

# BIG PICTURE EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

Experiences of students,  
parents/carers and teachers

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## 1.1. STUDENT DISENGAGEMENT FROM SCHOOLING

Too many young Australians, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances, are not benefiting from the rewards of education and training. For others, there is a growing sense of frustration and alienation about the kind of education they receive, and from their point of view school is boring, irrelevant and disconnected from the world they know. For many, there is a lack of personal connectedness and meaning as their own needs, desires, aspirations and interests are denied in large high school settings where the focus is on subjects, timetables, discipline, didactic teaching, examinations, and classroom based learning. These historically persistent and protracted problems have preoccupied policymakers, researchers and school reformers for the past sixty years or more.

Whilst hardly new, the issue of student (dis)engagement is an increasingly urgent public policy matter not only in terms of economics - cost, productivity, global competitiveness, innovation and human capital, but also social cohesion, mental health and wellbeing, social justice, and democracy itself. At a time when young people face an increasingly volatile and uncertain future due to the impact of globalisation, deindustrialisation, technology, and job insecurity, schools are under pressure to resolve some complex social, economic and political problems not always of their own making. Ironically, schools are often perceived to be a part of the problem and also the solution.

Against this broader backdrop, this report attempts to identify, map and describe the experiences of students, their parents/carers and teachers attending schools in a range of sites across Australia adopting an interest-based approach to learning. The intent is to illuminate the experiences of these participants and, from their vantage point, better understand how this approach might address questions of student engagement, school reform, school leadership, curriculum, organisation, assessment and school-community relationships.

## 1.2. BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In 2011, the Origin Foundation funded research into Big Picture learning, which is being adopted by an increasing number of schools across Australia. Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) is a not-for-profit organisation with the stated aim of stimulating ‘vital change in Australian education by generating and sustaining innovative, personalised schools that work in partnership with their greater communities’. (<http://www.bigpicture.org.au>).

The Origin Foundation is committed to supporting a broad range of education programs with the capacity to provide ‘a pathway to a brighter future for individuals and their communities’ ([originfoundation.com.au](http://originfoundation.com.au)). They looked to research to provide evidence, or ‘proof-of-concept’, of the capacity of Big Picture learning to support this commitment.

This is the report of the research team that was established by BPEA to conduct the study funded by the Origin Foundation. It contains technical details about the methodology, a full description of the findings, and an analysis of the capacity of Big Picture learning to support ‘a pathway to a brighter future for individuals and their communities’.

The research team included A/Professor Deb Hayes and Ms Debra Talbot from the University of Sydney, and Professor Barry Down and Dr Kathryn Choules from Murdoch University.

## 1.3. BACKGROUND TO BIG PICTURE EDUCATION

Elliot Washor and Dennis Littky developed the Big Picture approach in setting up the Metropolitan Career and Technology School (The Met) in Providence Rhode Island, USA in the 1990s. They have since created Big Picture Learning that has now established more than 80 schools in over 20 States in the USA. They had previously worked with the Coalition of Essential Schools in the United States of America that is based on the research and ideas of Ted Sizer (1996).

Many aspects of Big Picture Learning have been explored, over the last twenty years, in Australian schools under the auspices of the Australian National Schools Network (ANSN), and the leadership of BPEA CEOs, Viv White and John Hogan. BPEA evolved from the ANSN and is working in collaboration with colleagues in the USA.

Schools that have adopted Big Picture Learning share a commitment to personalising their organisational processes and structures with the aim of educating “one student at a time”. Underpinning this approach is the belief that each student has a unique set of interests, needs, and capabilities around which personalised learning plans are designed. Each student designs their own learning plan in collaboration with their teacher, known as Advisory teacher. Parents or carers and professional mentors are also invited to participate in this planning process.

BPEA (2009) is underpinned by a number of key assumptions about how to improve student engagement in learning. Size is important and schools must be “small enough to encourage the development of a community of learners, and to allow for each child to be well known by at least one adult” (p. 4). The relationship with the community is also important and schools must connect students and the school to the community “both by sending students to learn from mentors in the real world, and by allowing the school itself to serve the needs of the local community” (p. 4).

BPEA is founded on the belief that deep learning takes place when: each student is an active participant in their education; each student’s course of study is personalised by teachers, parents and mentors who know them well; and school-based learning is blended with outside experiences that heighten the student’s interest.

BPEA includes three categories of school: (1) A Big Picture School (or Academy or Program) explicitly using the Big Picture Education (BPE) design with intent ‘all the way through’. These are usually start-up sites made up of new and old schools that wholly adopt the learning design; (2) A Big Picture Inspired School (or Academy or Program) adapting key elements of the BPE design for school and integrating them into their school but without going ‘all the way’ with the design; and (3) A Big Picture Exploring School that is interested in having a look at the BPE design, and trying a few things out just ‘to see’.

#### 1.4. OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH DESIGN

The research team developed a methodology that responded to the Origin Foundation’s request for an assessment of the capacity of Big Picture learning to support its commitment to ‘a pathway to a brighter future for individuals and their communities. The resulting study is located within the cultural sciences because the concept under examination is not naturally occurring; neither is it a social phenomenon that is observable in existing social activities. It does not appear in the same form wherever it exists but it takes on characteristics that are shaped by local conditions, including the expertise of teachers and leaders, the availability of resources, and the stage of implementation. While some of these characteristics are quantifiable, the concept of Big Picture learning is an inherently complex phenomenon that does not lend itself to standardisation or measurement.

Big Picture learning is an assemblage of practices. It cannot be fully examined or assessed through the stated personal beliefs of individuals. Such statements tell us what individuals think about the concept rather than how it is operationalised, and its effects at particular sites. It is entirely constructed through shared agreements and intentions. It is a formation of schooling that is coordinated and jointly accomplished through social activities. These activities are created and given meaning through the efforts of teachers, students and parents who choose to engage in a particular kind of schooling.

The purpose of the research was to document the cultural activities associated with the adoption of Big Picture learning across a range of sites through the experiences of students, teachers and parents/carers. While these experiences are able to be quantified and measured through instruments such as surveys, the process of quantification would have required predictions to be made about the range of possible experiences. Consequently, experiences that were not easily predicted or described may have been excluded.

Another approach would have been to create narratives that shed light on the experiences of individuals. This form of data collection traces experiences through individual stories. It is highly idiosyncratic and may not tell us about the concept under examination, along with the recognisable social activities that are associated with it. An emphasis on individuals also draws attention away from the collective experiences of groups, and how these may change with time. In addition, such accounts reveal personal details that make it difficult to ensure the anonymity of participants.

Consequently, the research team set out to document the collective experiences of students, teachers and parents, across a number of Big Picture schools by conducting unstructured interviews over a period of time. The findings of each group of participants are presented as sets of experiences, or phenomena, that are described through related categories. This phenomenographical approach is discussed in more detail in the full report, but important aspects of the research are summarised below.

## **1.5. SUMMARY OF DATA COLLECTION PROCESSES**

The research was conducted under the auspice of the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (Protocol No: 14204).

Sites visits were conducted in six BPEA schools across three states. These sites were visited at least twice over a twelve-month period.

These schools were at different stages of engagement with BPEA ideas, and included schools in all three categories described previously - BPE School, BPE Inspired School, and BPE Exploring School.

Interviews were conducted with twenty-six students ranging from those in their first year of secondary schooling to those in their last year. We invited each student to share a work sample that illustrated how they learn in a BPEA Advisory. The work sample was a talking point. We did not request an exemplary work sample but one that might represent a challenge, a process, a work in progress, or something that is already completed.

We also requested access to a copy of a personal narrative or reflection written by each student.

After talking with each student, we visited them in their Advisory class, and interviewed their Advisory teacher. We asked each teacher to elaborate on observations made in their Advisory class. We interviewed a total of twenty Advisory teachers.

Where possible, we conducted interviews with each young person's parent or carer. Some of the interviews with parents and carers were conducted by phone. We interviewed seventeen parents or carers.

In order to comply with privacy requirements, the initial invitation to parents and carers to participate in the study was issued by school personnel. This also assured them that the school was aware of, and supportive of, the research.

## **1.6. INTERPRETING THE FINDINGS**

Before detailing the findings, we provide some observations drawn from the fieldwork that may assist in their interpretation. These observations describe aspects of the nature of BPEA operating in the participating schools, and also how the fieldwork was conducted.

As previously stated, the participating schools were different types of BPEA sites. Some were attempting to adopt the learning design across the whole school, while others operated Advisories as separate streams within conventional schools. They were also at different stages of implementation due to variations in the length of time that BPEA had been operating at each site. When we first visited some of the schools, students had been enrolled for less than one term. These local variations in experiences, combined with variations in physical and human resources, contributed to differences in the experiences of participants.

BPEA schools are small by design. This is an important distinguishing feature of Big Picture learning that contributes to more personalised approaches to learning and to organisational processes. Personalisation is most noticeable in Advisories where teachers work with small groups of around fourteen students. These structures afford more frequent opportunities for teachers to work with students one-to-one, or in small groups.

There are a number of design elements that, in combination, distinguish Big Picture Education from other designs of schooling. These elements or 'distinguishers' influence everything that Advisory teachers, leaders, students and families try to do in a Big Picture school or program. The experiences of participants provide an indication of the strength of adherence to BPEA design distinguishers across the participating schools. However, the report is not an evaluation of the uptake of these distinguishers. The distinguishers are:

- Academic rigour: Head, heart and hand
- Leaving to learn: Learning through internships
- Personalisation: One student at a time
- Authentic assessment
- Collaboration for learning
- Learning in Advisory
- Trust, respect and care
- Everyone's a leader
- Families are enrolled too
- Creating futures
- Teachers and leaders are learners too
- Diverse and enduring partnerships

In addition BPEA has five learning goals that inform student development:

- Empirical reasoning
- Quantitative reasoning
- Communication
- Social reasoning
- Personal qualities

These goals should be negotiated by students, their teachers and their parents, and should be visible in all the work undertaken by students. However, the report does not measure the degree to which this or other design features of BPEA are adhered to, but it does report on the experiences of the participants related to their attempts to work with these design features.

The experiences of the participants contained in this report suggest that there are variations in the degree to which BPEA had been implemented at each site. It is outside the scope of this report to assess the levels of adherence to BPEA design distinguishers at each site, but the experiences of participants provide some insights into both the fidelity of implementation, and related effects.

Feelings of anxiety and 'not knowing' should not necessarily be interpreted as negative indicators, or signs that BPEA is not working, since the process of engaging students in the active construction of their learning plan involves ongoing negotiations with their Advisory teachers, parents/carers and mentors. These negotiations may involve the resolution of complex problems. In these circumstances, occasional periods of uncertainty reflect real-world conditions, and can add authenticity to the process of learning.



Although we talked with a small number of students, our data was strengthened by interviews with each student's Advisory teacher, and most of their parents/carers. These matched data sets provided opportunities to document students' experiences from a number of perspectives.

We were not able to observe some important features of BPEA, such as exhibitions, but we did visit some students during their internship placement, and we interviewed a small number of mentors. Despite limited access to direct observations of the range of features of BPEA, we were able to document the experiences of participants with exhibitions, internships, and other features of BPEA.

## 1.7. KEY FINDINGS

The Origin Foundation has identified two 'practical objectives' to support its belief in 'the power of education, training, and development to transform lives and improve communities' ([originfoundation.com.au](http://originfoundation.com.au)).

These objectives are: maximising the education prospects of current and future generations of young people, particularly the vulnerable; and creating employment readiness training and work experience opportunities for the long-term unemployed.

These objectives are relevant to the work of BPEA, which is committed to innovative and diverse models of schooling to meet the needs of those that the current educational model does not support, and to meet the wide range of needs of young people generally. Below we summarise some key findings relevant to each objective.

### 1.7.1. Experiences likely to maximise the education prospects of current & future generations of young people, particularly the vulnerable

Internships and other features of BPEA afford students learning opportunities that are experienced as distinctly different to their prior experiences in conventional settings. Students reported feeling more motivated, learning more, and feeling more supported in BPEA schools.

Students welcomed the opportunity to engage in interest-based approaches to learning, and reported being more involved in learning, and learning how to learn in BPEA.

Limiting the size of schools and classrooms, and assigning a small number of students to work closely with an Advisory teacher affords more personalised approaches to schooling. Students valued the opportunity to develop close relationships with their Advisory teacher and with their peers. They also reported getting to know themselves better.

Students choose to enrol in BPEA schools for reasons ranging from negative prior experiences and bullying by peers to positive evaluations of how the concept of an individual learning plan based on their interests would be right for them.

Students reported feeling part of a community, sometimes expressed in terms of belonging to a family, and experiencing high levels of support from both peers and Advisory teachers were other commonly reported experiences.

Parents reported an ease of communication with Advisory teachers, and were reassured by the family-like feel of the small scale of the school.

Parents recognised that the smaller scale of BPEA schools, as well as the sustained involvement of teachers with a small group of students through Advisories afforded opportunities for teachers to develop a deeper understanding of their child's interests, and how to support their learning.

Fair and supportive relationships with teachers are important to students (Te Riele, 2006). Feeling cared for matters to young people, and they like to learn in a friendly environment (Noddings, 2003). Students in the study articulated an acute awareness of the importance of relationships. They described why relationships matter, and how the structural and organisational dimensions of a BPEA school, especially the small size and role of Advisory, support relationship building.

### **1.7.2. Experiences likely to contribute to creating employment readiness training & work experience opportunities for the long-term unemployed.**

The nature of BPEA learning, including assessment through exhibition, learning through interest, and internships, supported the production of authentic assessment tasks and experiences that had meaning beyond the classroom, and connected students to the world of work.

