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Promising Practices: What students, parents and teachers say about learning in a Big Picture context.

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Key Findings of the The Big Picture Academy Research Project

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Introduction

This report identifies the key findings from a research project into the early implementation (the first 20 months) of the Big Picture Education (BPE) design for learning and school¹ in five different schools in Western Australia. The aim was to understand better how student engagement for learning and aspirations develop in a Big Picture context. These findings are reported more extensively in a series of Research Briefs, Combined Reports and papers.² Our goal in this document is to bring the findings together into the one summary report.

The Big Picture Academy (BPA) Project

The Big Picture Academy (BPA) Project was part of a much larger project funded by the federal government called “MAP4U” or Murdoch’s Aspiration and Pathways for University project. The MAP4U project sought to “develop sustainable programs that will grow the number of eligible, willing and able students to attend university.”³ That is, increase the numbers of students moving into tertiary education from low socio-economic communities in outer metropolitan areas.

In the BPA Project, Big Picture Academies were introduced and supported in three schools. A whole-school Big Picture (BP) orientation was supported in two other small schools. Two BPE schools from another low socio-economic region were engaged to take a leadership role in the project.

Each of the five project schools implemented⁴ the BP design to different degrees around the key BPE practices. Not only did fidelity to the design vary amongst them, for a number of reasons, none of the academies/schools implemented the complete BP design.

The BP Academies Research Project

This report focuses on the data collected through student, parent and teacher interviews carried out on three separate occasions from the end of Term 1, 2014 through to early in Term 4, 2015. At the final time of these interviews, the Advisory Teachers⁵ (ATs) in four of the schools had less than two years experience implementing the BP design.

The students interviewed predominantly commenced in a BPA or BP oriented school, or arrived soon into Term 1, 2014.⁶ They chose the BP educational option for various reasons. Some of the students were effectively pushed out of mainstream schooling. Others were looking for an educational experience that would allow them to pursue their interests.

In addition to interviews researchers also gathered evidence from fieldwork observations including samples of student and teacher work and notes from student Exhibitions. When required these were followed up with ATs and students for clarification, further evidence and confirmation.

1 Refer www.bigpicture.org.au for overview of the BPE design for learning and school.

2 <https://www.bigpicture.org.au/big-picture-academy-bpa-project-map4u-murdoch-university> accessed 1st March 2018.

3 <http://www.map4u.com.au> accessed 26th October 17.

4 A research report on the issues related to implementation is forthcoming in 2018.

5 Each student was in a group called an Advisory and each Advisory had an Advisory Teacher.

6 Two students commenced in Term 1, 2015.

This qualitative data provided insights into the experiences of these students – as described by them. We believe that we can only properly comprehend the student experience of school by listening to what students have to say. These accounts were supported by a significant adult in the lives of each student in order to clarify, validate and/or develop the student’s story.

Finding a way to present student accounts of their school experience presented some challenges. Each school had a different student cohort, introduced the BP learning design for school-specific reasons and implemented the design with varying degrees of fidelity. Furthermore, students brought their own unique histories and personalities to the project. The student snapshots presented in this report reflect the interplay between the individual (their experience of learning in a BP environment as well as their family background), and the institutional arrangements of particular schools (structure, culture and pedagogy), including those aspects common to the BP design for learning. Whilst there were some idiosyncratic differences between and amongst individuals, common themes that emerged from all five schools were identified.

Engagement

Engagement has long been identified as a broad, multi-variant, multi-layered theme. In the context of this study it included how the students felt about their learning (both historic and current), their interest and enthusiasm and their general endeavour and output. However, the fundamental starting point (from which each student's deeper commitment to learning had become or now became possible), was identified early as the desire and commitment to participate. Greater student engagement in the BPE environment was universally endorsed by the students and parents interviewed.

Disengagement from mainstream schooling

Students talked - and wanted to talk a lot - about why mainstream secondary schooling did not work for them. At one end of the spectrum there were students who had been expelled or were otherwise completely disengaged from school itself. School was not a hospitable place for them. At the other end were students who were hanging in at school, generally because of the promised benefits of secondary schooling, but also dreaming of a more relevant educational experience. Student reasons for disengaging from mainstream secondary school ranged amongst and were often combinations of:

- a perceived lack of support from staff
- disruptive classrooms
- bullying and intimidation from other students
- intimidation from some staff
- a lack of understanding of the content and processes in the classroom
- a lack of interest in the content
- too much pressure – either perceived or real
- a lack of relevance and flexibility.

