

Reviewing the Big Picture learning design

THE STORY SO FAR

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WHY DO WE NEED TO CHANGE THE WAY WE DO SCHOOL?

For as long as anyone can remember parents and teachers have told young people that if they do well at school they will have better futures; that better educational qualifications will lead to secure, well paid careers. It is certainly true that completing school is better than not completing. The problem is that over the years, since the global financial crisis, the link between qualifications and secure employment has started to fray a little. It appears that while good NAPLAN scores and Year 12 completion are essential, they may no longer be enough. The evidence for this comes in part from a surprising decline in the statistics related to active participation in education, employment or training for 15-24 year olds.

For the 20 years from 1986 to 2006 high school completion rates failed to increase at all. This stagnation at last has been overcome so that during the past three years, completion rates have improved substantially. If the old bargain still held up, this increase in school participation and educational qualifications would have led to lower youth unemployment. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Instead, the number of 15-24 year-olds not in employment, education or training is increasing. The old bargain is not working - you can no longer say that getting more schooling automatically leads to bright futures or guarantees young people a fair chance of success in life.

What matters now, it appears, is that in addition to mastering the skills and knowledge that the curriculum delivers, young people also need to develop a sense of who they are and what they are interested in. They need to connect with things they are good at and develop these interests in a way that gives them a passion for learning, right now. They need to explore ideas about their futures. They need broad horizons; they need to know what is possible. They need the chutzpah to imagine new futures that did not exist before now. Their high aspirations need to be combined with engagement and confidence. None of this comes automatically out of standard schooling - in fact for some young people the standard approach to senior secondary schooling stifles such imaginings and deadens their engagement. All too often young people feel that they are forced to do subjects they do not like, to always strive for goals set by others and to defer enjoyment to some unknown future date when all the slog will pay off in terms of a good job. For too many young people, this formulation makes no sense. This is, in a nutshell, the reason why we need to change the way we do school.

WHAT DO BIG PICTURE SCHOOLS SEEK TO OFFER?

Big Picture schools promote highly personalised learning by engaging students in adult world activities, involving parents, and making a variety of connections to the communities in which students live. Big Picture learning goals promote intellectual rigour as well as critical and creative thinking. Big Picture schools seek to promote a smooth transition to post-secondary schooling by encouraging students to explore work-related interests through internships and self-chosen projects that encourage students to creatively delve into subjects that are meaningful to post-secondary study.

The way Big Picture schools work is based on Big Picture Learning (US) traditions, modified to fit the Australian context, and supported by an extensive literature that considers the pedagogical and practical outcomes of Big Picture schools. The design principles underlying the activities of Big Picture schools in Australia feature:

- Small size schools and classes promoting secure, personalised learning environments;

- Advisory groups of a teacher and 12-17 students as the core learning community that encourages supportive relationships among teachers and peers;
- Personalised and interest-based learning focusing on comprehensive individualised learning plans incorporating learning through interest internships and assessment through exhibition. Internships connect students to the world of work and real-world learning. Quarterly exhibitions of students' work, to which parents are invited, and the creation of a portfolio of work, provide rigorous evaluation of student learning and development.
- Internships in meaningful project work in the community under the direction of a mentor. These internships enable students to pursue their interests and passions. Project work is designed to foster broad learning rather than developing specific vocational skills. The Advisory teacher ensures that the internship is integrated with the learning goals of the student and subject-related study. Students become aware that learning has meaning beyond the classroom to the world of work. They increasingly have a growing sense of confidence and self-efficacy in community and work settings.
- Parental involvement as an integral part of the Big Picture learning community. Parents are asked to help students develop their learning plans, and to participate in quarterly exhibitions and learning plan meetings on a regular basis.



BIG PICTURE SCHOOLS: THE STORY SO FAR

Big Picture schools, academies and programs in Australia

In 2006, Yule Brook College in Western Australia became the first Australian school to adopt the Big Picture design principles. Since then, an additional 37 schools have either adopted these principles entirely, or have adopted several of the Big Picture principles, integrating them into the school's educational program. Big Picture Education (BPE) encompasses a range of practices; not all of them are fully implemented in every school affiliated with Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA). Among the 38 schools affiliated with BPEA, some provide Big Picture learning for **every** student, some enrol a substantial grouping within the school in an **Academy** that has adopted Big Picture principles, while in other schools an exploratory program is implemented, involving just one or two Advisory groups. Overall, there are now 17 Big Picture schools and 15 Big Picture Academies, but as things evolve some schools may adopt more Big Picture practices, while others may scale up from small programs to full Academies. Big Picture schools have now been established in every state, as well as in the ACT. To date, the most extensive programs have been developed in Tasmania and Western Australia, but there is substantial growth in the numbers of programs in NSW and the remaining states. BPEA includes non-Government as well as Government schools. An additional seven schools will be adopting the Big Picture design in 2014, bringing the total number of schools affiliated with BPEA to 45.

