

Overcoming the barriers to engagement and equity for all students

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Paper to be presented at Australian Curriculum Studies Association 2009
Biennial Conference *Curriculum: a national conversation*, Canberra, 2-4 October

ABSTRACT

Australian schooling suffers from a strong nexus between education, social background and geographic location, which reinforces existing patterns of privilege and disadvantage. The most recent *How Young People Are Faring* report, released by The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), shows the persistence of the relationship between social background and geography with educational achievement and attainment. Other research by FYA shows that some schools in low socioeconomic areas are challenging this relationship by transforming learning in the middle years, when students are most vulnerable to disengagement, low achievement and early leaving. The research describes the various factors that either support or block these schools' efforts to create an engaging curriculum connected to students' lives and to their community. This paper will draw on these findings as well as new research soon to be released by FYA to propose the systemic reforms and policy frameworks – including those that relate to a national curriculum – that are needed if all young Australians are to have access to a quality education.

¹ The authors gratefully acknowledge the work of Dr Barbara Lemon in preparing this paper.

Introduction

This paper examines the current landscape of barriers to engagement and equity in Australian schooling and explores both programmatic and broader structural responses to overcome them. The discussion draws from a number of pieces of research conducted and commissioned by Education Foundation, a division of The Foundation for Young Australians. The first part of the discussion examines the relationship between levels of socio-economic advantage, engagement, completion of year 12 or equivalent and the combined impact of these on transitions from school to work and further study.

The second part of the discussion focuses on the particular challenges of middle years disengagement, and the potential benefits of reconfiguring the learning experience along personalised or student-centred lines. Two applied examples of this approach – the Cityscape and ruMAD? programs - are then explored. Both programs promote student-led, independent learning that encourages collaboration between students and within the wider community, and appear to be impacting positively on student attendance levels while building stronger relationships between students and teachers. The final section of this paper argues that the benefit of these programs can be greatly improved if accompanied by broader structural change to Australian schooling.

Barriers to engagement: the big picture

The recent global financial crisis reminds us of the vulnerability of young people in a climate of economic change. Young people make up a significant proportion of retrenched workers in periods of economic recession, and those without year 12 or equivalent qualifications have proven to be most at risk. For young people, pathways to learn and earn are shaped by a confluence of factors, ranging from environmental, structural, educational and other contextual dynamics, to the agency and resilience of the young individuals themselves to understand and navigate the worlds of school, work and further study. A recent overview of young people in Australia shows that levels of engagement vary by state and territory, gender, social background and academic history (Lamb and Mason, 2008).

There is a continuing body of evidence to show that educational achievement in Australia is significantly determined by individual socioeconomic status or social background. (SES is a composite measure based on parental education, parental occupation and assets in the home.) The 2008 edition of the 'How Young People Are Faring' report (Lamb and Mason, 2008) strongly indicates that young people from low SES areas are less likely to engage in full time education or work. Lamb and Mason find that 19 year-olds from low SES backgrounds attain Year 12 or its equivalent at a rate of just over 26 percentage points lower than those from high SES origins. At age 24, well over one-third of those from low SES backgrounds have not completed Year 12 or equivalent, in contrast to about one in seven of 24 year olds from high SES backgrounds. Compared to their more affluent peers, Australian students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to underperform in literacy and numeracy, to have negative attitudes to school, to be truant, to be suspended or expelled and to leave school early. They are also more likely to struggle with the transition from school to work, and less likely to take up or succeed in further education and training (Lamb & Mason, 2008; Productivity Commission, 2005).

A young person who completes year 12 or equivalent has much better chances in making a successful transition from school to work and/or further study and training. Year 12 completion is crucial to success in the first year following school: not only are school completers more likely than early leavers to enter into further study, they have an advantage entering the labour market, and are more likely to secure full-time work. Early school leavers are at greater risk of labour force marginalisation and remain so well after leaving school. Where just over 4 per cent of early leavers are unemployed or not in the labour force in the seventh post school year, and throughout most of the seven-year post school period, Lamb and Mason (2008) find that only 0.4% of those who complete Year 12 or equivalent experience the same level of disengagement from work. Only three quarters of recent school leavers are engaged in full-time work or full-time education in the year after leaving school. About 40 per cent of early school leavers are in part-time work, seeking work or not in the labour force – double the rate for Year 12 completers.

The overall rate of educational attainment for those from low SES backgrounds is only 58 per cent, and even lower for poor achievers in school. This tells us in no uncertain terms where the greatest efforts in school, policy and investment are required (Lamb and Mason, 2008, p.vi). The need and current opportunity for broader structural reform will be discussed in the final part of this paper. But firstly, it is useful to examine, from a local perspective, the ongoing challenge of middle years disengagement.