Mentors played a key role in providing opportunities, encouragement and expertise to students in real-world contexts.

Students enrolled in BPEA schools because they could see the relevance of their learning to career pathways, employment and personal interests.

Students described a growing sense of confidence and self-efficacy in work situations.

Teachers acknowledged that the BPEA approach required that they know their students well, and take responsibility for their learning and development.

Students stated that opportunities to undertake internships linked to their interests, and career aspirations were important considerations in their decision to enrol at a BPEA school.

Parents noted the positive effect that external learning experiences, including internship, had on their child's motivation to learn. They appreciated the opportunities for their children to learn about the world of work, and to explore career opportunities.

Young people who leave school before completing Year 12 commonly say they dislike school (Curtis and McMillan, 2008). For many students who experience a sense of alienation and disengagement from schooling, failed relationships are often the source of their disillusionment. The findings suggest that students in BPEA schools have a good chance of remaining engaged in learning because of good quality student-teacher relationships.

## 2. REPORTING THE EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPANTS IN BPEA

### 2.1. DATA COLLECTION: SITE VISITS

In 2011, three members of the research team conducted a pilot visit to one of the selected schools. During this visit interviews were conducted with students in focus groups as well as individually. Advisory teachers, specialist teachers and other key personnel such as the deputy principal were also interviewed. Wherever possible, more than one researcher was present for each interview. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. During the breaks between interviews the researchers discussed and refined both interview techniques and interview questions with a particular focus on which questions seemed to work best for opening up the conversation with students about their experiences of life and learning in a Big Picture school.

The first round of 2012 school visits by the two research teams was conducted during April and May. The teachers at each school had preselected students to participate in the study. The teachers had made their selections according to which students and their parents were willing and able to talk to us about both their past and present experiences as students and learners. The participating students were from different schools and different year groups but all were relatively new to Big Picture. None of the students had been enrolled in Big Picture for more than a year prior to the first round interview. Our first contact with the participating students in each school was during a focus group which we used as an ‘ice-breaker’ for sharing and gathering information, and also to establish a timetable for individual interviews and visits to Advisories and other sessions. Over the course of the following day or two the research teams interviewed each student, their Advisory teacher, one of their parents/carers, and other specialist teachers who had contact with them in the school. The focus of these interviews with the students was to gather from them an account of their experiences so far; with the parents it was to find out how they thought Big Picture was working, or not, for them and their child; and with the Advisory teachers it was to gather information about how each of the case study students was managing their relationships and their learning in a Big Picture school. The researchers visited the students as they worked in their Advisory groups, in workshop/class groups, independently and sometimes at their place of internship.

During the school visits the research teams allocated time to move around the different Advisory groups and chat informally with students and teachers. We also met with some of the teachers as a group after school. These experiences underscored for the research team the value of students’ narratives, and the potential of case analysis to enrich these narratives through the inclusion of a range of perspectives including families, friends and former teachers. However, as we began to analyse the data and develop the student narratives it became apparent just how difficult it would be to protect the anonymity of students when each of their narratives described a very unique and personal learning journey. It was at this point that we agreed to adopt a phenomenographic approach to the analysis and representation of the data.

The school visits were important for establishing and maintaining an empathic connection with the students. Observing the students’ workspaces and interviewing adults who play a key role in their lives helped researchers become “sensitive to the individuality of conceptions of the world” (Ashworth & Lucas, 2010, p297) held and expressed by each student. The trustworthiness of the phenomenographic analysis was dependent on the students’ words being interpreted in relation to how, where and when they were spoken to and their individual school and family context.

A second round of visits to each of the sites was completed during October and November 2012. A new site where students had not been previously interviewed was also included in this round. Students were asked to reflect on how their year had been since we last spoke to them and to tell us about what had changed, what had stayed the same and how they were feeling about their learning.

Researchers used guiding questions to assist students to expand on their descriptions of learning through interest, learning through internship, organising their learning and exhibiting their learning. Students were asked to share examples of the work they had exhibited with the researchers.

The analysis of these second round interviews was guided by two questions:

1. Are the experiences we have identified holding up? That is, do the phenomenon and category descriptions do justice to the students' experiences as they have described them?
2. Are there any new experiences for which a phenomenon and/or categories need to be developed?

## 2.2. DATA ANALYSIS

Phenomenography allows the researcher to describe “variations in the ways an aspect of the world has been experienced by a group of people” (Mann, 2009) rather than describing each individual's unique set of experiences. As such, “individual voices are not heard” (Marton & Booth, 1997) in the same way as they would be through a case analysis and consequently individual participants are not easily identifiable. The methodology was originally used by a research group at the University of Gothenburg in the 1980's to describe students' learning as a result of a university mechanics course (Marton, 1986) and in recent times, it's theoretical assumptions have been more clearly described (Akerlind, 2005). Underpinning the methodology is an assumption that “each phenomenon, concept or principle can be understood in a limited number of qualitatively different ways” (Marton, 1986, p. 31).

The primary data collection method of phenomenography is the open-ended, in-depth interview. The first round individual interviews with each student were kept as open as possible. Each of the students knew that we were there to talk with them about their experiences in a Big Picture school but the opening question was designed to open up rather than guide the conversation. Prompting questions were asked by the interviewer to illicit a more detailed description on particular topics or themes initiated by the participant. Interviews with students were transcribed verbatim and then read and re-read to identify moments when participants were describing their experiences. These descriptions were highlighted in the body of the transcription, tagged with an identifying label and then extracted as quotations. They were pooled with the descriptions of other participants and then sorted into groups according to similarities in terms of what the participants were talking about. Each of these topics of conversation was then labelled as a phenomenon and a title and brief description assigned to each one.

Quotations were then organised within each phenomenon to represent the range or variation in participant experiences of that particular phenomenon. Often, this range represented a variation from less positive to more positive but within each range it was noticed that quotations fell into groups or categories. When a parsimonious sorting into categories was achieved within each phenomenon the researchers attempted to label each ‘category of experience’ or as they are alternatively known, ‘category of description’. The categories and the quotations they contained were then re-read in the context of both the transcripts from which they were extracted and the interviewer's empathic understanding of the student to ensure that meaning had not been lost or distorted in the analysis process. The intent was to generate a set of categories that are “stable and generalisable” (Marton, 1981). This process was carried out independently by each of the research teams using the data from the schools they had visited. The categories independently generated were then examined and modified by the two teams working together. Through discussion of differences in labelling and re-examination of selected quotations a set of categories was agreed on for the next phase of the analysis.

### 2.2.1. Technical notes

Each category has been checked to ensure that the quotes contained in it were internally consistent. This resulted in some quotes being re-coded. Some new categories came from the second round of interviews. These categories reflect increasing exposure to BPEA. For students, this meant that they were better able to describe what was going on for them.

For both the teacher nodes and the parent nodes there are some categories that contain a number of quotes from one individual. This reflects the unstructured nature of these interviews where issues pertinent to the experiences of the participants emerged. Some of the categories attributed to teachers and students are similar but they tend to reflect different experiences. For example, in the category 'Curriculum' the teachers tend to talk about modifications they have made to a 'standard' BPEA approach in order to make things work better for them and/or their students.

The focus of this methodology is on the range of experiences reflected in the categories. Hence, methodologically it is important to not diminish experiences related by one person, or a small number of people.

## 2.3. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings of the study are presented in three sections that describe the experiences of students, teachers and parents. These experiences are presented as sets of categories, or phenomena. The purpose of the adopted research methodology, phenomenography, is to identify the range of the participants' experiences even if only one individual reports some experiences. To assist in the interpretation of the data, the categories that constitute each phenomenon are listed beneath the heading for each phenomenon, and the number of participants who contributed to the formation of each category is shown in parentheses. These figures are indicative of the experiences reported by participants; they should not be taken to indicate the frequency of the experience across Big Picture schools, or the complete range of possible experiences.

## 3. PHENOMENA DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS

### 3.1. CHOICE OF CONTENT

This phenomenon relates to what students experience as the content of their learning. It covers a range of experiences from curriculum that is closely aligned with state-based curriculum documents to a curriculum that is based on the student's interests and co-constructed with the assistance of an Advisory teacher.

Students reported:

- interest-based learning was connected to external experiences including internships (16)
- external experiences and internships were not well-connected to their interests (6)
- not doing an internship or external experience linked to their interests (5)
- their interests shaped their learning (18)
- interest-based learning mapped back to state curriculum outcomes (7)
- interest-based learning constructed with state curriculum outcomes in mind (7)
- content of teacher designed workshops contributed to learning through their interests (12)
- participating in workshops intended to meet state curriculum (13)
- learning plan constructed to meet state curriculum outcomes (4)

#### 3.1.1. Connections between the classroom and beyond

Unlike work experience, and other forms of learning beyond the classrooms, internships are meant to be strongly integrated with each student's learning goals and their work in the classroom. Students who were able to describe the connection between their work in the classroom and their internship experiences demonstrated an understanding of how these experiences worked together and contributed to their learning. Their explanations took the form of contrasting their experiences in a BPEA school with their prior experiences in a conventional school. A common point of contrast was an awareness in BPEA of 'how it all works'. In the following extract, a student attempts to describe how writing in her journal helps her to reflect on and resolve problems at school and at home:

*You've got to keep going because it's no use just being like I'm so angry that I really can't do it today. That's something that I would have probably done a year ago but I'll never do that now. If I've got a problem I'll stop and I'll know to step back and know kind of where to go next which is really good. Sorry, I'm going really off topic, but I was just explaining how it all works.*

*So really briefly we start; we do a mind map... where all these scattered thoughts become planned and organised and you understand really where you're at and what you want to get out of it. You then have journal entries each week from there of your progress throughout. So there are things that I didn't end up doing or changed, which you have every single learning plan, because you realise that the idea of something isn't always what it is.*

This explanation of 'how it all works' demonstrates an understanding of the learning processes that are a feature of BPEA schools. Students were not just engaged in learning activities developed by teachers, they were actively involved in constructing their own learning experiences, and in making connections between what they do in the classroom and their internship:

*I did an internship at a day-care centre but for the first four weeks of the learning plan I was studying and doing child development and learning a lot about children... I was like oh I'm writing and I'm doing all this stuff [but] as soon as I got into the day-care centre it*



*was so good. It was like everything I've been learning, you're learning and you're doing on a computer, you're writing all this stuff up, and you go into there, and you go like it's all true - it's not just the writing and it's not just - you're actually writing for something and you're learning something...*

Students who reported being involved in establishing and setting up their internship experience described making contact with possible mentors, carrying out shadow days, and assessing the fit between external and internal experiences.

*... it's real-world learning. I had to set up the phone calls and the meetings to get this [internship]. I had to get there every day myself and things like that. That has helped me so much. It opens you up to so much more.*

Some students welcomed the opportunity to learn beyond the classroom and interact with a range of people.

*It's been amazing - it's been the best thing ever! I've got to learn from people I'd never get to meet.*

Some students reported a range of problems with internship placements. These included not being able to secure a placement that was accessible and connected to their interests, discouraging experiences with adults at the internship site, and being asked to complete repetitive tasks or tasks not related to their learning goals. Some students also felt that they were not ready for a workplace.

### 3.2. LEARNING THROUGH INTERESTS

Students commented favourably on the ability to choose what they would learn.

*It's wicked here. Because it's more about what you want to learn.*

*It is really good at Big Picture. It is way better than normal college. You get to choose. It's like school but in your own interest. It helped me get all the points [for completing year 11 and 12 in the one year].*

While many students shaped their interests around possible future careers, for others, it provided an opportunity to explore their current interests:

*We were ... talking about what big picture was... they said it's not what you want to be for your future career, it's for an interest and something that you are interested in now. I am really interested in crime and I like the policing and stuff.*

*So I said, I would like to look at forensic science and more of the policing side than the science side and it has been really, really good.*

*I had always been set on it was something that you wanted as a career, I don't know and then once everything was said I was like, well it's not about what you want to do 10 years later, it's about what you are interested in now. That's what Big Picture is; it's just something that you are interested in right at this moment. So this is what I am interested in.*

While interests decentred school subjects from their place in the curriculum, many students recognised a place for traditional school subjects in their learning.

*In mainstream...I hated science and I was like I am never going to use science in my life. Why do I have to do a class of stuff like this? I'm not interested. Then coming into Big Picture and [my Advisor] knew I didn't like science.*

*Then she said to me, you do realise most of the stuff, like your projects are science based. Because I was connecting it myself and doing it myself, it was then I realised that you do need science but I was just doing it on topics that I was interested in.*

*So if it wasn't for Big Picture I would probably still be hating science, just because the topics we covered weren't interesting to me.*

Shaping their own projects afforded students the opportunity to reflect on how they learn, and what they learn in ways that appear to be missing in conventional learning environments. One student described her experiences in the following way:

*You have to start being able to think; how can I not just put maths and science into this, but how can I pull things out of what I'm learning [so] that I actually realise how much I do use maths already. Like my last learning plan, I was writing an information report on the second famine of Ethiopia and I wrote pages of...stuff and I found it really hard because I'm a story[teller], like I love just writing. So it was really hard to write an information report for the first time because you have to be so specific and scientific. I felt I couldn't just write.*

*I just realised after I was able to step back from what I'd written and I was able to look at how much science and maths was in already what I was writing. ... I didn't pick up what is massive in Big Picture because you don't really realise. [In mainstream] classes you're given your maths, and you're given your science, and you're given your literacy and things like that. You have to figure it all out yourself, which is hard to wrap your head around sometimes.*

### 3.2.1. Opportunities to engage in subject-based knowledge

BPEA schools provided opportunities for students to engage in traditional subject-based knowledge. Students enrolled in BPEA streams operating in conventional schools were able to return to mainstream classes to extend their understanding of certain topics or subjects. More commonly, BPEA schools offered workshops in particular syllabus areas, such as mathematics and literacy. These workshops were intended to deepen the students' understanding in critical subject knowledge, and contribute to their preparation for externally administered standardised tests. One student reflected on the contribution of the workshops to her learning.

