

Towards a pedagogy of personalisation: what can we learn from students?

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Abstract The idea of personalised learning is of particular interest to educators, policy makers and parents concerned about the persistent problem of student disengagement from schooling especially in communities ‘at disadvantage’. Escalating numbers of young people are ‘dropping out’ of school both literally and metaphorically because they no longer find it relevant to their lives. Put simply, these students do not fit the standardised curriculum or mechanical ways of ‘doing’ school. In response, there has been a plethora of alternative schools/programmes established to meet the interests of students deemed to be ‘at risk’, ‘disengaged’ or ‘troublesome’. Whilst a great deal is already known about ‘what works’ in terms of engagement (relationships, relevance and rigour) schools have remained stubbornly resistant to major structural, cultural and pedagogical change. If we are serious about re-engaging *all* students in learning, then it will require a fundamental shift in the way we design schools *for* learning. In this article, we wish to explore what this looks like from the point of view of two students attending a small school in the process of integrating the Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) design for schooling. BPEA is a small not-for-profit organisation committed to creating small schools based around the personal interests of each student. From the students’ vantage point we seek to identify a number of organisational, pedagogical and relational conditions that appear to be making a difference to their lives. A central argument is that students are more likely to engage in learning when they have ownership

and control over what, how and with whom they learn. When these conditions are brought into existence, we see evidence of enhanced relationships with peers, teachers, families, communities and other significant adults. Finally, we wish to argue that the provision of learning choices is a social justice issue because all students irrespective of their backgrounds have a right to a good education.

Keywords Personalisation · Student engagement · Curriculum · Social justice · Big Picture Education Australia and Portraiture

Introduction

Young people of school age in Australia are switching off, disengaging and being excluded from schooling in unprecedented numbers, “particularly those from non-traditional, adverse and challenging backgrounds” (Smyth et al. 2010, p. 1). Brotherhood of St Lawrence CEO Tony Nicholson describes the situation as an “unfolding social disaster” with between 30 and 40% of young people not completing 12 years of secondary schooling (Cook 2014). The fallout can be devastating for individuals, school communities and society alike. When students fail to complete their schooling and make a meaningful transition to adulthood, then we are all worse off. The problem of disengagement from schooling continues to be one of the most complex, persistent and protracted problems facing education systems today.

In response, Australian federal and state governments have shown some commitment to improving school retention rates, addressing disengagement and lifting educational outcomes as measured by standardised test scores [e.g., Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN)].

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As well, there are undertakings to create more equitable outcomes for low socio-economic status (SES) and Indigenous students. In pursuing these goals, the *National Partnerships on Youth Attainment and Transitions* negotiated between the Australian federal, state and territory governments as part of the Council of Australian Governments (CoAG) agreement in 2009 provided the political framework for much of this work. Through this agreement, each state government signed up to the *Compact with Young Australians* whereby all students are entitled to an education or training place based on a ‘learn or earn’ policy until they turn 17 years of age. Within this arrangement, each state government has its own specific strategies relevant to local priorities and circumstances. In the case of Western Australia, in which this research was conducted, there are a host of school and community-based engagement programmes approved by local Department of Education Participation Managers. In addition, there are also a number of Curriculum and Re-Engagement (CARE) schools established to cater for disengaged and disruptive students who, for a range of reasons, do not fit conventional/mainstream schools (see te Riele for discussion).

Yet, despite these political commitments and declarations far too many young people fail to achieve and/or engage in schooling (or more specifically learning). The irony is that this situation continues despite decades of knowledge about how people “actually learn best” (Farrell 2008, p. 11). The problem, according to Farrell and Hartwell (2008), is that we never question the basic model of “formal schooling” (also referred to as ‘mainstream’, ‘traditional’ or ‘conventional’) because it takes on a “seeming intractability” (p. 111) based on “rituals, traditions, and conceptions of how learning occurs and what is most worth learning that were developed well over a century ago” (p. 109). Tyack and Tobin (1995) refer to these resistances to reform as the “grammar of schooling” characterised by self-contained classrooms, didactic teaching, age-related classes, timetables, subjects, testing and competition, to name a few (see Haberman 1991; Freire 1970; Postman 1979; Dewey 1938/1997; and Sizer 1996).