Well, the students in there were disruptive and I couldn't really learn anything... I didn't really get the work... The teachers couldn't control the students as well, they just let them, some of them even egged the students on to do bad stuff... I didn't like it... I couldn't learn anything... I did my work in there but I didn't learn much in there... I just did it and that's it. (Student)

Parents were concerned that the curriculum was irrelevant, that their child wasn't known well, that they weren't being prepared for post-school life and that their child's opportunities had been unnecessarily and possibly unfairly limited by early streaming.

From disengagement to engagement

After only one term in a BP environment students noticed increased levels of engagement with their learning and school. Many now actively and enthusiastically took ownership of their learning. For some, the process of re-engagement was more cautious but, for most, over time this became stronger, deeper and more nuanced.

As I'm learning, I'm a lot more focussed. I do a lot more study. I do a lot more engaging with the work. I do a lot more work. I do a lot more sports and other things as well. (Student)

Students explained this shift in one of three ways:

1. The opportunity to negotiate curriculum and instruction. They responded positively to having a greater say over what and how they learnt and with whom. In particular, being able to choose interest projects meant they were beginning their learning journey with a subject in which they already had knowledge, interest and ability.
2. Ongoing AT support and interest in their learning.

I actually have a teacher that understands me so it's getting easier... She actually spends time explaining things further. She is explaining different techniques and the ones that I find easier she will teach me more on that bit. (Student)

3. Parental support through engagement with Learning Plans and participation in Exhibitions. Students valued the ways in which attendance at Exhibitions and involvement in Learning Plans opened up new lines of communication with their parents.

Parents noticed this stronger engagement by the students with learning and school. In particular, they talked about improved communication with their child at home.

As with all learning, a linear progression from disengagement to engagement was not found. Even though engaged, situations arose that caused confusion and concern for some students, but this also provided opportunities for deeper learning. Students clearly identified the importance of having choices and how this impacted on their engagement, academic performance, learning and well-being.

Learning

Students articulated an awareness of the new relational environment being created in their Advisory and how it contributed to engagement with learning. Throughout this study there were examples of students who could describe how they were changing and what they were learning. Furthermore, they could identify a range of conditions necessary for their learning and ‘learning about learning’. That is, the kinds of cultural, relational, pedagogical and organisational conditions that support their learning.

Relationships – respect, trust and care

Students valued the closer relationship with their AT because they felt connected and supported. They saw this relationship as an important cornerstone of their learning. For many students, the acceptance and interest shown by the AT was unusual, facilitating a sense of belonging and trust. A few students found their relationship with their AT had some low moments as well, even so, they preferred it to the usual teacher-student relationship found in many large high schools. Students appreciated that their AT provided one-on-one support and stayed with them from one year to the next.

I don't know [why I have confidence to talk with the AT here], it's hard to explain... they treat us how I want to be treated... With respect and stuff, like the way they would want to be treated. (Student)

Students also felt more connected to their peers than in mainstream school settings because of the smaller class size and increased time together – during each week and from one year to the next. But more than that, students discussed the benefits of enhanced openness and diminished competition with other students. Students identified the benefits of the program for their family relationships as well.

Parents noticed and appreciated the key role of the AT in supporting their child's learning. They understood the importance of relationships and how this contributed to their child's learning. Parents observed their children engaging more socially with a wider cross-section of students.

They gelled really nicely, yet they're not completely dependent on each other... They're all different kids that have come into this program and they're kids that perhaps wouldn't have sat together at lunch-time or had anything to do with each other... But I like it because they interact with people that they possibly otherwise would not have, and it's not through judgement or gender or who's clever and who's not, it's just because they're all part of something else and they chat and interact... She comes home and says, "Oh, we're doing something in a group," and it might be a couple of kids she's never done the group with before, but it's never been, "Oh, I've got to work with him or her." It's just matter of fact and, "I'm working with them today," so it's very good. (Parent)

Affective – well-being, self-worth and self-efficacy

Throughout the second year of the project, students described how they generally felt much happier with school which in turn led to a greater sense of self-worth and support for each other. Students felt better about themselves and this often enhanced relationships with their families and beyond. Family members noted this too. For some students, this appeared to be a result of increased academic success and enhanced social connection (both at school and in learning

in the community). This enhanced sense of well-being was especially marked in those students who were most alienated and disengaged from mainstream schooling. However, BP students at all participant schools described a greater level of well-being and happiness in their BP environment.

