The BIG PICTURE ACADEMY Research Project

MAP4U Murdoch University

RESEARCH BRIEF 6
Promising Practices: what students and their parents say about learning in a Big Picture context

Introduction

This Research Brief provides a summary of a preliminary analysis of the Round 2 student and parent interview data. It includes a preliminary analysis of the qualitative (interview) data obtained from students and parents in the second round of data collection in the Big Picture Academy research project. Five schools are involved in this part of the research project. The students interviewed commenced 2014 in a Big Picture Academy or Big Picture oriented school, or arrived soon into term 1, 2014. They chose this option for various reasons identified in Research Brief No. 5. Some of the students were effectively pushed out of their mainstream school. Others were looking for an educational experience that would allow them to pursue their interests. Having spent almost a year in a Big Picture environment it is informative to listen to their experiences again. To what extent have the hopes and expectations they voiced in the first round of interviews (Term 1, 2014) been realised? To what extent has the promise been delivered?

Round 2 Data Collection

What has happened before?

In Term 1, 2014, four students were randomly selected from each Big Picture Academy/oriented 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). These students were in Years 9 and 10. One school was not organised in this way and the students interviewed were drawn from across the student body – students from Years 8 – 11. A first round of interviews with students occurred in Term 1 with one student being interviewed body – students from Years 8 – 11. A first round of interviews with students occurred in Term 1 with one student being interviewed very early in Term 2. The analysis of that data has been documented in individual reports for each school and a combined school report.

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. We saw in the analysis of the first round of interviews (Research Brief No. 5) that some students were looking for ways to clarify their post-school plans. Other students, who already had well formulated plans, were looking for support to realise their dreams and hopes. As the academic year unfolded for them, they were able to attend to and further their aspirations. We continue to explore the notion of aspirations in order to understand better what a *pedagogy of aspirations* might look like.

The key research question guiding the analysis of the student data is: "How does student engagement, learning and aspirations develop in a Big Picture Academy?"

Second round of data collection

In Term 4, 2014 the same students selected for interview initially were interviewed for a second time. In addition, where possible a parent of each student was also interviewed. In total, 17 students were interviewed and 13 parents were interviewed (a minimum of two from each school). This report provides an analysis of those interviews.

Three of the original 20 students interviewed had left the school or the Big Picture Academy (from two schools) by Term 4, 2014 and one student was unable to be interviewed despite repeated attempts. One of the exiting students was able to be interviewed prior to her leaving at the end of Term 3. From informal discussion with teachers it appears that two students not interviewed in this round had disengaged from school. NOTE: One of these students has fully re-engaged in 2015.

Approach to the analysis

The themes that were identified in Research Brief 5 are reported here with additional depth, some changing emphases and at times a divergence of experience, informed by both student and parent perspectives. Further themes have emerged to give us additional insight into the experiences of these students in a Big Picture education environment. Our findings are reported here.

This qualitative data provides some insights into the experiences of these students (and their parents). We continue to approach the investigation by listening to what young people have to say. And in this Research Brief we also listen to what their parents are saying. The perspective of a significant other of the student can clarify, validate or develop the student's story. It acts as a form of triangulation to the student voice.

The findings in this Research Brief required balancing of the variety of experiences of individual students and also accommodation of the differences between the diverse sites. Each school has a unique student body and has introduced Big Picture for school-specific reasons. In addition, the fidelity with the Big Picture model varies significantly across schools – some schools having only a loose orientation, other schools being able to implement more of the Big Picture distinguishers. None of the academies/schools is truly Big Picture design in terms of fidelity to all distinguishers. Each school is doing what is possible within its particular context. Students comments about their experiences thus relate to the Big Picture model as applied in their school rather than in its ideal form.

There are some aspects of the student experience that are clearly linked to the particular school context and as a result we hear similar stories for all the students at that school. Other aspects appear to be clearly idiosyncratic to the individual student and not shared by other students. It has been a challenge to present the student and parent voice in a way that does justice to each individual, and to the schools. The result is of course imperfect.

What happens next?

A final round of data collection for the BPA Research Project is scheduled for the second half of 2015.

We know that we can learn a lot by listening to what young people have to say about their education and what works best for them and why. We offer this Research Brief as a way of informing educational practice and the policy making process.

Summary of Findings from Round Two

In this Research Brief, the findings from the second round of data collection are reported together with findings from the first round of student interviews. Given longer student involvement in a Big Picture education experience the initial themes have become more nuanced and additional themes have emerged. The various themes resonate in different ways for each student in their particular school context.

STUDENT THEMES

Disengagement – alienating experiences of mainstream schooling

Round One finding

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.

New insights

Parents are concerned about the education their child receives. They want it to be appropriate for the individual as well as providing their child with what they need in order to be able to move into the workplace and/or further education. Many of the parents interviewed believe that mainstream education did not always serve their child's needs. These parents were supportive of innovative forms of education.