With the core class workshops, they give you enough to get a basic grade, if you want a better grade then you have to put more effort in and I'm assuming that's how it is out in the real world.

Students who were undertaking external accreditation processes had to show how their learning in a BPEA context met the required qualification standards. They worked closely with their Advisory teacher on this task, and they provided evidence of their work ranging from bulky folders overflowing with evidence, to no evidence of their work.

### 3.3. STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

This phenomenon relates to what students say about themselves as learners and how they describe their success with learning. The categories reflect a range of experiences, from students who prefer teacher-led instruction to those who describe themselves as autonomous learners, and from those who feel anxiety about their performance to those who perceive that their performance standard has improved.

Students reported:

- feeling like their academic performance and standard has improved (15)
- feeling motivated by working with interests (13)
- learning more effectively and with more control than in mainstream (12)
- learning more and doing more work in a BPEA context (11)



- getting to know themselves and others as learners in BPEA (10)
- enjoying independent learning (6)
- learning social skills (4)
- recognising a need to improve (5)
- becoming comfortable with BPEA process (5)
- experiencing difficulties accessing knowledge or understanding (3)
- a preference for teacher-led instruction (1)

### 3.3.1. Students' experiences of learning

Placing students' interests at the centre of the curriculum focussed attention on these interests, but it also focussed attention on how students participated in schooling. As suggested below, students were required to play a more active role because they had more control over the content, and over the learning processes. In conventional schooling, young people occasionally have input into how they learn, suggesting and choosing the form of learning activities, but they generally have little control over what is learnt.

*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*

Students accounted for improvements in their learning by relating how they had 'grown as a writer', 'got better at exhibitions', and improved the standard of their results. They also accounted for improvements in their learning in terms of learning more.

*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.*

*Definitely I could feel it within myself and then I could definitely see it when my mid-semester reports came. Last year my mid-semester report and my end of year report were just filled with E's and D's, and I just lost all concentration with work. This year, when I got mid-semester reports, I had a sinking feeling because I knew I'd done my best but sometimes my best isn't always enough. Then opening the packet, and there was just everything, just A's and B's with a few C's and it was just - it was such an uplifting feeling because I'd known that moving to Big Picture was such a great choice for me. Because if I was still in a mainstream class I don't know if I'd even still be at school right now.*

### 3.3.2. Students' motivation for learning

Students who reported feeling motivated by learning through their interests described how they explored these interests through internships, and through other learning activities in the community that afforded opportunities to make connections between their learning and the world beyond the classroom.

*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 [internship] and stuff, it all makes sense and you enjoy it more. You are doing stuff you enjoy and I love it.*

Students who accounted for improvements in their learning and their levels of motivation often compared their experiences in a BPEA school with their prior schooling experiences.

*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*

*It just - it's a great way for someone who's struggling in school almost to taste something new. It's just blissful. It's just brilliant.*

The ability to learn through interests and beyond the classroom were experienced by most students as affording more flexible and accommodating learning opportunities.

*Big Picture adjusts to you; you don't have to adjust to it.*

### 3.3.3. Students' awareness of themselves as learners

Perhaps, one of the most surprising, strongly held and widely reported experiences reported by students was that they had learnt about themselves as people, as well as learners. They were able to describe the conditions under which they learnt well and poorly, as well as how they learnt in different and similar ways to their peers, and they also described having gained great self-understanding and awareness.

*When you are into Big Picture you step out and you go on your - you find, it sounds sort of corny in a way, but you find yourself. You find your own path and your own interests and stuff.*

*I've developed a lot as a person and as a learner, which is really helpful in Big Picture. Like you don't just always think it's an - it's a way of education of course, but you personally like for my later life and my future I think that I've learned so much that I'll take with me. Just things that I'm going to be more aware of, like I know I work now, like the way I can work and the way I can't work, and what my distractions are and my high and low points, and things like that.*

A number of students were also able to describe how BPEA helped them learn how to learn. They were no longer dependant on a teacher to shape and direct their learning, but were more responsible for what and how they learnt.

*I think that Big Picture has taught me the process on how to get it - like not just, oh the computers don't work so I can't do any work. Like what can I do instead of that, so I can go tomorrow and go straight on, or I will go home and do homework, like kind of just thinking through things a bit better I guess which has been massive for me in Big Picture which is good.*

Students also described the challenges of increased responsibility for their own learning: the need to be well organised, to manage their own time, to plan their work, and to be self-motivated. A number of students described a period of adjustment when they were not always clear on how to go about preparing for their exhibitions, or how to plan their interest projects but with time they learnt from their peers, their Advisory teachers and from experience.

I don't think it took that long for everyone but I just didn't know how to do it, and it was hard to adjust, really hard to adjust to the way learning is up here.

### 3.4. TANGIBLE PRODUCTS

As previously discussed, students were invited to bring along to their interview with researchers an example of their learning. This phenomenon relates to the work samples that students presented and described, and these work samples were mainly preparations for exhibitions of their learning, or products presented at these exhibitions. The students' experiences range from no plans for products or no products to show, to original products and presentations to be used as exhibition content.

Students presented:

- original and creative products for exhibition (10)
- authentic products linked to interest-based learning (12)
- products arising from tasks set by teachers during Advisory or workshops (7)
- products that reflected superficial learning and/or misconceptions (1)
- no plans for products or no products (4)

In BPEA, assessment is through exhibition of student work. Throughout the term, as students work on their interest-based projects, they are expected to produce artefacts to present in their exhibition that demonstrate what they have learned. There was considerable variation amongst students as to whether or not they had any tangible products of their learning to make available to the researchers. A number of students were able to provide authentic products linked to their interest-based learning and most of these same students had also produced some highly creative and original products.

*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*

*Yeah. They were my blood splatters that I created*

*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*

*Then this was one of my service learnings, which was at the end of last term where I made costumes for Dance Fest. So that's just there showing the collar that we made and the actual skirts.*

Some students had products arising from tasks set by teachers during Advisory or workshops.

*I have an industrial revolution report here on the computer. Here's my diary entry for a child in the industrial revolution. I enjoyed writing it.*

Some students had no products they could access from any physical filing system or from either their personal or their Advisory teacher's computer.

*Interviewer: Can you show us some work? That was a little bit of a mystery last time*

*Student: A mystery to me too.*

### 3.5. PEDAGOGY

This phenomenon relates to how students experience working with knowledge, what is sometimes referred to as content delivery, and associated classroom practices. It covers a range of experiences from those that are constrained by limited resources through to independent learning culminating in assessment by exhibition.

Students reported:

- that their performance was assessed through exhibition (20)
- working together to learn (9)
- working independently (10)
- that their Advisory teacher assists to plan individualised learning (18)
- formal planning structures assist them to take control (17)
- that they devise their own planning strategies (8)
- Advisory ‘anchors’ the learning (8)
- smaller classes are helpful (4)
- their learning is sometimes inhibited by lack of resources (8)

#### 3.5.1. Assessment through exhibition

The BPEA approach to learning through student interest appears to disrupt traditional standard classroom practices. For example, students highlighted that assessment through regular exhibition performance was key to the student-centred approach of BPEA. Most students felt motivated by the process of developing their exhibition presentation, and perceived that their presentations were getting better over time.

*This is going to be my main portfolio and then [Advisory] and I have already thrown some ideas around about how I can set my exhibition out... So we will probably set it up as some kind of crime scene...and then I will have the other science books I've read from and everything around that.*

*That's another thing that always makes me want to get more done because that's the worst thing, standing in front of your parents who have come to see everything and your teachers and you have completed like one piece of work for the whole term. That's just another incentive to complete as much as you can... It looks a lot better on you and it feels better presenting a lot of things instead of just one.*

*...it's at your exhibition you feel when you are sharing it with everybody it is more for you because you are "Oh, Wow! Look how much I achieved" or it's not necessarily about what you have achieved it's what you learnt from it.*

*Well the last exhibition I did was pretty much the one that I had after [an internship experience in another city] so I had only about three or four days after I came back so that was pretty much throughout the whole journey and just a time to share my experiences. My exhibition that I'm organising now is going to be totally different...I'm organising a family fun day with [my mentor].*

#### 3.5.2. Learning in an Advisory

For most students planning with their Advisory teacher and other members of their Advisory class using formal structures assisted them to take control of their learning and determine how they would access content knowledge and skills.

*Here the learning plans gave me the confidence to take charge of it. So now I can do all of this, so I try and do something further. With everything really.*

*I think it sets you up for you to gain things like time management...So how it works in Big Picture is we have a ...seven week learning plan...she gives us this massive piece of paper and she just pretty much says...something that your most passionate about and you really want to concentrate this time around put in the middle, make it your centre focus. Then from there pretty much just make a line and write just write exactly what you think you want to learn and...how you're going to show that. So we've got, it's called empirical reasoning and quantitative reasoning and communicational [sic] and social reasoning.*

*Sometimes [Advisory teacher] has an idea and she makes it relevant and the things we wanted to do aren't relevant but after we've done the things on our learning plan then we can do the other tasks we wanted to do.*

A number of students described how the Advisory class provided an 'anchor' for their learning in terms of a physical space and also when help was needed from either their Advisory teacher or peers.

*Here there is only one class so there is not the stress of having to be in the classroom on time. You're always there. It is a small space – you're not going to forget where you have to be.*

*Less movement, get started straight away*

*You can book in a session for a set time but you can get help whenever you need it.*

*My Advisory, we had to help each other out. So I started with medicine (on mind map) and they did where you could get it from.*

Some students reported that a lack of either physical resources or teacher expertise was inhibiting their learning. Examples of this were small scale in the case of a student interested in photography not having access to a camera and larger scale in terms of lack of access to specialist industrial arts and cooking facilities.

*I can't find and my teachers can't find what I need to finish my Advisory project.*

### 3.6. RELATIONSHIPS-TEACHERS

This phenomenon relates to how students describe their relationships with adults in teaching or advising roles. The categories range from a focus on whole class to highly valued, individualised relationships.

Students reported:

- supportive relationships, they feel known and understood (11)
- teachers help all the way when something goes wrong (5)
- positive relationship with teacher (10)
- that they respond to teachers' high expectations (4)
- that they recognise and make use of teachers' expertise (5)
- their relationships with teachers were unsatisfactory in mainstream (3)
- that not all relationships with teachers in BPEA are comfortable (2)

The relationship between each student and the adults that facilitate their learning in the role of Advisory teacher or workshop teacher is crucial to the success of the BPEA interest-based learning design.

Most students reported a positive relationship with their Advisory teachers and specialist teachers and a number of them credited this to their experiences of being helped all the way even when something had gone wrong and also to their sense of being known and understood.

*...but here if you are not doing well [Advisory teacher] will help you as much as she can. She will be like what's wrong? Why aren't you doing this? Really question where you are going wrong. Why are you not interested? Try and get you back on the right path so you are not left alone.*

*Because it's the close bond with the teacher in BPEA that lets you do that. I never sat down with a teacher in mainstream and talked about [name's] work because there were 30 other people in the class and you can put your hand up and they help you with that task but you don't get much time to actually discuss it they just try to reword the question.*

Some students spoke about the way in which they recognise and utilise the expertise of various teachers other than their Advisory teacher and how they respond to teachers' high expectations.

*I suppose because I get help from all the Advisory teachers, which leads to opportunities*

*All the BPEA teachers...have different expertise*

*She just makes you think so much deeper*

A small number of students mentioned aspects of their relationships with Advisory teachers with which they were not comfortable.

*He gets pretty...sometimes I just don't always feel like going up and talking to him*

*...she [mother] has been in a couple of times and her and [Advisory teacher] have had some talks. I don't actually know about what because I haven't been in the room which kind of worries me. I hate that.*

### 3.7. SCHOOL CULTURE

This phenomenon relates to the way the students describe the culture of their school. The categories include a sense of belonging to a 'community of learners', and a sense of respect and trust as students are treated as adults.

Students reported:

- feeling that they were part of a community of learners (7)
- a sense of community (8)
- being treated as an adult or trusted (1)
- being treated with respect (2)
- that they fit in well (3)
- that BPEA feels like primary school (1)

#### 3.7.1. Community of learners

The scale of BPEA schools, in particular the small scale of each Advisory group, and the relationships that develop in these settings afford opportunities for students to work together, and to support each other.

*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.*

Students also reported experiencing a stronger and more sustained focus on learning than previously experienced.



*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.*

### 3.7.2. Friendly family feeling

Schools can be harsh and alienating environments in which students experience bullying, inflexible structures, and impersonal relationships. In contrast, students in the study described feeling part of a community, sometimes expressed in terms of belonging to a family, and experiencing high levels of support from both peers and Advisory teachers were commonly reported experiences.

*Everyone is friendly to each other. It is more like a family.*

*Everyone's friendly to each other mostly – the students and teachers.*

*It is not so much a school, more of a community.*

These experiences were sometimes described in terms of being treated with respect and trusted: 'like an adult'. Other students spoke of feeling safe, and of 'fitting in'. One student compared their experiences in favourable terms to what they had experienced in primary school.

