strategies are identified and supported across the literature, there are additional strategies that are not addressed by all. Flower et al. (2011) encourage parental involvement as a key component for alternative school settings. Including the parents in discussions and meetings is crucial in order to demonstrate to the students that the school and their parents are aligned in their common goal of supporting them and wanting the best for them. This united front is important for students to witness. Whilst Maillet (2017) does not mention parental inclusion, including volunteers is mentioned as a key component to supporting 'at risk' students to achieve in the classroom. Effective and consistent volunteers possess an ability to relate to the 'at risk' students in a way regular staff do not, as the students perceive them as non-authoritarian and therefore allow them to build a relaxed relationship with them. Beken et al. (2010) have identified inclusion in the curriculum of elective subjects specific to trades as beneficial to 'at risk' students who may not pursue a university degree or Year 11 and 12 education. Continuing their education into a trade and apprenticeship may be more of a realistic journey for students in alternative school settings who may prefer to learn on the job rather than in a classroom setting.

In conclusion, alternative school settings are designed to meet the needs of the students first, in ways mainstream school settings do not, with strategies focused on the growth, development, and success of the student. To do this, alternative school settings need to embody high impact strategies which transcend academics to include social, emotional and behavioural growth in caring, supportive and flexible learning environments, in order to support the students to complete their education and no longer be deemed as 'at risk'.

Method

Participants: This single case study focused on an alternative school setting in an inner city suburb of Sydney. At the start of the research process, the following four staff members were invited by letter to participate:

1. School principal

2. Stage 5 coordinator - responsible for all Stage 5 (Year 9, Year 10) students

3. School psychologist

4. Literacy coordinator

As the researcher holds an executive role in this particular alternative school setting, there was no recruitment process as such. Instead, the staff were individually invited to participate to ensure each participant was of equal or higher standing in the school as the researcher, so there would be no power imbalance, no perceived implicit coercion, and no obligation to participate. As an insider, the researcher already had extensive in-depth knowledge of the alternative school setting and was in a current working relationship with each participant. It was important for the researcher to be mindful of those who chose not to participate, others who were not invited to participate, and the potential power imbalance between the participants and the researcher. In this regard, participants who

held higher or equal positions in the school were invited to participate. The School Principal and three lead staff members in the fields of psychology, literacy and student management, all hold positions in the school which would not create a power imbalance with the researcher as they are of equal or higher standing. Ethical considerations were guided by National Ethical Research and approval was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee to proceed with the research after a declaration by the researcher of the potential risks the participants may encounter during the research process

Data Collection:

The individual, 60-minute interviews were held face-to-face, onsite, and the primary goal of the research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies implemented in this alternative school setting, which aim to support the students to engage in their education, change their behaviours and complete their Year 10 education. The interview questions were open-ended to provide an opportunity for in-depth answers and insights into the good practice features instilled in the alternative school setting.

There were five primary research questions:

1. There are 12 good practice strategies for alternative school settings as identified across the literature. Which of these strategies are instilled by staff in the alternative school setting in question?

2. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which

are the most effective in supporting the students to achieve academically and complete their education, and why?

3. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which

are the least effective in supporting the students to achieve academically and complete their education, and why?

4. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which are the most effective in supporting the students to improve their behaviour and engage appropriately, and why?

5. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which are the least effective in supporting the students to improve their behaviour and engage appropriately and why?

Data analysis:

Qualitative data was gathered in order to generate knowledge which was grounded in human experience (Nowell et al., 2017), and the data were analysed thematically to obtain an understanding of the phenomena experienced. The analysis explored the experiences of the staff and the meanings they attached to those experiences. A thematic analysis was applied to all interview material, highlighting similarities and differences, and producing unanticipated insights. Themes emerged from the interviews as follows:

1. Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth, academic or behavioural

2. Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings

3. Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important

Findings based on the three themes

1. Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth, academic or behavioural

When the participants in this study were asked to rank the twelve good practices identified across the literature, from the most effective to least effective for instilling change for

adolescents in this alternative school setting, building positive relationships emerged as an overwhelming response. Ranked first across all participants for behavioural growth, building positive relationships was identified as a crucial component of an alternative school setting. As stated by one participant:

> You can't do anything with our students without positive relationships. Greater gains are made if you've got a positive relationship with them. Relationships with teachers can have a profound effect on their growth.

Another participant echoed this response by expressing their opinion of achievement across both domains:

> It doesn't matter if you're the best teacher or the best counsellor; if you haven't got a relationship with the students, they're not going to learn to the best of their ability. They'll still learn and still grow but you won't get the best out of them. So, without a relationship they won't be achieving all they can achieve. They can still achieve but it won't be anywhere near what it could be or should be.

A third participant explained their ranking of building relationships as follows: Building relationships, that's the most important. When I have a good relationship with a student, more often than not they will do the right thing when I ask them to because they don't want to break that relationship with me. You get the biggest buy-in from the kids when you have a positive relationship with them.

Likewise the fourth participant, confirmed the mutual opinion that building positive relationships was the most important strategy on the list:

> Building positive relationships, you show it and do it across all the others on the list. You can't do the others on the list without positive relationships.

It is understood that building positive relationships with students in an alternative school setting is made possible due to the low student-to-staff ratios. Having six to eight students in a classroom enables the teacher to get to know the students intimately, as opposed to a

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mainstream educational setting where there are 20 - 30 students in the classroom. This is confirmed by one participant in this study who stated:

> The low student-to-staff ratio is absolutely essential because you get the
>
> opportunity for the young person to settle and stabilise and build up a sense of
>
> trust with their teacher; they feel safety in that relationship because having less
>
> students means that development of that relationship happens quicker. The
>
> students can feel an authenticity between themselves and the teacher and the
>
> teacher can get to know the students and their individual needs a lot quicker.

Likewise, another participant expressed their belief that, "you build better relationships when you have smaller numbers in the classroom". Whilst a low student-to-staff ratio is identified as a contributing factor to building positive relationships at this alternative school setting, it is worthwhile to acknowledge that whilst the relationship may be easier to build in a smaller setting, it is crucial the relationship is built on authenticity, trust and security. As one participant expressed:

> With positive relationships it's not just about being warm and friendly to a student
>
> but I think the staff members here have to come with a certain level of authenticity.

Another participant confirmed this understanding by stating:

> If there is a genuine, respectful, authentic relationship with someone then the
>
> student is more likely to be willing to work through a difficult moment to come
>
> back to what the expectation on their behaviour is. It's co-regulating and you can
>
> do that when you have a meaningful relationship.

Likewise, a healthy level of trust is the foundation to building a positive relationship, especially with students in alternative school settings who often have a trauma background and exhibit challenging behaviours. As explained by one participant in this study:

For the student to have a positive relationship here, they have to feel a sense of

safety and trust, and without that, why should they or could they change

anything to do with their behaviour? Their behaviour serves as a coping strategy

for them which has unfortunately not fitted within the mainstream system, but

when they come here we are trying to make them feel safe and supported and

secure enough to explore how some of those behaviours may not be very

functional in society and how those behaviours have led them here, not because

they're a bad kid but because that environment and system did not support

students with those behaviours.

Building positive relationships as an effective strategy for growth extends beyond the

classroom setting. Taking opportunities to develop supportive and authentic relationships is

important in the school playground, on school excursions and on camps, as the students

start to see their teachers as more than just an educator in the classroom. This was detailed

by one participant who stated:

When the students see their teacher being supportive, authentic,

consistent, professional outside of the classroom and within the

classroom, it builds up a security in the relationship with that teacher.

They see their teacher as a real person. The school sees all those

opportunities outside of the classroom as wonderful experiences for the

students who often don't get a lot of that. Taking opportunities to build

positive relationships beyond the classroom needs to be supported by the

school mission as well as a collective understanding that the student is

supported to develop holistically across all domains and in all

environments. A school with a faith background may be well-suited to

this foundational ethos, which is at the core of the purpose of the

school.

As identified by one participant in this study:

> Positive relationships are important because of our students' disorders and
> complexities, and also because of the faith foundation. They need to know
> God loves them and the best way to show that is to take an interest in them.

Another participant confirmed this opinion:

> A faith foundation is all about relationships. Having a positive relationship
> with staff and students means you can achieve almost anything with them
> because they'll be happy to work with you and try… they might fail and fall
> down but you're there to pick them up because it's a positive relationship.
> That's a real strength here and a real personal focus because it's the most
> important aspect of the school.

A final feature of a positive relationship which was understood as necessary across the four participants in this study was listening. Demonstrating to these students in an alternative school setting that the staff are listening to them and what they have to say is important, and being heard is a key component to building a positive relationship. This was explained by one participant as follows:

> There is a willingness to listen to them and give time to form those bonds and
> relationships and the kids genuinely feel loved and cared for. They know you
> care about them and you will take time out of answering emails etc. to spend
> time with and listen to them. That's huge value.

Another participant expressed a similar belief:

> Everyone here genuinely cares about these kids and wants to hear what they
> have to say. Natural? Yes … we are compassionate people and it's the culture
> of the school. If the executive sat in their offices and never made an effort to
> talk to the kids, then what are they modelling to the staff?

The general consensus of the participants was summed up in the following statement from

one of the participants about the value of building positive relationships to achieve growth in an alternative school setting:

> Positive relationships are key because without them, we can't do any of it. They have to feel safe with us. It's crucial. These kids will interpret behaviour from staff very quickly whereas other kids, who haven't experienced those adverse childhood experiences, won't.

2. Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings Embedding positive approaches into the school pedagogy supports students with complex, academic, behavioural, and emotional challenges to feel a sense of belonging, which may encourage them to engage in the school community. Whilst educators do not have control over the risk conditions of home life, family influences and external factors, they can contribute to students' improved wellbeing and a greater sense of self through strategies employed in the classroom. On the list of nine good practice strategies used as a focus in this study, the three strategies which identify a positive approach as opposed to a punitive one were: a positive classroom environment, positive reinforcement, and positive behaviour management strategies. These three strategies were ranked higher by the participants than four other strategies on the list: social skills programs, parental involvement, volunteer inclusion, and trades included in the curriculum.

Positive reinforcement was ranked third, fourth and fifth most effective for behavioural growth by the four participants, whilst it ranked fifth to eighth for academic growth. All participants acknowledged the importance of positive reinforcement as opposed to negative reinforcement, as expressed by one participant:

> Positive reinforcement is so valuable. These kids we get have seriously low self-esteem through experiences of trauma, abuse, poor relationships and poor attachments, and others just feel like they don't meet the standards of mainstream

settings. So, a lot of them feel deep down they are not very good or not very

lovable. [The] opposite of positive reinforcement is negative reinforcement and

our kids are very sensitive to feeling shame or feeling they have done something

wrong and they've failed.

Another participant mirrored this opinion:

Positive reinforcement is really valuable because it has the potential to really

build up their own sense of their intrinsic motivation to do the right thing or to

fit in well with the whole community. Some of our rewards systems are really,

really good, especially for our ADHD kids. It makes it very obvious what they

need to do to achieve that reward.

The importance of positive approaches lies in the understanding that punitive approaches

are not effective with students who are diagnosed with behaviour disorders or mental

health issues. Punitive approaches may exacerbate situations and enhance feelings of

failure for students, which is an end result alternative school settings try to avoid. The

participants were conclusive in their understanding of the ill effects that punitive

approaches can have on the cohort at their particular alternative school setting:

Punitive approaches are what students here have encountered their whole

lives. There still need to be rules to be followed and a line in the sand but it's

about how we implement them and how we talk about them and how we

reinforce them…Whatever you have in place needs to be an effective strategy.

Whilst punitive approaches were not endorsed at this alternative school setting, it was

widely understood across the four participants that expectations and accountability were an

important inclusion in the way issues were dealt with. Supporting the students to

understand the part they play in an issue and empowering them with tools to address the

issue are necessary life skills. As expressed by one participant:

It's about having expectations so therefore, if they haven't met the expectation and something happens as a result of that, you don't want to be too punitive. The "result of" can just be a conversation or a restorative justice process or a counselling session. It's about addressing it and making sure you address it because otherwise you're letting it go and turning a blind eye. You need to address it so they understand it. We are such a supportive environment. You need to take the time at an alternative school setting. Mainstream also, it's crucial for any child to have that conversation but it's imperative here. You just find the time to make it happen.

This response was mirrored by another participant:

Not being punitive but teaching kids how to say sorry. That's an invaluable life skill - to acknowledge you did wrong and repair the relationship which is often not modelled at home so when they see us do it, it has a huge impact.

As one participant summed it up: "We concentrate on the positive behaviours as an effective strategy across the school". Focusing on the positive, as opposed to the negative, supports these students in this alternative school setting to want to make change to the way they approach situations. Positive classroom environments, positive reinforcement and positive behaviour management strategies are all effective features of this alternative school setting, which consequently supports our students to be the best version of themselves and therefore encourages them to achieve academic and behavioural growth.

3. Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours

Flexibility allows staff to adjust their teaching to suit the needs of learners whilst flexibility affords the students a feeling of comfort and of not needing to conform to expectations that

are evident in mainstream school settings. The four participants in this study agreed with flexibility being an effective approach, yet that it was also important to offer some structure in the day to support the needs of students with challenging behaviours who benefit from predictability and knowing what is happening and when. As expressed by one participant: Highly structured, but with plenty of wriggle room for flexibility.

This involves highly structured classroom routines and school protocols without being too rigid that the expectations on the students become overwhelming and unachievable. These are often the reasons why mainstream school settings do not suit this cohort, as confirmed by another participant:

> Predictability alongside high structure works for our kids. They know
> what's coming next. A level of success is really important with literacy
> lessons and our kids, [as are] consistency and predictab[ility]. They feel
> comfort in what is coming next. Structure is more important for our kids
> than [for those in the] mainstream and keeping the structure because when
> change comes they don't cope.

Flexibility ranked highly as an effective strategy for behavioural growth, scoring two to five out of twelve for all participants, whilst it ranked lower for academic growth with rankings between four and eight out of the twelve good practice strategies. The importance of flexibility was confirmed by one participant:

> But again, when you've got the kind of kids we get here you have to be able to
> be highly flexible and not hold what you want to do as the teacher or staff
> member as the priority. It has to be able to be the students' priority, day by
> day, case by case.

By contrast, highly structured classroom environments ranked lower with scores of five to nine out of twelve for all participants for behavioural growth, yet it ranked higher for academic growth with rankings between two and seven out of twelve. The importance of

highly structured environments was confirmed by one participant:

> Rigidity is really stabilising for them, to have that structure but simultaneously to be able to manage a kid that's really disorganised or very dysregulated. It's balancing those two things.

The participants conclusively agreed that highly structured environments with flexibility work well together for our students, as opposed to functioning on their own. Highly structured classroom environments and flexibility are not effective strategies independently but, together with a good balance between them, they can be an effective strategy for students with challenging behaviours. This was confirmed by all four participants in this study:

> Our teachers here keep it highly structured but not structured in a rigid, controlling way. It's structured in a way that leaves plenty of room for flexibility and it comes down to the expertise of the teaching staff and their understanding of why a student might be getting up and sitting down repeatedly or not following instructions.

Another participant echoed this response:

> Wouldn't want too high a structure. There needs to be flexibility in it. But you need a base structure. I equate it to [the fact that] the rules are in the curriculum and the outcomes I need to achieve, but it's up to me how I reach the outcomes. And making sure I get to those outcomes.

A focus on the skillset of the educator to read situations and adapt the day or the lesson accordingly is of high importance in an alternative school setting. Being able to balance the structures and boundaries of a classroom with the flexibility students need in that moment is a honed skill. As explained by one participant:

> Our teachers need to be highly flexible and be able to differentiate 'on the

fly' spontaneously; be very, very flexible because the kids turn up, some of

them, go home to very chaotic environments so they're not eating regularly,

sleeping regularly plus there's all these diagnoses laid on top of that, so to

be able to be flexible is … they have to be extremely flexible… gifted at

being flexible but still driving for that particular structure so that the kids

know what's coming and it settles them. But at the same time being able to

manage whatever comes up really, really flexibly.

Likewise, knowing the students and understanding their intricate, individual needs

supports the educator to be flexible whilst honouring school structures, as confirmed by

another participant:

So it's about really understanding each individual and each teacher has to

be authentic with what they expect of that kid. Sticking rigidly to

outcomes as a teacher cannot work with these students. Personal growth

is so much more satisfying. You have to change as an educator to suit

being here.

The flexible and highly structured approach was identified as an effective strategy in an

alternative school setting as it allows the educator to cater to the individual needs of the

students. Adapting and changing the lessons and the tasks to suit the students is crucial in

any educational setting, and even more so in an alternative school setting where the

students present with complex needs. As explained by one participant:

Just in our interactions we are flexible. We approach our students in

different ways depending on the student. We have that luxury because it's a

small community. We know the students well because it's a small

environment. You adapt a different style per student. [It's] one of the core

things we do really well here. You couldn't do the same in a mainstream

school.

Another participant confirmed the need for an the ability to cater to individual needs because of the low student-to-teacher ratio:

> Flexibility leads to catering to the individual, which leads back to small numbers. We have the ability to be more flexible here because we have smaller numbers in an alternative school setting than in [the] mainstream. Changing things up is easier if you are catering to 6 humans as opposed to 30 humans.

3.3 Links and implications

As identified by Maillet (2017), alternative schools are designed to provide an engaging and enriching educational experience for students with challenging behaviors and one of the key ways to achieve this is through building positive relationships. All participants in the interviews agreed that the relationships between staff members and students can make a critical difference to the students' academic and behavioural growth. Encouraging students to view themselves differently to what they have experienced in the past, i.e. a failure or not good enough, is crucial to helping them want to achieve that level of academic and behavioural change. In supporting the students' desire to want to change, the staff in alternative school settings need to be authentic listeners, they need to instill in the students a level of trust, and they need to help them feel safe and secure in the school community, so that they feel their behaviours and academic ability can change and will change if they accept the support and work with staff, not against them. Included in this is the understanding that a faith foundation, low student-to-teacher ratios, and extra- curricular activities are crucial inclusions in an alternative school setting when supporting students to make change.

Anh and Simpson (2013) have explained that fostering a positive climate in an alternative school setting leads to students' success. The students' desire to want to make personal change is enhanced when they are engaging in positive experiences as opposed to negative

ones. Positive classroom environments, positive reinforcement, and positive behaviour management strategies have far greater impact on behavioural and academic growth than punitive or negative strategies. Building their self-esteem and helping them feel strength in making the necessary changes to achieve academic and behavioural gains are impacted by positive approaches in the school community instead of negative approaches. Expectations, rules and accountability are still crucial for their growth, as these are skills they will need as they progress through life. However, when approached in supportive and positive ways, they have a greater and longer lasting impact than having to face punishments for their actions.

A key feature of alternative school settings is their flexible pedagogical approach, as identified by both Maillet (2017) and Ahn and Simpson (2013). It is crucial for staff to employ a flexible approach to addressing the curriculum and their classroom management instead of a rigid approach, as students with challenging behaviours and a trauma background need flexibility to help them feel comfortable. In saying that, flexibility needs to be finely balanced with predictability as this supports students with behaviour disorders or a family history of disruption and unpredictability. When working alongside each other, flexibility and predictability support students in feeling safe and secure in the school community and provide them whith much needed boundaries so they know what to expect when these boundaries are crossed. An important understanding amongst the four participants in the interviews was that not all students in an alternative school setting need flexibility and predictability. Getting to know the students and learning who needs which strategy to help them achieve growth is a crucial part of the staff's role when working with students in an alternative school setting or a mainstream setting.

