Issues of reconnection: Youth at Risk (YAR) in the Western Australia Education System

Tanya Tedesco-Malone

Keywords: *Youth at Risk, schools, educational support, mental health, developmental stages, child poverty*
Note: *In this paper, the terms "children," "adolescents," "youth at risk," and "students" are used interchangeably to refer to individuals aged 12–18 years*

Abstract

This literature review examines key issues affecting young people aged 12 to 18 years facing a range of complex and interconnected challenges impacting or rupturing their educational journey within Western Australia's (WA) education system. Students that are disengaged or disengaging from WA's education system are classed as Youth at Risk (YAR).

Disengagement in school education is complex and often cumulative and YAR in WA are often navigating multiple challenges such as mental health issues, substance use, domestic and family violence and socio-economic disadvantage.

Trauma informed and flexible alternative education programs with smaller class sizes and access to counselling support create safe meaningful opportunities for students to reconnect with learning. These settings promote healing, resilience and generate smoother pathways to future employment.

To support these successful transitions the use of trauma informed narrative therapy interventions that help students to reengage and reframe their stories, identify their strengths, rebuild and reestablish a sense of belonging and purpose are recommended.

Introduction

According to the latest figures released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Australia's population grew by 1.7 per cent in 2024 (Cho, 2025) with Western Australia (WA) being reported as having the fastest growing population tipping over the three million mark in 2024 (Polini, 2025). The ABS identifies vast differences in growth patterns between states and territories with WA reported as having the highest growth rate of 2.4 per cent versus Tasmania having the lowest growth rate of 0.3 per cent (Cho, 2025). In conjunction with this WA reported a 2.6 per cent increase in births totalling 292,400.

It is often said that "children are our future" (Hullinger, 2021). This literature review takes a deeper look at the younger population in WA and what supports are available, given the state's increasing population and the subsequent impact on the education system.

Corresponding Author: Tanya Tedesco-Malone

Email: Tanya.Tedesco@outlook.com

Australian Counselling Research Journal ISSN: 1832-1135

There are approximately 652,890 children and young people currently living in WA, representing 22 per cent of the state's population (McGowan-Jones, 2025). While many thrive, a significant number face complex challenges that hinder their successful transition into adulthood (McGurk & Rowe, 2022). Over the past decade, WA has recorded the most substantial decline in Year 12 completion rates compared to other Australian states and territories, despite some gains in non-government school retention (Thompson, 2024).

Although approximately 476,000 children and young people were enrolled in formal education across WA in 2023 including around 113,000 in Years 7 to 12 government schools continue to struggle with retaining students through to Year 12. Alarmingly, the proportion of 15 to 24-year-olds fully engaged in education or work the year after leaving school dropped dramatically from nearly 78 per cent in 2022 to under 50 per cent in 2023, marking a near 30 per cent decline in just one year (McGowan-Jones, 2025).

This literature review explores the key factors driving disengagement among students aged 12 to 18, and the alternative educational pathways currently offered to support and sustain them in education. It also highlights initiatives supported by the Department of Training and Workforce Development (DTWD), including traineeships, apprenticeships, and short courses, as viable avenues to re-engage these young learners (Department of Training and Workplace Development, 2020).

Defining Disengagement

It is essential to define what it means for students to disengage from education as a multifaceted challenge. Disengagement includes students who are physically present at school but not actively involved in learning, as well as those who attend sporadically or drop out entirely (Department of Communities, 2022). In WA, students who are disengaging or already disengaged are often classified as vulnerable youth or Youth at Risk (YAR) (Department of Communities, 2022).

Several factors contribute to student disengagement, such as learning difficulties, mental health issues, trauma, and a lack of belonging within the school environment (McGurk & Rowe, 2022). These challenges may be compounded by social isolation and systemic barriers (McGowan-Jones, 2025). Research consistently shows that mental health challenges, social exclusion, and a sense of disconnection from school are among the leading causes of disengagement (Hancock, K. J., Christensen, D., & Zubrick, S. R., 2018). Socioeconomic disadvantage also plays a major role. For example, in WA,

105,000 children have been reported to live below the poverty line and Vadivel et al., (2023) states low "socioeconomic status" as the reason some children have had to leave their studies (McGurk & Rowe, 2022).