The importance of educational engagement

Educational engagement is both an important predictor of and key preventative factor in underachievement at school. While it is affected by social background and geographic location, it is also strongly shaped by school-based factors including pedagogy and curriculum (Fullarton, 2002; Murray et al, 2004; Willms, 2003). Most studies infer that disengagement from school causes poor achievement. Others suggest that low achievement causes students to withdraw from school or that engagement and achievement go hand-in-hand. Whatever its causative relationship, disengagement is particularly linked to lack of success in the crucial middle years (Cole, 2001).

While it has been suggested that all middle years students are at risk of disengagement (eg Murray et al, 2004), the evidence is clear that in disadvantaged schools, disengagement happens earlier and is more intractable (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle & Seal, 2005). All of the effects of disengagement – flattened growth in literacy and numeracy, passivity or cessation of effort, underachievement or lowered achievement, disruptive behaviour, poor attendance or leaving (Cole, 2006) - tend to be more pronounced in schools with many disadvantaged students. This nexus is of particular concern given the trend for poorer Australian students to be clustered in schools with poor educational outcomes located in economically depressed areas with low educational profiles (Keating & Lamb, 2004). This means that schools with the greatest need to engage students have the least capacity to do so.

There is strong agreement that the solution to disengagement lies in the redefinition of the learning experience along personalised or student-centred lines. Student-centred learning underpins the practice of the comparatively few schools internationally that combine high student poverty with high achievement. These schools have a challenging curriculum that is connected to students' lives and to

the community in which they live; that presents authentic tasks requiring complex thought and allowing time for exploration; that caters for individual differences in interest and learning styles; that develops cooperation, communication, negotiation and social competencies generally; and that emphasises depth of understanding and control over one's learning (Centre for Applied Educational Research, 2002; Kannapel & Clements, 2005).

Cityscape and ruMAD?

Through its Education Foundation division, The Foundation for Young Australians conducts two programs - ruMAD? (Are You Making A Difference?) and Cityscape - that help schools implement a student-centred approach to learning in the middle years. Many of the schools that participate in ruMAD? and Cityscape serve low socioeconomic areas. Both programs provide a model of student-centred learning and include professional learning for teachers.

Cityscape uses the city as a resource to provide meaningfully interactive, real world learning experiences for Year 9 and 10 students. The Cityscape program has three phases: pre production, production and post production. In the pre production phase, students complete a preliminary sequence of class-based activities including the development of a research hypothesis to be tested during the course of the program. They form their work teams and prepare their research briefs. While at Cityscape (the production phase), students work in teams to independently investigate their topic. In the post production stage, students reflect on personal and team outcomes of the week and analyse the data they have collected before formally presenting their findings to peers, staff and parents. Schools participate in Cityscape on an elective basis by applying to Education Foundation.

ruMAD? is a middle years curriculum framework that promotes and facilitates inquiry-based, student-led initiatives designed to effect social change at the school, local and community levels. Its educational objectives are to provide young people with opportunities to engage in independent, student-centred learning; to model independent, student-centred learning for teachers; and to enable young people to make a difference in their school or community. In Victoria, schools generally approach Education Foundation to register for the program. In other states, schools are generally nominated by the respective department of education.

Schools can implement any of five levels of MADness. The MAD Day is designed as one day of action by a group of students or the whole school. It is often used as an introduction to ruMAD? or to celebrate an ongoing project. ruMAD? projects are long term, often year long projects designed to be run as part of the school curriculum. Through ruMAD? Student Foundations, students learn how to raise and grant money to bring about social change. The ruMAD? Youth Ambassadors strand encourages students to become advocates and role models for the ruMAD? program. The ruMAD? Social Enterprises strand supports the creation of student-led businesses.

What schools are doing

Increasingly, schools seek participation in Cityscape and/or ruMAD? as a considered response to the issue of student disengagement. A growing number of schools adopt the program/s as a planned

commitment and on an ongoing basis because they believe that they represent innovative practice that is challenging and instructive for both students and teachers. These schools use the program/s both as a central component of their middle years strategy and as a model to inform wider reform across the school. In some cases, the reform process is sparked by teachers who have observed the program/s in action and brought its learning model back to the school. In other cases, schools hear about the program or find it through a deliberate search for a new model of practice.