## 3.8. RELATIONSHIPS-STUDENTS

This phenomenon describes the ways in which students were able to establish and nurture positive relationships with each other. There is a strong sense of collaboration in Advisory as a key mechanism in getting to know each other well, developing mutual respect, valuing difference and nurturing a sense of common purpose.

Students reported:

- that the focus on learning about each other through learning interests builds understanding (3)
- respect for other students (3)
- getting to know their fellow students well (8)
- that issues between students are resolved faster than in mainstream (3)
- not being bullied because a smaller school makes bullying harder (1)
- feelings of alienation, not knowing anyone in mainstream continue in BPEA (2)

### 3.8.1. Mainstream or BPEA feelings of alienation, not knowing anyone

In other parts of this report we heard a great deal about the impact of bullying and the struggles some students had with mainstream schooling and how this influenced their decision to enrol in a BPEA school (see phenomenon 8). For some students, however, these relational issues persisted irrespective of the school.

*I tend not to talk with other students. For me there is not much difference from mainstream school.*

Even in BPEA schools some students reported instances of not really fitting in or knowing anyone else:

*'Terrible day' when a couple of kids started picking on him.*

*Would love having someone else here [that I know].*

Despite feelings of isolation by some students, the overall experience of students in BPEA schools demonstrates a significant sense of relational trust and well being among students.

### 3.8.2. Getting to know fellow students well

A number of students described the opportunities they had to get to know each other well. No doubt, the small high school design played a key part in creating the mechanisms and flexibility for this kind of relational activity. Students described the benefits of working in Advisory and the opportunities this afforded in getting to know each other well.

Structured events such as the school camp were also significant in helping students bond with each other.

*Earlier on in the year, we camped down at Port Arthur with the grade - that was pretty fun.*

*Yeah, just brought everyone closer really, because we had to share cabins with everyone else so by the end of the trip you were talking to everyone. I started talking to a few people that I wouldn't talk to usually before the trip.*

For some students, the Advisory played a pivotal role in creating and sustaining mutual relationships with their peers. Advisory provided a place where students were made to feel welcome and relationships could flourish because students knew each other well, class sizes were small, difference was accepted and conflicts dealt with respectfully.

*It's taken a while this year because of the new students but now it's just like we're one big family. I suppose so everyone gets along well. It's easier than in a normal school.*

*Grade 10s kind of scared me...now they are like older sisters*

*The small class numbers. You don't have to worry about not knowing anyone.*

*We've really grown with each other and we've learnt a lot about each other, so like we've also gained a lot of friendships.*

*Well, we are all a lot closer. We are so much more tighter as a class and I work with more of the different people than just sticking to who I was with before.*

*I just realised then that we are so much more like a family now than we were at the start of the year. I was terrified then. It was so weird being in a class with the grade 10s and even grade 9s that you didn't know but it's really, really good now.*

*I think that the size is important to help that - you all stick up for each other.*

*Our Advisories are pretty small so I'm pretty much friends with everyone in my Advisory.*

*You get to learn what other people are in to.*

### 3.8.3. Not bullied – smaller school makes bullying harder

Elsewhere the issue of bullying has been described as a persistent problem for some students especially in mainstream schools (see phenomenon 8). Interestingly, and consistent with the above experience of getting to know fellow students well, one student observed the lack of bullying at his BPEA school because everyone knows each other well.

*I haven't been bullied since I moved here - everyone knows everyone so this makes bullying difficult. It is a smaller space - bullying harder here.*

### 3.8.4. Issues between students resolved faster than in the mainstream

In explaining the enhanced relationships between students, some students identified the speed with which issues were resolved. There was a sense in which little things were noticed and attended to in a prompt and timely manner usually before they could escalate into major relationship problems.



*There is the odd bad apple everywhere – but they are weeded out. One kid was picking on kids and he got removed. It was handled very maturely. They were very quick to jump.*

*You still get a bit of the argument stuff but you get over it very quickly not like at other schools where it would go on for months*

There was also a feeling that because students know each other well, diversity and difference were more widely accepted than in mainstream schools. One student in comparing his previous experience of school observed there's no racism here.

### **3.8.5. Focus on learning about each other**

Expanding on the experience of getting to know fellow students well, some students were very articulate about how all of this worked. In addition to the role of the Advisory in creating a sense of family, students were able to explain how knowing each others' interests was really important, as was having the space to simply 'sit and talk'. Students appreciated the opportunity to interact in (un) structured ways where they could do important identity work in finding friends, exploring interests, resolving conflicts and pursuing a sense of individual and collective identity.

*I mean our Advisory is part - that's another thing, we've got about five people at the moment but I know what everyone is studying so I know what their interests are. It means that we've got something to talk about even if we're not the same sort of people. Does that make sense?*

*It has changed SO much because the first week the main focus was just be nice to each other, just be civil to each other because you're going to spend the rest of your high school with each other so you might as well get along.*

*We had the opportunity to just sit and talk. We weren't allowed to talk about guys or any other problems we just had to worry about our schoolwork. You had interests and other people might have had those interests.*

*[student] and I have been together since grade 7 but we're even stronger now. The grade 10's used to scare me but now I have confidence in talking to them.*

*We are like a little family we always say because even though we are all off doing our own thing we still always come together or we are always still helping each other.*

### **3.8.6. Respectful to other students**

Some students valued the deep sense of respect that permeated all aspects of school life. For these students, the values of respect, trust and care provided the cornerstones of school culture. It became an overarching narrative that students readily identified with and appreciated.

*Because you get to know the people better, you get more respect for everyone.*

*Very respectful to each other.*

### **3.9. REASON FOR ENROLLING IN BPEA**

This phenomenon describes the reasons why students enrol in BPEA schools. Students and their families make a deliberate choice to enrol in BPEA schools because it offers them a different kind of experience of doing school. Students were very articulate about the reasons for enrolling in BPEA schools including their desire to pursue interests and possible careers, the attraction of internships and real-world learning opportunities, the benefits of feeling safe and known in a smaller school, and the geographical convenience.

Students reported:

- that interest-based learning and internship were the main attractions (7)
- BPEA may help with getting a job, career motivation (4)
- it was safety and a smaller, friendlier campus that appealed (2)
- having been bullied in the past (4)
- struggling academically in mainstream (6)
- that it was their parents' choice (3)
- it was because the school was conveniently located (2)

### 3.9.1. Location

Typically, students enrol in local neighbourhood schools because of the convenience, affordability and friendships. Having the option of attending a different kind of school in the local area was very attractive to some students and their families. Having a choice allowed them to make a more informed decision about what kind of education suited them best. In other words, traditional one-size-fits-all approaches to schooling do not work well for some students. Where local choice was not available we heard of some instances where students were prepared to travel considerable distances to attend a BPEA school because of its unique approach to student learning. As one father explained:

*He [my son] travels into [a BPEA school] everyday. There are schools out our way however their reputation... I don't think that he would stand a chance of getting an education out there. ... The generalised standards within the school aren't good.*

However, enrolling at the local public high school was for most students a default position because it was the only realistic option available to them given their family's financial circumstances. In response to the question of whether they had any other choices, one student summed it up pretty well, "Not really my parents live here".

### 3.9.2. Parent choice

For some students enrolling at BPEA schools there was strong family involvement and support in the decision-making process. This should hardly be surprising given one of the key distinguishers of BPEA schools is that "families are enrolled too". BPEA schools aim for real family engagement whereby parents and families are regarded as essential members of the learning team, starting with the application process and through to learning plan development, exhibitions and graduation. Based on what we know about student engagement in learning, parental support is a crucial element of school success.

For some students parent choice was the main reason for attending a BPEA school because in the words of one student "my parents live here" and for another "mum thought it looked like a good school to go to".

Whilst parent choice may have been a dominant factor for some, we also heard evidence of how one student carefully negotiated the enrolment process with his parents:

Before putting in the application to come to Big Picture I talked it over with Mum. Mum liked the fact that we would be given more responsibilities at Big Picture than at a normal high school. She also liked that it is smaller school. Dad was supportive of me moving too.

### 3.9.3. A history of struggling with learning in a mainstream setting

No doubt, a key reason for choosing to enrol in a BPEA school for many students was the sense of alienation and disengagement from mainstream schooling. Some students described the negative

experiences they had at traditional schools which for multiple reasons caused them to switch off and in a few cases led them to drop out of school altogether. The extent of the problem of student disenchantment with mainstream schooling, especially in low SES school communities, is well documented in a range of official statistics related to participation and retention, suspensions, behavioural difficulties, exclusions, and achievement. Furthermore, there is a growing body of evidence to highlight the deteriorating levels of mental health and well being among young people. These issues are examined in more depth elsewhere in this report, the point being, that the one-size-fits-all approach to educational provision serves few. Hence, the desire of some students enrolling in BPEA schools to find a more conducive environment to help them reconnect to learning and achieve success.

Students expressed a range of reasons for leaving mainstream schools, among them: bullying; irrelevance of subjects; poor relationships with teachers; lack of care, trust and respect; boredom; getting lost; and chaos to name a few. By way of example:

*I struggled a lot in mainstream classes because I'd often just get side-tracked. I'd be thinking - I'd be in one class thinking, okay, I've got this assignment and I'm working on this and everything's good and then I'd often go to my next class and everything would just completely go away from my head. So I'd get to the end of the day and I wouldn't remember anything that I'd done. It was difficult when it came to major assignments. I was not happy at [mainstream school] – not able to learn what I wanted to do.*

*A lot of the kids get lost.*

*The “chaos” of [mainstream school].*

*[It's] stressful having a variety of classes and having to be 'on time'.*

*Everyone is “death staring” each other. We are all strangers.*

*There [at mainstream school] I was trying to fit in so doing what others wanted me to do.*

*Here we don't sit in class and be really bored and wait for teacher to say 'get on with it'.*

Under these circumstances it should not be surprising that some students struggled to cope with life in mainstream schools and actively searched for alternative options where they were available. They chose to enrol in a BPEA school because they believed there was a greater likelihood of being recognised, respected and supported in their endeavours to engage in learning and build positive relationships with peers and teachers. One student showed a remarkable ability to reflect on these problems and the reasons for enrolling at a BPEA school:

*I'm 17. I'm in grade 11. I first found out about [the BPEA school] at my old school when [a teacher] came down and talked about it. They had a big seminar about different schools and [the BPEA school] was one that appealed to me cause I've always struggled at school. The kind of learning we do here is focused on what your interested in so I thought it was a good idea to come here.*

Another student was thinking about leaving school altogether. His mother was very upset and thought he might be better off in a private school. On his own initiative, he decided to attend an Open Day at a BPEA school after 'surfing the net' looking for a different schooling experience.

*It was kind of strange first being here, because I used to wander around the school and have a look and see what it was like, and it was really different, it felt really strange being here, different unusual, but now it felt like...it felt like I didn't know where I was, it was a new place.*

### 3.9.4. Bullied in the past

Some students described the experience of bullying as a major reason for moving from their old school to a BPEA school. Undoubtedly, young people who are subjected to bullying face enormous challenges as they endeavour to cope with school life on a day-to-day basis. It impacts socially, emotionally and academically on their sense of identity and self-worth. Students understand better than most how this plays out in their lives as evidenced in the following comments:

*I made a decision myself to come to BPEA because of the bullying. A lot of my friends came here the year before. I was interested in how BPEA worked – laid back, little school, community type school.*

*I moved here because I was being bullied at [mainstream school]. I haven't been bullied since I moved here – everyone knows everyone so this makes bullying difficult. It is a smaller space – bullying is harder here.*

*I was stressed and anxious all the time. ... I was too scared to walk around the corridors by myself. I used to talk to the social worker every day, every week. ... I didn't want to come to school. I was scared to get off the bus and walk to school. I did have quite a few friends but coming here was my decision and coming here was a better opportunity. I just feel a lot safer here.*

### 3.9.5. Safety, smaller, friendlier school

For some students the decision to enrol in a BPEA school was based on a belief that a smaller and friendlier school combined with a more personalised approach to learning would provide a fresh start and opportunity to forge positive relationships in a non-threatening environment.

*I applied because the campus is small, more opportunity, less people, friendlier.*

*I joined because I wanted a smaller and friendlier place. Here they treat you with more respect. They treat you as a young adult and you have to rely on each person to do the right thing.*

*Half the reason I moved [from my other school] is the space and size. I just feel a lot safer here. Bullying is harder here. I like that everyone knows everyone – this makes bullying difficult.*

*It is a lot better at BPEA – I know everyone.*

### 3.9.6. Advertised academic success

Unfortunately, for some students in mainstream schools academic success was often beyond their reach. Failure would manifest itself in many ways including poor behaviour, disengagement and dropping out. Students often wanted something better for themselves. Some students wanted to engage in learning and were willing to 'step up' academically once they could see the relevance of subjects (content) to their interests. This was a powerful hook in the process of reengaging students in learning. In the case of one family an important reason for selecting a local BPEA school was academic success as one student explained:

*The big sign at the front said it won the English academic award and my dad was like this must be a good school and I knew some of my football mates were here.*

Students themselves proved to be keen observers about the importance of academic success and the need to study hard, for example:

*In class things are quiet, everyone is head down doing their work.*

*I'm learning more here.*

*Kids are definitely doing more here than at [mainstream school].*

*I've done a lot more work – I would say my grades have improved, I haven't checked my report but – I've done a lot more work.*

*Here everyone is focused on work. We help each other.*

What we can conclude here then, is that some students are acutely aware of the importance of robust learning and how it is in their interests when presented in a relevant and purposeful way. They want to be challenged and engage in learning experiences that attend to big ideas, complexity and relevance linked to their desired futures.