Research on Big Picture schools in Australia

A number of complimentary sources of information and research can be used to track how well the Big Picture design is working to date. These include case studies of single schools, systemic research over several schools within one state, and a well-constructed qualitative research project conducted in schools across several states. Given the limitations on the space available in this short synopsis, only one example of each kind of research will be presented. These are:

- Case study: Yule Brook College, WA
- Systemic research: Big Picture in Tasmania
- The qualitative research project (2013) by Hayes, Down, Talbot, & Choules

BPEA gratefully acknowledges the generosity of the Origin Foundation for its substantial contributions to the research projects that are outlined in this brief report. With this support BPEA has also conducted surveys to collect the views of educational leaders in Big Picture schools, conducted case studies of several schools in addition to Yule Brook College and has also developed individual student case studies that are recorded as DVDs. Further research has been planned; for example, substantial studies will be conducted in WA, in collaboration with Murdoch University, in 2014-2015. All Big Picture schools are encouraged to engage in systematic monitoring of their learning programs, using the BPEA School Research Framework. At this stage the recommended self-monitoring is being carried out by many, but not by all, participating schools.

Case study: Yule Brook College, WA

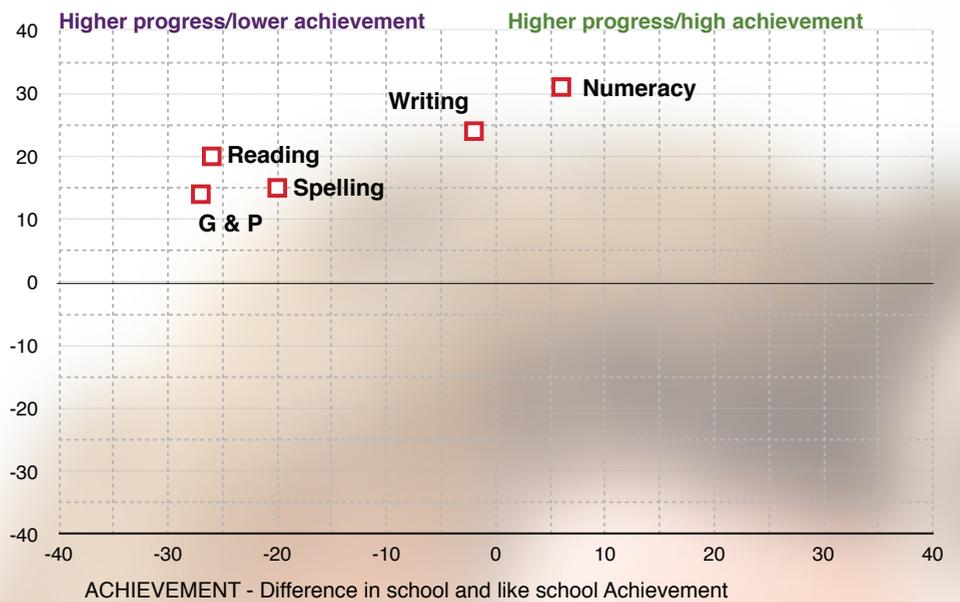
Yule Brook College, in Western Australia, has made significant pedagogical and social progress since becoming a Big Picture school in 2006. Critical to this success is the fact that the entire school adopted a *Big Picture* approach to learning. Two factors have been key in reconstructing this whole school. One is an emphasis on strong relationships between teachers and students, and supportive peer relationships among students. Important also is the inclusion of families and the community in the development of a new culture of learning and building strong relationships among these segments of the community with the college as well. The second emphasis is on authentic assessment that is built on the accountability that is inherent in the regular exhibitions by students of their interest-based projects, and the individual learning plans that encourage students to pursue interest-based internships.

Comparative results on NAPLAN tests for Year 7 and 9 students between 2010 and 2012 indicated that Yule Brook students showed remarkable *progress* in all areas, since their rate of improvement was better than other schools in the like-school group as well as being better than the mean progress scores for all Australian schools. In relation to NAPLAN *achievement* scores, their performance was above the like-school group achievement average in numeracy, and close to the achievement average in writing. This indicates very significant progress for what was once a residualised and low-performing school, and these results are shown graphically on the next page.

