

Enduring problems; old and new responses

Amongst the many questions asked about Big Picture Education is ‘how does it differ from the many interventions in schools aimed at turning around the young people we are losing?’ Implicit is another question: ‘why have schools and supporting agencies apparently not succeeded in engaging all our young people and helping them achieve?’ Then the final question: ‘is the Big Picture design one of the best responses we have – both in concept and in practice?’

To find the answers we have to think more about: the nature of the problems, the policy interventions and the action taken by schools and systems over the last few years. We then have to judge these interventions against recent critiques of mainstream schools; what is wrong and what is needed? To what extent does Big Picture tick the boxes? Does it measure up to the criteria that are agreed to be essential to achieve lasting and authentic change?

Our current evaluation of Big Picture tries to answer these questions. This section sets the context.

An enduring problem: youth disengagement

Ask just about any teacher and they’ll point to the importance of engaging students in learning if they are to achieve and succeed in any sustainable way.

Discussion about student engagement has tended to focus on the negative consequences of disengagement. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) points out that, in the absence of substantial research into positive engagement, we tend to focus on disengagement, particularly the behavioural consequences which can be more easily measured and tracked. Some of the more obvious symptoms of disengagement include:

- erratic or no attendance at school
- low literacy or numeracy/poor attainment
- lack of interest in school and/or stated intention to leave
- negative interactions with peers
- behavioural issues including aggression, violence, or social withdrawal
- significant change in behaviour, attitude or performance

These are familiar enough, although behavioural indicators alone tend to understate the extent of disengagement. Again, just about every teacher knows about the students who remain switched off at school but don’t appear in behavioural statistics.

So the problem is worse than the measures indicate – and it is also a problem that schools have a reasonable capacity to address. It also isn’t new: over a decade ago a review pointed to problems created by a non-stimulating school learning environment with no clear relation to the wider community or the adult world, and to negative teacher/student relationships which are propped up by rules and regulations which disallow young people from expressing themselves as adult and responsible members of the school community.¹

The consequences at school and beyond are also well known. Tony Vinson’s report *Dropping off the Edge: The Distribution of Disadvantage in Australia* highlights the powerful ‘links that

exist between such factors as early school leaving, low job skills, long term unemployment, court convictions and eventual imprisonment’.² Vinson describes ‘the enduring story of the disadvantaging consequences of limited education and associated lack of information retrieval and exchange skills, deficient labour market credentials, poor health and disabilities, low individual and family income and engagement in crime’.³

Clearly, ensuring that young people are connected to learning, with one eye on their post-school destination, is a big part of any solution.

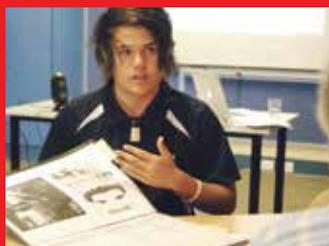
An enduring problem: the growth of mental health disorders

A growing body of evidence points to the escalating problem of mental health disorders among young people. Social and emotional health problems and mental disorders are contributing increasingly to the burden of disease, appearing at a younger age and increasing in severity. In 2007, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) reported that, of the total burden of disease and injury experienced by children and young people aged 0 to 14 years, 23 per cent was due to mental disorders – the largest burden of disease and injury for this age group.⁴

Mental illness is the most common health issue affecting young people in Australia, accounting for 61 % of the non-fatal burden of disease for young people.⁵ Those with mental health problems are more likely to report: feeling very stressed, having poor or fair physical health, performing below grade level at school, using alcohol or other drugs, and thinking about killing themselves.

Schools can, and should be, effective agents in addressing such problems. Unfortunately, many young people no longer look to school as a place where their creative spirit and energy can be developed. There is a crisis of motivation as evidenced by a general malaise – low quality work, absenteeism, hostility, waste, alcohol and drug abuse and cognitive illness created by a loss of meaning and purpose in education.

It would seem clear that the way we do school should reduce and not add to mental health disorders among young people.



Activity without change

As AITSL reports, governments across Australia recognise the importance of student engagement, but few explicitly provide strategies and guidance for boosting engagement in the classroom. Governments inevitably pull the levers over which they have most control, and policy intervention has touched on school leaving age and school-to-work transition, as well as 'learn or earn' adjustments to post-school support.

Such focus hasn't been very productive. As Professor Margaret Vickers states in *Reviewing the Big Picture learning design*, high school completion rates long stagnated, then recently improved but without leading to lower youth unemployment. Australia's education system continues to struggle against a persistent and protracted set of problems related to student disengagement, poor health and wellbeing and underachievement. A longer stay at school isn't delivering measurable dividends. It is hardly surprising that attention is turning to how we do school itself.

