

THE BIG PICTURE ACADEMY Research Project

MAP4U Murdoch University

RESEARCH BRIEF No. 5

Promising practices: what students have to say about learning in a Big Picture context

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1. Introduction

This Research Brief provides a preliminary analysis of the qualitative (interview) data obtained from students at the five core secondary schools in the first round of data collection in the Big Picture Academies research project. Each school has a unique student body and has introduced the Big Picture Academy or whole school orientation for school specific reasons. The ways in which the key Big Picture principles have been applied vary with the context and different emphases exist in each school.

The Big Picture Academy research project sits in a funding context designed to raise and support the aspirations of secondary school students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Young people from all walks of life are engaged in shaping their future in ways which have meaning and purpose for them. They do this in ways that makes sense in their personal, family and community context. It is one role of schools to provide young people with what they need to develop the capabilities to extend and support their aspirations. We thus examine the data in this research project to see how the schools are creating the conditions that allow young people to attend to and further their aspirations.

This is a rich interpretation of the notion of aspirations and enables us to understand better what a pedagogy of aspirations might look like. One of the relevant research questions guiding the analysis of the student data is: “How does student engagement, learning and aspirations develop in a Big Picture Academy?”

In Term 1, 2014, four students were randomly selected from each Big Picture Academy/school according to date of birth, making a total of 20 students interviewed across the five schools. The oldest, youngest and two students closest to the median age were interviewed at each of the schools. Where schools had a new Big Picture class starting in 2014 the students were drawn from that class (four schools). One school was not organised in this way and the students interviewed were drawn from across the student body. The majority of the interviews occurred in Term 1 with one student being interviewed very early in Term 2. The student interviews provide some insights into the experiences of these students and are analysed in the following section. The BPA Research Project has already completed further data collection in term 4 2014 and more is scheduled in 2015. Our initial findings are reported here.

2. Summary of Findings

We intentionally set out to listen to what young people have to say about their education and what works best for them and why. If the intent is to enhance the educational experience of young people, then we believe it makes a great deal of sense to hear what students have to say. Importantly, qualitative data especially student stories can serve an integral role in improving the policy making process. It helps us to better describe the dimensions of the problem under investigation, paying particular attention to the manner in which the participants define the issue. Furthermore, insider accounts provide an awareness of the multiple realities of the education system as well as a 'validity check' on statistical data (Rist, R (1981))¹. Like all data, however, care must be taken before generalising to the wider student body.

From the first round of interviews with students some common themes across schools are beginning to emerge. These are general themes that are significant to participants in this study. The themes resonate in different ways for each participant in their school context:

Disengagement – alienating experiences of mainstream schooling

A subset of students find it difficult to engage with mainstream school curriculum and instruction. The reasons range from a perceived lack of support, too much pressure, disruptive classrooms, and lack of relevance and flexibility.

Engagement – taking ownership of learning

Students are enthusiastic about the opportunity to negotiate curriculum and instruction. They respond positively to having a greater say over what, when and how they learn.

Relationships – respect, trust and care

Students value the closer relationship with their Advisory Teacher because they feel connected and supported.

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

Students feel happier and able to support each other. Students feel better about themselves and this often extends to improved relationships with their families.

Transformation – developing independence

Students recognise the importance of directing their own learning and behaviour. Students describe increased confidence in dealing with school and their imagined futures.

Real world learning – connecting to people in the community

Students identify valuable learning as taking place when they move into the community and engage with people and authentic tasks.

Post-school plans – looking to the future

Students want to engage in learning that allows them to explore their interests and their future career aspirations. There is important learning from this supported exploration.

1. Rist, R (1981). On the utility of ethnographic research for the policy process. *Urban Education*, 15(4), pp. 485 – 494.

3. Concluding remarks

The powerful message that we hear from these students is that their new way of ‘doing’ secondary schooling is helping them to engage and make sense of their learning in terms of both the content and process.

At this stage the research highlights what can only be described as ‘promising practices’. Students are telling us a great deal about what we describe as an emerging ‘pedagogy of aspiration’. We are interested to see how these promising practices evolve over time. We are interested in pursuing this idea with our school-based colleagues in our Research Circles because it helps us to better understand what works best for kids and their teachers. It’s interesting, so we want to find out more. We don’t have all the answers and for this reason we believe asking questions is crucial as we seek to change school culture, structures and practices. In other words, we have some very promising leads that help us to generate new questions to guide ongoing conversations and lines of inquiry around school change.

As we start to identify, map and describe these promising practices students themselves have alerted us to the importance of the following elements of the Big Picture design:

- the small size of the school or Big Picture cohort within schools;
- greater time and interaction with a teacher who knows them well;
- increased decision making about what, how and when they learn;
- being encouraged and supported to take steps outside the classroom and engage in learning in the community; and
- the engagement with post-school plans and options.

What strikes us most about the stories we have heard so far is the ability of students to talk about their learning in ways that we don’t normally find in schools. Students appear to be gaining a much greater sense of agency and control and this translates into new ways of being and becoming as learners, citizens and future workers. In short, these remarkable young people are developing aspirations – sometimes tentative, sometimes unambiguous. We see evidence of growing confidence as they explore their present and future in a supportive environment.

Above all, these initial findings suggest that student engagement and deeper learning are possible in schools that are flexible, responsive and respectful of young lives. Given the structural and systemic obstacles and barriers in changing schools this research highlights the pivotal importance of listening deeply to students’ voices. The noticeable difference a more personalised approach to learning makes in students’ lives is apparent from the evidence gathered so far.

The next phase of the research will add new knowledge and insights that will enable us to dig deeper as we start to unpack some of the key elements of ‘a pedagogy of aspiration’ within the Big Picture Academy schools.

This research is made possible thanks to the ongoing support and commitment of schools, staff, students and parents. We trust that the feedback from our study will provide you with some interesting and useful information. Your continued collaboration will allow us to continue this important research into the role of Big Picture Education at the local, national and international levels. What we seek is a better understanding of what works best for students and their teachers in terms of engagement, deep learning, aspirations and success. As well, it will contribute valuable knowledge to our understanding of the conditions that need to be created and more widely sustained to support progressive school reform.

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