Transformation – developing independence

Students recognised the importance of directing their own learning and behaviour. Students described an increased confidence in dealing with school and their futures by presenting their learning to others and engaging in out of school learning experiences. This growing level of self-reliance was facilitated by taking greater responsibility and ownership of their learning coupled with the implementation of supportive strategies to help them succeed at trying new things. Most students appreciated the challenges, although a couple of students wanted more scaffolding for some of their work. Students were far more confident in revealing something about themselves to both peers and teachers. A few students found the increased expectations and new environment challenging and chose to leave.

I'm only 15 but I've learnt so much that I never would have thought... about working with adults... and how things can be flexible and I think it helps you grow up as well because... you're expected to be able to be mature enough to do things and ... it's just helped me grow so much. (Student)

Some school contexts contained a higher number of students with physical and mental health challenges such as anxiety, than might be expected in a mainstream population. There were many examples of how the BP Advisory was able to support them in developing a greater sense of confidence, well-being and agency.

Learning about learning – self and others

The theme of “learning about learning” describes the student’s growing capacity to step back and reflect on the learning process itself. This included students:

- Exploring strategies for dealing with overload and finding some success
- Identifying “learning how to learn” as their greatest learning
- Learning through disappointment and disorganisation
- Achieving a growing awareness of learning through exploration
- Learning from exhibitions when not entirely happy with their performance.
- Learning how to learn by exercising greater autonomy and accepting increased responsibilities
- Learning about themselves
- Becoming more systematic in taking notice of their own learning
- Reflecting on their need for further maturing.

In terms of collaboration for learning students also showed an increasing awareness about the social nature of learning with peers, and from the world at large.

I've made new friends with everybody and I'm getting on with the teachers... Before, I didn't like conversing with people and would yell at them. Now I can talk to people...things have been going well this year, although there has been a bit of drama with the girls. That's been sorted out and we're getting on with it – we are civil to each other. We had a meeting and sat and talked it through. (Student)

I'm going a bit more in-depth in my learning about the game I play. I've taken recommendations from the community on the internet and incorporated it into my game. I've been learning that I can learn from everything that I do in life. Being part of a small group...[in Big Picture]...helps a lot because I don't have to be around different people every hour. (Student)

Deeper learning – facilitated by a personalised approach

Depth of learning was observed, evidenced by the extent to which students learnt about the content and processes of both disciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge around their interest. How students learnt about the language, key concepts, tools, and the 'ways of working' of their interest, were then investigated. Finally, learning was then assessed against the quality and 'fit for purpose' nature of their products and how this learning changed them for the better. Some of the students (especially those who had been most disengaged and absent in mainstream school) had some "catching up" to do in this respect.

One student at a time – starting from where students “are at”

For some students any learning was a significant improvement on their pre-BP education experience. Starting from 'where they were at' and based on their initial interest, these students gradually engaged in activities, albeit tentatively. As they re-engaged they broadened and deepened their study as their confidence grew. Their motivation to continue also grew. Others were better placed to start work because, as they already had deep interests they wanted to pursue, they were better equipped to move ahead at a faster rate. They conducted interest projects, sought qualifications and found internships in their area of interest.

Many students shifted their interests. Some became more specific and went deeper (e.g., Playing Basketball to Fitness for Basketball to Bio-Mechanics). Some shifted from their initial interest to a completely new area (e.g., Marine Biology to Nursing). Some held their initial interest (e.g., Game Design) and expanded it (e.g., Bookkeeping and Accounting).

One student at a time - “real world” standards

Students did not just 'do school.' They engaged with the world around them and some enrolled in courses on offer at other institutions both online and face-to-face nearby. All students participated in Shadow Days, Work Placements and most did Internships. Learning happened in many different ways, in different places and with different people depending on the student's needs at that time. Tasks completed needed to meet the standards required in other institutions, work places, and internships. It is important to note that the internship was the most challenging element in the BP design for ATs to implement. Some schools were still working out how to make it work. Not every student had a successful internship.