But changing how we do school is poorly served by unhelpful and sometimes conflicting policy priorities. Considerable attention is paid to measuring what is easily measurable, while ignoring what may be more important elements of effective schools – especially sustained student engagement. A renewed focus on student engagement and authentic learning has to survive the impacts of policies promoting high-stakes testing, curriculum mandates, government micro-management of schools and unproductive school competition.

One dimension of the problem, as articulated by Darling-Hammond (2010) is that:

“policies often create a hostile environment for school models that deviate from traditional structures that mountains of regulations have held in place”⁶

Even external policies that should make a difference have arguably had little impact on practice inside schools. There has been considerable attention given to teacher education and teacher supply, curriculum, assessment and reporting, as well as measures addressing school and teacher performance and accountability. Positive reform in such areas is important but regressive and inconsistent policies risk creating Darling-Hammond's 'hostile environment' for authentic school change.

More recent years have seen some shift in government priorities and a desire to initiate major school change by:

- mobilising community partnerships
- increasing levels of parental involvement
- fostering school autonomy

- stimulating innovation and flexibility
- providing tailored learning opportunities for students most at risk.

The question is 'whether these reach deep enough to achieve the changes in school pedagogy and structure needed.' The question that the Global Education Leaders' Program (GELP) also asks is 'whether and how school systems authorities can create these deeper changes.' In the meantime:

“...students, families, communities and entrepreneurs are creating their own learning models on the ground, while many governments continue, off pace, to dictate change from above. Emerging forms of schooling and learning are not waiting for permission from government or authorities, as the rapid spread of new learning opportunities can attest.”⁷

GELP mentions Big Picture Education in this context, but the experience of Big Picture in Australia is that governments and education authorities have been more supportive of these new learning opportunities than this generalisation might suggest. While progress is sometimes slow, education system leaders in Australia realise that we can no longer do more of the same and expect different results.

The response from schools

Both with and without policy support, schools have implemented a plethora of programs and interventions designed to address student disengagement. Thirty such programs are mentioned in a 2010 evaluation of Yule Brook College in Western Australia. As one leader at the school commented:

... when the school was first established, ... teachers tried different pedagogical approaches... it was very much like it was a laboratory for trying these things. And things came and went as people came and went and nothing stuck.⁸

Despite the best efforts of staff at the time, none of these programs was going to bring about the kind of shift in school culture that was necessary. As one teacher explained, “We've still got violence, we've still got poor attendance, we've still got low interest in numeracy. There's been no breakthrough here”. Programs offering personal support, alternative pathways and improved transition to work all had merit, but the school needed a circuit breaker, an alternative whole-school change strategy.

The experience of Yule Brook College is not unusual. Whether designed by the school or chosen from the large number on offer, most interventions tend to exist outside the core of the school. They are 'bolt-on' initiatives, often sitting alongside similar others, rarely (or at best, separately) impacting on pedagogy and school organisation - and often with distant sponsoring bodies and funding sources.

In some ways the bolt-on interventions, because of their often measurable success, get in the way of a serious rethink of how school could be done differently. For significant numbers of young people schools remain alienating places with rigid timetables, hierarchical structures, didactic pedagogies, punitive behaviour management policies, poor facilities, unbalanced emphasis on academic measurement, standardisation, competitiveness, streaming, an imposed curriculum and poor relationships with teachers.

Systems, other providers and funders

Every school jurisdiction in Australia can boast strategies and specific programs to address student disengagement or at least its multiple symptoms. Some of these strategies are more useful than others - school principals report that they have improved and have become more targeted over the years. At the same time they sometimes struggle in the face of reduced investment by governments in supporting structures, including consultancy support.

The resulting vacuum has been filled to some extent by the philanthropic sector, either directly or through the not-for-profit organisations which might link the sector to schools. A 2012 survey conducted by Leading Learning in Education and Philanthropy (LLEAP) indicated that the sector has sought to “engage more directly with education particularly working in collaboration with schools and not-for-profits around common areas of need for learners.”⁹ They commonly were involved in disadvantaged school contexts, with student engagement seen as a common need, along with addressing the problems that reduce engagement.

The survey also found that the top specific priority for schools and philanthropic foundations and trusts was to broaden learning for students via some type of “learning/academic focus area”, for example in literacy, numeracy and music. Schools, not-for-profit and philanthropic organisations identify learning focus areas, experiences, vocational pathways and community building as priorities.