Nonetheless, as Farrell and Hartwell (2008) argue, there has been a significant movement globally (Woods and Woods 2009; Farrell 2008) and nationally (te Riele 2012; McGregor and Mills 2011; Mills and McGregor 2014) towards alternative school programmes characterised by “child-centred, active pedagogy, with heavy involvement of the parents and community in the learning of their children” (p. 115). By way of example, in 2005, there were an estimated 12,000 alternative schools/programmes in the USA with at least a million home-schoolers (Farrell 2008, p. 112). In Australia, 33,000 young people are involved in over 400 programmes in 1200 locations (te Riele 2012, p. 17). Whilst varying considerably in philosophy and pedagogy, all of these schools/programmes share a fundamental desire to move away from the “traditional, age-graded “egg crate” pedagogical model” of the formal school system (Farrell 2008, p. 121).

It is in the context of these wider developments that we want to examine how students themselves understand, experience and respond to a pedagogy of personalisation within a Big Picture Education Australia (hereafter, BPEA) setting. BPEA is a small not-for-profit organisation (<http://www.bigpicture.org.au/>) committed to the principle of “one student at a time in a community of learners”. Patrick et al. (2016) define personalised learning in the following way:

Personalized learning is tailoring learning for each student’s strengths, needs, and interests—including enabling student voice and choice in what, how, when, and where they learn—to provide flexibility and supports to ensure mastery of the highest standards possible (p. 5).

This approach asserts the importance of placing students’ interests at the centre of everything the school does. At heart, this more personalised approach demands a fundamental rethinking of school design in terms of pedagogy, structure, relationships and culture. Such calls for school change are hardly new and can be traced back through the work of progressive school reformers like John Dewey (1938/1997), Herb Kohl (1994), Jonathan Kozol (1967/1995), Neil Postman (1979), John Holt (1964/1982) and Ted Sizer (1996). Of particular relevance to this article is Ted Sizer’s Coalition of Essential Schools (<http://essentialschools.org/>) which influenced the early work of the Australian National Schools Network (ANSN; Ladwig et al. 1994) and the eventual establishment of BPEA in 2006. This followed an extensive search worldwide for a new design for schooling capable of engaging students over time. Whilst most interest for this work came from schools in disadvantaged communities struggling with issues of disengagement, BPEA believes the design is relevant for all students, irrespective of their circumstances.

At the outset, we would like to add four caveats to this discussion: first, the challenge identified by Farrell (2008) of avoiding the pitfalls of “laudatory” accounts of alternative schools which can create “an impression that they are all paragons of pedagogical virtue, which they are not. They are all very human institutions” (p. 37); second, the idea of personalisation itself is neither neutral nor innocent. Indeed, we are mindful of the “politics of personalisation” which has been linked in its dominant form to a broader set of neoliberal imperatives related to human capital formation based on the principles of individualisation, responsabilisation, marketisation and school choice (Mincu 2012, p. xiii); third, the research informing this article is written primarily from the perspective of two students, which has both strengths and limitations; and fourth, whilst most teachers have heard or seen the term personalised learning, there is far less certainty

about what this actually means in the classroom context (Watkins 2012, p. 4).

With these caveats in mind, we are in agreement with Watkins (2012, p. 3) when he argues the need for a “richer view of personalisation”, one that moves beyond “individual” and “personalised inquiry” to embrace what he describes as “the personalised community classroom”. This perspective advances the view that learning is “a web of relationships and contexts, and learning is seen as fundamentally social, the means by which people join communities and become who they aim to be” (p. 12). In this sense, personalisation is “about building participation through belonging and collaboration” in order to advance “collective knowledge” (p. 12). In this spirit, Fielding (2012) urges educators to look beyond instrumentalist market versions of personalisation and, instead, see schools as “agents of democratic fellowship” for the purpose of developing “a commitment to education in its broadest sense in an explicitly democratic form” (p. 82).