Mental Health, Substance Use, Violence, and Poverty

In addition, 51.5 per cent of young people surveyed in 2021 mentioned mental health as a key barrier to academic success (Mission Australia, 2024). Mental health challenges among young people aged 12 to 17 in WA such as anxiety, ADHD, depression, and conduct disorders have been extensively documented (Meadows et al., 2020). It is also noted that these issues often co-occur with other complex problems such as alcohol and drug use, aggressive and anti-social or risk-taking behaviours, self-harm, emotional regulation concerns, truancy and disengagement from support services (McGurk & Rowe, 2022). These issues often disrupt school participation, particularly when compounded by substance use and exposure to domestic or family violence (The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020). For example, reports in WA state that alcohol and drug use can exacerbate all mental health problems, while trauma from domestic violence may create ongoing emotional and behavioural issues that interfere with school life (Harris, 2017; Tran, 2020).

The cumulative effect of multiple adverse experiences such as domestic violence, poverty, and substance abuse can significantly impact a young person's educational journey. These outcomes confirm that WA's youth facing overlapping challenges are at heightened risk of emotional dysregulation, poor academic outcomes, and future disadvantage, (The (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2020). In support of this the WA government's *At Risk Youth Strategy 2022–2027* stresses the need to address these compounding issues before they become entrenched (Department of Communities, 2022). If left unaddressed this cycle can also become intergenerational: disengaged young people may become adults with limited employment prospects or parenting capacities, perpetuating the same patterns of disengagement and hardship in their children (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2023). Sadly, many of these statistics are not new and it can be all too familiar to read how school students are not "thriving" in the education system (Koelma, 2017). The WA government has recognised these issues and through the Department of Communities, leads a "whole-of-government" approach working in partnership with young people, the youth sector, community groups and across all levels of government. This approach aims to support and develop programs and initiatives that meet the diverse needs of young people aged 10 to 25 years (Beazley, 2025).

Alternative Education Models

Research has linked adverse experiences in childhood, such as exposure to family and domestic violence and/or physical abuse, to children or young people engaging in harmful behaviours (McGurk & Rowe, 2022). It is recognised that this in turn may impact their formative years (Peat et al., 2005) which may also rupture their education journey and lead them to experience negative life outcomes (Deng et al., 2022). Education plays an important role and can hold many advantages for young people supporting them to prepare or plan for work or pursue a higher education while graduating from university (Al-Shuaibi, 2014). There is no 'one size fits all' answer to the issues faced by our mainstream education in its current format (Raj, 2025) and having the option to gain education in an area of interest may be the key to helping a person think, feel, and behave in a way that contributes to their success (Al-Shuaibi, 2014). The Department of Training and Workforce Development (DTWD) recognises this and now offers alternative education options (Department of Communities, 2022: (DTWD, 2025a) in vocational education areas. Targeted funding enables participation in vocational qualifications, such as Certificate II and III programs focussing on employment outcomes. According to the DTWD (2025), Youth at Risk students must be unemployed, face barriers to mainstream education, and be referred by approved agents. Eligible participants must be between 15 and 24 years old (Department of Communities, 2022).

Adult education settings offer a different contrast to traditional schools. As we have already discussed, there are multiple reasons mainstream schools often struggle to meet the needs of students dealing with trauma, mental illness, or socio-economic disadvantage. Wiedermann et al., (2023) argue that a proactive, holistic approach to mental health is essential for building a resilient educational infrastructure. However, rigid structures, large class sizes, and academic content disconnected from students lived experiences can alienate young learners (Maynard BR, Farina A, Dell NA, Kelly MS., 2019) and therefore reinforcing the need for this cohort of students to have alternative arrangements or options is a 'must'. Wiedermann et al., (2023) goes on to explain that educational institutions can effectively leverage the expertise of diverse stakeholders to create targeted interventions by cultivating partnerships, which in turn is what DTWD has done by developing their alternative programs with many also incorporating work experience. Therefore, students learn what life is like beyond mainstream schooling and have agency over their learning, which fosters motivation and a sense of ownership. Smaller class sizes help create safer environments for students who have experienced trauma. These spaces emphasise practical and relevant learning, which in turn supports smoother transitions into employment or further education (Re & Capodieci, 2020).

Importantly, alternative education is not just a second chance at learning, it is an opportunity for healing and empowerment (Mills & Mcgregor, 2013). The WA government is focused on a collaborative approach to support at risk young people that include targeted initiatives to address health, mental health, education needs and training and employment pathways (McGurk & Rowe, 2022). Currently, DTWD conducts a range of funded programs across multiple Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) that are designed to deliver training that meets the skill needs of the state (DTWD, 2025c) including apprenticeships, traineeships, priority industry training and the participation programs (DTWD, 2025b).

