



Exploratory Paper

This paper has been written to provide background to inform the direction of the “How Well Are We Going?” research project. What is clear from discussions with a number of Big Picture Principals across NSW is that each Big Picture School / Academy is unique in composition, and the Design is consistent. The Design is based on personalised learning plans centred around student interests and passions. Student learning takes place in an ‘advisory’ of 17 students, as well as in the community, to gain ‘real world’ experience in their field of interest. Students compile evidence of their learning in a Graduation Portfolio to comprehensively showcase their cumulative skills, knowledge and qualifications.

Selection Criteria

Big Picture is NOT a school for students with a disability. Big Picture is not an alternative to Special Education. Big Picture is a new Design and provides families with a choice. Big Picture is a Design for Learning for all students that emphasises the pursuit of personal interests, practice through outlearning opportunities and relationships with themselves and others. Enrolment does not start with a diagnosis – all students are recognised as individuals, as engaged and passionate learners that have particular needs to facilitate effective learning. BP essentially levels inequity. Students are not labelled within the advisory and there are no perceived differences between students, enabling students to demonstrate increased confidence and improved self-esteem. Labelling is simply a means of allocating funding according to how the student impacts the learning of others (when a more valuable determination could be made on the basis of “need”). As a result of the safe and supportive environment created in advisories, and the strong relationship advisors have with their students, a magnitude of issues for students often become evident over time (mental health, social support, learning needs etc). However, advisors recognise a reduction in mental health symptoms in some students over time (although they may re-emerge with certain triggers). Emotional wellbeing is paramount to successful engagement and learning.

Students thrive in the personalised, independent learning environment. The most important aspect is provision of support, diagnosis is secondary. Many students experience trauma and BP is primary source of support. Such students, and any issues they may have, often remain hidden in mainstream schools. They remain isolated and disconnected, and often experience minimal success in social and academic spheres. Out of home care, common for children experiencing trauma, may act as a limiting factor for inclusion in Big Picture as a result of a lack of family involvement. In such instances, Big Picture creates relationships with case workers and/or other significant adults to support the student in the absence of parents.

Parents are often hesitant to acknowledge or accept a disability, so students may remain undiagnosed, or parents may not disclose a disability due to cultural attitudes. Poverty and/or the reluctance of Indigenous community to engage in “deficit” process, may act as barriers to diagnosis. A lack of diagnosis is particularly problematic in mainstream



education, as funding, and therefore support, is dependent on diagnosis. The Big Picture Design does not rely on a diagnosis as the determining factor for students to access appropriate support.

The most important criteria for acceptance into Big Picture is willingness to learn. Prior to intake students are encouraged to reflect on their personal capacity to learn. Some Academies may include additional phases in the enrolment process, such as interviews, shadow days and reports. Diversity of the group encourages students to be caring and compassionate for someone with needs, behaviours or beliefs unlike their own, to understand that difference is OK. Students work with other students to provide support required.

There was significant variation in the number of Special Education Units in each of the schools, ranging from zero up to six. This did not seem to impact the selection of students for Big Picture. This is important so as not to identify Big Picture as an alternative to Special Education, but as a new direction in the education of students in Australia.

Terminology

There is a level of complexity associated with defining terms and determining what they actually represent in a consistent manner. The following were identified as important considerations.

Disability – But not disabled, so strengths are celebrated

Wellbeing – It is essential to look after the mental health of students, *“no student in crisis can learn”*.

Engagement – This is not the same as attendance. This is not just about showing up, but rather a measure of contributions to and participation in the learning environment. Students can remain engaged remotely (the “Unlocked Potential during Lockdown” study showed this). This flexibility around attendance may be an integral part of engagement for students with disability. There are no NESA standards for face-to-face learning (however, funding is dependent on physical attendance at school).

Inclusion – Students are not excluded on the basis of disability. Support is facilitated and accepted in advisory.

Transitions – Internships are essential for effective planning of successful transitions.

Existing wellbeing surveys

Some schools had participated in the “Tell Them From Me” survey which focusses on a variety of wellbeing components, such as advocacy, belonging, high expectations. There were some concerns surrounding the use of such survey as students may not understand the language. A limiting factor of these surveys for us is that it is not possible to extract data specific to Big Picture students. Other schools conducted their own surveys, such as the Social-emotional survey conducted by wellbeing co-ordinator at CCSC.



Modifications

Adjustments and modifications are made over time, if necessary, for all students. Alternate arrangements are often made due to the personalised planning for each student, for example, students with anxiety may have presentation times / audience adjusted. The learning plans of all students are personalised so they will automatically include any modifications required and are agreed to by both the advisor and the student. It may be necessary at times to work around students with particularly high needs by reducing numbers in advisory.

Students learning is structured around ongoing partnerships with

- parents to engage in continuous learning and monitor progress,
- internship mentors to understand their personal worth in the world of work, and
- the community in order to learn how to contribute to society in a meaningful way.

Key Concept

This section refers to what Principals felt was the most important concept to capture in the research project. The responses reflect the insight of NSW Principals into both the Design for Learning and the education of students with disability.

- The trust the parents have in Big Picture. They are dedicated and they are invested in their child's learning. One school noted a family of three sons, all very different, all enrolled in Big Picture and well suited to the Design.
- The high level of exit outcomes for a wide variety of students, generally exceeding personal and parental expectations as a result of the Design. One school stated Big Picture was an innovative approach in conservative area, but parents make the switch from traditional learning environments and recognise their child to be happier to be learning. Families have powerful stories to tell.
- What a difference Big Picture can make for students. Mental health problems are increasing amongst adolescents and Big Picture advisors recognise the importance of ensuring wellbeing for all students (including those with disability). There is a need to build capacity and encourage personal and academic growth in all students.
- Move away from allocation and entitlement of funding, and recognition of students on the basis of disability. Funding would be allocated more appropriately for students of low SES, students with disability and Indigenous students, as well as the introduction of some form of wellbeing index to ascertain need.

“Tipping Point”

The “tipping point” between inclusion and the integrity of the Design is difficult to define but a relevant concern. It is important to balance advisory dynamics so they accurately reflect society, but it is sometimes difficult to ascertain this in advance. Advisories need to maintain diversity, including a range of students to create a sense of balance and truly reflect the social construct in which we live and to prepare students for the real world. Some people perceive Big Picture as a Special Education Unit, which has the potential to cause advisories to become overwhelmed with high needs students. Big Picture is not just



for disengaged students or students with disability. This is a “new” Design that provides opportunities for all students to navigate their own pathway.

The tipping point exists for the advisor and the demands associated with some students that advisors tend to handle internally. Advisors need support and resources to effectively build capacity in some students. Advisors may need additional support if a particular student requires a lot of time, leaving other students vulnerable. The challenge is to work with students with too many needs (high support) in the same advisory.

Most importantly, the number of students with disability is not relevant. The tipping point is related to engagement, not disability.

Thank you to those principals who contributed to the opinions presented in this paper.