### 3.9.7. Career motivation and help with getting a job

For some students the main reason for enrolling in a BPEA school was a perception that the experience would be more aligned with a vocational outcome in terms of helping them to get a job. Some students were clear about what they wanted to do when they left school, while others had formed the view that attending a BPEA school would help them to make a vocational choice. We gained a strong sense of student motivations in the following comments:

*I knew what I wanted to do...but I didn't see how [my previous school] fitted into that. It seemed like a bit of a bludge school and I didn't see how I'd fit in there but I wanted to get a qualification.*

*I came here because I thought it would help me get a job...I never actually wanted to go to college it's just that there were no jobs that I could do. This place here could help me find a job - something that I'm interested in.*

*I want to be an architect and talked it over with Dad. At [my other school] there was not much other than the main subjects. We looked at BPEA – because I can learn architecture. I will do Cert IV and then uni.*

*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.*

The connection between careers, employment and future aspirations and the role of internships through individual learning plans (ILPs) were clearly attractive to many parents as well.

*The fact that Big Picture promised to be goal directed to something that he thought would be useful to him in the future.*

*At the start she was studying photography but that was not going to benefit her future. Her life is animal based and that is what she's based her projects on. She always said that she was doing something that she enjoyed.*

*[He] will do an apprenticeship – 3 yrs or TAFE – designing course (draftsman). He may want to go to College – academia the whole way. If he does architecture academic route it will take 7 yrs. If he does apprenticeship 3 yrs and then 5 yrs for architecture – he is well set up –building knowledge and degree. I think he will do the apprenticeship – will be able to articulate the needs of a builder – apprenticeship in carpentry – and money at the same time. He will get a trade certificate.*

### 3.9.8. Learning through interests

Prior to enrolment, a number of students were attracted to BPEA schools because it provided them with an opportunity to learn through their personal interests.

*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.*

*I am very focused on [web design]. I want to get work in the [multi-media] industry.*

*Now that it's my interests I feel I can really push myself. Before it was boring.*

*I'm working on stuff I'm interested in I've become more motivated and a more independent learner.*

*Coffee has become a passion of mine; I'm really interested in the science behind it.*

### 3.10. PERSONAL AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

This phenomenon relates to students' experiences of their personal and career development. It refers to the kinds of attributes, capabilities and knowledge that students acquire as they negotiate a sense of identity and self-worth. It includes a range of categories from the exploration of possible career options to a sense of freedom to be oneself.

Students reported:

- new imagining or planning for their future (12)
- learning to be leaders (2)
- becoming more adult (3)
- freedom to be themselves (4)
- developing confidence (8)
- developing career related skills (8)
- exploring career options (10)

#### 3.10.1. Exploring careers

Many students reported a strong association between their experiences at school and their possible future careers. Such views are consistent with the findings in phenomenon 1 (Reason for enrolling in BPEA). In the process of exploring their futures as young adults, workers and citizens there was a view that schools provided a space to develop a range of capabilities relevant to careers, life and success in the outside world. Students reported how their experience in BPEA schools prepared them for the adult world by helping them gain confidence, be themselves, and develop real-world skills. In short, there was a sense in which these young people were developing a sense of identity as they transition between school and the world of work. By way of example:

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

*As soon as I got the school-based apprenticeship it just, it changed a lot.*

*It sounds really weird but I actually really like working. I know it sounds weird, but I almost find it therapeutic to do what I do.*

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

*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.*

*BPEA is helping me explore my options.*

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

Some students were also appreciative of the fact that they were being treated as young adults as they explored their career options:

*I was a lost kid – now I feel like a young adult.*



*It's not what is on paper that counts. I think that's massive in our class. It's how you grow, it's how you develop and that's why I call it learning for life because it's not that piece of paper you're going to go show everyone, it's you as a person that you're going to go get a job or you're going to grow in life*

For other students there was a strong sense in which they were planning their futures.

*Hopefully I will be getting into professional photography – wildlife.*

*Maybe I will need to start my own business.*

*Yes but I'm trying to pick my courses so that I won't be wasting my time and I'll be using them to my advantage to help me in the future.*

*Time for me to man up now. It's getting to the stage where my future is developing, I guess, and what I do from now on is what the rest of my life will be.*

### 3.10.2. Developing career related skills

A number of students were very positive about the kinds of skills they were developing through their internships. Students valued the opportunity to gain 'real' world experiences in workplaces related to their interests. Such experiences afforded them an opportunity to engage in relevant and meaningful learning in an adult environment organized around tangible tasks. In other words, students were able to articulate the importance of how their learning in context was relevant to their future lives:

*I learnt a lot doing the projects, about web development, the tools that you can use. I didn't know a lot about it before – every time you do it you learn more.*

*I'm learning [through the internship] all about the responsibility and difficulty of planning lessons and how hard it is to get right information. Also, that I need to speak in [students'] terms.*

*Because of [my] internship... I have recognised prior learning.*

*I learnt how to talk to people – to talk to people formally – how to talk discretely and kindly.*

*We went to the places we wanted to film. We had to think about background noise – e.g., aeroplanes going overhead. We learnt to use cameras and equipment.*

### 3.10.3. Developing confidence

Some students talked a lot about their growing sense of confidence and self-efficacy. Identity work of this kind is a crucial aspect of growing up and schools are major social institutions in defining whom we are. Consequently, students are shaped formally and informally in terms of where they fit in the world. Based on the accounts presented below we can see how important it is for students and why it matters.

*I feel more comfortable talking than at the beginning of the school. I feel more positive with myself.*

*My negative feelings started at high school. I thought that I wouldn't succeed. Joining BPEA I see that I can do it. Once I started here I was still negative. I still have a long way to go – but I feel more positive about the future. It's still going to be a hard thing to do. I feel better with myself – know there's a good ending you've just got to make it.*

*I've opened up a lot more – and now tell people about myself a lot more. Sometimes it's good to get stuff off your chest – not just petty things. Ever since stuff happened a few*

*years back, I've been very bottled up and isolated and kept to myself. In Big Picture, I've opened up – telling them things that I knew.*

*I enjoy the Big Picture stuff. I've been told I'm energetic when standing in front of others. I have a lot of fun presenting.*

For some students this confidence was related to body image, a major concern for young people:

*Just probably more so with my bodybuilding because I can see that my body's changing just from doing different exercises. Just knowing that I found out how to do that shows to me that it's - you know, it's physical evidence that I know what I'm doing which I think is awesome.*

For others, it related to perceived academic strengths and weaknesses:

*I'm not saying I'm dumb because I don't think I'm dumb.*

As well as the ability to communicate with different audiences:

*Talking on the phone to people. It builds your confidence up.*

*Before coming to BPEA I was really shy and nervous. Now I can go up and speak to anyone. I don't know [how this occurred]. "I'm just happy". Probably Shadow Days have helped.*

*So after an exhibition you feel content with yourself even though you might not have achieved what you wanted to but you talk about the steps and the process of what you have done and what you have learnt and what you have taken from that if you have finished a piece of work or not.*

And to be themselves:

*Here you are who you are. You find what you want to do and do it, so it's really good.*

*Here I have a lot more confidence – to be myself, not what others want me to be.*

*Yeah. I thought that was really ridiculous because how are we meant to know what we really want to do if your pretending to be someone you're not.*

*Most of my friends want to be mechanics. I am a bit different – It feels good to be different. I could be high up in Hollywood.*



## 4. PHENOMENA DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS

### 4.1. EXPERIENCES WITH TEACHERS

This phenomenon describes the range of experiences of parents with their child's Advisory teacher.

Parents reported:

- quality relationships (4)
- ease of communication (9)
- teachers are highly motivated (5)
- informality of teacher-student relationships can lead to loss of respect for the teacher and their authority (1)
- their concerns were not properly attended to (1)
- that communication can be difficult (3)

The quality of the relationship with their child's teacher and the easy flow of information about their child's learning were important distinguishers for parents between their experiences in BPEA and those in mainstream. This may be attributed to the teachers having fewer students for longer periods of time but the difference in the teachers' attitudes to students and high levels of motivation were also credited.

*[This school] is amazing- they say "how can we help get your kid through school?"*

*[This Advisory teacher]'s got that rapport with parents to be able to communicate with us a lot more regularly and a lot quicker*

*I've had quite a few meetings with the teachers. The main thing for me is that I know the school is open to me at any time to go in and have a chat if I have any concerns whereas at the other school nothing ever came of my attempts to talk about the bullying at her previous school. But if it were happening now I feel I would be able to talk to them about it. More of a family feel about it, the teachers take the kids under their wing as though they're their own, spend more time with them than some parents do.*

Parents' experiences with teachers included some concerns about the informality of student-teacher relationships undermining teachers' authority. Not all parents were happy with the level of communication.

*So she said she'd look into it. She didn't look into it enough and she didn't call me back.*

*It's been difficult for us as parents to know exactly how he's going.*

### 4.2. ISSUES WITH BPEA INTEREST-BASED APPROACH

This phenomenon describes issues raised by parents about the key distinguishing feature of BPEA, its interest-based approach to learning.

Parents reported:

- BPEA not a good match to child's ability or interest (1)
- too early to be treated like an adult (1)
- too early to deviate from the standard curriculum (2)
- the learning is not structured enough (1)

- students can give up on subjects too early (2)
- perceived lack of teacher commitment to BPEA approach (1)
- lack of teacher expertise leads to subjects not taught or incorporated (2)

While the categories in this phenomenon are constituted by concerns raised by only one or two parents, taken as a set, they relate to perceived differences between BPEA and conventional approaches to schooling. As previously noted, all families were new to BPEA. Some students had been enrolled for less than a term when we first interviewed their parents/carers. A lack of familiarity with BPEA may have contributed to their concerns.

A lack of commitment to BPEA was a concern for one parent.

*If you're going to go in boots and all then you go in boots and all so you have to be passionate about it and support it all the time if you expect us to do the same thing.*

Parents expressed concerns about insufficient attention to subjects they viewed as critical to their child's education, such as mathematics and science. A perceived lack of subject area expertise among the teaching staff was suggested as a reason for this neglect.

### 4.3. EXPERIENCES WITH BPEA

This phenomenon describes issues raised by parents about their experiences with BPEA

Parents reported:

- that their child's achievements have exceeded past expectations (8)
- knowing a lot more about their child's learning (3)
- being happy that their child is happy to be in BPEA (3)
- perception of a need to always 'sell' BPEA (1)
- challenges to BPEA philosophy being met defensively (1)
- feeling isolated as possibly the only parent with concerns about BPEA (1)
- feeling underwhelmed (1)

Parents described a range of positive experiences associated with their child's enrolment in BPEA, including perceptions of transformations in their child's attitude to school, great enjoyment of school, and more academic success. Parents observed flow-on effects from their children's increasing confidence at school to their home lives as well as to their sporting and social lives. They also felt that they knew a lot more about their child's learning.

*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.*

*She's showing us more than what she ever used to, and we probably ask her more because she's more giving.*

However, one parent felt isolated and treated as being unduly negative when she tried to establish whether BPEA was the right choice for her child. She did not feel as though teachers engaged seriously with her questions and concerns.

*I feel like they're trying to defend it all the time. If you challenge anything, if you don't sort of - Wow! I think this is really progressive. I think this is really great for the kids. If you challenge anything about it, whether it's NAPLAN results or the rest of the curriculum or whatever, how's this affecting your daughter, they tend to be defensive about it.*

#### 4.4. INTERNSHIP, MENTORING AND EXTERNAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES

This phenomenon describes parents' experiences with the internship, mentoring and external learning experiences.

Parents reported:

- has a positive effect on learning or motivation (7)
- being involved or assisting (4)
- student not gaining much learning (3)
- takes up too much time (1)
- not relevant should be in class (1)

Parents noticed that external learning experiences, including internships, have had a positive effect on their child's motivation to learn because the experiences have provided opportunities for students to find out about the world of work, to feel autonomous, and to experience a sense of achievement.

*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.*

Parents spoke about their involvement in organising internship placements for their children and also about the level of support they provide to ensure that their child was engaging in appropriate activities at the placement.

*He's already been to two different architectural firms. One [he] found himself and the other I put him on to.*

*[My husband's talked with the mentor]...we try to get involved as much as we can.*

Parents were not uniformly satisfied with internships. This was often a direct result of the difficulties associated with organising suitable experiences.

*He hasn't done a lot of internships/shadow days. He tried work experience with tradesmen but he wasn't too keen on it. A day here, and a day there, it hasn't been as big a part as I would have liked.*

*I don't know that she's gained a lot from doing it.*

#### 4.5. INVOLVEMENT IN EXHIBITIONS AND LEARNING

This phenomenon describes parents' experiences with exhibitions, and learning in BPEA. The categories range from having attended all exhibitions to having attended none, and from being involved in planning their child's learning to having no involvement in learning plans.

Parents reported:

- having attended all exhibitions (8)
- they are involved in interest based learning project (4)
- a perception that they are not consulted when things are going wrong (1)
- that timing of exhibitions limits their involvement (1)

- their involvement in the learning plan depends on their initiation (1)
- they had not attended exhibitions (1)
- no involvement in learning plans (3)

While a number of parents reported that they had attended all of their child's exhibitions, one parent had not attended any. The timing of exhibitions affected parents' ability to be involved.

Parent-child discussion around learning was also reported as happening outside of school.