While there may be considerable agreement about such priorities, interventions take the form of smaller identifiable programs rather than impacting on whole school pedagogy and organisation. There are many barriers to larger scale change: eg schools might balk at the idea of a substantial restructure; funders might be wary about the cost and problems of pouring more resources into fewer schools. The 2013 LLEAP survey showed that schools were especially seeking support to build individual and organisational capacity – but philanthropic respondents to the survey placed this sixth in importance.

The biggest problem, as GELP has pointed out, is that such interventions tend to represent a solution to a particular problem within the existing model of schooling. These approaches do not affect the core model of schooling and therefore the nature of the learning experience.¹¹

This is the substantial difference between Big Picture learning, which requires whole school change with a large upfront investment, and other interventions that co-exist with existing school practice. Whole-school change, particularly when built around a personalised view of learning, is slow, messy, intensive and all-consuming – and potentially threatens the comfort zones of people inside schools and in associated organisations.

Yet all this is sometimes needed before authentic school change will take place.

Effective learning and authentic school change

To transform schooling at scale, we need clear evidence about what works in learning combined with a radical, alternative vision of what's possible. In short we need a set of rigorous and bold design principles on which transformation can be built.¹²

There has been no shortage of prescriptions of how effective learning can be created. The prescriptions are always useful, apart from anything else, to use as a checklist against which to judge claims made by school reformers, including Big Picture Education Australia.

In 2010 the OECD Centre for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) defined an effective learning environment as a place that:

1. makes learning central, encourages engagement, and where learners increasingly understand themselves as learners
2. ensures that learning is social and often collaborative
3. is highly attuned to the learners' motivations and the key role of emotions
4. is acutely sensitive to individual differences, including in prior knowledge
5. is demanding for each learner but without excessive overload
6. uses assessments that are consistent with its aims, with strong emphasis on formative feedback
7. promotes horizontal connectedness across activities and subjects, in and out of school.¹³

The cost to schools, school systems and countries that ignore such advice will continue to mount. Sir Ken Robinson - English author, speaker, and international advisor on education - points to the billions of dollars spent on countless initiatives in schools without any real improvements,

even for those who do stay in school.

He points to three principles and methods on which real solutions should be based:

“First education is always and inevitably personal. All students have their own reasons for staying in, or for pulling out of, school. Like you and me they are living, breathing individuals with their own hopes, motivations, challenges, attitudes and drives. The current system is failing so many of them because it is impersonal and standardized. The future lies in forms of education that are customised to the needs and motivations of the people in it.

Second, education is about learning. It can be improved only through a deeper understanding of why and how people actually do learn. The current system is failing because it typically force-feeds students a dried diet of received information. The solution is to adopt forms of teaching that arouse students' appetite for learning.

Third, focusing on learners and learning has important implications for the culture of schools. The current system is failing because it is rooted to the industrial culture of mass production - the fixed lesson periods of ringing bells, the division of students into age groups and the curriculum into separate subjects, and the rigid barriers between school and the world outside. Schools do not have to be like this.”¹⁴

Valerie Hannon, a founding director of the high profile Innovation Unit¹⁵, also advocates a deeper intervention. She argues that programs which focus on early leavers mask a bigger issue – left untouched is a much bigger group of students who also don't become self-motivated and self-directed learners. They appear to succeed in a highly controlled assessment driven environment, but struggle when left to their own devices.

This points to a “widening disconnect between what interests, motivates and engages young people in their ‘real’ lives and their experience of schooling; and that this disconnect grows steadily during the secondary school years.”¹⁶

Her Learning Futures program¹⁷ considered what design features might be needed in learning activities to see more students deeply engaged, more of the time. Such activities, she maintains, should:

- be located, either physically or virtually, in a world that the student recognises and is seeking to understand
- feel authentic, absorbing the student in actions of practical and intellectual value and fostering a sense of urgency
- enlist the outside passions of both students and teachers, enhancing engagement by encouraging students to choose areas of interest which matter to them

- enable a student to continue learning outside the physical and temporal constraints of the classroom, drawing on family members, peers, local experts and online references as sources of research and critique

Such activities, she writes, trigger high levels of student engagement. They not only form a checklist for teachers but suggest four design principles which are needed for schools, principles which the Learning Futures team felt held particular promise in making a school more engaging:

1. Project-based learning – Students design, plan, and carry out an extended project that produces a publicly exhibited output such as a product, publication or presentation.
2. Extended learning relationships – taking account of (and utilising) every student's extended learning relationships (peer-peer, student-teacher, involving parents or external mentors or businesses), so that learning is something that can happen at any time, in any place, and with a wider range of coaches, mentors, and experts.
3. School as base camp - treating school as a base camp for enquiries, rather than as a final destination and sole source of knowledge.
4. School as learning commons - transforming school into a common ground for which teachers, students and the local community share responsibility, where they share authority, where they *all* learn, and from which they all benefit.