The Foundation for Young Australians has examined the efforts of these schools and other schools in disadvantaged locations to create a more student-centred curriculum for the middle years (Black, 2007; Stokes & Turnbull, 2009). While a student-centred curriculum is not a panacea for the complex challenges faced by schools serving low socioeconomic areas, the evidence is that it can provide an important means for improving student engagement.

The findings show that many of these schools saw marked improvements in student engagement, participation, retention and achievement since they began their efforts. The schools cite greater student confidence and a greater student ability to respond to a challenging curriculum. They also cite higher teacher expectations of students and stronger relationships between students and teachers. In instances where disengagement has been great, the schools describe students' reconnection to schooling and significant drops in absenteeism. They attribute these changes to a more student-centred classroom, more explicit messages about learning from teachers and – where reform has been implemented across year levels or across the middle years - greater consistency in approach from class to class.

The schools that have implemented Cityscape and/or ruMAD? note that the programs have met or exceeded their expectations in terms of student engagement. As one school leader has said: *“this way of learning - less of the teacher out front talking, more discussion, kids being responsible ... has a real impact on kids, especially at Year 9 ... The kids can't say they hate school as previously”*. The programs have been particularly successful in engaging the students most at risk of disengagement. Teachers have observed that *“the very kids [usually] most disengaged are the ones wanting to drive the day”* and that *“the students who are [usually] most challenging are sitting in the front row”* (Stokes & Turnbull, 2009).

What challenges do schools face?

Despite the uniformly positive findings that emerge from the studies in relation to student outcomes, most of the schools testify to variability in the way that teachers have adapted to a new middle years curriculum. Ongoing teacher learning is an essential feature of an effective school (Elmore, 2006; Johnson, 2003) and particularly important in sustaining improved student learning in disadvantaged schools (Grant et al, 2003). In recognition of this, most of the schools across the various studies have taken deliberate action to develop teachers' professional knowledge and skills as part of their reform of the curriculum. As one principal has testified, *“if you don't invest in the teacher, you can forget the whole thing”* (in Black, 2007).

A number of the schools developed some form of professional learning team structure under which teachers regularly and formally come together to share the experience and insights arising from their new practice. At some of the schools, teachers are timetabled together so that they can meet for up to 90 minutes a week to share ideas and act as informal coaches for one another. Some have also introduced peer-to-peer learning where experienced teachers help others develop their understanding of student-centred learning and establish it in their own classrooms. In most cases, these learning teams operate within a whole school context where all teachers come together in regular professional learning forums, often for one timetabled period a week.

Despite their considerable investment in teacher learning, most of the schools are still hampered by teachers unprepared to take on new practice. One principal estimates that 50 per cent of his teachers are struggling with the transition to student-centred learning. This echoes a common view across the studies that *“the biggest challenge is the teacher challenge”* (in Black, 2007)

The dominant view of the schools is that the benefits of a more student-centered teaching practice outweigh any difficulties in its introduction or implementation, but it is clear from this group of studies that the introduction of such practice represents a significant commitment for schools with high student need and limited resources. For example, the multiple demands on teacher time remain a barrier to the full implementation of the ruMAD? program in the 2009 case study schools. Lack of funds and time for teacher learning is a source of frustration for staff and leadership who want to see progress happen quickly: *“you know that changing your practice as a teacher will change outcomes for the kids, so you want it to all happen at once”* (principal, in Black, 2007).

The issue of school capacity comes up time and again in these studies. Effective leaders in disadvantaged schools use external opportunities to generate improvement (Harris & Chapman, 2002), but schools trying to meet the needs of disadvantaged students often equate improvement with new programs without the ability to integrate them into existing commitments or sustain them (Black, 2007). One of the strongest findings of the middle years research is that reforms not integrated into the school culture will eventually fail and that most middle years strategies are short-lived (Hill & Russell, 1999). In contrast to this, the evidence of the Foundation’s research is that some schools are proceeding in a way that promises to have a more longstanding impact on student outcomes. In the case of schools implementing ruMAD? and/or Cityscape, the programs are seen as fitting readily with the school’s direction, philosophy and middle years reforms. Their effectiveness has been considerably increased where they have been integrated into the school culture and curriculum (Stokes & Turnbull, 2009). This local integration is ideally underpinned by broader structural change.