With these introductory remarks in mind, we want to do a number of things in this article. First, we want to provide an overview of the broader social context in which the idea of personalisation is located. This means understanding something about how social context impacts on education especially in school communities characterised by high levels of poverty and student disengagement. Second, we provide a synopsis of BPEA—its history, philosophy, distinguishers, and design for learning. Third, we explain the use of portraiture as a methodological tool to investigate the experience of students. Fourth, we present the portraits of two students—Chuckie and Rose—as a means of getting up close and personal to how students themselves understand, experience and respond to personalised learning approaches. Finally, we draw on these accounts to identify some of the key pedagogical lessons we might learn from students themselves.

The social context

In Australia, like most western countries, the shift towards neoliberal ideologies and policies since the mid-1970s (e.g., marketisation, competition, managerialism, performativity, school choice, standardisation, high stakes testing and back-to-basics) has resulted in growing levels of social and educational inequalities (Teese and Polesel 2003; Wilkinson and Pickett 2009). In the context of school choice in particular, wealthy families with resources have turned in large numbers to private/independent schools, significantly subsidised by public funds. As a consequence, public schools with dwindling budgets are left to cater for working class and poor children (Bonner and Shepherd 2016). This policy manoeuvre gained ascendancy under the conservative Howard government during the 1990s. As a result, Australia now has one of the most highly stratified and residualised education systems

in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OCED; OCED 2011).

In this environment, the logic of the market endeavours to explain inequality in terms of deficits and pathologising discourses (Nilan et al. 2007; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) that function to mask the broader historical, structural and institutional forces at play in society and schools. For instance, when a young person experiences difficulties in life, the personal deficits of the individual are identified as the cause of the problem (e.g., lazy, lack of aspirations, poor behaviour, low levels of literacy, dysfunctional families and so on) rather than the systemic structural forces shaping the formal school system. As a consequence, the real causes of injustice (e.g., poverty, unemployment, health and housing) are hidden by a “public sphere...dominated by individualising, victim-blaming discourses [in which] structural perspectives are absent or marginalised” (Fraser 2012, p. 45).

Hence, when mainstream schooling is not working for students, they are blamed for their failure and are likely to, in turn, blame themselves. Young people from families with social, cultural and economic backgrounds alien to the normalising high school are not only indirectly excluded from the benefits of education, but denied the “interpretative schema” with which to explain their situation in terms of injustice (Fraser 2012, p. 46). From a social justice perspective then, what is needed is “a schooling system that includes everybody” (Lynch 2002, p. 12) and that actively works against both the historical and contemporary forces of exclusion. To this end, there is a need to identify those aspects of pedagogy, curriculum, assessment and organisation of schools that are more likely to re-engage marginalised young people for learning (e.g. Smyth and McInerney 2012; Mills and McGregor 2014; te Riele 2012; Zyngier 2011).

Against this backdrop, we want to explore how a pedagogy of personalisation might contribute to these broader debates based on the experience of students themselves. In other words, we want to listen to what students have to say about “what works” best for them and from their vantage point, identify what needs to change. In this task, we use two student portraits to highlight not only the limitations of mainstream schooling for marginalised young people but also the possibilities for success linked to a renewed emphasis on the democratic public purposes for Australian education (Reid et al. 2010, p. 8).

Putting it another way, we want to explore a different way of ‘doing’ school based on the experience of two students involved in a more personalised approach to learning within a BPEA setting. In the BPEA context, “personalisation” has a very specific set of educational practises attached to it:

With the help of the advisory teacher and parents, each student develops a learning plan that explores their

interests and passions, and identifies personal learning goals, authentic project work and wider curriculum requirements. This plan is reviewed and updated regularly (BPEA, 2017, p. 2).

In keeping with this approach to personalisation we adopt the methodology of portraiture to place students at the centre of our research. In doing so, we seek to explain how personalisation is also a matter of “curricular justice” for marginalised students (Connell 1995). The two portraits represented below are taken from a larger research project carried out between 2013 and 2015 in a low socio-economic status (SES) community in an outer metropolitan area of an Australian state capital city. The purpose of the overarching project was to investigate initiatives to enhance student engagement and aspirations in education and training in the region. The BPEA project was one of four key initiatives to encourage innovation in teaching and learning.