The participation programs are designed to support youth at risk. As the Department has recognised potential barriers to accessing, engaging and completing mainstream training these programs have been developed so the RTO can offer additional support to students to support them to engage and retain them in training. Examples of support that RTOs can offer students include mentoring and counselling (DTWD, 2025b). In addition many RTOs offer opportunities for student counselling (WAA, 2025).

Despite the benefits of alternative education, significant challenges remain. For example, young people may experience communication difficulties with peers and teachers which can undermine their sense of emotional safety in the classroom (Re & Capodieci, 2020). Addressing these issues requires the implementation of trauma-informed teaching strategies that are grounded in empirical research (Watson & Astor, 2025).

Trauma informed teaching strategies are grounded in constructivist and socio-emotional pedagogical principles which recognise that student's past experiences significantly shape their capacity to learn (Brunzell et al., 2015). Therefore, by adopting a trauma-informed lens educators can create a safe and supportive environment where the students feel secure enough to

participate and develop (Brunzell et al., 2015). Considering YAR students generally have a history of some form of trauma it is important to incorporate forms of relationship-building strategies to support them in the classroom and enhance their engagement (Wilson-Ching & Berger, 2023), such as icebreakers to cultivate classroom belonging (J. M. V. Sasan et al., 2023).

Reauthoring Student Narratives

Disengagement rarely stems from a single issue. It often reflects the intersection of personal, social, and systemic barriers, particularly among students facing poverty, housing instability, family violence, trauma, or mental health issues (Commissioner for Children and Young People WA, 2023). We understand that students disengaged from mainstream education that are choosing to reengage in alternative education can be taking the first step of their journey to transition into employment or further education (Watson & Astor, 2025). Therefore the option to engage in mentoring and/or counselling at this time can be extremely supportive. Viewed through the lens of Narrative Therapy, this could be seen as supporting students to help them "reauthor" their stories. Rather than focusing solely on behaviour correction, this approach highlights students' values, commitments, and strengths and it can help young people externalise problems (such as, anger or anxiety) and explore their responses to these challenges (Thompson, 2024). One example would be the cognitive behavioural program "Talk Sense to Yourself" (TSTY) by Jeffrey Wragg that focuses on self-talk and emotional regulation (Saji, 2015).

Conclusion

This literature review has highlighted the multifaceted challenges faced by young people at risk of disengagement from education, including poverty, homelessness, domestic violence, trauma, and mental health concerns. While these issues are well-documented in psychological and social contexts, their nuanced effects on educational engagement remain underexplored. While this paper focuses only on WA there are clearly opportunities and recommendations for future research using a national lens to compare state-based policies and practices while tailoring interventions to the unique social, cultural, and economic needs of individual regions.

For counselling professionals, the findings emphasise the need for holistic strategies that acknowledge the complexity of disengagement. Supporting at-risk youth requires more than addressing immediate crises; it demands long-term strategies that reconnect young people to meaningful education and employment pathways. By providing trauma-informed, flexible, and youth-centred learning environments, educators and service providers can offer students not just an education but a renewed sense of agency, purpose, and belonging. Counsellors working in this space can consider multiple methodologies to support students' needs including options such as Narrative Therapy to invite students to reflect on the personal stories they tell themselves and explore how these narratives influence their actions and self-image. Short, structured sessions delivered one-on-one or in small groups can help students identify personal strengths and preferred ways of responding to challenges. A predictable and safe learning environment enhances the effectiveness of these interventions, as it allows space for self-exploration, growth, and confidence-building (Vanzin & Mauri, 2020).

For counselling professionals and educators, the findings demand a shift towards integrated, trauma-informed, and youth-centred approaches that prioritise not just academic outcomes but also a young person's sense of agency, belonging, and purpose. Practice recommendations include embedding trauma-informed pedagogy to provide safe environments where young people can rebuild trust and re-engage with learning. The implementation of narrative and strength-based interventions can support students to critically reflect on the personal stories they tell themselves, reframe limiting narratives, and help them to identify strengths that foster resilience and hope. Offering adaptable, personalised education and training pathways supports disengaged youth to reconnect with meaningful educational and employment opportunities.

For researchers, there is an urgent need to bridge the gap between psychological research and educational practice. Future studies should explore the long-term impacts of trauma-informed and narrative-based interventions, examine the role of cultural identity in engagement, and investigate how emerging technologies can enhance connection and learning for at-risk youth.