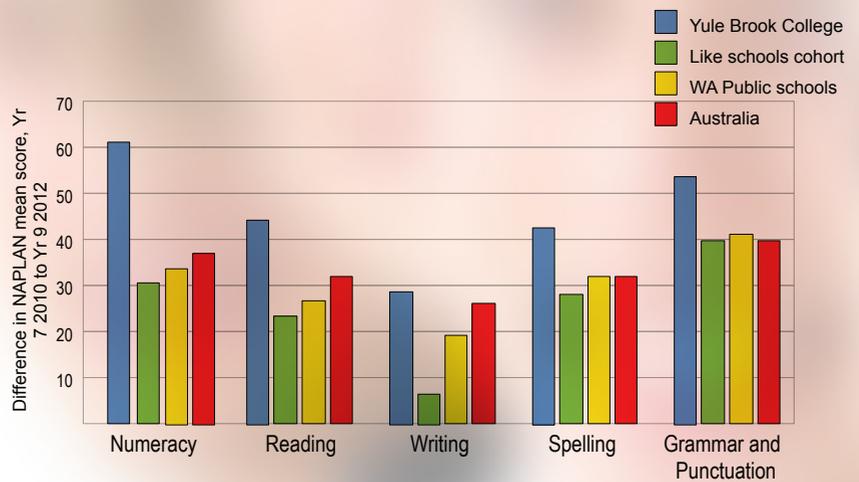
Most Big Picture schools only enrol students who are in Year 9 or beyond (Middle schools run from year 9 to 10, and senior schools run from Year 10 to 12). Thus, Yule Brook is uniquely able to provide data that bridges two NAPLAN tests – the Year 7 and Year 9 tests. Results from Yule Brook indicate that, where longitudinal data is available, participation in Big Picture learning tends to result in extraordinary improvements in student performance.

For more on Yule Brook, see www.yulebrookcollege.wa.edu.au.

**Student Progress and Achievement Compared with Like Schools
Naplan year 7 2010 to year 9 2012 Yule Brook College**



**Summary of student gain in NAPLAN
2010 – 2012 (Years 7-9)**



Systemic research: Big Picture Schools in Tasmania

In Tasmania, Big Picture schools are located in a range of communities with varying socioeconomic circumstances, with the Big Picture program catering to students from a variety of backgrounds. Tasmanian data show a general improvement in school attendance among most Big Picture students. For example, Big Picture students in Scottsdale High School have the highest overall attendance rate in the school at over 90% in 2009, 2010 and 2011. Ogilvie High school reports that most student attendance improves when they are in Big Picture, and Montrose indicated that attendance among Big Picture Year 9 and Year 10 students was 86% in 2011 and 89% in 2012. At Launceston City Campus, Big Picture students in Year 9/10 improved their attendance by 7% in 2011 and 2012.

Retention figures for these high schools also indicate largely smooth and full transition of Big Picture students to their next school year, apprenticeship or fulltime employment and training. Of interest as well are the attainment figures which show Big Picture students performing as well as general students on the Tasmanian Curriculum Framework (TCF) and Australian Curriculum Framework (ACF) at Montrose High, and where data exist for Scottsdale High School, 53% of Think Big (Big Picture) students received academic excellence awards which is 22% higher than grade averages of regular students. In 2010 the dux of the school was a Think Big student.

Of particular interest as well are the high rates of parent participation in Big Picture student exhibitions. All four high schools report parental participation at over 90% for Big Picture student exhibitions, and a range of 60%-90% of parental attendance at Big Picture student learning plan development seminars.

While the total numbers of students may be relatively small - 802 Year 9 and Year 10 students participated in Big Picture in five high schools over the four years from 2009 to 2011 - the data indicate that Big Picture students do greatly benefit from the experience. For most students there is no thought of returning to "normal" public schools.

The qualitative research project (2013) Hayes, Down, Talbot, & Choules

In 2011 a research team comprising Deb Hayes with Deb Talbot (Sydney University), and Barry Down with Kathryn Choules (Murdoch University) came together to conduct a study funded by the Origin Foundation. This study entailed repeated visits to six schools across three states, and 26 students ranging from the first to the last year of secondary education were interviewed. Wherever possible each student's Advisory teacher and a parent were also interviewed; thus, the researchers were able to go well beyond the focus on the individual young person, and examine the social context in which their learning was taking place. This was an important and appropriate decision, since Big Picture differs from standard schooling designs because it creates a learning community to support each young person. The quality of the relationships between students, teachers, peers and parents is, therefore, key to its success.