Conclusion

Strategies employed in an alternative school setting for adolescents transferred from a

mainstream school setting, due to their special needs requirements, was the focus of this case study. Four staff members were invited to be interviewed and participate in this research in order to determine which of the twelve best strategies identified across the literature were included in this particular alternative school setting, and of those, which were most effective in achieving academic and behavioural growth in the students. In their professional opinions, the participants ranked the twelve good practices and three themes emerged as the main strategies employed in this alternative school setting: building relationships with students is crucial for any growth academic or behavioural, positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings, and flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours is key. Each of these strategies work together to achieve the best outcomes for the students and they are not stand-alone strategies. Instilling a flexible and predictable approach in the school culture builds a positive relationship with the student who needs the flexibility to feel safe. Similarly, embedding positive approaches into a school community, as opposed to punitive measures, develops feelings of safety, security and trust between the student and the staff, which in turn supports the development of a positive relationships.

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CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This research is aligned with the following methodology, with each component being further detailed in this section.

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Research paradigm = Pragmatism                   │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Methodology = Qualitative case study             │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Qualitative data generation method = Interviews  │
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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  Qualitative data analysis = Thematic analysis    │
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Figure 1: Methodology

4.1 Research paradigm: Pragmatism

The research paradigm follows a pragmatic position, which is well-suited to case study as a means of examining the reality of a subject and to identify its nuances and distinct features (Mills et al., 2010). A pragmatic study focuses on what works in a real-world situation and involves identifying a problem, viewing it within its context, and engaging in research inquiry in order to better understand the context and ultimately solve the problem or answer a question (Mills et al., 2010). The focus is on the practical rather than the theoretical, which is ideal for this case study as the focus is on the practical strategies employed in the alternative

school setting and identifying what works and what does not work for the adolescents'
academic and behavioural growth.

Pragmatism is a research philosophy based on the epistemological recognition that there is
no single way of learning but many different ways of understanding because there are
multiple realities (Saunders et al., 2012). Knowledge of such multiple realities is therefore
gained through qualitative methods such as interviews, through which the researcher gains
a better understanding of a problem from the points of view of people who have lived the
experiences. Using the qualitative method of interviews for this study has allowed the
researcher to determine not only what the participants thought but why they thought it,
through in-depth questioning, which allowed for a deeper understanding of their thoughts
and feelings (Saunders et al., 2012).

To adhere to the principles of the pragmatic research paradigm, the case study has been
chosen as a research method for this topic. Whilst there is a concern case studies can lack
rigour and can be prone to bias, if strong research questions and data collection methods are
used, case studies can be ideal for a pragmatic research paradigm (Yin, 2018).

4.2 Methodology: Qualitative case study

As explained by Denscombe (2014), a case study is an analytical and holistic focus on a
natural setting which may include a variety of means for collection of data, such as
experiments, surveys and interviews. It provides a look into real life situations or people
and provides the reader with insight into how that particular place or person operates. Case
studies are a distinctive form of empirical enquiry, as described by Yin (2018), with a how
and why focus on real life contexts.

4.2.1 Why use case study?

As case study research focuses on why, what and how questions (Ebneyamini &
Moghadam, 2018) it appeared logical to the researcher to approach this research with a
case study lens. Using a case study framework seemed to be the best fit to answer how and
why twelve good practice strategies support adolescents to achieve academic and
behavioural growth in an alternative school setting. Examining the research questions in a
natural setting, and thereby allowing why, what and how to be answered in meaningful
and relevant ways, is exactly what the case study method embodies (Ebneyamini &
Moghadam, 2018).

4.2.2 What type of case study?

As explained by Ebneyamini and Moghadam (2018), case study research can be divided
into many types, including exploration, theory building, theory testing, and theory
extension/refinement. When the topic is broad and highly complex, when the available
theory is limited, and when great importance is placed on the context, a case study can be
appropriate for building and testing theory, building and testing an hypothesis, and as a
descriptive study (Ebneyamini & Moghadam, 2018). This research has followed a case
study method as it is building a body of evidence around the strategies that are most
effective in instilling academic and behavioural change in adolescents enrolled in an
alternative school setting. The researcher has built on existing theory in analysing the data
collected from the four participant interviews, and has identified three emerging themes
that can be used as a starting point for further research and investigation.

4.3 Qualitative data generation method: Interviews

Interviews were chosen as a form of qualitative data collection for this study as they are a
powerful means of inquiry and of collecting information (Hannan, 2007). Acquiring

meaningful information from the perspective of staff working in the alternative school setting was at the core of this study; therefore, using interviews as a means to achieve this was a logical choice for the researcher. As suggested by Ebneyamini & Moghadam (2018), for the purposes of qualitative case study research, conducting interviews aligns well with the principles of case study research as they invite the participants to share a narrative of their experiences. This research invited four staff members at the alternative school setting to share their understanding of how the alternative school setting in which they were employed operated, and based on their personal experience, to identify which strategies were most effective in facilitating growth in adolescents with challenging behaviours.

4.4 Conceptual framework

John Dewey was a pioneer in the 1930s and 1940s for the alternative school setting, based on his understanding that not all students possess the same learning approach and ability and therefore require different educational settings (Beken et al., 2010). This advocacy for an alternative school setting was also born out of a realisation in the 1950s in the US that their public education system neglected minority groups. Instead of investigating ways to improve the mainstream school systems that failed more than 50% of students (Beken et al., 2010), alternative school settings were created to house the neglected students. Whilst alternative school settings are still evolving in their definition, it is understood that they are designed to support students who are at risk of school failure within the mainstream school setting, as their needs are not being met. Of interest is the explanation by Beken et al. (2010), who have defined the profile of students attending alternative schools as those who have a higher number of risk factors present in their lives, as compared to those from mainstream schools, such as substance abuse, suicidal behaviour and sexual, emotional and physical abuse. For these students,

enrolment in an alternative school may be viewed as a "last resort", either by choice or by mandatory placement (Lehr & Lange, 2003). Enrolment 'by choice' implies that the alternative school setting is a desirable option under the control of the student or parent, whilst mandatory placement may also be referred to as a 'forced choice' whereby students are excluded from their mainstream school setting. This terminology has always held negative implications for the alternative school setting however, since alternative school settings in this context suggest student choice and second chances, rather than compulsory or involuntary schooling (Beken et al., 2010). The phrase 'second chance' provides a feeling of hope for the student who is at-risk of educational failure, as indicated through poor grades, refusal to attend school, disruptive behavior and suspension, which are all factors associated with early departure from school.

4.5 Qualitative data analysis: Thematic analysis

Qualitative data was gathered in order to generate knowledge, which was grounded in human experience (Nowell et al., 2017), and thematic analysis was used to obtain an understanding of the phenomena experienced. A rigorous thematic analysis has the potential to produce trustworthy, insightful findings through identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting themes found within a particular data set (Nowell et al., 2017). A thematic analysis was conducted on all interview transcripts, highlighting similarities and differences, and producing unanticipated insights. The analysis explored the experiences of the staff and the meanings they attached to those experiences. Hearing their accounts over the course of the study helped the researcher gain insights into emerging themes. The themes were based on good practice strategies from across the literature, which the interviewees identified as the most or least effective at supporting 'at risk' students in their alternative school setting.

4.6 Research design

The following diagram explains the research design step by step, including the literature

review, twelve good practice strategies, qualitative data collection, and interview questions.

Literature review to identify the following good practice strategies of alternative school settings

1.Smaller class sizes	2.Positive classroom environment	3.Flexible structure	4.Positive reinforcement	5.Student performance	6.Teacher expectations
7.Building positive relationships	8.Positive behaviour management	9.Social skills	10.Parental involvement	11.Volunteer inclusion	12.Trades included in the curriculum

Recruitment process and participant summary - Four staff employed in the same alternative school setting as the researcher were asked to participate in the study.

Qualitative data collection - Interviews with four staff were held onsite, face to face, one on one for 60 minutes. They were asked the following questions:

Which of these 12 good practice strategies are present in the school?	Which are the most effective for academic growth?	Which are the least effective for academic growth?	Which are the most effective for behavioural growth?	Which are the least effective for behavioural growth?