The scope of such change goes well beyond the reach of almost all the interventions created by schools, systems and philanthropic organisations. But nothing less will do to create the depth of change required.

An Australian perspective

For some time the concerns expressed about schooling in Australia have reflected such approaches. As the Victorian “Myer Full Service School Project” indicates, re-engaging young people in learning means:

- building relationships that are inclusive, engaging and enabling
- pursuing personal and community development in ways that enable all young people to remake the conditions of their lives
- bringing into existence schools and communities that actively research their own circumstances and practices
- considering individual development to be part of a wider process of active community development for young people

- integrating co-operative collaborative approaches between schools and other agencies/ professionals aimed at ensuring school completion; regarding schools as only one part of a wider community/ agency commitment to making a difference in the lives of *all* young people¹⁸

As Barry Down reminds us, the emphasis clearly needs to be on “a schooling system that includes everybody” and that actively works against both historical and contemporary forces of exclusion.¹⁹ At heart, therefore, is the need to address those aspects of existing patterns of curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and organisation of schools that may unintentionally sustain, marginalise, alienate, and exclude some young people (generally those not from the dominant cultural and economic group).

In this task, there are some key elements that contribute to student engagement:

- students are more likely to be motivated in programs that allow for close adult-student relationships;
- students’ engagement increases in environments where they have some autonomy in selecting tasks and methods, and in which they can construct meaning;
- motivation and engagement are enhanced in well-structured educational environments with clear purposes;
- motivation is enhanced in settings with a challenging curriculum, high expectations, and strong emphasis on achievement;
- motivation and engagement are enhanced when students have multiple paths to competence;
- helping students develop education and career pathways can enhance their understanding of school and their motivation²⁰

The place of Big Picture

In its design and in its implementation in schools, Big Picture Education ticks the boxes outlined on these pages. The brochure *The Big Picture Journey*, describes the twelve Big Picture Education distinguishers. In Australia these have evolved from those developed initially in the United States - and interestingly pre-date much of the recent commentary about the urgency and direction of authentic school reform.

Clearly the Big Picture Education framework reflects, and has even influenced, the changed directions advocated by leading thinkers and doers in school reform. The Big picture approach, and the ideas on which it is based, have been recognised by the UK based Innovations Unit which showcased a collection of the 10 best schools and 10 big ideas for 21st Century education.²¹ In the United States President Obama identified Big Picture as an exemplar of the kind of education required for success in life, careers and family.²²

Big Picture has also come to the attention of GELP, set up as a collaborating global partnership of teams of education system leaders and organisations. In its recent book, *Redesigning Education*, GELP outlines what it takes to transform education systems. The book cites Big Picture Learning as an example of this development, noting its formation in the United States by Dennis Littky and Elliot Washor, “who wanted to provide students with a personalised learning experience driven by their passions and anchored in internships out in the community two days a week”. (p 19)

Big Picture is, therefore, an innovative model of education that aims to connect students and the community in order to create learning programmes rooted in the real world. In doing so, it is well suited to meet the changing realities of 21st Century living and learning. Big Picture Education Australia now has nearly forty programs operating in Australia, from within-school academies to greenfields Big Picture schools. Its schools provide students with a small, safe, and relational community of learners where the principle of ‘one student at time’ provides a greater chance of addressing the significant educational, economic and mental health problems facing young people today.

But Big Picture in Australia also exists for a second purpose: to generate discussion and debate amongst policy makers, educators and community leaders about the kinds of structural and pedagogical changes that are required to improve student engagement in learning and more inclusive and socially just outcomes. Big Picture wants to provide a catalyst for school change around curriculum, pedagogy, structure, relationships, organisation and community with a view to improving the educational outcomes and life chances of all students.

To achieve this we believe that it is important to provide a narrative about how Big Picture began and evolved in Australia because it is, in no small part, a story, warts and all, of the trials, traps and triumphs of how to establish and grow authentic school change.



Big Picture
EDUCATION AUSTRALIA

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COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS...
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