Big Picture Education Australia—an overview

We now want to move on to explain something about BPEA, a small not-for-profit organisation seeking to re-engage young people in learning. BPEA offers an innovative educational design that requires schools to work in highly personalised ways with students, families, community organisations, businesses, government and non-government agencies. BPEA was established in collaboration with Elliott Washor and Dennis Littky who set up the Metropolitan Career and Technology School (The MET) in Providence, Rhode Island in the 1990s (<http://www.themethighschool.org/>; Littky and Grabelle 2004; Levine 2002). They have since created Big Picture Learning (BPL) with over 80 schools in 20 states in the USA and worldwide including the Netherlands, Italy, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

BPEA draws on a number of key assumptions about how to improve student engagement *for* learning (BPEA 2009). Foremost is a preparedness to challenge what Washor and Mojkowski (2013) describe as “the deeper four” causes of widespread student disengagement—not mattering, not fitting in, unrecognized talents and interest, and restrictions (see Fig. 1).

When looking at the “deeper four” elements of student disengagement, we can begin to see why school size is important in the BPEA design. 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” (BPEA 2009, 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). At this



Fig. 1 Why students drop out (Washor and Mojkowski 2013, p. 120)

early stage of implementation in Australia, there are two schools identified and approved by State Departments of Education as BPEA-designed schools. However, there is a network of approximately 40 schools exploring the design principles by integrating the design across the whole school (as was the case for Chuckie and Rose’s school) and those establishing “academies” inside larger schools.

The BPEA approach is founded on the belief that deep learning takes place when:

- each student is an active participant in his/her education;
- his/her course of study is personalised by teachers, parents and mentors who know him/her well; and
- school-based learning is blended with outside experiences that heighten the student’s interest (p. 4).

Based on a substantial body of research, we know that schools need to be highly relational, personalised, non-competitive and success-oriented places if they are going to work well (e.g. DiMartino and Wolk 2010; Noddings 2005). When these kinds of qualities are evident, then there is a much greater likelihood of achieving improved levels of student engagement, academic performance, parental involvement, teacher satisfaction, community engagement, health and well-being and social cohesion (Toch 2003; Benitez et al. 2009; Wasley and Fine 2000).

Therefore, the BPEA design requires schools, primarily through the Advisory Teacher, to identify the interests and capabilities of each student. The Advisory Teacher negotiates personal learning plans, and also convenes meetings with students, parents and mentors in order to develop plans and discuss progress. They broker internships in the community and find support in areas outside of their own discipline. In addition, they help students to develop depth in extended projects and exhibitions *for* learning. Advisory Teachers work with their students for extended periods of time each and every week ideally for the duration of their high school years (Choules et al. 2017, p. 22). Thus, knowing each student well

is a pre-condition to developing personalised approaches based on students' interests and passions. This structural and pedagogical shift from conventional schooling sets up the possibility of school being a place where every student is known well and made to feel welcome.

The question becomes then: how are students responding to this personalised approach and what are they learning? One way to find out is by listening deeply to what the students themselves have to say about their experience. But first, we shall briefly say something about portraiture as a methodological approach.

Research approach—portraiture

Portraiture is described by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), pioneers of this approach to research and documentation in the social sciences, as combining:

...systematic, empirical description with aesthetic expression, blending art and science, humanistic sensibilities and scientific rigour. The portraits are designed to capture the richness, complexity, and dimensionality of human experience in social and cultural context, conveying the perspectives of the people who are negotiating those experiences. The portraits are shaped through dialogue between the portraitist and the subject, each one participating in the drawing of the image. The encounter between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and is crucial to the success and authenticity of the rendered piece (p. 3).

In the written portraits of Chuckie and Rose, we have sought to capture in some way the essence of these young people as learners. We acknowledge that portraits can only ever be partial and incomplete accounts. There are questions unasked, reflections unspoken and stories untold. Each of the students interviewed presented themselves as strong unique characters. In the individual semi-structured interviews (30–45 min), we were able to gain a sense of who they are. The contemporaneous notes made during the conversations were developed into narratives and checked against the transcript of the interview. The intent was to allow the participants' identities to become apparent within the ethical requirements of protecting confidentiality (Smyth et al. 2004). These identities are constantly being shaped, both consciously and unconsciously, in relation to the external environment. As Quinn et al. (2009) explain: "All research that relies on 'voice' faces [the problem of slippage], because there is no true and authentic self only multiple narratives that are culturally shaped" (p. 194).