Figure 2: Research design

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4.7 Method

Below is the step-by-step method employed to facilitate this research.
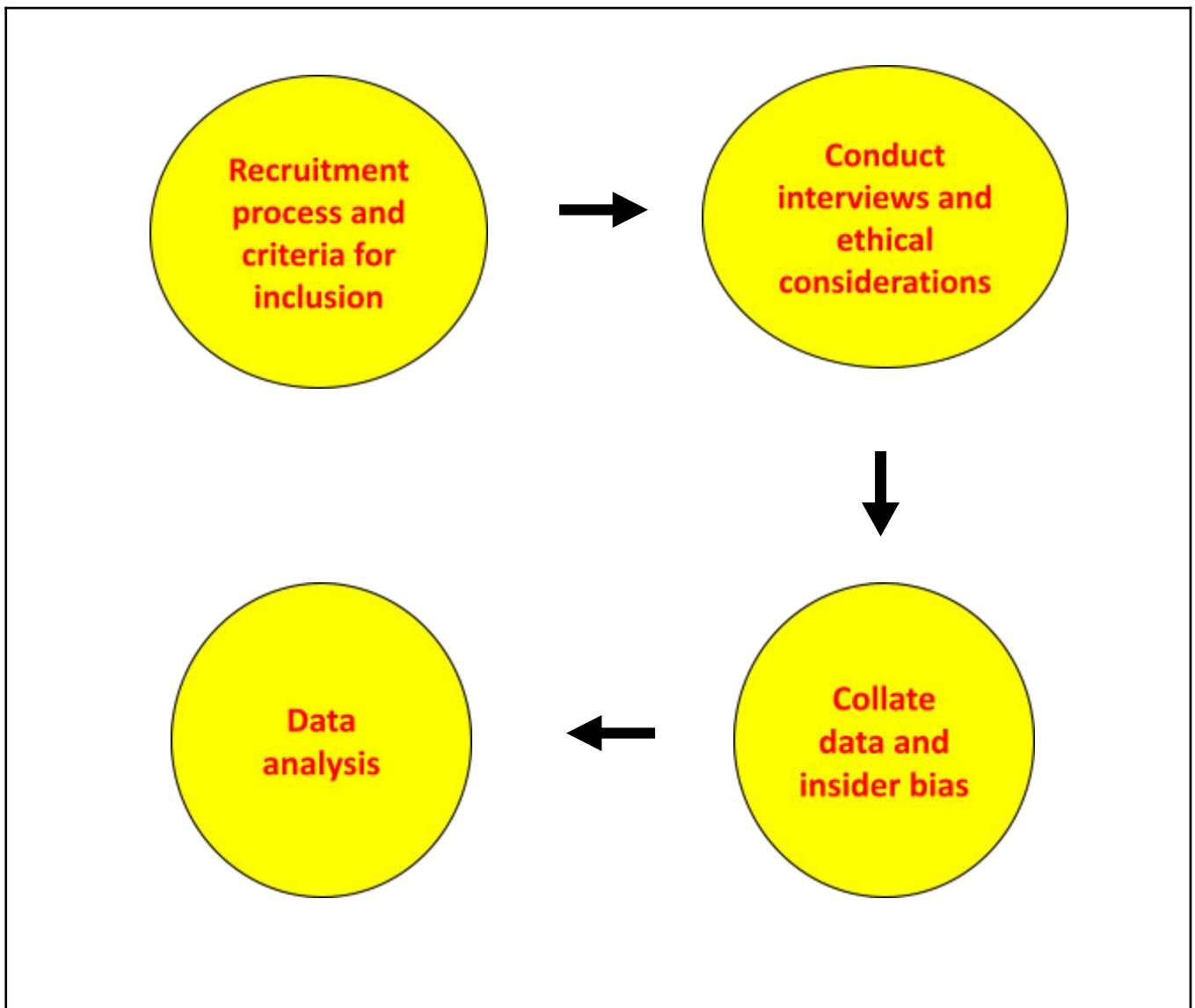
Figure 3: Method

4.7.1 Recruitment process and criteria for inclusion

Driven by fitness for purpose, this single case study focused on an alternative school setting in an inner city suburb of Sydney. At the start of the research process (January 2022), the following four staff members were invited to participate:

1. School principal

2. Stage 5 coordinator - responsible for students in Years 9 and 10

3. School psychologist

4. Literacy coordinator

They were each given a UniSQ (University of South Queensland) information letter, explaining the research purpose and process, and a consent form. Each participant was encouraged to ask questions of the researcher to ensure they had a complete understanding of the process and how it may impact their day.

As the researcher held an executive role in the alternative school setting, the recruitment process was a convenience sample where the four staff were invited to participate. This was to ensure that each was of equal or higher standing in the school as the researcher, so there would be no power imbalance, no perceived implicit coercion, and no obligation to participate. It was important for the researcher to be mindful of those who chose not to participate and others who were not invited to participate, and to interact sensitively.

Whilst the participants included in this research may be deemed an example of convenience sampling (Etikan et al., 2016) as they were readily available to the researcher and overrepresent educators at the executive level, they also provide sufficient for the context of this research. The staff members asked to participate demonstrate a diverse cross section (Murray et al., 2013) as they represent four different areas within the school; psychology, literacy, behaviour management and leadership. Each participants' contribution to the research lies in their personal experiences within their level of expertise. therefore providing opinions and perspectives which are different to the other participants. Contributing an opinion from a psychological angle differs to the opinion given with a literacy lens. The

diversity amongst the participants allows for a sufficiently broad opinion base to create data of value for this research.

4.7.2 Conduct interviews and ethical considerations

Qualitative data were collected through one-to-one, face-to-face sixty-minute interviews between each participant and the researcher onsite at the alternative school setting, at a time suitable to both. The researcher used a mobile device to record the interviews in in order to write the transcripts of the interviews afterwards. The interviewer focused on asking open-ended questions, allowing the participants to answer based on their complete knowledge and understanding of the good practice strategies employed in their alternative school setting. The good practice strategies the participants were asked to focus on were catering to student needs by having low student-to-teacher ratios,implementing highly structured positive classroom environments, having flexible structures that instil positive reinforcement to encourage appropriate behaviour, student performance, teacher expectations and standards, building positive relationships between students and all staff in the school, positive behaviour management strategies, implementing social skills programs, parental involvement, volunteer inclusion, and having the curriculum include trades. The participants were asked to reflect on which strategies were most and least effective in their alternative school setting in supporting the 'at risk' students to engage and complete their education. It was expected, as the

researcher has a solid rapport with the participants based on their existing professional

relationship, that the participants would feel comfortable to open up and speak honestly

during the interview, which would consequently provide greater depth to the data

gathered, as suggested by Fleming (2018). However, as explained by Humphrey (2013),

whilst the data gathered may be robust given an insider has facilitated the research, it

more often than not uncovers sensitive material about stakeholders and the working

environment which may jeopardise the research. Research as an insider-researcher needs

to be approached sensitively as the audience may include past and present students,

colleagues and directors at school and government levels. Ethical considerations were

guided by National Ethical Research (Austalian Reasearch Council, 2018) and approval

was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics

Committee to proceed with the research after a declaration by the researcher of the

potential risks and mitigating strategies the participants may encounter during the

research process (Appendix F). As a school-based study there was a responsibility to

ensure all participants remained anonymous, that all data collected would have strict

confidentiality, and that all chosen participants, as colleagues of the researcher, would be

of equal or higher standing in the school than the researcher and be without conflicts of

interest. It was ensured that informed consent was given by all participants and that

participation in the interviews was by voluntary consent with no repercussions if

participants chose not to participate or if they changed their mind during the process. It

was important that the relationship between the researcher and participants maintained

professional boundaries at all times, which extended to respondent validation by means

of drafting the report collaboratively. Once complete, the researcher would ensure that

the final paper would be provided to the school community, with permission being

granted beforehand from the participants.

4.7.3 Collating the data and insider bias

In order to manage the issues of insider bias and reliability during the collation of the data and the conducting of the interviews, the researcher needed to be mindful of the impact their position, as an insider, may have on the research and therefore prepared appropriately to ensure any bias was minimised (Fleming 2018). The researcher already understood the history and culture of the alternative school setting and did not need to spend time familiarising themselves with the nuances of the research context. However, challenges that may have been encountered have been outlined by Fleming (2018):

1. Minimisation of the potential coercion of the participants
2. Acknowledgement of the desire for positive outcomes
3. Awareness of the potential conflict of the dual roles of educator and researcher within the same context
4. The researchers' personal position being too close for objectivity.

In order to manage the first of these challenges, the researcher only invited participants who held a higher or equal position of power within the alternative school setting. The expectation was that these staff members would not have felt obliged to participate or needed to adjust their honest responses in the interviews for fear of being judged. Instead, they would have felt relaxed enough to have an open conversation which contributed to knowledge, meaning and understanding directly related and relevant to the practices of the alternative school setting. The researcher began each interview with a

disclaimer indicating that the interview space was safe and the information gathered was solely for the purposes of the research and not to be used for further judgement (Fleming, 2018).

In order to manage the second issue of acknowledging the desire for positive outcomes, the researcher developed research questions that directly related to identifying and improving practices in the alternative school setting. As explained by Fleming (2018), it is crucial to recognise and manage the risks and challenges during the research process in order to ensure ethical and trustworthy research is conducted to achieve a realistic outcome, rather than simply a positive outcome.

In order to manage the third issue, awareness of the potential conflict between the dual roles of educator and researcher within the same context, the researcher was mindful of existing relationships with the participants and ensured these were not compromised, while any potential for conflict of interest was identified and controlled. The researcher continuously monitored the research process to ensure ethical practices were maintained.

In order to manage the fourth issue, the researcher was aware of the criticisms related to an insider researcher who may be too familiar with the context to be objective (Fleming, 2018). It was therefore important for the researcher not to display bias through preconceived ideas, yet still provide realistic insights into the alternative school setting. The researcher also ensured full transparency about who they were, and they thus identified themselves as a researcher and educator in the alternative school setting. Overall, it was important for this research to be considered credible and trustworthy in order to make valuable contributions to the workplace, to knowledge, and to the personal and professional development of the researcher.

4.7.4 Data analysis

Once the interviews were complete, the researcher listened to each recorded interview and wrote the interview transcripts to gain a better understanding of the commonalities and differences between each. The researcher identified three emerging themes from the transcripts as follows:

1. Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural

2. Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings

3. Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important

These three themes were organised into a table with three columns, with each theme as a heading for one of the columns. The researcher then divided the evidence from all four transcripts into the appropriate columns as a means of organising the information in such a way that it would make writing the paper somewhat easier. This process of tabular thematic analysis, as explained by Robinson (2022), highlighted the relationship between the collected data and the identified themes in a visually acceptable way. It supported the researcher's analytical process to be fully transparent to others and it provided a greater understanding of how prevalent themes were situated within the dialogue with the participants, which promoted a higher degree of trustworthiness in the process of thematic analysis in a general sense (Robinson, 2022).