The challenge now is not simply to understand why young people disengage but to reimagine how education, counselling, and research can work together to keep them connected.

References

Al-Shuaibi, A. (2014). *The importance of education*. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/260075970_The_Importance_of_Education

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2015). *National youth information framework (NYIF) indicators*. Australian Government. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/national-youth-information-framework-nyif-indicato/contents/summary

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2017). *Alcohol, tobacco & other drugs in Australia: Fact sheets*. Australian Government. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/alcohol/alcohol-tobacco-other-drugs-australia/fact-sheets

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2020). *National drug strategy household survey 2019*. Australian Government. https://doi.org/10.25816/E42P-A447

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2024). *Health of children*. Australian Government. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/children-youth/health-of-children

Beazley. (2025, July 28). *Young people*. Department of Communities. https://www.wa.gov.au/organisation/department-of-communities/young-people

Best, M. (2024). The complex and contradictory nature of alternative education provision. *Cogent Education, 11*(1), 2413208. https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2024.2413208

Brunzell, T., Waters, L., & Stokes, H. (2015). Teaching with strengths in trauma-affected students: A new approach to healing and growth in the classroom. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 85*(1), 3–9. https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000048

Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 35*(3), 262–278. https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059

Cho, B. (2025, June 19). *Australia's population grew by 1.7 per cent*. Australian Bureau of Statistics. https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/australias-population-grew-17per-cent

Clark, L. (2017, February 5). Almost half of Australian school students bored or struggling, says Grattan Institute. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/feb/05/almost-half-of-australian-school-students-bored-or-struggling-says-grattan-institute

Commissioner for Children and Young People. (2022). *Profile of children and young people in WA 2021*. Government of Western Australia. https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/media/4578/profile-of-children-and-young-people-in-wa-2021-report-final-web-version-