Engagement – taking ownership of learning

Round One finding

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

New insights

The majority of students interviewed appeared to be at least if not more engaged than when they started in the Big Picture Academy/inspired school. However, while this was true in general, a few students had not maintained their previously expressed enthusiasm and interest.

Exhibitions – a site of learning and connection (New Theme)

Round Two finding

Exhibitions play a key role in enabling students to gauge their learning and develop new skills and confidence in presenting their learning to others. Exhibitions are highly valued by parents who were consistently impressed with their child's learning and capacity to express their learning.

Relationships – respect, trust and care

Round One finding

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

New insights

Students continue to identify a close and supportive relationship with their Advisory Teacher as an important cornerstone of their learning. For many students the acceptance and interest shown by the Advisory Teacher is unusual, facilitating a sense of belonging and trust. A few students found their relationship with the Advisory Teacher was not working as well as it was at the beginning of the year. However, they recognised it as still being qualitatively different from the usual teacher/student relationship. Students felt more connected to their Big Picture peers than in mainstream school settings, arising out of the smaller class size and increased time together.

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

Round One finding

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

New insights

Students and parents are noticing improved happiness and sense of self-worth extending from the student's experience at school, to home and beyond. This appears to be coming from various sources including the student's academic success and enhanced social connection (both at school and in learning out in the community). This enhanced sense of well-being is especially marked in those students who were most alienated and disengaged from mainstream schooling. However, there are students at all schools demonstrating enhanced well-being and happiness in their Big Picture environment.

Transformation – developing independence

Round One finding

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

New insights

Students continue to gain confidence in a variety of domains such as their capacity to learn, presenting their learning to others and engaging in out of school experiences. Students growing self-reliance is facilitated through the recognition that they have a greater responsibility for managing their learning coupled with the implementation of various strategies to achieve that. Most students were appreciating the challenges, although a couple of students found the degree of responsibility too much and wanted more scaffolding.

Real world learning – connecting to people in the community

Round One finding

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

New insights

Students engaged in a variety of learning experiences in the "real-world," facilitated through the school. Only a minority of students were able to engage in fully developed Internships. Those who did engage were inspired, clarified their career goals, and learnt many important skills. Students who were not able to participate in a fully developed Internship often found the experience unsatisfactory and disengaging.

Post-school plans – looking to the future

Round One finding

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.

New insights

Continuing engagement is evident as the students explore post-school options. For some students, greater clarity has emerged and they have identified clear pathways to achieve their chosen career. For others, the possibilities have increased, making choice more difficult.

Learning about learning – self and others (New Theme)

Round Two finding

A subset of students were able to take a "bird's eye" view of their learning and describe their meta-learning. Being placed in the Big Picture learning environment where they are required to be more responsible for their learning has highlighted for them their learning strengths and limitations. They identify a capacity to use this knowledge to help them in future learning.

Implementing a new school design – a complex process (New Theme)

Round Two finding

Some students and parents from one school had concerns over the process of implementation and the readiness of the school for the new design. There was also uncertainty as to how participation in Big Picture would impact future education possibilities.

PARENT THEMES[1]

Parent-school relationship – becoming more personal

<u>Round Two finding</u>

Parents highly value regular contact with the Advisory Teacher. They compare it favourably to previous experience in mainstream schooling. The informal contact by phone, email and being welcome to visit the class enables parents to feel informed and part of their child's education.

Availability of Big Picture – extending access

<u>Round Two finding</u>

A subset of parents expressed a belief that Big Picture schooling was a model of education that would benefit all students and should be more widely available.

Interrupting intergenerational and structural disadvantage? – turning things around

<u>Round Two finding</u>

A subset of parents related to their child's struggles in mainstream secondary schooling based on their own negative experience of secondary school. They know that mainstream schooling disadvantages certain groups of young people and believe that Big Picture schooling has some capacity to turn this around.

Traditional schooling and innovative school design – tensions present

<u>Round Two finding</u>

A few parents were concerned with the absence of mainstream educational practices that they were familiar and comfortable with. They were concerned at a possible negative impact on their child.

THREE KEY THEMES

1. There is an acknowledgment that mainstream schooling or a 'one size fits all' approach to education is not working for a significant cohort of students. In response some students actively chose to enrol in a different way of doing school where they felt a greater sense of ownership, belonging, and relevance. Others were "pushed" out of mainstream education into the Big Picture alternative.

2. Personalised approaches to education benefits student engagement. Throughout this research we heard time and time again about the positive effects of personalisation. These attempts to implement the Big Picture design have resulted in students who are enthusiastic about learning, are developing enhanced relationships with family and peers and are growing confidence and capacities to manage their own learning.