One student at a time – authentic methods

Some students went beyond the typical approach to doing a 'school project.' Research techniques employed by experts helped students move beyond low-level Wikipedia information

gathering i.e., cutting and pasting information into an assignment of questionable value. Many students found their projects had a purpose beyond that of mere completion. This also applied to students who were able to engage with practical projects – working with a mentor to produce a product using the authentic tools and methods of that profession, trade or occupation. This provided them with far more accurate assessments of the long-term viability of their initial interest and desire.

One student at a time – personal interest to academic knowledge

Some students started with a practical “hands on” interest (e.g., Basketball). As they created work activities and projects linked to their interest they began to see the links to other disciplines (e.g., Bio-mechanics), and other subjects that helped them to deepen their understanding (e.g., Human Biology). This in turn developed their capacity for undertaking independent research.

Promising practices

Six promising practices that students describe as encouraging their engagement and supporting their learning were identified. In describing each of these practices it should be noted that not all aspects of the BPE design had been fully implemented in the five sites and variations existed in the extent and depth to which the learning design had been implemented in each setting at that time.

Advisory – like an extended family

The Advisory,⁷ a small community within a BP-inspired school, was the student's family group at that school. Students remained with the same Advisory for two-to-four years and were expected to become respectful, caring and productive members of the Advisory group. The Advisory was the time for students to be exposed to a wide range of ideas, interests, skills and experiences and the AT's role was to mould, teach, inspire, provoke, bond, organise and make the learning come to life.

Students talked a lot about the collaboration, cooperation and camaraderie (see previous sections), that developed in their Advisory and the role of their peers. Advisory was a very important part of the structure and process for the students.

We all do our work in our own way but we share ideas in the group. I enjoy that. It was hard to share at first because in the general program [mainstream classes] we are used to people taking your ideas because we've got to do the same topics. In Big Picture, we make it our own even though we are doing the same topic, it means it is less competitive. People have different things they are good at and present their work differently. People are encouraged to get out of their comfort zone too. At Town Hall, we would discuss everyone's ideas and give suggestions. (Student)

Advisory Teacher – supporting, extending and deepening

In order that every BP school student may have an adult who cared deeply about him or her, one of the goals of the BP learning design was to link the AT⁸ with their Advisory for the period of time the student was in the Academy/BP school. Successful implementation of this goal resulted in ATs being ideally situated to advise, co-ordinate, teach, facilitate, challenge, support and care.

Students talked about their AT as someone who listened to them, was available to them, and showed interest in them. Their AT mattered to them and the student knew they mattered to the AT.

They are more involved in our lives than I expected. (Student)

[Y]ou check-in with the teacher once a week, so they know you're on track - and just get going to where you have to be. Instead of the teacher standing at the front telling us what to do, he says, "Okay, you tell me what you're doing, and if you need something then you let me know and we can try and sort that out." (Student)

7. Adapted from Hogan, J et al (2008) *Advisory A small community within a Big Picture school*. Big Picture Education Australia.

8 For more detailed description of the role of the Advisory Teacher refer to page X in the full report or refer Hogan, J et al (2008) *Advisory A small community within a Big Picture school*. Big Picture Education Australia.

Being able to negotiate time has helped me academically. It takes the stress out of it. I'm doing really well. It also helps me that we sit down with the teacher and discuss what mark we deserved. This one-on-one feedback helps me know what I can do differently in the future. (Student)

Real-world learning – connecting to people in the community and deeper learning about their interest

Many students operated and worked in community-based contexts⁹ which allowed them to interact with people, places and objects outside the school. As a result, these students learnt how to negotiate their way in the adult world through a range of strategies including Informational Interviews, Shadow Days, Internships with expert Mentors, Authentic Tasks, and Exhibitions.

Although only a small number of students in the interview sample engaged in fully developed Internships, students considered they benefited from the 'leaving to learn' experiences. They identified valuable learning happening when they moved into the community and engaged with people and authentic tasks. Those who did engage with Internships were inspired, clarified their career goals, and learnt many important skills.

Students expressed a sense of accomplishment when they set up their "out of school" experience because it allowed them to address fears of talking with adults and taking on responsibility.