february-2021.pdf
Commissioner for Children and Young People. (2023). *Profile of children and young people in WA 2022*. Government of Western Australia. https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/media/4578/profile-of-children-and-young-people-in-wa-2022-report-final-web-version-february-2022.pdf
Cooper, T. (2017). *Homelessness in young people aged 16 years: A literature review*. Commissioner for Children and Young People WA. https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/media/2489/literature-review-homelessness-under-16-years-final-web-file.pdf
Deng, Y., Cherian, J., Khan, N. U. N., Kumari, K., Sial, M. S., Comite, U., Gavurova, B., & Popp, J. (2022). Family and academic stress and their impact on students' depression level and academic performance. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 13,* 869337. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2022.869337
Department of Communities. (2022). *At risk youth strategy 2022–2027*. Government of Western Australia. https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2022-08/At-Risk-Youth-Strategy-2022.pdf
Department of Health. (2017). *National drug strategy 2017–2026*. Australian Government. https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/national-drug-strategy-2017-2026.pdf
Department of Training and Workforce Development. (2020). *VET (WA) ministerial corporation purchase of training services business rules*. Government of Western Australia. https://tracmin.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/tra-business-rules-january2020-v1.24.pdf
Doran, C. M., Kinchin, I., Bainbridge, R., Calman, J., & Shakeshaft, A. (2017). Effectiveness of alcohol and other drug interventions in at-risk Aboriginal youth. *Drug and Alcohol Review, 36*(5), 643–652. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/321278684
DTWD. (2025a). *Alternatives to full-time schooling* [Shaping the Future]. Department of Education WA. https://www.education.wa.edu.au/alternatives-to-full-time-schooling
DTWD. (2025b). *Participation program referral agents: Fact sheet*. Government of Western Australia. https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2023-11/dtwd-tra-ref-agent-factsheet-feb2020.pdf
Hancock, K. J., Christensen, D., & Zubrick, S. R. (2018). Development and assessment of cumulative risk measures of family environment and parental investments in the longitudinal study of Australian children. *Social Indicators Research, 137*(2), 665–694. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-017-1607-3
Hullinger, A. (2021, August 23). Preparing children for the future requires imagination. *Global Digital Library — Thought Leadership Institute*. https://thoughtleadership.org/preparing-children-for-the-future-requires-imagination
IES. (2024). *Developing trauma-sensitive classrooms to support students and educators*. U.S. Department of Education. https://ies.ed.gov/rel-appalachia/2025/01/handout-strategies-developing-trauma-sensitive-classrooms-support-students-and-educators
Koelma. (2017, July 14). Why school has stopped working. *The Mulberry Journal*. https://themulberryjournal.com/writing-collective/why-school-has-stopped-working
Lyons, G., Ford, M., & Arthur-Kelly, M. (2011). *Classroom management: Creating positive learning environments* (3rd ed.). Cengage Learning.
Matthys, W., & Lochman, J. E. (2009). *Oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder in children*. John Wiley & Sons. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/jcu/detail.action?docID=547086
Maynard, B. R., Farina, A., Dell, N. A., & Kelly, M. S. (2019). Effects of trauma-informed approaches in schools: A systematic review. *Campbell Systematic Reviews, 15*(1–2), e1018. https://doi.org/10.1002/cl2.1018
McGowan-Jones, J. (2025). *Profile of children and young people in WA 2025*. Government of Western Australia. https://www.ccyp.wa.gov.au/media/ycdpncje/profile-of-children-and-young-people-in-wa-2025-web-ready.pdf
McGurk, S., & Rowe, M. (2022). *At risk youth strategy 2022–2027*. Government of Western Australia. https://www.wa.gov.au/system/files/2022-08/At-Risk-Youth-Strategy-2022.pdf
Meadows, G., Farhall, J., & Fossey, E. (2020). *Mental health and collaborative community practice: An Australian perspective*. Oxford University Press. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ackedu/detail.action?docID=6512734
Mills, M., & McGregor, G. (2013). Re-engaging young people in education: Learning from alternative schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 17*(2), 123–140. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286719153
Mission Australia. (2021). *Youth survey*. https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/youth-survey
Patterson, G. R., Forgatch, M. S., & DeGarmo, D. S. (2010). Cascading effects following intervention. *Development and Psychopathology, 22*(4), 949–970. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579410000568
Peat, M., Franklin, S., Devlin, M., & Charles, M. (2005). Revisiting the impact of formative assessment opportunities on student learning. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology, 21*(1), 102–114. https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.1345
Polidano, C., Hanel, B., & Buddelmeyer, H. (2013). Explaining the socio-economic status school completion gap. *Education Economics, 21*(3), 230–247. https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2013.789482
Polini, G. D. (2025, June 19). WA the fastest growing state or territory in Australia, as population tips over 3 million. *ABC News*. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-06-19/wa-population-hits-three-million-abs-data-reveals/105436770
Raj, S. (2025, February 2). One-size-fits-all education: A critical examination. *21K School India*. https://www.21kschool.com/in/blog/one-size-fits-all-education
Re, A. M., & Capodieci, A. (2020). *Understanding ADHD: A guide to symptoms, management and treatment*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429201738
Sasan, J. M. V., Tugbong, G. M., & Alistre, K. L. C. (2023). An exploration of icebreakers and their impact on student engagement in the classroom. *International Journal of Social Science Research, 3*(11), 566. https://doi.org/10.46799/ijssr.v3i11.566
Vadivel, Balachandran & Alam, Sohaib & Nikpoo, Iman & Ajanil, Bemnet. (2023). The Impact of Low Socioeconomic Background on a Child's Educational Achievements. Education Research International. 2023. 10.1155/2023/6565088.
Van Ryzin, M. J., & Roseth, C. J. (2021). The cascading effects of reducing student stress: Cooperative learning as a means to reduce emotional problems and promote academic engagement. *The Journal of Early Adolescence, 41*(5), 700–724. https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431620950474
WAA. (2025). *Student support services*. https://www.waacademy.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/WAA-Student-support-services-V2.pdf
Watson, K. R., & Astor, R. A. (2025). A critical review of empirical support for trauma-informed approaches in schools and a call for conceptual, empirical and practice integration. *Review of Education, 13*(1), e70025. https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.70025
Wiedermann, C. J., Barbieri, V., Plagg, B., Marino, P., Piccoliori, G., & Engl, A. (2023). Fortifying the foundations: A comprehensive approach to enhancing mental health support in educational policies amidst crises. *Healthcare, 11*(10), 1423. https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11101423
Wilson-Ching, M., & Berger, E. (2023). Relationship building strategies within trauma-informed frameworks in educational settings: A systematic literature review. *ResearchGate*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04590-5
Yates, S. (2019). "An exercise in careful diplomacy": Talking about alcohol, drugs and family violence. *Policy Design and Practice, 2*(3), 258–274. https://doi.org/10.1080/25741292.2019.1638697