*It's given more structure to get involved, to see what's going on as distinct from having to think through as a parent, those daily questions and track through in a fairly clinical manner. It's less clinical to talk about what her plans are and then it also gives a bit of structure to what she is talking about.*

Parents reported being actively involved in their child's interest based learning project but this was not the case for all parents, and parents also reported having had no involvement in the learning plan and, in one case, no contact with the Advisory teacher.

*No, I haven't, no. (been involved in learning plan meetings). (Were you invited to be involved?) No. Basically the contact is discussion after each term's presentation.*

*I've never met [Advisory teacher]. Not spoken to [Advisory teacher]. I work afternoons and not allowed to have my mobile on me.*

A parent spoke of a fear that parents were not consulted when things are not going well for the student's learning.

*If something's going wrong, not working well in the classroom I'm not sure they actually... bring the parents in.*

#### 4.6. EXHIBITIONS AS ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

This phenomenon describes parents' experiences of exhibitions as a means of assessing their child's learning in BPEA. The categories range from their students demonstrating increasing confidence and depth of understanding, to experiencing difficulty and not understanding how exhibitions work.

Parents reported:

- student has demonstrated increasing confidence and competency (7)
- student has demonstrated depth in research and knowledge (4)
- reports lack detailed information of assessment and progress (1)
- superficial learning demonstrated at exhibition (3)
- exhibitions have been difficult for the student (3)
- not understanding how exhibitions worked as assessment (1)

Many parents spoke about their child's initial lack of confidence with exhibitions and how surprised and impressed they were that this had improved with subsequent presentations. Parents were also impressed when their child was able to speak about their learning without having to resort to cue cards or other prompts. Parents took this as a measure of their child's understanding of what they were learning about as well as their increased confidence with public speaking.

*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.*

Opinions were almost equally divided as to whether parents were satisfied with the level of research and the depth of knowledge being exhibited.

*What 18 year-old kid could explain [a complex theory]? He knew a lot of the detail. I was surprised that he knew and then he related it to computer games and how it is used in the games.*

*All their work is kept on computer. He has shown me a couple of things. The mathematical and social science element that is supposed to be in his bodybuilding thing...I just don't see it. It puzzles me how he is meeting the standard when I'm just not seeing it.*

In relation to teachers reporting on the quality of student learning demonstrated through exhibition, one parent said

*The reports show either 'satisfactory' or 'cause for concern' - I would have liked more detail.*

#### 4.7. POSITIVE ASPECTS OF BPEA INTEREST- BASED APPROACH

In contrast to the earlier phenomenon related to issues with an interest-based approach, this phenomenon describes a range of positive experiences with this key element of BPEA.

Parents reported:

- appreciation of the flexibility to cater for individual needs (3)
- pride in authentic tasks or products completed by students (3)
- recognition of a learning community (2)
- valuing small classes and one-on-one attention (7)
- that mixed-ability means kids are recognised for what they are good at (1)
- that the calm, focused approach works (1)
- that students can explore career options (3)
- the difference between hobby and career is recognised (1)

The most important characteristic of the Big Picture Education approach for parents seemed to be the smaller classes and the smaller school. Parents believed this contributed to more careful monitoring of their child's learning, an increased level of learning support from the teacher and a sense of community.

*The good thing is that through the Big Picture program, there's a lot more oversight from teachers about how she's going. That's been a big benefit I see because one of the difficulties in the education system is that teachers are completely overrun, not able to give the attention to each student. But through the Big Picture program, I see [student]'s been able to get that.*

Parents also highly valued the individual approach to their child's interests and learning needs. It could be argued that this is an expected corollary of smaller classes but parents spoke about it more in terms of the Big Picture Education philosophy and the pedagogy of the Advisory teachers.

*...it gives them a chance to explore. That's probably the important thing that I see Big Picture does. It allows them to explore and by exploring, they start to answer those questions and decide themselves what they want to know, why they want to know it and which way is up.*

Importantly, while parents appreciated the opportunities that Big Picture Education provided for their children to explore career opportunities, one parent noted that the program also allowed for recognition of the difference between 'interest' and 'work experience'.

*[The Advisory teacher] has asked her several times if she would like to go into something to do with PE teaching or the fitness line. [She] doesn't seem keen on that. She loves her sport as a pastime not a career.*

#### 4.8. PERCEIVED PURPOSE OF BPEA

This phenomenon describes parents' perceptions of the purpose of BPEA. The categories range from an appreciation of an individual learning path, to recognition of it providing respite from a range of problems associated with conventional settings.

Parents reported:

- BPEA offers an individual learning path (8)
- personal attributes are important for success in BPEA (2)
- BPEA is good for kids who have a career in mind (4)
- BPEA offers an alternative to bullying in mainstream (3)
- BPEA is good for 'problem' kids (5)
- BPEA is considered 'alternative' by the public (2)

Most parents felt that the purpose of Big Picture Education was to provide an individual program of learning built on each student's interests and strengths.

*I think it helps every type of child...To turn your interests into schooling. Even some smart children are not interested and get lost. To find something that you are interested in and turn it into a learning experience...it's what we all want to do with our life journey - to find our passion.*

Parents also acknowledged that success in the Big Picture Education program was dependent on the students' responses and their personal attributes.

*BPEA has given her that opportunity but I do feel a lot of it is self-generated, making things come to fruition.*

The capacity for Big Picture Education to cater for individual student needs was also endorsed through parent comments about students who had experienced bullying or a lack of support for their learning 'problem' in mainstream schooling as well as for those who already had a strong career focus.

*I think that some of the kids that I know that come into it have got massive issues, this is probably a really good thing for them, probably the only chance they are going to get at getting a reasonable education and getting out of it without being kicked out of school. So I think it's a really great thing and I hope that if that's what they need, that's what they get.*

Two parents commented on what they thought the general public perception of Big Picture Education might be, saying:

*I think a lot of people out there still see the school as...just for a bludge*

*I think people think it is a bit of a - it's very new age and it's a little bit alternative.*

#### 4.9. ENROLMENT OF SIBLINGS OR OTHERS IN BPEA

This phenomenon describes parents' willingness to consider BPEA for their own or other people's children who are not currently enrolled.

Parents reported:

- BPEA should be available earlier (1)
- their other child has already applied or is enrolled in BPEA (2)
- a positive recommendation for enrolling in BPEA (8)
- they are happy for their other child to apply if they want to (1)
- other child is too academic for BPEA (1)

When parents were asked what advice they might give to another parent who was considering enrolling their child in Big Picture Education or what advice they might give the Education Minister about future enrolments most responded with a positive endorsement.

*To the Minister of Education I'd say, keep it going, keep it funded throughout Australia. All states would benefit in the long run. These kids have been forgotten through the education system - kids with a disability - kids lacking social skills.*

*I advocate what is happening here: the principles, the dynamics and the approach. These students will become an important part of society. They are achieving and they are very proud.*

One parent felt that the Big Picture Education program should be offered to students much earlier in their lives than it had been for his daughter who began in Year 9. He said:

*Possibly even in primary school, having time for them to explore that. My strategy, for instance in primary school, was getting them to actually enjoy the idea of learning, trying to give them practical examples of why they were doing what they're doing...But I think it gives them a chance to see what the relationship between what they're doing at school and what it means in life - giving them skills and strategies to approach life.*

Some parents were happy to have another child enrol if they wanted too or said that the other child was already enrolled. One parent felt that even though Big Picture Education had been the right choice for the child who was enrolled that her other two children were “too academic” and would remain in mainstream schooling.



## 5. PHENOMENA DESCRIBING THE EXPERIENCES OF TEACHERS

### 5.1. ISSUES WITH BPEA INTEREST-BASED APPROACH

This phenomenon relates to the kinds of pedagogical issues facing teachers in BPEA schools. These range from finding suitable internships, parental involvement and student behaviour to questions of depth of learning and curriculum coverage. Whilst these comments are from a very small number of teachers and therefore not generalizable, they are instructive in terms of the kinds of professional development issues requiring closer attention when implementing BPEA design principles.

Teachers reported difficulties with:

- finding internships (4)
- increasing parental involvement in learning plans and exhibitions (3)
- finding ways to address the fact that ‘kids don’t know what they don’t know’ (2)
- ensuring academic rigour and depth (3)
- the limit to how much guidance students will accept (2)
- student and parent perceptions that students are missing curriculum basics (2)
- students opting out and playing up (1)
- access to practical work facilities (1)

#### 5.1.1. Finding internships

Some teachers reported difficulty in finding suitable internships for students. Often this related to the context of the school community and at other times it was the inability to find good mentors willing to take on the task. Internships require a considerable amount of rethinking for teachers, students, parents and community mentors alike, therefore, it should be hardly surprising to see teachers searching for exemplars and support around what makes a good internship.

*The difficulty arises in finding the kids internships that are outside the scope of their existence. It’s easy to get an internship site for hairdressing etc that is, within a working class sphere. The difficulty is when they are looking at places outside their world where professionals are based. The kids get intimidated by working in a different class (culture). But the good thing about internships is that it can get them to think outside their realm of cultural possibility - “they are rough diamonds”*

For other teachers, there was an awareness that internships need to get better at both school and classroom levels.

*We didn’t do much – on the whole not very good at getting internships off the ground. We want to discuss this more next year.*

*We, as the school, need to look more seriously at developing relationships*

#### 5.1.2. Increasing parental involvement in learning plans and exhibitions

Given BPEA’s emphasis on family engagement there was a consistent focus on getting parents involved in learning plans and exhibitions. This kind of parental engagement was very important for teachers.

*We are trying to get the ILPs to play a bigger part. We got the parents in for the first time this semester. We didn’t get as many parents as we hoped. For those that came, it was good.*



*Last year for Exhibitions – 100% of parent attendance on at least 2 Exhibitions.*

*Parents definitely involved in exhibitions but not involved in learning plans due to difficulty in getting them in.*

*They are always willing to take time off from work to come to exhibitions. The family really values education.*

### **5.1.3. Extending students' learning, subjects and academic rigour without taking control**

A key issue facing some teachers was the question of how to extend students beyond 'what they don't know' without taking control and imposing irrelevant subject based content. Of course, teacher judgment is critical because it depends on the group, the student and the context. For some teachers there was ongoing tension as they tried to balance student interests/autonomy and teacher authority/direction in order to connect students' learning to broader bodies of knowledge (subjects) and new understandings (rigor).

*We think the BPEA model is a 4-year model and we are dealing here with Year 9-10 students who are not at the level of independence (of year 11 & 12 students) yet. The kids need more "knowledge and structure".*

*I found this article, I think the whole group will benefit from it - let's sit down and we'll have a discussion about it. I think that is really important too, because you've got to bring things to them as well, you can't expect them just to have it all from their own perspective - they need that development.*

*They have the trust that, well I know she is not just giving it to me because it's pointless or that it's just busy work - there is some plan behind why she's given me this work - and that's nice that they see that.*

Sensitivity to the issue of control versus autonomy is apparent in the following teacher's comment.

*If you make too many suggestions about what they should be doing in their project then they say that's not my project anymore and they lose interest. We've changed our thoughts about how to manage the projects. When we look at a project we see what could make it richer and deeper but we have to hold off with suggestions and just offer at an appropriate time "Have you thought about this" rather than sitting down and planning out from the beginning, on the kids behalf, how they could cover their maths, science etc. So we hold off a bit until the kid is feeling confident and then we make suggestions.*

### **5.1.4. Students opting out and playing up**

In the case of one teacher there was a concern about a few students opting out and playing up.

*One of the problems was this trying to be "purist" and letting the kids learn around what they are interested in. What we found was the kids, some would really engage but there were some who were still really opting out.*

*When they went out to classes in the mainstream (cooking, maths etc) they would play up and then it would be my personal fault. We were persevering with this idea that kids could go out for what they wanted. Even though we tried to keep it tight it just couldn't.*

### **5.1.5. Access to practical work facilities**

For another teacher there was a desire to have more in school practical facilities for students to use their hands as well as their hearts and minds. The issue of tinkering captures well the interest in exploring materials in order to produce artefacts and objects of value.

*I think it's critical that BPEA schools have a hands-on component, an applied learning component, to their schools. Whether it's cooking or woodwork or sewing the students need that hands-on resource. At present, since you guys have been here, we are not catering for our hands-on learners as well as we would like to purely because we are still setting up the workshop.*

*One girl in my Advisory who has no interest in woodwork or metalwork is doing an ancient civilizations project and to find some maths and some active learning in her learning plan she is looking to build a scale model of the coliseum. So downstairs is a place where she could come to do that and I could help her. Another student who has no interest in hands-on learning is doing a project on Manga and has decided he would like to make a replica of a weapon that is used in the cartoon series so we talked about him coming downstairs ... so those sorts of things come up unexpectedly as you explore the kids' interests.*

## 5.2. CURRICULUM MODIFICATIONS TO BPEA INTEREST-BASED APPROACH

This phenomenon describes how teachers adapted the BPEA curriculum to address the local conditions of schooling. External influences, and internal modifications are described.

Teachers reported:

- BPEA runs in conjunction with other programs (1)
- implementation of a flexible timetable (1)
- interest-based learning mapped back to state curriculum outcomes (2)
- skills are developed through standard Advisory tasks applied to interest-based topic (2)
- students co-construct curriculum with state curriculum in mind (1)
- students go to some mainstream classes (3)
- workshop content feeds into interest-based topic (3)
- workshop content designed to meet state curriculum ((3)
- some forms of mainstream testing or assessment are included (2)
- internship not necessarily linked to interest-based learning (1)
- teachers construct the curriculum for Year 8 students (1)
- Year 11 & 12 student focus is on state curriculum (2)

### 5.2.1. Modifications

Teachers in each of the participating schools had interpreted and modified the Big Picture curriculum to address the perceived needs of students, and to respond to local conditions, such as the availability of colleagues with subject-area expertise among teachers. Teachers in each site worked out how the interest-based approach of Big Picture could be adapted and modified to accommodate relevant syllabus documents. We conducted the research during the period in which teachers were also starting to pay attention to national curriculum documents. The interest-based approach of BPEA was variously positioned in relation to the subject-based approach of state and national curriculum documents. There are no blueprints for how to do this well, and teachers are required to develop local solutions to complex curriculum design issues.