I'm going to go to the day care centre [for my first Shadow Day] and help out there... I went down and I sorted it out. It was a bit scary because I'm not very good at speaking to people – I get a bit nervous but it was good once I had done it – to know that I did it and was responsible and independent. (Student)

Students recognized what had happened when they learnt about work and workplaces.

I was helping out in the office... It's just so amazing to hear the sort of people that they get coming in about their questions or stuff that's going on with them... (Student)

Students gained great satisfaction from doing things they liked doing, and doing things that mattered both to them and to others.

I was lucky enough for them to ask me to deconstruct and improve their youth kits. I'm currently still working on that because that was quite a big job but I'm finding it great how I get to have some input in it and talk to people around my age with what they want, because they're all written by men in their 40s or 50s. (Student)

When they were on Internships of their choosing and making, students stepped up to what was required of both themselves and their work and they learnt, even in complex work environments. They valued the many informal opportunities that arose in situ and identified vital links and learning about their imagined careers. They recognised how they gained knowledge and a capacity to engage with adults and they valued both the expertise of the Mentor in their field of interest and the networks they were able to access.

However, some students considered their involvement to be unsatisfactory and disengaging

⁹ See Hogan, J et al (2008) *Learning Through Internships (LTI)*. Big Picture Education Australia.

as they found themselves unable to participate in a fully developed Internship. From their experiences a number of impediments to getting an Internship were identified:

- Difficulties associated with the process of getting an Internship led to feelings of insecurity
- The link between the Internship and in-school learning needed to be clear
- Getting out of placements that were neither of their choice nor interest
- Overcoming nervousness when venturing out on Shadow Days or Internships
- Dealing with a lack of positive response from inquiries for Shadow Days or Internships.

Last time we spoke I was interested in marine biology but my interests have changed, ever since my learning for Shadow Days, Internships and especially going to the vets. The Internships are really good for helping us think about our future. Now I want to work with animals, possibly as a vet, or somewhere in medicine. My interest in being a vet was sparked by my dog Marley getting something stuck in his intestine. We were able to be involved in looking after him. I was able to get an Internship at a vets and I was able to do a lot more than I thought I would. I watched all the surgeries and even helped. On one occasion I actually helped with the monitoring of the heartbeat. I also did cleaning duties and things like that but I got to see every side. The vet suggested that I try to do biology and chemistry at school. After the Internship with the vet I did some study into radiation – with the x-rays. And outside school I researched vaccinations, oxygen saturation and things like that. (Student)

Despite having some initial reservations, parents saw the value of their child's engagement in real world learning in the workplace/community as it:

- Supported the acquisition of workplace skills
- Developed their child's confidence
- Increased their child's enjoyment and engagement by linking with their child's interest
- Satisfied their child's search for greater relevance with their learning.

Some parents acknowledged the difficulty of finding a Mentor for specialist areas and believed they had a role to play in helping their child find an Internship.

Post-school plans – looking to the future

This theme captured the students' plans and goals for their imagined future. It included the ways in which students' thought about their future careers and the extent to which they perceived schools did or did not support them. Conversations, strategies and experiences that appeared to assist students by linking their present learning with future possibilities, were described, devised and explored.

From the beginning students wanted to engage in learning that allowed them to explore their interests and their future career aspirations. Over the research period most students gained greater clarity around future pathways and chosen careers. For others, the experience opened

up new possibilities. Some were able to identify that they were now no longer as interested in something, as they had thought they were or would be when they began. Some schools emphasised the importance of students becoming experts in the pathways available to them. Students had mapped and implemented plans including completion of relevant qualifications beyond and outside of school. A few students had left Big Picture to put in motion the next stage of their career pathway (e.g., moved to TAFE or moved into a pathway in a mainstream school.) For some, the range of possibilities increased, making their choice more difficult.

Parents valued the focus on the future and the resultant conversations with their child. They noticed their child's increased engagement and movement towards their post-school goals. They liked that the BP Advisory enabled their child to pursue their goals. They liked knowing about their child's current plans.

I don't think he would have been where he is today [accepted into a Cert IV at TAFE] if it hadn't been for this program, I'm sure he wouldn't have been... He still would have been doing good in school – but he would have just been one of the numbers and he wouldn't have enthusiasm. (Parent)

Some parents wanted their child to receive even more individual career based support.