The two portraits used here are not exceptional. They tell stories which are similar to many other students we interviewed. In selecting these two students, we adopt what Connell (1995) refers to as "strategic sampling" whereby the focus is on a few cases "where the theoretical yield should be high" (p. 90). In other words, we chose the portraits of Chuckie and Rose to identify productive possibilities in order to better understand 'what works' best for them. As a research method, portraiture requires researchers to sit in an empathic position alongside the participants. We have sought to represent in a faithful way the life-worlds of each student. As Ashworth and Lucas (2010) suggest, we can determine the success of an interview based on whether it gives access to the person's life-world. We are confident that the portraits communicate, no matter how incomplete, the spirit of the young people we interviewed.

As a method of enquiry and representation, portraiture is also well-suited to pursuing social justice in education because it creates a process for young people to describe more fully their experience of schooling. The portraits place the students voice at the centre of the research—legitimising their experiences, opinions, desires and fears. It requires us to work "on and from young people's territory as determined by the definitions of space, needs, interests, concerns and lifestyles" (Pring et al. 2009, p. 72). In the process, researchers must first unsettle some of their own assumptions, move from a place of knowing and then listen to what students are saying. We went back to the students with a copy of their written portrait to read and confirm, adapt and/or modify how they were represented. We wanted the students to feel comfortable with the composition of their portrait and how they would be used. Both Chuckie and Rose showed great pride as their portraits came to life.

Thus, portraiture seeks to confirm the centrality of people's lives in research rather than the use of abstract categories and statistics. It is interested in the daily realities of students' lives, their hopes, fears, pain and dreams and how we can relate to them. This allows the reader to connect with young people with a greater sense of empathy, respect, trust and care. However, the methodology is not without difficulties. Portraits can have a strong flavour of transformation about them. We did not want to produce an overly celebratory rendition, lacking in critique and reflexivity. Academic research requires us to look beyond the superficial by asking more probing kinds of questions to reveal the gaps, silences and contradictions. In short, there is still much to learn and know about creating sites of learning for marginalised young people. Indeed, whilst Chuckie and Rose's schools adopted a personalised learning approach, they did not pretend to have faithfully enacted or fully grasped the meaning of personalisation. There are still many complex issues and questions to be investigated as it relates to depth of learning and understanding what is really going on (Talbot and Hayes 2016).

So, we present the portraits, not as proof that all is well but as a starting point for ongoing teacher reflection and inquiry

(Farrell 2008). Our bigger purpose in the context of this research is to provide schools with constructive feedback to enhance teaching and learning. Putting the voices of the students centre stage enables us to name our own position too—a preference that the needs of students especially those from low SES school communities are given proper recognition in framing institutional life.

Portraits

Chuckie

The first portrait is that of Chuckie, a student in the middle years of high school who lives in a low socio-economic community. He had been at the BPEA school for one term when we first interviewed him. For the first two years of high school he was enrolled at a local school with approximately 1000 students. He said, “I did some stupid things” there. In hindsight, he did not feel as though the school was helping him to learn. He experienced a lot of bullying by other students. Some of the teachers also “triggered” Chuckie’s behaviour. In retaliation, he often walked out of class and school. He estimates that he was absent for about half of year 9. So far, he has only missed one day at his new BPEA school due to sickness. He acknowledges that this is indeed a remarkable turn around for him. Chuckie lives with his mum, aunty and two sisters. His mother didn’t finish high school and Chuckie has not heard from his father since he was 2 years old. He is now fully engaged in learning, in a better relationship with his mother and having “more ups than downs.” In Chuckie’s words:

If I wasn’t here I would probably be sitting on the oval, smoking and wagging it with the other kids.