The following table demonstrates this process and includes quotes from the participants which reflect each theme:

Table 1

	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	Theme: Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	Theme: Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
1	I think the low teacher-to-student ratio is absolutely essential because you get the opportunity for a young person to settle and stabilize and build up a sense of trust with their teacher. They feel safety in that relationship because having fewer students means that development of that relationship happens quicker; the kids can feel an authenticity between themself and the teacher; and the teacher can get to know	We are trying to make them very well structured and positive classroom environments. Work is put up that has been completed to reinforce positive learning but that is left to the individual teacher. Not all are highly structured.	Highly structured but with plenty of wriggle room for flexibility.

	the kids and their individual needs a lot quicker.		
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
2	Research suggests you build better relationships when you have smaller numbers.	Positive reinforcement is so valuable. These kids have seriously low self-esteem through experiences of trauma, abuse, poor relationships and poor attachments, while others just feel like they don't meet the standards of mainstream settings. So, a lot of them feel deep down that they are not very good or not very lovable. The opposite of positive reinforcement is negative	Predictability alongside high structure works for our kids. They know what's coming next. A level of success is really important with literacy lessons for our kids. Tied in with high structure is consistency and predictability. They feel comfort in what is coming next. Structure is more important for our kids than mainstream ones, as is keeping the structure, because when change comes they don't cope.

		reinforcement and our kids are very sensitive to feeling shame or feeling they have done something wrong or they've failed.	
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
3	We have to be really conscious of what is a realistic expectation for that kid and what is a good outcome.	So, positive reinforcement is really valuable because it has the potential to really build up their own sense of intrinsic motivation to do the right thing or to fit in well with the whole community. Some of our rewards systems are really, really good, especially for our ADHD kids. It makes it	Research has shown our students thrive on structure and routines and any change to that makes it difficult. If there is no structure then they will act as if there is no structure. Our kids acted out when our school building was a heap and now we are in a nice setting, they don't act out. There is definitely a need for them all to be structured, not necessarily the same structure or no need to be

		very obvious what they need to do to achieve that reward.	very vigilant about it, but they should all have some structure.
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
4	With positive relationships, that's very much a part of; it's not about just being warm and friendly to a student but I think the staff members here have to come with a certain level of authenticity,	We don't have punitive punishment.	Wouldn't want too high a structure. There needs to be flexibility in it, but you need a base structure. I equate it to the rules in the curriculum and the outcomes I need to achieve but it's up to me how I reach the outcomes. And making sure I get to those outcomes.
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important

5	Providing teaching opportunities and opportunities to create positive relationships. If there is a genuine, respectful, authentic relationship with someone then the student is more likely to be willing to work through a difficult moment to come back to what the expectation of their behaviour is. It's co-regulating and you can do that when you have a meaningful relationship. Camps and what we do outside of the classroom genuinely help to build up those PRs, and for students to see teachers in different environments but being consistently supportive, caring.	When you give positive verbal feedback: "That's a good comment", or a points system; it's all positive.	Our teachers need to be highly flexible and be able to differentiate 'on the fly' spontaneously, be very, very flexible because the kids turn up, and some of them go home to very chaotic environments so they're not eating regularly, or sleeping regularly, plus there's all these diagnoses laid on top of that. So, to be able to be flexible is … they have to be extremely flexible… gifted at being flexible but still driving for that particular structure so that the kids know what's coming and it settles them. But at the same time being able to manage whatever comes up really, really flexibly.
	Theme:	**Theme:**	**Theme:**

	Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
6	When the kids see their teacher being supportive, authentic, consistent, and professional; and when they see that happens outside of the classroom and within the classroom, it builds up a security in the relationship with that teacher. It happens in both settings but it's unusual for students to experience that as often as they do here, when they see their teacher as a real person. They witness the teacher being kind and supportive to someone else that's valuable too. The school sees all those opportunities outside of the classroom as wonderful	Staff do positive reinforcement regularly. Positive reinforcement doesn't necessarily mean giving the kids stuff. I would like to see more genuine, positive reinforcement about school work and behaviour on the playground. Students aren't good at it but it's something we can pass onto them; verbal PR and the reward system and raffle system, and 'a pat on the back'.	Our teachers here keep it highly structured but not structured in a rigid, controlling way. It's structured in a way that leaves plenty of room for flexibility and it comes down to the expertise of the teaching staff and their understanding of why a student might be getting up and sitting down repeatedly or not following instructions.

	experiences for the kids who often don't get a lot of that.		
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
7	The kids definitely get that sense from everybody… It's not just about academics, it's about them as a person.	[In regards to consequences]: "As a result of your behaviour …" puts it in a more positive light.	They need to feel secure in the structure; they know what they're turning up to and what to expect every day. At our school, even outside of the classroom, we have these rhythms that happen every single day.
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
8	It's about connecting and building that relationship. There is a willingness to	It's about having expectations so therefore, if they haven't met the expectation and	… that creates a sense of safety and stability that happens.

listen to them and give time to form those bonds and relationships, and the kids genuinely feel loved and cared for. They know you care about them and you will take time out of answering emails etc. to spend time with them and listen to them. That's a huge value.	something happens as a result of that, you don't want to be too punitive. The "result of" can just be a conversation or a restorative justice or a counseling session. It's about addressing it and making sure you address it because otherwise you're letting it go and turning a blind eye. You need to address it so they understand it. We are such a supportive environment. You need to take the time at an alternative school setting. Mainstream also, it's crucial for any child to have that conversation but it's imperative here. You just find the time to make it happen.	
Theme: Building relationships with	**Theme:** Positive approaches are	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure

	students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	most effective in alternative school settings	and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
9	Everyone here genuinely cares about these kids and wants to hear what they have to say. Natural yes … we are compassionate people and it's the culture of the school. If the executive sat in their offices and never made an effort to talk to the kids, then what are they modeling to the staff?	In regards to positive behaviour management strategies, [it is about] not being punitive but teaching kids how to say sorry. That's an invaluable life skill - to acknowledge you did wrong and repair the relationship which is often not modeled at home so when they see us do it, it has a huge impact.	It would be sheer chaos if we didn't have that rigid structure there for teachers to know what we're moving through, and coordinators putting all that in place very, very thoroughly.
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
10	Spending the time to get to know others, working together. If you help others,	Concentrate on the positive behaviors.	But again when you've got the kind of kids we get here, you have to be able to be highly

	they will help you ... and that's our school culture. Helping each other so we're not afraid to ask for help. There are a lot of risk factors in this environment - high risk of burnout, depression, high stress day to day. Self care for each other is important.		flexible and not hold what you want to do as the teacher or staff member as the priority. It has to be able to be the students' priority, day by day, case by case.
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
11	Positive relationships are important because of our students' disorders and complexities, and also because of the Marist foundation. They need to know "God loves them" and the best way to show that is to take an interest in them.	Punitive approaches are what students here have encountered their whole lives. There still need to be rules to be followed and a line in the sand, but it's about how we implement them and how we talk about them and how we reinforce them. Is	Rigidity is really stabilising for them, to have that structure but simultaneously to be able to manage a kid that's really disorganised or very dysregulated. It's balancing those two things. Flexibility with our teachers.

	Big part of building relationships here is because we are Marist. "To teach students you have to love them and love them all equally as if they were your own".	our raffle an effective strategy for getting kids here on time? Whatever you have in place needs to be an effective strategy.	
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
12	Marist style is all about relationships. Having a positive relationship with staff and students means you can achieve almost anything with them because they'll be happy to work with you and try… they might fail and fall down but you're there to pick them up because it's a positive relationship. That's a real strength here and a real	For parental involvement, the 'tuning into teens' program implemented good strategies and let parents know they were not alone with their child's behavior, which was a real positive. The feedback was very good.	So, it's about really understanding each individual and each teacher has to be authentic with what they expect of that kid. Sticking rigidly to outcomes as a teacher cannot work with these students. Personal growth is so much more satisfying. You have to change as an educator to suit being here.

	personal focus because it's the most important aspect of the school.		
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
13	Staff are genuinely building relationships here across the board… There may be one or two, but it's generally working here. It doesn't matter if you're the best teacher or the best counselor, if you haven't got a relationship with the students they're not going to learn to the best of their ability. They'll still learn and still grow but you won't get the best out of them. So, without a relationship they won't be achieving all they can		Just in our interactions we are flexible. We approach our students in different ways depending on the student. We have that luxury because it's a small community. We know the students well because it's a small environment. You adapt a different style per student. [It is] one of the core things we do really well here. You couldn't do the same in a mainstream school.

	achieve. They can still achieve but it won't be anywhere near what it should be or could be.		
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
14	When it (parent involvement) works well it's a beautiful working relationship that really supports the child in their growth at home and at school, because we are all trying to do the same thing and reinforcing the same values. When it works, it works well.		Flexibility leads to catering to the individual, which leads back to small numbers. We have the ability to be more flexible here because we have smaller numbers in an ASS [alternative school setting] than in mainstream. Changing things up is easier if you are catering to 6 humans as opposed to 30 humans.
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for

	growth; academic or behavioural	alternative school settings	students with challenging behaviours are important
15	In regards to parent involvement, this is where most growth occurs. There would be a difference if there were more parent involvement / contact, [but] only if the parent is willing. The parents who want to be involved are already doing it. The others probably wouldn't engage in anything anyway. So ideally it would be great but you're not going to change some.		Definitely a need to be flexible here. Too flexible allows too much, inflexibility allows a clash and a fight. There has to be a happy medium.
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
16	What we do here. Taking the time to sit and listen and		A lot of our students don't like change and you have to be

	acknowledge you can see they're upset; then they see you are not having a go at them, you're actually listening when they talk.		flexible to accept change at the last minute. It's a skill that needs to be taught and modeled. I wouldn't expect them to be flexible coming in here.
17	For the student to have a positive relationship here, they have to feel a sense of safety and trust, and without that why should they or could they change anything to do with their behaviour. Why would they want to change their behaviour? Because their behaviour serves as a coping strategy for them which has unfortunately not fitted within the mainstream system. But when they come here, we are trying to make them feel safe and supported and secure enough to explore how some of those		We have flexibility with rules, e.g. swearing ... it happens but we don't want you to swear and we want you to understand why we don't want you to swear.