Exhibitions – a place and time of learning and connection

Exhibitions¹⁰ provided an opportunity for students to present their work to their AT, peers and family. It was one of the ways they demonstrated they were meeting their learning goals. As a central part of the BPE learning design, Exhibitions occur at least three times per year.

By the end of Term 3 of the first year, Exhibitions had played a key role in enabling students to gauge their learning and develop new skills and confidence in presenting their learning to others. Exhibitions were highly valued by parents who were consistently impressed with their child's learning and capacity to express their learning. The majority of students commented positively on the learning facilitated through having to present their work to peers and family.

Students described the benefits of Exhibition:

- People could see them and what they had learnt
- Attendees gave good feedback and asked questions
- Students described movement from anxiety to comfort over time with Exhibitions in front of peers
- Students learnt to speak well in front of a range of people
- Personal work was shared in a safe environment.

However, not all students were comfortable with the demands of an Exhibition. Some felt they needed more scaffolding and less independence.

¹⁰ White, B et al (2016) *A Guide to Exhibitions*. Big Picture Education Australia.

Students generally presented on their interest projects together with reflections on the nature of learning itself. The Exhibition process required students not only to reflect on the content of their chosen project but to deepen their understanding by linking to subject knowledge. It also required them to reflect on how they engaged with the task and what they understood about themselves as individuals and as learners through and as a result of the experience. Students showed great awareness about their strengths and challenges as they openly discussed what they had learnt about themselves. Students talked about behaviours such as a tendency to procrastinate, to get caught up in the minutiae, to obsess or avoid things. Parents/guardians and ATs explored with them how to use this self-knowledge for future learning. For some students, this awareness allowed them to identify new strategies to help them respond to new learning opportunities and avoid past mistakes.

Overall parents were pleasantly surprised with their child's performance at their Exhibition and saw their child's engagement and hard work resulting in learning that was not possible in mainstream school programs. Parents talked about what they learnt about their children through the Exhibitions and felt much happier seeing their child growing in confidence. Some observed a new, more confident side to their child through the Exhibitions.

To get up, actually get up and talk in front of people - he's always been a bit shy about that... With these presentations... and things and Exhibitions he's coming out of his shell a lot more... I've been to all of them... It's good, really good... [I was a bit surprised] that he's able to get up and communicate so well now... I know he knows what he's doing... but actually being able to... get it across the people, I think he's doing extremely well. (Parent)

The research identified two key features of the Exhibition that were fundamental to deeper learning. First, the key role of parents in the process – from their obvious interest in the student, the work and the process, their support for the students in getting ready, and their involvement in giving feedback and asking probing questions. Secondly, the Exhibition was a “moment of truth” and key to making students accountable for their work and learning.

A depth of learning was not apparent at all Exhibitions – especially for those new to the process, time and practice were necessary. Not all Exhibitions “worked” to everybody's satisfaction, every time – that is the point. A vital part of the Exhibition process was always the post-eventum “Where to from here?” question period. Students and ATs were still learning how best to approach Exhibitions.

Those that have done [Exhibitions] are evolving, are getting better. I think we as a staff are getting better at supporting them and talking them through. We're still trying to get depth with all their work in general but it's improving even there... I'd still like to see greater sense of metacognition with the seniors and in general depth of content and theories... For some it's... trying to get depth [in their project work], and for some it is actually just getting that depth of learning reflected in their Exhibitions. Sometimes it is “I know that you have a greater understanding of those concepts than you have just presented.” (Teacher)

Family engagement – families are enrolled too...

In the BPE design for learning and school, families play an important role in each student's education. They are expected to participate in quarterly Learning Plan meetings, be involved in student Exhibitions of learning, attend an Orientation for new families as well as a number of

school functions throughout the school year. Although not all parent/families participated as fully as they were expected, there was increased family/school engagement in all students/parents interviewed.

Parent-school relationship – becoming more personal

Parents valued regular contact with the AT. They compared it favourably to their previous experience in mainstream schooling. The informal contact by phone, email and being welcome to visit the class enabled parents to feel both secure and a part of their child's education.

Parents identified the following kinds of benefits:

- Welcomed by the BP school – a change from mainstream school
- Appreciated feeling welcome in their child's BP classroom
- They (and their child) could approach the AT with ease
- More involved in and with their child's education
- Appreciated a closer relationship and more regular communication with AT
- Valued that AT really knew their child and gave regular, detailed feedback.

