ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION IS 'REACH': RESOURCED EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES in COMMUNITIES AND HIGHSCHOOLS

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I perceive that the greatest challenge facing the Alternative Education (AE) sector is its ability to articulate the value it brings to the education sector, in a way that honours its approach but also honours the integrity of the mainstream system. In this brief article I suggest that the term 'reach' goes some way to describe the function of Alternative Education.

A school's reach into the community is Alternative Education

Compulsory education requires the system to reach into all corners of the community with an opportunity to learn. It requires schools to reach beyond the school gate, compelled with a vision to educate its community. In this case it would follow then that: school is not a building; it is people meeting together for the purpose of engaging in learning.

A school's reach is achieved by engaging with the community

Resourcing constraints on schools and factors outside of a school's control inhibit some young people to receiving their right to an education. However, by utilising a 'reach' programme, these students can be provided with an educational alternative. These programmes are often community based Non Government Organisations. The strength of these programmes is found in the ability to present learning opportunities which are relevant to the academic needs of the students and delivered in a way that supports psycho-social development.

Characteristics of a programme of REACH

Open arms: REACH programmes have an open-arms approach; or an extended hand. This philosophy is one of inclusivity: "we welcome you, just as you are".

Touching the heart: This is about building relationships of trust. The heart of the student is touched by the care and empathy or their tutors and other students. This is the baseline of engagement.

Grasping the mind: REACH programmes then engage the student's mind in developing learning programmes based on two areas: gaps in basic education, and building on the students strengths. Integral to successful engagement will be attending to various health and social issues that this cohort often present with.

Bringing in: An effective programme of REACH will draw the student out from the corners of the community, and into a new direction for their life. The idea of 'bringing in' encompasses the idea of transitioning.

Reaching is about stretching: A current problem with Alternative Education providers is that they feel stretched, particularly in terms of resources. A better challenge for Alternative Education is using the term 'stretch' to intimate that striving to be innovative.

Range and Reach – the point of difference between Schools and AE providers
Range, reach and relevance are terms that have been utilised in the discourse of the youth development. Relevance needs to be implicit in any learning context. When content and pedagogy is relevant to the individual needs of students, and civic aspirations, resonance occurs. Schools that resound, that is: 'that sound like me', 'speaks like me', 'feel like me', will engage learners.

Schools provide more range than Alternative Education providers, in terms of the curriculum on offer, and sporting and cultural opportunities. Whereas, Alternative Education providers have a targeted curriculum that meets the learning gaps and builds on a student's strength. AE consortia often have a range of AE programmes to call upon.

Conclusion: R.E.A.C.H.
Resourced: Compulsory schooling needs to be resourced. Would there be merit in seeing the funding attached to the individual student, rather than the institution?

Educational Alternatives: This means educational alternatives to formal schooling as we currently know it. These educational alternatives are most likely non-formal education.

In Communities: This speaks of NGOs, such as churches, iwi, charitable trusts, or Private Training Establishments providing Alternative Education,

And Highschools: This acknowledges the Alternative Education programmes that are operated by Highschools without contracting external providers. The pedagogy employed

In conclusion, the school champions learning for its geographical community, and is able to reach the vision of all students in its catchment or zone 100% engaged in education through providing programmes of REACH , such as Alternative Education.