The Big Picture design involves a complex assemblage of practices and its implementation unavoidably varies from one school to another. It does not lend itself to standardised measurement since the use of pre-existing scales is only valid if one already knows what one needs to measure: i.e., what experiences and events are likely to occur in hugely diverse Big Picture contexts. Any unpredicted experiences would be excluded from the study if such scales were used. For this reason the research team decided to conduct an unstructured series of research interviews over time. These interviews were analysed to reveal sets of experiences, or phenomena, that represent the collective experience of students, teachers and parents associated with Big Picture schools. Some of the outcomes from this research are summarised below.

WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS IN BIG PICTURE SCHOOLS?

Based on the Hayes et al research described above, it is clear that students experienced wide-ranging responses to the opportunities offered in Big Picture schools. Teachers and parents also were supportive of the Big Picture initiative. Their comments are noted below. Representative student statements are indicative of outcomes achieved in the schools that participated in the Big Picture research project. As BPEA suggests, the careful implementation of design principles will lead to students who are:

Committed to learning

You get so much more out of it. You actually find the purpose of school. It really makes sense and then connecting that to the real life learning when you do your LTIs and stuff, it all makes sense and you enjoy it more. You are doing stuff you enjoy and I love it.

Attending and participating in school

Within the first five weeks I was enjoying school and I wanted to be here. It wasn't as if getting up for school in the morning was a pain. I wasn't dreading going to school anymore. I was excited to go because I knew what I was learning about, and that it was something that I enjoyed. So that was probably the biggest part of the year for me

Becoming more engaged because of an interest-based approach to learning

The kind of learning we do here is focused on what you're interested in so I thought it was a good idea to come here. [Here there's] more freedom, you can choose what you want to learn.

Creating great projects

So I decided because I hadn't done a BLOG as a form of presentation that it would be fun and interesting and new to present my work in a BLOG

Contributing to the community

What I'm doing is organising a family fun day with my mentor so we're raising money for [a children's hospital]...I've been contacting a lot of businesses...so a lot of letter writing... I've been doing a lot of the funding side of things so I kept the document of the budget

Doing more work and improving academically

I think I've improved vastly from when I was in the, I suppose you could call them normal schools, because I used to just sit in class and sort of get left behind with all my classes. You can't get left behind when you're doing it by yourself

I've done a lot more work – I would say my grades have improved.

Kids are definitely doing more here than at [our previous school]. This time last year I'd have 5 pages. Now I have lots down.

At [my previous school], I would do nowhere near as much, I'd get sick of it. Now, I'm loving the work. I'm lying in bed and still writing things down.

In supportive relationships with teachers and peers

I suppose we were lucky in some sense but I think also I thought it was a bit corny at the start of the year how they were saying, oh yeah a community of learners and that sort of stuff. But that's what it turns out to be I think. Yeah I just think we help each other and you're bound to end up - I don't know, just having it work.

No, I wouldn't go back to mainstream now. I enjoy it too much in here and I find it easier to learn as a group in here and everything. I just feel more confident, even if I don't know something, you can just put it out there and say it instead of being judged for oh she doesn't know anything like some classes are in mainstream.

Increasing personal confidence and thinking about the future

BPEA is a good opportunity to pursue my goals of being an animal carer or vet – the shadow days and internship gives me the opportunity to see the work involved.

Knowing more about the job market and thinking creatively about their options

I'm exploring my options – going on work placements.

I'm thinking about continuing with paediatric nursing, what they do, studies I've got to do stuff like that.

Preparing themselves for the world of work

I have learnt that finding a job in photography is harder than it looks.

RESPONSES OF PARENTS AND TEACHERS

Parents' responses to BPEA were also varied and depended on numerous items such as the length of time the BPEA school had been in operation. Reservations regarding BPEA will be considered later. However the intent here is to indicate a range of positive experiences that parents associated with their child's enrolment in BPEA. For example,

If you can turn around a child's attitude to being at school and to participating in the manner that I've seen, then the model of the school has to be a winner - if it works for 10 out of 1000 then that is 10 that are reaching their potential.

...just over time to see her, how she responded to the program and her performance and just unlocking a desire for learning, was amazing. I sincerely believe that she wouldn't have got that in any other way.

I'm impressed by the work that she's done - the quality of her work. You wouldn't regard [her] as academically really on the ball, a really high achiever but she has, through this process - her skills, her researching skills, her ability to tap information, her writing skills and her speaking skills have really developed. So I've been impressed to see the development in those skills.

Being involved in internships in out-of-school settings was also perceived by parents as being important.

He came back home raving about it. Enthusiasm about it full bore. When he got the report back he was genuinely pleased- he had achieved what he wanted to do on that day.