Enhanced relationships – new opportunities and conversations

Discussions with family highlighted the pivotal role of family engagement in the BPE design.

Initially, for many it generated a sense of optimism about their child's future.

When Mary (pseudonym) was asked to leave the school she was at before I told her she couldn't drop out. She really wanted to. I'm very happy that she did try this school. I don't want her ending up a statistic – a teenage mum with no job, getting benefits. I wish this school was around when I was at high school – I left school at 14 and haven't been back since. (Mother)

As well, parents often described better and stronger relationships with their child.

My relationship with William (pseudonym) is changing. When he was in mainstream he'd arrive home angry, drop his bag down. I'd ask how his day was. He'd just say "bad." Now he wants to talk to me because he's interested in being at school. The Exhibitions are good for him to push him a bit more and good for his confidence. They give him an opportunity to reflect on how he's going... (Parent)

In addressing the negative experiences of schooling faced by many students, the BPA project attempted to create and sustain a set of innovative structural, pedagogical and relational practices (promising practices), conducive to enhancing student engagement for learning.

Aspirations

The BPA project was located within a funding context designed to raise and support the aspirations of secondary school students from disadvantaged backgrounds, for further education and training.¹¹ The term “aspirations” is itself not without difficulties because it is often assumed that many young people – especially those from low socio-economic backgrounds – are deficit or lack aspirations.¹² In other words, students are often “pathologised” (e.g., lazy, lack motivation, low IQ, dysfunctional families, troublesome and so on), hence the focus is on “fixing” the individual rather than the context in which the learning takes place. As Carter-Wall and Whitfield¹³ (2012) explain, “What may look like “low aspirations” may often be high aspirations that have been eroded by negative experience.”

To this end, the BP Advisory through the work of the AT attempted to build the capabilities of each student by assisting them to identify the kinds of lives they wanted to lead, providing them with the skills and knowledge to do so, and helping them to understand and change their circumstances for the better (Sen¹⁴, 1992; Appadurai¹⁵, 2004)

While these practices were still in the early stages of implementation at the research schools there was strong evidence that when enacted well, these promising practices provided students with the necessary social and intellectual tools to act on their dreams and aspirations for the future. This research found that all students had aspirations for their young lives. They all had passions, interests and ideas about their future – some, rather amorphous; others, quite clear and specific.

With support from their AT and others (parents, Mentors), most students had undertaken preparatory steps to facilitate their future education and training, careers and life. These steps included:

- Regularly discussed their interests and passions with their AT (and peers) and then went deeper around the things that really mattered to them
- Regularly discussed their career plans and pathways with their AT (and peers)
- Conducted online research into tertiary and further education courses
- Contacted and visited TAFEs and universities to obtain relevant information
- Organised Shadow Days
- Organised and participated in Internships
- Enrolled in relevant (sometimes external), training courses alongside their BP work.

11 See description of the MAP4U project at https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/murdochs-aspirations-pathways-university-project-map4u/?doing_wp_cr on=1423210648.6372709274291992187500.

12 Eg Valencia, R. (2010) *Dismantling contemporary deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice*. New York: Routledge.

13 Carter-Wall, C., & Whitfield, G. (2012). *The role of aspirations, attitudes and behavior in closing the educational attainment gap* (p4). York, UK: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

14 Sen, A. (1992). *Inequality re-examined*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

15 Appadurai, A. (2004). The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition. In V. Rao & M. Walton (Eds.), (pp. 59-84). Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

In this preparatory work:

- There was a focus on strengths and assets of students rather than pathologies and weaknesses.
 - Students were provided with an alternative framework for understanding 'success' and 'failure' in education and work.
 - The AT created a context in which students thought differently about their futures. Barriers and obstacles they faced whilst developing the skills and knowledge to lead the kinds of lives they desired, were identified.
 - Students were provided with opportunities to 'leave school to learn' through Internships and social networking in the adult world in order to explore future pathways and careers.
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Concluding Remarks

This Summary Report provides a synopsis of the key research findings of the BPA project in five different educational sites in an outer metropolitan region of Western Australia. The region had poor rates of student participation and retention in education and training as well as a range of social indicators of disadvantage including health, unemployment, crime, violence, alcohol and drug abuse and welfare-dependency.