The broader context

Despite some evidence to suggest that student socioeconomic background does not significantly impact upon educational outcomes (Marks, 2006), the relationship between social background and educational outcomes is now widely accepted. The success or otherwise of the programs described above – which reflect broader evidence that many disengaged students respond well to alternative learning settings, experiences and mentoring – is dependent upon the existence of an educational framework that allows them to be applied in an equitable and sustainable way. Comparing PISA data

and Victorian AIM data, for example, Keating identifies a more consistent relationship between school population characteristics and educational outcomes than between individual student characteristics and educational outcomes. This suggests that “institutional or structural forms of schooling have a mediating impact upon the patterns of individual outcomes” (2009, p.12). As Keating suggests:

Numerous programs supported by both levels of government have been implemented across the states and territories over the past three decades. However, there has been no comprehensive and sustained effort based upon firm research evidence of what works best for these students. The level of disengagement is higher in some schools and some regions of the country. (p. 39)

Within the context of the Melbourne Declaration and a policy environment favouring collaboration to address core educational problems arising from disadvantage, Keating (2009) proposes a national reform agenda and a set of national projects that would seek to enhance the structural environment in which the benefits of these kinds of programs could be more fully realised.

Keating’s argument is centred upon the rigid nature of some structural characteristics of Australian schooling that weaken the capacity of the wider system to deliver quality and equity, while diminishing or restricting the capacity for policy change. His whole of system approach targets two levels: “the national and system level where the more socially aspirational principles and goals can be established and where key infrastructures can be strengthened, and the local level where new delivery mechanisms can be established and subsequently serve as platforms for broader structural reforms” (Keating, 2009, p.51). Specifically, Keating suggests the introduction of a joint Commonwealth–states/territories initiative, potentially in partnership with non-government organisations, that can home in on areas with high levels of early school leaving and stage purpose-built interventions to assist with student reengagement. Programs such as Cityscape and ruMAD? are ideal models in this context.

Among Keating’s proposed set of national initiatives is a strategy for middle years reengagement. Despite widespread acknowledgement in the literature, and from teachers and principals themselves, that middle years schooling requires more attention than any other stage (Keating, 2009, P.28), the levels of investment in these years are relatively low. Schools in disadvantaged areas particularly lack capacity to introduce these programs where they are most needed. A more consistent and targeted strategy for investment by the Commonwealth Government is required.

The need to take a more holistic approach to schooling from early childhood through middle years to senior secondary schooling is widely acknowledged. The recent Compact with Young Australians reflects further recognition by COAG of the importance of year 12 or equivalent completion to successful entry into the world of earning and learning beyond the school (COAG, 2009; Office of the Prime Minister of Australia, 2009). The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians affirms this, and articulates a bold set of values based on the common good. It also explicitly acknowledges the importance of young people playing an active role in their learning.

Of particular importance to the discussion here, however, overarching Keating’s set of national projects, is his proposal for systemic reform. Building upon current COAG and other federalist initiatives, he calls for a national curriculum framework and a national approach towards senior

secondary programs and provision. The current development of a national curriculum framework opens up an opportunity to rethink the pathways, purposes and pedagogies of schooling. The agreement by COAG (2008) to establish a National Curriculum Board and National Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (Parliament of Australia, 2008) “are premised upon the principle of universal access and are expected to deliver a platform of learning and values that have deeply common elements” (Keating, 2009). The next step is to articulate and implement these goals and purposes of schooling in a way that recognises the importance of programs delivered at the local level, and which provides investment, training and capacity accordingly.

Conclusion

The issue of improving school capacity in disadvantaged contexts has become a more prominent feature of the policy landscape of social inclusion. This landscape is characterised by a growing recognition of the intensity and complexity of the challenge to school leaders and policy makers alike in seeking to overcome the barriers to engagement and equity for all students. This recognition is particularly evident in the recent Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008). The Melbourne Declaration ambitiously sets educational goals based on themes of democracy and social inclusion. These goals prescribe a model favouring locally tailored area-based policy around schools and preschools, and strong links between communities and schools across all school sectors (government, independent and faith-based) (Keating, 2009). These goals invite educators and policy makers to reflect on and implement successful, sustainable programs and initiatives at the level of the school community and more broadly at the level of system-change.

At the local level, disengagement from school continues to be a major challenge. Strongly linked to academic underachievement, disengagement is particularly evident in schools with disadvantaged students. The experience of Cityscape and ruMAD? programs in promoting student-led, independent learning that encourages collaboration between students and within the wider community represents a positive way forward. The evidence suggests that these programs are having an impact by improving student attendance levels and building stronger relationships between students and teachers. Nevertheless, schools face challenges in enabling all teachers to embrace and adopt the student-centred model, and in working around limited school capacity to implement new programs.

The ability for schools to meet this challenge would be greatly enhanced through broader structural changes to schooling in Australia and while the current environment favours this combination of local and systemic change, the ongoing problem of disengagement makes this a necessity.

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