Advisory teachers also responded positively to BPEA although they mentioned, "being tired" and "mentally exhausted but fulfilled" by the experience. Reaching the correct balance is quite demanding as one teacher indicated.

We make sure we embed the national curriculum, big picture philosophy, as well as the school requirements, and that's taken us a long time to get that balance of enough of each component to make everyone happy and also to meet their academic outcomes.

Teachers were also very clear that

The relationships become very strong. People comment on the kids becoming a nicer person through being here. In a normal school you don't talk one-on-one. Here we block out half an hour to talk to each student each week.

Personally I've really enjoyed the change to Big Picture. I really get to know the students and will know why the kids are having a bad day and when I should leave them be for a bit.

In concluding this section it is worth noting that there is a substantial body of educational research that indicates that good relationships with teachers and support from positively oriented peers are essential ingredients if disaffected students are to re-engage with learning.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR BIG PICTURE EDUCATION

As the Big Picture system becomes consolidated, there are three issues that demand attention and further development. In brief, these are:

The need to provide appropriate supports at the school level and further professional development opportunities for Big Picture Advisory teachers.

Committed Advisory teachers are essential to the successes of Big Picture. Working with 'one student at a time' to co-construct interest-based projects and learning plans, setting up internships, and so on means that many Big Picture teachers are exhausted by what is involved. For teachers in Big Picture Academies, their schools may not recognise the extent to which their working conditions differ from those of mainstream teachers. For all Big Picture teachers, balancing the requirements of the Australian Curriculum with the co-development of interest-based projects for individual students entails significant challenges. Interactions with other Big Picture teachers in the network, the development and provision of curriculum support materials and opportunities to share examples of good projects will continue to be important for Big Picture. This work demands further investment.

The research conducted to date indicates that the extent to which schools commit themselves to internships does vary considerably.

While this element of the Big Picture design is implemented in some Big Picture schools, this is not universal: some schools do not offer internships at all, while others offer one-day rather than two-day internships. The variation in commitment to internships is not surprising. In part it is because setting up learning opportunities outside of schools is something that very few teachers have ever done, and in part it is related to variability in the age of students in different Big Picture programs. Some Big Picture schools enrol students who are in Years 7-10, others cover Years 8-10, or Years 9-10, and in addition, some Big Picture schools enrol senior students who are in Years 10-12. Year 11-12 students can explore wider options and might be expected to exercise more independence in organising their internships than Year 7 students. There are exemplary cases where internships work very well, but at the local school level more development work may be needed to locate internship sites, train mentors and so on. Where younger students are involved, group projects or projects that do not necessitate independent work outside of the school may be appropriate.

Every decision to sustain or expand the commitments to the Big Picture design will depend on the production of data that convinces parents, teachers, educational leaders and policy makers that Big Picture is really working; that Big Picture students are progressing to become confident young people with a real interest in learning.

Achievement data such as NAPLAN, attendance data, and high school completion rates rank high among the auditing requirements that will be imposed on BPE as on any other educational innovation. These are important but not sufficient. During the school years, these measures should be accompanied by indicators of student welfare, and measures of engagement with learning. As students transition from school to work or further study, BPEA needs to gather data on the pathways they follow, since in the end the real test relates to what our young people do two or three years out of school. One recommendation that might be considered here is to ask schools affiliating with Big Picture to commit themselves to a program of monitoring of results, in order to achieve this outcome.

CONCLUSION

In the seven years that have elapsed since Yule Brook College became a Big Picture school, the number of schools that have fully or partially adopted this design has grown steadily to 45. By surveying and monitoring these schools, it becomes evident that the students in Big Picture schools represent a range of ability levels, with a good proportion of high performers. What the students have in common is that for a variety of reasons, they had become disengaged from school. Many of them had poor attendance records before entering Big Picture; some were high-needs students who had regular contact with school counsellors; many were eligible for financial support; all were considered by their teachers to be performing below their capacity. The research results reviewed here speak of a significant turn-around in the lives of these students. Where NAPLAN data are available, these indicate remarkable improvements in student achievement on core academic skills.

Attendance data also improve very significantly, indicating higher levels of engagement with school. Above all, it is the students' own words, captured in the qualitative research, that provide the most compelling indication that Big Picture is working well for them. As we argued at the beginning of this review, students need to connect with things they are good at and develop their interests in a way that gives them a passion for learning. Their high aspirations need to be combined with engagement and confidence. They need support as they continue to explore ideas about their futures. In Big Picture schools across Australia, these things are happening. This is an innovation that will make a difference, and investing in its future will pay significant dividends.

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