In this context, the BPA project collaborated with five schools to implement the BPE design for school based on student interests and the BPE philosophy of: *One student at a time in a community of learners*. The aim of this research was to gather evidence, largely from the point of view of the students, about the effectiveness of this approach to enhance student engagement, deeper learning and aspirations for post-school life. Students were interviewed three times over a 20-month period. Based on the stories of the young people themselves as well as their AT and parents/guardians, four key themes were identified:

From disengagement to reengagement with learning and school

Students identified numerous reasons why they disengaged from mainstream high schools. These included:

- boredom
- irrelevance
- not being known
- bullying
- inflexibility
- timetabling
- didactic teaching
- intense competitiveness.

For most of the participants in this research, large high schools were inhospitable places for learning. However, as students were given more ownership, control and responsibility for their learning based on their interests, the evidence showed a growing re-engagement with learning and school.

Learning about learning

Students were able to identify and describe: how they were changing, what they were learning, and some key conditions necessary for their learning. These included:

- Relationships – with peers and others based on trust, care and respect
- Affective – developing a sense of well-being, self-worth and self-efficacy
- Transformation – developing independence, autonomy and agency
- Learning about learning – about self and others
- Deeper learning – facilitated by a personalised approach.

Promising practices for learning

Students identified a set of promising practices that appeared to be making a difference for them. These included:

- Advisory – like an extended family. The engine room where the AT worked closely with each student over a sustained period of time to develop their interests and capabilities.
- Advisory Teacher – supporting, extending and deepening. The AT who knew each student well and took responsibility for facilitating the development of Learning Plans and out of school experiences whilst building a culture of collaboration, mutual respect, inquiry and well-being.
- Real-World learning – connecting to people in the community and deeper learning about their interest. Here students took responsibility for pursuing their interests with an expert Mentor in the community. Not every student got to experience a fully constituted internship. Internships were still a work in progress some 20 months into the work.
- Post-school plans – looking to the future. Every student had a post-school plan exploring and developing their options.
- Exhibition – a place and time for learning and connection. The mechanism by which students demonstrated their learning in a supportive and caring environment
- Family engagement – families are entolled too. Families were pivotal to the learning process and actively signed up to be involved in Learning Plans and Exhibitions.

Aspirations as developing capabilities to achieve goals

The evidence presented in this report challenged traditional deficit views about young people lacking aspirations and instead, focused on identifying the conditions in which aspirational capabilities can develop. These included:

- A focus on strengths and assets of students rather than pathologies and weaknesses
- The students were provided with an alternative framework for understanding 'success' and 'failure' in education and work
- The AT created a context in which students thought differently about their futures by identifying the barriers and obstacles they faced whilst developing the skills and knowledge and dispositions to lead successful lives.
- Students were provided with opportunities to 'leave school to learn' through Internships and/or social networking in the adult world in order to explore future pathways and careers

Whilst these promising practices provide some cause for optimism we also need to be mindful of the complexity, uncertainty and fragility of school change. Creating alternative ways of ‘doing’ school requires vision, leadership, persistence, time, and resources. Furthermore, there are no ‘quick fixes’ or ‘magic bullets’ to complex social and educational problems such as student engagement. And this complexity accounts for the variation in the degree of fidelity to the design from school to school.

However even at this early stage of implementation (20 months) many students showed a greater willingness to re-engage with learning with a greater sense of purpose, relevance and rigour. The promising practices outlined in this report show how schools can begin to address some of the most persistent problems facing education systems today around student engagement, deeper learning, aspirations and student wellbeing. There is sufficient evidence to indicate that when these promising practices are put in place, no matter how modestly, with the active support and goodwill of diverse groups of people then young people are more likely to flourish.

If I weren't in Big Picture I wouldn't be attending school. Big Picture provides a safety net. The portfolio entry to university is really helpful. I think my learning at Big Picture is deeper than in mainstream. I wouldn't have gone into the Cert IV and if I had just done ATAR and failed, I'd be screwed. (Student)

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EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

The logo for Big Picture Education Australia features the words "Big Picture" in a large, bold, serif font. Above the word "Picture" is a stylized red and orange arc. Below "Big Picture" are the words "EDUCATION AUSTRALIA" in a smaller, bold, sans-serif font.