	behaviours may not be very functional in society and how those behaviours have led them here, not because they're a bad kid but because that environment and system did not support students with those behaviours. With a positive relationship with us as a whole school, and with each individual staff member, they're going to settle quicker and they are going to see that what we are trying to show them is to help them be the best version of themselves, and to understand themselves, to be able to cope outside of this school better. Whereas if they arrive here thinking we are just here to get our own academic outcomes met and we're not really interested in		

	them as a person and making them feel safe and secure, they're behaviour is not going to grow, it's going to regress or be reinforced. Their behaviour has come from, if you're a young person who has been emotionally abused your whole life until you get here and constantly told you're not the doing right thing, they're only going to see us as another traumatic figure telling them they're doing the wrong thing so they are going to push against it to protect themselves. Or they're going to avoid it or do anything they can to push against that to feel a sense of safety and control. Whereas if they get here and see loving, warm, genuinely		

	caring people who are consistently interested in them as a person and encouraging of them and constantly showing them that they are very worthy and worthwhile, they are going to start being more interested and curious about different ways of doing things. [They] become more self-reflective on their own behaviour. Ultimately that will serve them well because society does not tolerate a lot of behaviours our kids haven't learnt to master yet. Not because they're bad but because they haven't built up those defenses to cope in their own little worlds. PR is key because without it we can't do any of it. They have to feel safe with us. It's		

	crucial. These kids will interpret behaviour from staff very quickly whereas other kids who haven't experienced those adverse childhood experiences won't. Tones of voice are read into more, and they will build a wall and nothing can be done until the wall is brought down.		
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
18	Building relationships, that's the most important. When I have a good relationship with a student, more often than not they will do the right thing when I ask them to, because they don't want to break that relationship with		In staff meetings, we talk about things to keep the standards up, e.g. no music in class. All staff need to be on the same page but not too rigid, not too black and white. Every situation and person is individual, all on an individual basis. We try to keep the standards the same. Some

	me. [You] get the biggest buy in from the kids.		staff don't want to pick the battles so behaviours are ignored. [We need to be] flexible but still have expectations and standards.
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
19	You show it and do it across a lot of the others on the list. You can't do the others on the list without positive relationships.		Parental involvement is critical. The principal is always communicating everything with parents. The challenge is some parents are less responsive in terms of their capacity to pick up information that is sent to them, so we need to be flexible with that approach, e.g. meeting them in the carpark, sending a note home, repeated reminders. A small community does this well because they have a deep understanding of each family

			and family system and how that family operates compared to others; being able to cater to that and them.
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
20	You can't do anything without it (positive relationships). Greater gains are made if you've got a positive relationship. Relationships with teachers can have a profound effect.		Flexibility comes from an understanding of what the students are so therefore it's important to be flexible. They're acting out for whatever reason, but if you're flexible, you understand it and you can then deal with it in a different way that will be more effective. Flexibility is important. You don't know how they've walked into the classroom or room so I can't just say "well, you're just being a naughty child"... that's not the way. You need to be

			flexible and say: "Right, something has happened here", and you need to find out what. I don't know how. We won't deal with it now. So, you're flexible in how you deal with it. Emphasizing 1 - 7 are very [much] the same.
	Theme: Building relationships with students is crucial for any growth; academic or behavioural	**Theme:** Positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings	**Theme:** Flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours are important
21			Because the students know what they're walking into, which is good for all settings, in life. You can thrive academically or behaviourally if you know what you're walking into and you know what your teacher or boss is like. Consistency and predictability, which our kids may lack in their homelife.

Once the table was developed, the researcher was better placed to determine which of the twelve strategies identified in the literature review aligned with the data collected from the interviews. Of the twelve good practice strategies identified across the literature, building positive relationships between students and all staff in the school, instilling positive reinforcement to encourage appropriate behaviour, implementing highly structured positive classroom environments, positive behaviour management strategies, and flexible structures were agreed upon by the four participants as the most effective strategies for alternative school settings. The literature review also highlighted the importance of catering to student needs by having low student-to-teacher ratios, a focus on student performance, teacher expectations and standards, and implemented social skills programs; however, the four participants identified these four strategies as not as crucial as the initial five. Whilst these latter four strategies have a place in all alternative school settings, as identified in the literature, their effectiveness may not have as great an impact as the initial five strategies. The final three strategies, which were addressed across the literature as important inclusions in alternative school settings, i.e. parental involvement, volunteer inclusion, and curriculum to include trades, did not align with the data as effective strategies. This is largely due to the fact that the alternative school setting highlighted in this study achieves a level of growth for the cohort, yet trades are not offered in the curriculum, parents are minimally involved, and whilst volunteers are accessed, their impact is not as great as the other strategies on the list.

Tables of the ranked results of the twelve best-practice strategies from the four participants are included in Appendices C and D.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS, DISCUSSION, CONTRIBUTIONS, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Introduction

This chapter summarises the study's results and discussion. Further detail is provided in the publishable article. Once the interviews were completed the researcher listened to each recording and created transcripts of each interview. These were then analysed, using the principles of thematic analysis, to determine if there were any emerging themes and commonalities between each participant's point of view. Three themes were identified and explored using the participants' information to drive the discussion.

5.1 Results

The results of the research have been included in greater detail in the publishable article in Chapter 3. Below is a brief outline of the results.

The first theme that emerged was the importance of staff investing time into building relationships with adolescents in alternative school settings in order to ignite their intrinsic desire to grow academically and behaviourally. As emerged from the interview transcripts of the four participants, building relationships inadvertently builds trust, which is the foundation of change and growth.

The second theme that emerged as an effective strategy employed in alternative school

settings was incorporating positive approaches into all aspects of the school. If the school

adopts positive strategies to deal with challenging behaviours in the classroom and

outside of the classroom then it is more likely to instill long-term change and growth as

opposed to punitive strategies.

The final theme to emerge was the crucial inclusion of flexibility with structure and

predictability for students with challenging behaviours in an alternative school setting.

Approaching the students' behaviours with flexibility and an ability to 'go with the flow'

provides them with an understanding that the staff understand their needs, and the

students learn to rely on that as a predictability in their relationship with the staff, which

in turn builds a strong relationship.

5.2 Discussion

The discussion of the research results has been included in greater detail in the

publishable article in Chapter 3. Below is a brief outline of the discussion.

Once the themes were identified, the researcher unpacked the content into a discussion

which highlights three recommendations for alternative and mainstream school settings.

The first recommendation was to include building relationships into the school's ethos as a

means to build trust and instill change. The second recommendation focused on

incorporating positive approaches into the daily running of the school, including:

implementing highly structured positive classroom environments, instilling positive

reinforcement to encourage appropriate behaviour, and ensuring positive behaviour

management strategies are employed by all staff. The final recommendation was to

maintain a flexible approach to the students, aligned with some predictability and structure.

Given their special needs, students in an alternative school setting thrive when they feel the structures in place can adapt according to their needs on any particular day, which in turn instills a sense of predictability that they can rely on.

5.3 Contributions to theory and practice - Triple dividend

The Triple dividend refers to the benefits of this study to the researcher and the broader Community, as explained by Tanner et al. (2015). In reference to this study, the triple dividend benefits the personal development of the researcher, the professional development of those working in mainstream and alternative school settings, the workplace, and the overall benefit to knowledge of the how, what and why of alternative school settings.

The following section outlines the triple dividend of this study in greater detail.

5.3.1 Personal development contributions

The benefit to the researcher from this study, both personally and professionally, lay in the achievement of the research and the proposed learning objectives.

Professionally, enhancing the analytical skill set of the researcher, through identifying patterns, determining commonalities, collating data, and evaluating results, has been of extensive benefit to the professional growth of the researcher. Completing the research in a timely manner has been of personal benefit as it has empowered the researcher to take on other pursuits, knowing this was accomplished.

5.3.2 Professional practice contributions

The benefit to professional practice from this study is the greater understanding of how alternative school settings support adolescents with special needs. It is important to the researcher to understand how alternative school settings differ from mainstream school settings, and to explore those strategies employed in alternative school settings that encourage growth and development for students who have been asked to leave the mainstream school setting. The questions that were addressed in this study were: How do these students achieve success in the alternative settings but not in the mainstream setting? What is missing in the mainstream school setting for these students that the alternative school setting satisfies?

5.3.3 Workplace contributions

There are three benefits to the workplace from this study. Firstly, the workplace benefits from acknowledgement of the work achieved by staff to support the 'at risk' adolescents. The researcher will present a report to the school, which will inform the staff, parents and students of the areas the school is excelling in and the areas for growth. This study has sought to validate the good work being achieved and give direction in the areas that need extra attention.After reading the report, the alternative school setting may choose to implement new initiatives that target the strategies identified as least effective, whilst continuing to promote the most effective strategies. Secondly,the report may also be a catalyst for further growth in other alternative school settings and mainstream schools. Strategies may be employed which

assist staff to support their students in more effective ways and particularly in mainstream schools, new strategies may assist staff to support their 'at risk' students so that they may no longer be deemed 'at risk'. Finally, this research may benefit students in the alternative school setting if their staff focus more on the effective strategies and focus less on the least effective strategies. Applying more energy towards building relationships, flexible approaches and positive systems can only benefit the students as they begin to feel a greater sense of belonging and understanding which may inadvertently support them to change the way they see and do things.