*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 described how they were required to map students' interests to subject-based curriculum documents.

The one-to-one nature of the relationship between teachers and students in their Advisory class afforded opportunities to identify gaps in students' knowledge and skills.

*Spelling was one of those things that she never picked up, and everyone said, 'Oh you will pick it up, you will pick it up'. She got to this year, and the first piece of writing I got from her - and I said, 'Your spelling is atrocious'. She said, 'I know'. Then I worked with [other teachers to help her pick up] - for some reason [all the years] in primary school and high school - she hadn't picked up core spelling skills. We worked on those and we got a sheet of the top 400 words that you need to spell on a regular basis and she worked through that in her own time. We still work on those really hard-core skills, because they can't explore their passions if they don't have those skills.*

In sites where there is a Big Picture Education stream operating alongside conventional approaches to schooling, BPEA students have the opportunity to participate in conventional classes. A number of reasons were described for making use of these co-located resources: filling perceived gaps in students' knowledge; preparing students for mandatory external assessment tasks; providing specialist teaching and learning opportunities, such as language classes or access to industrial kitchens and workshops; and providing access to teachers with subject-area expertise.

### 5.2.2. Meeting syllabus requirements

The interest-based approach that characterises learning in a Big Picture Education Advisory appears to raise concerns in the minds of teachers, parents and students about the adequacy of the scope and depth of knowledge that students encounter. In contrast, it is generally assumed that conventional classrooms provide adequate coverage of essential knowledge. It is beyond the scope of this research to assess the validity of these concerns and assumptions. However, teachers raised issues related to the adequacy of the knowledge covered in Big Picture Education settings.

*Too many of our kids thought they were missing bits. Some parents wouldn't put their kids in Big Picture because they would miss out on things... We had a lot of parents interested but saying "no, they won't get this, they won't get that".*

One teacher described the approach taken in their school to address this concern in the following way.

*It's very AC [Australian Curriculum]; it's about making sure you are getting these basic entitlements to the basic knowledge areas.*

Teachers also talked about the challenges of implementing the Big Picture Education design and some of the compromises they had to make. For example, not all internship placements were connected to students' interests, and some schools experienced difficulty placing all students. In these circumstances, compromises were made by seeking placements that were likely to contribute to increased student confidence in the workplace, and seeking placements with mentors who would provide a positive experience.

Teachers of Years 11 and 12 expressed concerns about meeting requirements for accreditation. One described the issue as 'extremely challenging'. Both teachers and students were required to pay attention to how interest projects afforded opportunities to meet mandated criteria.

*This year all the Yr 11 students are doing [externally assessed] subjects so they have to have a certain amount of points and there are certain things they have to do. I have to keep detailed notes about what they have done around their coursework - of how their interest covers the course work they need to cover.*

We are unable to assess whether the challenges faced by Advisory teachers were different to those faced by their colleagues in conventional settings. However, the Advisory teachers expressed some anxiety in meeting the demands of external accrediting bodies.

*While I'd love to let them just follow that activity for the amount of time they need we were really panicking about hitting the road with this and starting fresh and not really understanding what it was we were doing and the pressure from the department to have evidence.*

### 5.3. TYPES OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN BPEA

This phenomenon provides insights into teachers' perceptions of students enrolling in BPEA schools, and what they bring to school in terms of skills, knowledge, attitudes and confidence.

Teachers reported:

- learning problems or lacking core skills (4)
- capable but may lack confidence (2)
- lacking social skills (3)
- range of students widening (2)
- students with a strong career focus (2)
- good with practical learning (1)
- disengaged had lost interest in learning (2)

#### 5.3.1. Learning problems or lacking core skills

Some teachers, expressed concern about BPEA schools being viewed as a place of last resort for difficult students or those with special needs who may not be coping in mainstream high schools.

*Yr 11 group – includes high maintenance students (development or behaviour). Two have Asperger's Yr 12 and Yr 11. And students with extremely poor literacy and numeracy.*

*My group were all new to BPEA that year. It was a classic case of BPEA being used as a place to put all those kids who were causing disaster out there. The group was notorious and predominantly a big friendship group.*

*Approx 80% of students have some kind of learning disability.*

#### 5.3.2. Capable but may lack confidence, social skills or interest

For some teachers, there was a perception that students were capable but often lacking in confidence, social skills or interest.

*He wasn't confident enough in his own self to set the expectations for himself.*

*With support he'll be a student leader next year. Now he realizes "I'm not the nobody in the room." He's found his identity.*

*For these younger ones it's about realizing they can do something and be good at it.*

*He is a very confident young man who quickly established himself as a leader in my Advisory. He has a range of interests, is a curious learner, exploring his passions is very easy for me because he is just a naturally curious guy. He gets on with a wide range of people and can talk to people of all ages.*

Other teachers believed that some students lacked social skills, although these issues are hardly unique to BPEA schools.

*She was closed off – glaring at everyone.*

*So he came a long way socially just by doing that. He's very sensitive, a beautiful kid.*

*When she came into BPEA she seemed socially immature*

Some teachers also identified students who for one reason or another had lost interest in learning but wanted to give it another go in a new environment.

*This would be the kid's last opportunity to engage with education. He was being very disruptive at [his former school] but here he is working.*

*She had become quite disengaged as a learner. Not through behaviour or anything, She just switched off and didn't really see herself as a learner. She talked about - in her speech at the Big Picture conference - she said I'm going to give Big Picture a go, because it couldn't get any worse.*

### 5.3.3. Range of students widening

Some teachers acknowledged that BPEA schools were also enrolling a range of students beyond the stereotypes of 'difficult', 'special needs' and 'disengaged' learners. In other words, BPEA schools were beginning to widen their appeal to students who wanted an alternative learning environment to mainstream schooling.

*They are not selecting disruptive kids.*

*The BPEA School isn't seen as a school of 'last resort'*

*We now have a much better mix and range of students.*

*Her passion for cooking, she really wants to become a chef. Wow, perfect BPEA student, she already has a passion. Bright and independent but lacking confidence.*

Whilst some other students came to BPEA schools because they wanted an opportunity to work with their hands and/or pursue their career.

*Yes because he was constantly being pressured to do the things that would have met the educational requirements but he just didn't want to do it. So with him as a student I just explore everything to reach his goal which is getting an apprenticeship. So all his learning he does with me in my Advisory is based around construction skills. He has done worksheets based around construction but he just doesn't get into the theory side of it but hands-on he's a completely different kid in the workshop.*

## 5.4. BEING A BPEA TEACHER

This phenomenon describes how teachers experience their role as an Advisory teacher in a BPEA school. It details the rewards and challenges associated with their role, as well as their understanding of what it takes to do it well.

Teachers reported:

- a rewarding experience (5)
- having time to pursue learning with each student (6)
- working as a team (4)
- a need to reflect and question your approach (7)
- being more than just a classroom teacher (7)
- having the right skills and motivation is important (5)
- cross-curriculum content knowledge is essential (7)
- working with limited resources (3)
- high physical and emotional demands (6)

### 5.4.1. Rewarding experience

While teachers described the challenges of teaching in a Big Picture school, they also described the rewards.

*I'm going home mentally exhausted but fulfilled.*

*At this early point I haven't gone home and felt I can't be bothered getting up the next day, it isn't worthwhile. It is a good type of tiredness.*

*It's been a difficult experience – but usually in a good way. What I've most enjoyed is that it is so strong in philosophy, its core tenets. When we talk about it as teachers – we are in big philosophical discussions. As a beginning teacher this is very enriching – all different ideas and approaches.*

Teachers described the satisfaction they felt when students got excited about learning.

*It is the reaction of the kids that I love – when they get excited about something. One kid is interested in music. She got off the phone and was bouncing off the walls. That is what is the pat on the back for us.*

### 5.4.2. Having time to pursue learning with each student

The opportunity for more sustained work with a smaller number of students was also described by teachers as contributing to their levels of satisfaction.

*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.*

Teachers described how the structural arrangements and processes in a Big Picture setting afford opportunities for different kinds of problem solving.

*With students with behavioural issues the relationship is different but still on the same level. A student was continuously late so I called her mother in. We all sat down together to be all on the same page. I asked "How do we solve this problem?"*

Teachers described how these conditions also impact on learning.

*In the past, I'd have to rush through the curriculum. Now I think, what are these kids' strengths and how can I help them? Now it's more about the depth than the quantity. The time to dedicate to subjects to learn something is present in BPEA.*

*I love working in BPEA because I've got time extended to work with my 16 students*

### 5.4.3. Working as a team

Teachers described the importance of working as a team of professionals who share their skills and expertise in order to collectively meet the needs of students.

*The expertise and the structure of our team is why we feel it's successful. We all have a specialization in an area different to each other.*

In some settings, there was a strong ethos of "everyone's a leader". This ethos extended to students, as well as teachers as leaders.



#### 5.4.4. A need to reflect and question

Teachers described an ongoing need to reflect upon their practice and question their assumptions. This is a characteristic of good teaching practice across conventional and unconventional settings, and it takes on different forms according to the context. In Big Picture schools, teachers described the need to reflect upon their practice and question their assumptions in the following terms.

*My understanding is that the students drive the learning. My job is to help them identify and map the curriculum. But I'm constantly going back to reassess what I thought BPEA was about.*

*I've had to re-think my whole teaching practice.*

*As I was marking their maths tests I found myself thinking about each of them on a completely different level. Why has she answered this and then not done that? What's going on here?*

#### 5.4.5. Being more than just a classroom teacher

The Advisory teachers described how they understand their role in a more comprehensive and wholistic way than when teaching in conventional settings.

*The relationship with students is different in every way. We see them every day. At mainstream we're not thinking about whether they were tired, and what's going on in their lives, understanding of what is happening at home. We get to know their sleeping patterns, eating patterns, personal and family difficulties. At times I get really frustrated with all of them and their attitudes. I care more about them as people than I ever would as a teacher – that is just about marking their work and assessing their knowledge.*

*The first thing that all the staff here try to do is develop relationships with the students... genuine relationships based on trust, honesty and where possible a shared interest.*

Some teachers allowed students to contact them out of hours.

*All students have my mobile – if they are working on something at home – then can call or email.*

*It is good that they feel that they can contact me out of hours.*

*It's not a job where you can say according to the union I'm on my lunch break. I see myself as more than a classroom teacher. At times, mother, social worker.*

Teachers described a different kind of contact with the students' families.

*We are in contact with the parents all the time. In my last school I probably wouldn't have even know what the kid's parents look like but here I know them all on first name basis*

*Each teacher is asked to call each student before school starts to welcome them back & teachers are asked to call parents with positive news and reinforce the good job that parents are doing with their child.*

#### 5.4.6. The right skills and motivation

Teachers described the kinds of skills and motivations that were necessary to work in a Big Picture setting,

*The key is having the right people as Advisory teachers.*



The 'right' people are required to be good at multitasking, and to be flexible when things are not going to plan. They also need high quality communication skills, and to be able to teach in an inquiry way. The most valued attribute was described as the capacity to develop relationships and rapport with students and their families.

The experiences and resources derived from prior experience were valued and recognised as important.

*It's all the resources from my previous teaching years that I bring with me because you still need all those tools to teach. It's not just about their interest, it's about skilling them up through their interest and I think there's that balance that's sometimes struggled with.*

*In BPEA you have to love teaching and you have to know about 15–20 topics at the same time.*

#### **5.4.7. Cross-curriculum content knowledge is essential**

Teachers agree that it was essential to be able to work across the curriculum.

*Cross-curricular experience is useful. There is some benefit to having been a primary teacher.*

*It's not black and white limits to subjects – this is maths, this is science. Instead we are finding the connections. That is the idea of it.*

*I have to be across a broad range of curriculum and for me personally that's my biggest worry. Having the core subject workshops takes the pressure off me a bit to find maths etc in kids' interest projects.*

In some schools, there were gaps in subject- area knowledge.

*I have taken on teaching Maths & English because there is no one else here to do that.*

#### **5.4.8. Physical and emotional demands**

The demands of teaching in a Big Picture setting are well summarised in the following quotation.

*I think we got to about the end of term 1 last year and it already felt like the end of term 3. I've never been so tired in my life...I've never been with a bunch of people that work this hard and I've worked with some really good teams before. We'd be on Facebook to 2-3am for those first two terms most nights doing stuff. There's no release time in the school day so we're up late at night making the connections and thinking about our work. I'm not complaining because it's my choice do this but it's really, really tiring and that's one of the low points.*

Teachers described high levels of exhaustion and stress.

*I've never been more tired in my life.*

*It is contact the whole time.*

*It's bloody hard in here.*

*For me sitting and being an Advisory teacher but also supporting everybody else is really hard.*

*For me finding the time to have those one-on-one meetings has been really hard with so many interruptions.*

*Each of us works a full day (unlike mainstream). It's not just during school hours. Girls, parents and some mentors call me out of hours.*

There was some evidence of these conditions contributing to teachers taking time off, and teacher turnover.