3. School change takes time, perseverance, resources and leadership. Attempts to unlearn and learn different ways of doing school, for students, teachers and parents alike, is a complex process involving a deep understanding of the nature of school change and the interconnections between school culture, structures and practices. Pivotal to this process is a willingness to engage in self-reflection to understand and improve practice. Along the way, there are tensions and contradictions as participants negotiate new ways of thinking and acting. Leadership which facilitates the Big Picture Academy/oriented school to achieve greater fidelity to the Big Picture design supports enhanced student engagement and learning. Student concern and dissatisfaction arises where their experience is contrary to the promise in the Big Picture design.

1. Parents were interviewed for the first time in Term 4, 2014 so all parent themes are new to this report.

Some Concluding Remarks

In this Research Brief we present a summary of findings from the student and parent interviews that were part of the Second Round of data collection. Those findings draw on the descriptions and explanations of students and their parents concerning the implementation of a Big Picture Academy within a traditional school structure and the introduction of a Big Picture orientation within two small alternative schools. A detailed description of the interview data is reported in the *Combined School Report from Round Two of Interview Data Collection.* We are interested to know how students understand, experience and respond to a more personalised approach to learning. In pursuing this research we deliberately adopted a methodology that created a space for students to have a say about their experience of schooling and from their vantage point, identify the productive practices that need to be created and more widely sustained to enhance student engagement in deep learning. This Research Brief summarises the empirical evidence generated about what works best for students (and their schools, teachers and parents) and what doesn't. Underpinning this research is a deep belief that students know well what goes on in their schools. The stories of young people and their parents coupled with our own observations enhances our awareness not only of the problem of student (dis)engagement but the ways in which schools can be reinvigorated to enhance student learning and aspiration.

In these concluding remarks we want to draw together some key themes while providing a foundation for future thinking and action. At the risk of oversimplification, three key themes are identified. First, there is an acknowledgment that mainstream schooling or a 'one size fits all' approach to education is not working for a significant cohort of students. Students in this research spoke candidly about the limitations of their previous school experience and how it interfered with their learning. The reasons are varied but we hear accounts of boredom, irrelevance, bullying, and poor relationships with teachers and peers to name a few. In response some students actively chose to enrol in a different way of doing school, where they felt a greater sense of ownership, belonging, and relevance. Others were in effect "pushed" out of mainstream education and have found themselves in a Big Picture oriented school/program.

Second, personalised approaches to education benefit student engagement. Throughout this research we heard time and time again about the positive effects of personalisation. The fact that students have some say and control over what and how they learn appears to be a significant factor in their (re)engagement. The opportunity to pursue their learning in the community through Internships is seen by students as an important advantage in thinking about their future careers and life. Students acknowledge the central role of relationships especially with their Advisory Teacher, peers and mentors as crucial influences on their learning. In summary, the strong engagement that is evident from most of the students is linked to personalised learning, to Exhibitions, to their relationship with the Advisory Teacher, to getting out into the "real world," family involvement[1] to freedom to pursue their future goals and the support they receive to do. These attempts to implement the Big Picture design have resulted in students who are enthusiastic about learning, are developing enhanced relationships with family and peers and are growing confidence and capacities to manage their own learning.

Third, school change takes time, perseverance, resources and leadership. Attempts to unlearn and learn different ways of doing school, for students, teachers and parents alike, is a complex process involving a deep understanding of the nature of school change and the interconnections between school culture, structures and practices. Pivotal to this process is a willingness to engage in self-reflection to understand and improve practice. Along the way, there are tensions and contradictions as participants negotiate new ways of thinking and acting. The 'old culture' is never far away – traditional assumptions, behaviours, beliefs and practices continue both overtly and covertly as new ideas and innovation come into play. It is apparent in this research that where school leadership is strong, stable and supportive school change is more likely to occur. Leadership which facilitates the Big Picture Academy/oriented school to achieve greater fidelity to the Big Picture design supports enhanced student engagement and learning. Student concern and dissatisfaction arises where their experience is contrary to the promise in the Big Picture design.

Regular dialogue between students, teachers, parents and school leaders is crucial to ensuring participants are supported through the process. To assist in this task there needs to be a set of practices that allow participants to have the time and space to raise awareness, develop plans, gather evidence, reflect and take action. Indeed, it takes a village to raise a child. This Research Brief highlights the profound importance of engaging with new modes of thought (and thoughtfulness) around the ways we do schooling. Simply doing more of the same, only more intensely, does not seem like a good option to us given the challenges facing students at the beginning of the 21st century. The evidence reported in the *Combined School Report from Round Two of Interview Data Collection* and summarised here shows that listening to what works best for students is a promising start. This report highlights the profound importance of engaging with new modes of thought (and thoughtfulness) around the ways we do schooling. Simply doing more of the same, only more intensely,

does not seem like a good option to us given the challenges facing students at the beginning of the 21st century. Based on the evidence presented by the young people and their parents in this report we can confidently say that listening to what works best for students is a promising start.

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.