5.3.4 Contributions to knowledge

The benefit to the development of broader knowledge is in identifying and addressing the gap in the literature. This study was unique in that it was not only based in an alternative school setting in inner city Sydney, which has had limited exposure, but the researcher is an educator in this particular alternative school setting, and was therefore able to provide an insider's point of view. This research also stands alone as it has drawn on the existing literature to compile a list of the twelve good practice strategies that should be implemented in alternative school settings, and then addressed these twelve good practice strategies in interviews with experienced and professional staff in the alternative school setting. This research contributes to knowledge as it provides solid, current evidence of the strategies that are most effective and least effective in a Sydney based alternative school setting.

5.4 Limitations and opportunities for further research

There are three main limitations of this study and all three may provide opportunities for further research.

Firstly, this research has relied on interviews as its only method of qualitative data collection, which has limited the scope of the study. With more time allocated, the study could have explored other sources of qualitative data collection, such as questionnaires for staff, parents and students that would have allowed them to comment on their experiences at the alternative school setting. Questionnaires handed out to the students and the parents could have provided valuable data if they had been designed to ask what they believed the most and least effective strategies to be, out of the twelve good practice strategies. Asking the students in particular would have created a powerful data set, for the questionnaire would have asked them personally what they believed had helped them to grow academically and behaviourally, and would have asked them to reflect on the difference between their mainstream school education and their alternative school education. Additionally, including quantitative data collection would have been another avenue to support the scope of this study. Behaviour records or school reports from the mainstream school setting and the alternative school setting, to compare academic growth and behavioural growth, would have been another valuable addition to the study. A before-and-after exploration of the students' academic abilities and behaviours before they attended the alternative school setting, and what it was like once they had spent some time at the alternative school setting, could have indicated that students had the capacity to grow and change and that maybe the mainstream school was not providing them with what they needed. Alternatively, using a sample of students to compare their academic ability and behaviour before and after the alternative school setting could have helped to further determine the most effective and least effective strategies.

Secondly, conducting interviews with only four staff members provides a narrower lens to look at the alternative school setting, as opposed to multiple lenses. It would have been ideal if there had been scope to extend the research to include interviews with all staff, parents and students. The four staff members chosen to participate held executive roles in the same

school as the researcher. Each participant needed to be of equal or higher standing as the researcher so there would be no power imbalance, no perceived implicit coercion and no obligation to participate. Including all staff would have forfeited this requirement but would have allowed for the remaining sixteen staff members to express their opinions on which strategies were most or least effective, and this would have broadened the database. Similarly, including parents and students in the interviews would have given the adolescents a voice in this research which they do not currently have. Providing an opportunity for the cohort to identify which strategies have supported them to achieve academic or behavioural growth would have provided valuable insights.

The final limitation to the study is the focus on adolescents as a whole cohort rather than as individuals with special needs. This study could have branched into a focus on different special needs the school caters to, asking such questions as: which strategies are most and least effective for adolescents diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder, or which strategies are most or least effective for adolescents diagnosed with depression? This could be an area for further research with robust ethical considerations, as all students are classified as having a disability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the primary goal of this research was to gain an in-depth understanding of the strategies implemented in an alternative school setting which support students to engage in their education, change their behaviours, and complete their Year 10 education. Through four interviews with employees at the alternative school setting, three themes emerged as the most effective strategies for instilling growth academically and behaviourally: 1) building relationships with students is crucial for any growth academic or behavioural, 2) positive approaches are most effective in alternative school settings,

and 3) flexibility with structure and predictability for students with challenging behaviours is important. Evidence from this research supports embedding these strategies into an alternative school setting as they are beneficial to students with challenging behaviours and support them to engage in their education, change their behaviours, and complete their Year 10 education.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: This table demonstrates the process of analyses the researcher facilitated when examining the literature for the good practice strategies.

Flower, A., McDaniel, S. C., & Jolivette, K. (2011). A literature review of research quality and effective practices in alternative education settings. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 489-510.	Maillet, A. L. (2017). Six powerful practices for alternative education programs. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *61*(3), 234-238.	Ahn, S., & Simpson, R. (2013). Relationships between risk factors, perceptions of school membership and academic and behavioral engagement of students who attend an alternative school for behavioral and emotional challenges. *The Journal of Special Education Apprenticeship*, *2*(1),6.	Beken, J., Williams, J., Combs, J., & Slate, J. (2010). Academic alternative school settings: A conceptual analysis, part 1. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, *5*(2), 1-13.	Cumming, T. M., Strnadová, I., & Dowse, L. (2014). At-Risk Youth in Australian Schools and Promising Models of Intervention. *International Journal of Special Education*, *29*(3), 16-25..
catering to student needs by having low student to teacher ratios		smaller student-to- teacher ratio	smaller student-to-teacher ratios	
implementing highly structured classrooms	providing an active and creative approach to instruction in the classroom			clear, well-defined school and classroom expectations
	accelerating student learning		focus on student performance	maximising student participation
	flexibility	flexible structure and schedules	flexible scheduling	
	raising teacher expectation	high standards		
building authentic relationships between students and all staff in the school	building positive relationships and connecting with students			

instilling positive reinforcement to encourage appropriate behaviour				use contingent and specific praise to recognise student achievement in both academics and behaviour eg. token economies
promoting positive behaviour classroom management		fostering a positive emotional climate		In the classroom, provide students with increased opportunities to respond
enforcing positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS).				use of research-based classroom management strategies for students with challenging behaviour.
implementing social skills programs and effective academic instruction		an availability of extensive social services and support programs		
providing functional behavioral assessment	inclusion of volunteers		individualized instruction	
encouraging parent involvement			addressed those students who needed a second chance	
			electives specific to the trades	

KEY:

Red = only mentioned here   Colours = where the strategy is matching

Appendix B: In this table is a list of specific and open-ended interview questions designed to answer the Research Questions.

Type	Question
General	**What is your understanding of how this Alternative School Setting embraces each of the following good practice strategies, as identified across the literature?**
	Low student to teacher ratio
	Highly structured positive classroom environments
	Flexibility
	Instilling positive reinforcement
	Improving student performance (filling the gaps in their education)
	Teacher expectations and standards
	Building positive relationships
	Positive Behavior management strategies
	Social skills programs
	Parent involvement
	Volunteer inclusion
	Curriculum to include trades
Specific	**Using the above 12 good practice strategies, rank them in order of**

	most effective to least effective, in your professional opinion.
	Low student to teacher ratio
	Highly structured positive classroom environments
	Flexibility
	Instilling positive reinforcement
	Improving student performance (filling the gaps in their education)
	Teacher expectations and standards
	Building positive relationships
	Positive Behavior management strategies
	Social skills programs
	Parent involvement
	Volunteer inclusion
	Curriculum to include trades
More Specific	Why did you choose this as the most effective for academic growth?
	Why did you choose this as the least effective for academic growth?
	Why did you choose this as the most effective for behavioral growth?
	Why did you choose this as the least effective for behavioral growth?

Concluding question	**In your professional opinion, is there a good practice strategy which should be included in this list but isn't?**

Appendix C: This table details the participants ranking of the Best Practice Strategies for academic growth. The colour coding has been used to highlight the numeric ranking ie. which ones were chosen first, second, third etc. The last four have been left without colour coding to highlight the collective participant understanding that these are the least effective strategies of the twelve.

ACADEMIC GROWTH	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D
Low student to teacher ratio	4	7	2	3
Highly structured positive classroom environments	5	2	6	7
Flexibility	8	6	8	4
Instilling positive reinforcement	6	5	7	8
Improving student performance (filling the gaps in their education)	2	8	1	5
Teacher expectations and standards	1	3	4	2
Building positive relationships	3	1	5	1

Positive Behavior management strategies	7	4	3	6
Social skills programs	10	10	11	11
Parent involvement	9	11	10	9
Volunteer inclusion	12	9	9	10
Curriculum to include trades	11	12	12	12

Appendix D: This table details the participants ranking of the Best Practice Strategies for behavioural growth. The colour coding has been used to highlight the numeric ranking ie. which ones were chosen first, second, third etc. The last four have been left without colour coding to highlight the collective participant understanding that these are the least effective strategies of the twelve.

BEHAVIOURAL GROWTH	Participant A	Participant B	Participant C	Participant D
Low student to teacher ratio	4	4	7	3
Highly structured positive classroom environments	9	7	5	7
Flexibility	3	2	4	5
Instilling positive reinforcement	5	5	3	4
Improving student performance (filling the gaps in their education)	10	8	9	6
Teacher expectations and standards	8	3	6	2
Building positive relationships	1	1	1	1

Positive Behavior management strategies	2	6	2	8
Social skills programs	7	11	10	11
Parent involvement	6	9	8	9
Volunteer inclusion	12	10	11	10
Curriculum to include trades	11	12	12	12

Appendix E: This table answers the final interview question of additional suggestions for the list of Best Practice Strategies. Participants identified 4 strategies which could be included in the list but have not been, as follows:

1. Outdoor education
2. Staffing
3. Trust Building
4. Faith Dimension / Spirituality

Outdoor Education	Opportunities to build relationships outside of the classroom. Kids are growing up with so much technology they need more time to connect with nature and the environment. We are trying to form conscious adults and the best way to do this is to take them out into nature to experience it. Help them become better rounded humans.
Staffing	Teachers ability to co-regulate with the student in a non-threatening yet safe way. Teachers notice and help them ground themselves instead of being dejected from the room. Offer support calmly instead of not tolerating the behavior. Which is part of building positive relationships. If you're not managing behavior in a trauma informed way, you run the risk of re-traumatising the kids and doing worse things than if they stayed in a mainstream setting. It's essential. Employment processes are crucial here to make sure you get the right fit of a teacher who has the awareness and capacity to be empathetic without the training necessarily. Need training to be part of our processes here annually just like Child Protection training. Need it to be at the forefront of what we do is that we know how to manage kids with a trauma background. We know how a

traumatized child will present when they're asked to do something they don't want to. It's not just refusal… I'm sick of being asked to do things I don't want to do. We see non-compliance but the young person feels forced. Trauma informed practice is essential for all of us.