## 5.5. BENEFITS OF EXPERIENCE IN MANAGING BPEA

This phenomenon refers to the capacity of teachers to better understand their practice and improve it. It acknowledges that deeper learning about the BPEA design principles and needs of students comes with experience and reflection.

Teachers reported:

- enhanced ability to reflect and adjust to meet student needs (3)
- improving internships (1)
- improving interest-based learning projects (2)
- making better use of Town Hall (1)

### 5.5.1. Enhanced ability to reflect and adjust to meet student needs

Some teachers identified the importance of experience in terms of managing and improving their own understanding and practice. In particular, there was a feeling that once immersed in 'doing' BPEA it was much easier to dig deeper by reflecting on the needs of individual students and how internships, projects and group building activities contributed to student learning.

*We are thinking of a structured weekly check-in with each student – to be introduced next year. They will bring their work – what they are working on next week.*

*We have kept reflecting and changing, always improving ...*

*Working out how to get our students out on Tuesday and Thursday...we have really worked on our mentor program- what we want to get out of it.*

*Town Hall for building community and getting together. Sometimes we focus on things like setting a goal for your week (on the Monday) and then reflecting on that in the Friday meeting. Sharing what we have done. Sometimes we just play a game.*

For one teacher, there was much greater confidence around managing internships and connecting them to projects and learning plans.

*Pulling back to 1-day/week for most students. Mentors getting better. We have gone from 30%-90% of the students being out in the community*

*We have tried to link the projects to internships. Because of the difficulties in setting up internships and the time delays a lot of projects weren't being completed. We have tried to change the order to having a project interest and then finding an internship to fit with that.*

These levels of exhaustion and stress were associated with extending the depth and quality of what students are doing.

*For [some teachers] it has been easy to include maths, science and English. For others it is a bit more difficult. You have to think outside the square. How can we include the subjects?*

*The projects are now looking "more creative and interesting and real".*

## 5.6. CHALLENGES FACED BY STUDENTS

This phenomenon describes teachers' perceptions of the challenges faced by students enrolled in BPEA schools. The teachers also provide insight into how they attempt to support students to meet these challenges.

Teachers reported:

- taking on more than they can manage (1)
- fit between interest-based learning and an academic pathway in the future (6)
- literacy skills remain minimal (1)
- exploring knowledge more deeply (3)
- being in an adult workplace (2)

Teachers described a range of challenges faced by students, some of which related to taking on more than they could manage. For some students, learning beyond the classroom helped them to identify and eliminate possible career paths. It also helped them adjust to the demands of a workplace, including turning up on time, negotiating with a supervisor, and taking initiatives.

The one-student-at-a-time approach places students' understanding under scrutiny in ways that are unlikely to occur in conventional settings with larger class sizes. In Big Picture Advisories, there is time to challenge students on their thinking and to examine their skills.

*Do you know what a comparative essay is...no...do you know what an essay is...no not really...then we need to read some essays and look at the language features and structure.*

Teachers described being able to push students to think more deeply.

*I've encouraged her to follow her passion but to start to think about developing depth and rigour in her project.*

Teachers described some of the challenges associated with preparing students to make the transition from a Big Picture learning context to a more traditional school or post-school environment. There was support for seeking university entry, and recognition of work towards accredited programs through the presentation of a portfolio of work, but also a concern that this would not be considered legitimate evidence of performance. Consequently, teachers expressed the need to provide students interested in attending university with traditional curriculum offerings.

*Its really important to her mum that she works in core curriculum areas in case [she] decides to go to university. You have to respect the parent's wishes because it's important to the relationship with their kid.*

*Expectations shouldn't be removed just because they're in a Big Picture environment. In fact they actually want the expectation, because that means that if they're meeting those expectations they feel like they're achieving.*

## 5.7. EXTERNAL PERCEPTIONS OF BPEA

This phenomenon refers to the perceptions of external stakeholders including non-teachers, students and community. It's about how new or different ways of organizing schools are viewed from the outside and how these judgments are arrived at, rightly or wrongly.

Teachers reported on:

- people in general (2)
- non-BPEA teachers in the same school (1)
- non-BPEA students in the same school (1)
- other educators (1)

### 5.7.1. People in general

There was a clear perception among some teachers that their school was different, and it was therefore really important to make a good impression.

*We want to build dynamic relationships with the people around us. Yesterday some new kids went for a smoke and harassed some Uni kids and then on Facebook came a whole lot of negative comments about the school and the kids here.*

*It's very different, the pressures that parents, students and the other teachers put on something that is new and different. I think it's difficult for people to accept change and difference but when you talk to a lot of parents in the community they say I wish that had been there for me. They appreciate that their kids are intelligent but in different ways. They may not be good at sitting in a classroom and playing "the game" but they may be fantastic out there in a work environment.*

### 5.7.2. Non-BPEA teachers and students in the same school

In schools where there was a mix of mainstream and BPEA approaches to learning there was a sense of rivalry and suspicion reported by one teacher.

*When we had some extra teacher support...even though this teacher seemed onside, negative comments would go out to the mainstream.*

From a student perspective, teachers also reported a sense of suspicion among some non-BPEA students largely based on hearsay.

*Last year we weren't expecting any yr 9's to join BPEA because when [student] and I spoke to them they gave us this look like where not going anywhere near BPEA, we know the stories (about the terrible time).*

## 5.8. PEDAGOGY OF PERFORMANCE

This phenomenon specifically relates to how teachers assess student performance in the exhibition.

Teachers reported:

- performance assessed through exhibition (2)

The exhibition is an integral part of the Big Picture Education curriculum. Teachers observed how it afforded opportunities to assess student performance.

*The students respect each other. They realize that: "even though doing the exhibition is hard for me – all the others have to do it too. I am a part of a community of learners."*

The use of rubrics for set oral presentation allowed student performances to be moderated across classrooms.

## 5.9. TANGIBLE PRODUCTS

This phenomenon refers to teacher perceptions of the originality, quality and depth of products and tasks produced by students.

Teachers reported:

- original products and presentations for exhibition (2)
- products reflect a limited range of skills (1)
- tasks set by teachers during Advisory or workshops (1)

### 5.9.1. Original products and presentations for exhibition

Exhibitions, journaling and reflections are a pivotal part of student evidence of learning. Teachers place a great deal of emphasis on ensuring students' work is rigorous and linked to their learning goals. The following teacher comments demonstrate a great deal about how these strategies work and the ways in which teachers support enhanced depth and quality of student learning outcomes.

*At [his] Shadow Day he made drawings and that will be part of his Exhibition. He is looking at legal guidelines for building.*

*The creative response was that they had to reflect on their Big Picture year and the focus being on the change within their learning. It's about self- reflection as a learner and so their creative response could be music, song, collage, art, scrap booking. It could have been anything except for interpretive dance. I drew the line at that one, because I wasn't really sure how I was going to - then there's a piece of writing that goes with it and they're taught how to write a rationale and we go through all the scaffolding about how to write a rationale. They had to look at the symbolism; they had to look at strengths and weaknesses of what they did in actually creating this document and also within their year. It can't be more than 500 words and that's quite hard for them to do that, so we've got [student]'s - she decided to make a scrapbook*

*So their journal is probably their key element. Here's [student]'s journal and this is graded too - there's a rubric for the journal as well. The journal's about thinking. It's not about writing styles and so the focus isn't on spelling or anything like that, but it's about that deep thinking, which is often difficult to mark, but we have to, to some degree. So, from here they will revisit their journal and they'll take parts from the journal to indicate as evidence.*

In the case of one teacher there was a feeling of frustration about the limited range of skills being demonstrated and the difficulty of getting final pieces of work.

*We've had some difficulty in actually getting our hands on concrete products of the work, particularly the harder bits. Sometimes the students are happy to show us their creative stuff, but we really haven't had very much writing, not that we overly value that, but we really haven't seen much finished work from kids. So, it's really difficult for us to get a sense*

### 5.9.2. Tasks set by teachers during Advisory or workshops

This category describes some of the tasks set by teachers during Advisory.

*One of the last assessment pieces was a creative response with a written rationale. It's a common assessment task that's used in advanced English classes. It's a common assessment task used in college, which is where they're all going. With all assessment tasks, we try to link with what's going to be before and after, so that they're not lost when they leave.*

*The assessment piece for the last learning plan was this scientific information report, which they could choose but most of the time it was related to whatever they were doing in their learning plan.*

*The portfolio is actually - and I push this really hard - is a stand-alone document, that any person who walked off the street could pick up and tell me what happened in your year. The highs, the lows, the deep thinking ... all of that. That's 100 per cent of their grade for communication for this term. So, it's a significant document.*

## 6. CONCLUSION

This concluding section of the report summarises the experiences of students, parents/carers and teachers as they relate to the aim of BPEA to stimulate ‘vital change in Australian education by generating and sustaining innovative, personalised schools that work in partnership with their greater communities’ (<http://www.bigpicture.org.au>).

The site visits provided opportunities to observe how leaders and teachers were implementing the BPEA design distinguishers. It is important to note that they were modifying these distinguishers to respond to local conditions such as, the availability of subject specialists, the requirements of accreditation processes, and the perceived learning needs of students. This resulted in local variations in how BPEA was being implemented at each site. These variations are reflected in the experiences of the participants.

Students, parents/carers and teachers all described their experiences with BPEA as being different to their prior experiences in conventional schools. The reported advantages were greater in number than the reported disadvantages.

Notably, students reported enjoying learning and the increasing confidence in their ability to learn.

Other advantages included the smaller and more personal scale of BPEA schools. For students, these benefits extended beyond structures, such as Advisories, and included improved relationships, not just with their teachers but also with their peers, and more involvement of parents/carers in learning processes.

Disadvantages included less access to some subject-area specialists, less confidence of exposure to core bodies of knowledge, and the risk of failure of important design features such as poor quality internships.

Some of these disadvantages related to problems arising from the implementation of local variations to BPEA that lacked fidelity to its design distinguishers. For example, parents raised a number of issues in the phenomena *Experiences with teachers*, *Involvement in exhibitions and learning*, and *Experiences with BPEA* that were the effects of the BPEA distinguishers not being implemented or not operating effectively, such as when parents/carers were not involved in their child’s learning plan, or when the internships were not undertaken or not well connected to their child’s learning plan.

In contrast, parents/carers who experienced quality communication with Advisory teachers reported feeling more involved with their child’s learning, enabling closer monitoring as well as celebration of their child’s progress.

Parents/carers concerns with the curriculum are reported in the phenomenon, *Issues with BPEA interest-based approach*. These concerns reflect the experiences of parents/carers who were early adopters of BPEA, and also relatively new to this type of schooling. It is recommended that BPEA develop ongoing mechanisms by which current and former students and their families are able to provide feedback on their experiences during and after enrolment in BPEA.

Students were able to describe the features of BPEA. They articulated how the design distinguishers fitted together, and were intended to support their future careers and plans. They demonstrated a sense of ownership and control over their learning, and were able to explain why learning in BPEA was important to them. For example, in the phenomena *Students’ experiences of learning and Students’ motivation for learning*, students readily identified a sense of purpose, meaning and engagement in their learning, especially as it related to their interests and career aspirations.

Advisory teachers acknowledged the demands of the intensely relational dimensions of the BPEA under the phenomena *Being a BPEA teacher and Benefits of experience in managing BPEA*. In addition, they reported the need to have an extensive pedagogical repertoire, and deep understanding of a number of key learning areas to support interest-based learning.



One of the major tensions reported by Advisory teachers under the phenomenon *Curriculum modifications to BPEA interest-based approach* was the difficulty of meeting official syllabus and accreditation requirements and maintaining fidelity to interest-based learning. Innovation of the kind proposed by BPEA, therefore, requires ongoing dialogue with relevant authorities, students, parents/carers and supporters.

Under the phenomenon *Benefits of experience in managing BPEA*, teachers described the pivotal importance of experience in understanding and implementing the BPE design distinguishers and comprehending how the parts fit together. This presents some unique challenges in terms of introducing innovation and how BPEA might think about the role of experienced mentors, coaches and even internships to support novice BPE teachers.

In addressing the issues raised by teachers, it is recommended that BPEA:

- (i) Continue to provide teachers and school leaders with opportunities for ongoing professional learning to deepen their understanding of cross-curricular teaching, project based learning and subject disciplines;
- (ii) Explore with stakeholders (including professional associations, universities, schools and education systems) a more sustainable and systematic approach to pre-service and in-service professional learning and accreditation;
- (iii) Continue negotiations with federal and state jurisdictions to achieve recognition and accreditation of BPEA programmes in their own right; and
- (iv) Establish direct pathways and entry to universities through the development of portfolio entry standards.

By way of concluding remarks, this technical report highlights the significant and profoundly important work being undertaken by BPEA to bring about 'vital change in Australian education by generating and sustaining innovative personalised schools that work in partnership with their greater communities'. We need to acknowledge that reforming schools 'ain't easy'. It's complex, challenging and time-consuming work. There are numerous obstacles, barriers and interferences to systemic and school level change. It requires imagination, commitment, courage, persistence and passion by many individuals and groups. Above all, it requires the vision, commitment and goodwill of stakeholders, sponsors, funders and the wider community to make it happen. This report adds to the body of evidence about the kinds of structural, organisational, pedagogical and community related conditions that need to be created and more widely sustained to enhance student engagement in learning. This is best achieved by listening to the experiences of those people most directly affected - students, parents/carers and teachers. Based on these experiences we have identified, mapped and described the kinds of challenges and opportunities ahead. If Australia is going to become a truly clever country prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century it must find ways to support innovation of the kind advocated by BPEA so that all students benefit from a relevant, rigorous and meaningful education.



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