When you see staff who have not succeeded here it's because they have low emotional intelligence. They don't get it. Seeing a student and being able to understand the why and how, relating to them and being patient with them. Take the time and be aware emotionally of what other people are going through. Empathy is dangerous as you put yourself in their shoes which isn't what you want to do. It's not about that. Two people could have experienced the same thing but what they go through is completely different. So you can ever think that you know how they're feeling. That's a lack of emotional intelligence, thinking that.

Life Experience versus Academic achievement? Look at the current staff and see who we are already loaded with and then make a decision based on balance. Difficult to make that call. It comes down to meeting the people. We are a special and unique school so we are looking after these students so choosing the right person is really important. It comes down to who would be open to learning the other, because you need both. It would come down to refereeing questions about how flexible they are and how adaptable they are ... genuine and loving people but can they meet deadlines and tick boxes??

Would LEADERSHIP be an important inclusion on the Best Practice list? Would leadership be crucial / critical for the success of an Alternative School Setting? Can the school still function well under different leaders? Yes it could. But it might thrive in different areas under different leaders. Leadership is important but

	the focus of the leader may change the focus or direction of the school, does that mean it's positive or negative? You need good leaders, not just one person. It doesn't matter who it is ... but they have to be good and they have to have a direction. What they model and what they live and emotional intelligence and understanding. I think an understanding of what is being done is imperative. Good leadership can only come from an understanding of what you're trying to achieve or what direction you're headed. **If good leadership was on this list of 12, where would you have put it for Academic growth?** Higher for behavioral growth than academic. It would be in the top 7. It's important. Those 7 are Crucial. I would have 8 as Emotional intelligence and 9 as Faith. Top 9. Academics can move and shift the staff but modeling behaviors is really important from the top. And you model them so therefore they're present everywhere.whereas I cant model academics because I only teach one or two classes. *You can have the best qualifications in the world but if you can't relate to kids there is no point, particularly in Alternative School Settings because of the size of the school.*
Trust Building	How do you measure it though? You see the shift in behavior, that's how you measure it. What does someone who has a Masters know more than someone with experience?. Experience VS Training. Is the bigger part as a teacher or leader in this Alternative School Setting - the education you have or the human skills you have? It's hard to measure on paper when you hire someone. Patience, willingness to learn, resilience - those are the valuable skills in special education. You have to adapt yourself everyday according to how they present themselves.A love of learning and

	a love of wanting to actually help but you don't see that until the staff are employed. **You can't teach these kids anything without building that relationship first. That trust has been broken for them**. So that's the first thing you are doing. Repairing trust of adults/ students/ teachers. I care about you and I want you to learn. It's only after they choose to trust you, they've been testing you, then they go okay I see …. Then it starts to change. Mistrust can be so deeply entrenched. **When you have their trust you achieve more.**
Faith Dimension / Spirituality	Giving them hope or something to live for. An aim in life. Mindfulness is part of our spirituality, there is no Jesus in it. Contemplation on "there is a God ". Faith formation. The individual is important. In the image and likeness of God so they need to be loved and forgiven. A Spiritual base . A purpose or a feeling of a purpose. Even in Govt Alternative School Settings. Not necessarily explicitly taught. Students pick up that faith through us role modeling. Alternative School Settings are about them as a human, not just academics or behavior. Creating good citizens. This environment would not be what it is without the faith dimension. Marist is the foundation the school has been based on which doesn't mean you have to be Catholic or have faith yourself but to work here and get the most out of it you have to have those traits. Any person. It doesn't matter if you believe or don't believe

Appendix F: This Information Sheet details the project, albeit with a different title to the current paper as the title has evolved and changed. The information sheet identifies the potential risks to the participants.

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

Project Title

A Case Study : Strategies employed in an alternative school setting for adolescents transferred from a mainstream school setting due to their special needs requirements.

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Description

This project is being undertaken as part of Master of Professional Studies Research through the University of Southern Queensland.

The purpose of this study is to determine which strategies employed in an alternative school setting are most effective and least effective in supporting adolescents with special needs to make academic and behavioural change. The study will take place in a co-educational alternative secondary school in an Inner West suburb of Sydney, NSW. It is an Independent school which caters to adolescents in Years 7 – 10 who are diagnosed with one or more of the following special needs; Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Oppositional Defiance Disorder, Autism Spectrum Disorder, learning difficulties and mental health complexities. Due to their special needs these adolescents have transferred (by choice or by referral) to the alternative school setting from a mainstream school setting as their needs were not being met. They are at risk of not completing their education as their special needs impact their learning.

The 5 research questions for this study are:

1. There are 12 best practise strategies for alternative school settings as identified across the literature. Which of these strategies are instilled by staff in the alternative school setting in question?
2. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which are the most effective in supporting the students to achieve academically and complete their education and why?
3. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which are the least effective in supporting the students to achieve academically and complete their education and why?
4. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which are the most effective in supporting the students to improve their behaviour and engage appropriately and why?
5. Of the strategies employed by staff in the alternative school setting in question, which are the least effective in supporting the students to improve their behaviour and engage

Participation

Your participation will involve partaking in one interview that will take approximately 1 hour of your time.

Questions will include:

1. There are 12 good practice strategies identified across the literature. They are listed in no particular order on this document. Please rank them from most to least effective in this alternative school setting for this cohort, according to your professional opinion, for academic growth and behavioural growth.
Now, that you have ranked these best practise strategies :
2. Which have you chosen as most effective and why for academic growth?
3. Which have you chosen as the least effective and why for academic growth?

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part, you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage.

If you do wish to withdraw from this project, please contact the Research Team (Professor Karen Trimmer 0407902362 or myself 0455224455).

Your decision whether you take part, do not take part, or take part and then withdraw, will in no way impact your current or future relationship with the University of Southern Queensland and The John Berne School.

Expected benefits

It is expected that this study will directly benefit you as it will acknowledge and validate the work you and all staff do to support our 'at risk' adolescents. You will be presented a report which will inform all staff, parents and students of the areas the school is excelling in and the areas for growth. The study will seek to validate the good work which is being achieved and give direction for the areas which need extra attention. From reading the report the school may choose to implement new initiatives which target the strategies which were identified as least effective whilst continuing to promote the most effective strategies. The report may be a catalyst for further growth.

Risks

In participating in the interview, there are minimal risks such as,

- **finding the process time consuming** - balancing time demands amidst busy work schedules which will be managed by organising a suitable time and date to meet which suits both the participant and the researcher.

- **feeling pressured to participate** - a power imbalance between the researcher and participant should not pose a risk as the participants are of equal or higher authority in the school than the researcher.The recruitment process will be initiated by a third party administrative person who will email participants to ask them to participate.

- **a feeling of fatigue** during the process which will be managed by regular breaks and a maximum time frame of 1 hour for the interviews to take place at a mutually agreed time. If preferred, the interview time may be broken into 15 minute time slots over a period of a week instead of completing the whole interview in one time slot.

- **feelings of stress or anxiety** about the process and due to the line of questioning about personal practises which participants may not feel comfortable disclosing.

- **feelings of discomfort from other colleagues** who react negatively to not being asked to participate in the research project. To minimise this, the interview will be conducted in an agreed safe place where the participant may feel free to openly share experiences and knowledge in a confidential setting without anyone else listening.

In the event of Covid compliance issues, Zoom meetings can be utilised to help manage the associated risks.

In the event that counselling services are required, the following are suggested:

- https://www.catholiccare.org/family-and-Individual-services/counselling-and-relationships/
- https://counselling-and-community-services.business.site/?utm_source=gmb&utm_medium=referral
- 24/7 SERVICE - https://www.accesseap.com.au/

Privacy and confidentiality

All comments and responses are confidential unless required by law.

- The interview will be audio and/or video recorded (in the case of a Zoom meeting) for the purpose of transcription. The researcher only will handle the transcription process of the audio recording.

- You will be provided with a copy of the transcript from the interview and have a minimum of two weeks to review and request any changes to the transcript before the data is included in the project for analysis.

- All data will be deleted after the minimum 15 year retention period as per the recommendations from GRDS (Queensland Government General Retention and Disposal Schedule).

- Data storage and security will be in accordance with USQ guidelines. Primary data storage will be on my primary device. Secondary will be on USQ network drive MS OneDrive with backup on the USQ approved cloud storage service (One Drive). As a further backup I will also store a copy of the data on my device on the school premises.

- Subject to written consent of the individual participants data may be requested by myself alone, as the researcher, in the future to be considered as part of an extension to this project or similar projects only.

- It will not be possible to participate in the study without being recorded.

- Your consent is required but you will not be identified in any publication..

Consent to participate

I would like to ask you to sign a written consent form (enclosed) to confirm your agreement to participate in this study. Please return your signed consent form to myself prior to any further involvement.

Please contact me if you have any questions or would like to request further information about this project.

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project, you may contact the University of Southern Queensland, Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics on +61 7 4631 1839 or email researchintegrity@usq.edu.au. The Manager of Research Integrity and Ethics is not connected with the research project and can address your concern in an unbiased manner.

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project.

Please keep this document for your information.

- participant should not pose a risk as the participants are of equal or higher authority in the school than the researcher.The recruitment process will be initiated by a third party administrative person who will email participants to ask them to participate.

- **a feeling of fatigue** during the process which will be managed by regular breaks and a maximum time frame of 1 hour for the interviews to take place at a mutually agreed time. If preferred, the interview time may be broken into 15 minute time slots over a period of a week instead of completing the whole interview in one time slot.

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- 24/7 SERVICE - https://www.accesseap.com.a