He goes on:

Before I came to the Big Picture school I was at mainstream high school. That didn’t work out so well. I used to have fights and get into trouble. Even though I would sit in the corner and keep to myself, so many kids would come and pick on me and start fights. I have anger management issues. It’s as if there is a little switch that gets triggered in my head and I start retaliating, first verbally, then physically. I was swearing at teachers, walking out of class, throwing chairs, the kind of things teenagers do. I did a bit of work but not much. I didn’t really like it.

I decided to come to this school because it wasn’t working where I was. If I did not come here I would probably be sitting on the oval, smoking and wagging it with the

other kids. This school has given me a chance and got my head out of my arse. I wish I’d been to a Big Picture school all my life.

There’s been a huge change in me as a result of changing schools. The last time I did any work in school was in Year 5. Now I do a lot of work. It feels the same as I did in Year 5 where the teacher was standing over me, helping me with my learning. They also help me with anger management. If I feel angry, I go for a walk, and get some fresh air and when I’m ready come back in. I still stay on the edge of things and talk to myself. The difference is that there are no bullies. The teacher is always around the corner.

The relationship with Sal [Advisory Teacher] is sort of like my mum. She is nice, calm, easy. She walks around and helps you. I like having someone that stands over my shoulder and is there when I need more help.

Here it’s like a big family. The relationships with the other students are different too. They are like brothers and sisters. I get to know the other students better. We know a lot about each other – details – it is a whole lot better. It’s the relationships that make this school different to the mainstream school I was at. It gives us all a chance to be part of something, to belong. Here we get to sit on a park bench that students made. We get to sit on couches and use pillows and bean bags that the students have made. And they are comfy!

The Big Picture approach helps us with our work, we understand each other better and it’s helping us find out how hard things are in life.

We go on different excursions and see different places. Get the opportunity to see different reactions.

Rather than having to do all my work on paper like in the mainstream school, we do a lot on the computer here. I’m not that good at writing but I can type fast. When we did a test recently I was the first to finish. It felt pretty good I got 350 words done in the time. I could never do that with pen and paper.

After school finishes I’m thinking of being a bricklayer or going into the army. Being in the Big Picture programmes will help me achieve those aims. With my personal learning plan Sal and I worked out what I want to learn. She is going to help me find out about the army. I’m looking forward to researching that with her. I do have to improve my writing which makes me a bit nervous as it is very messy and it’s been a while since I’ve had to write. But if I want to be a bricklayer I have to be able to write – a resume, safety paperwork, documents...

My mum thinks it’s excellent that I’m doing something with my life instead of sitting on the oval, smoking and doing nothing. My mum is happy with me and brought me a motorcycle as a reward. I feel much better than I

did before. Before I was angry and upset but now I'm happy and jumping around. Although we still have ups and downs, now there are more ups and downs.

Rose

Rose is also a middle school student who had been at the BPEA school for one term when we interviewed her. Rose previously attended two large mainstream high schools where she experienced bullying. By the end of year 9, Rose was attending only half of the time. She had been streamed into the less academic classes and her self-esteem was not good. The decision for her to come to the BPEA school was made by her teachers and Rose's mother. Rose did not have great hopes for this school—scared of not fitting in here either. Even though Rose has had some days off during the term, her attendance has significantly improved. Neither of her parents completed high school or further study. She lives with her mother, father and little sister in a low socio-economic community. Her parents are supportive of her move to the BPEA school. In a sign of her growing maturity and social skills, Rose told us that one of the girls who bullied her at her previous high school had recently started at the BPEA school. Despite this difficult history, Rose offered to show the new girl around because she would like someone to do that for her. It was nearly three years since this bullying incident. Rose did not want to carry a grudge around any longer. In a nutshell, Rose says:

If I was still at mainstream school I would have dropped out ...

Rose continues:

I came to this school because of the bullying I experienced at the mainstream high school I attended. The bullying started at the first high school where the girls chased me out of school. So I tried another mainstream high school. That didn't work out either. The kids were bullying me because I had red hair. By Year 9 I had stopped going to school a lot of the time. I'd come home from school in tears or just not talking. Now when I go to school I'm happy, my head is not down like before. I say hello to Colleen [Registrar] and my teacher and it's all okay. I am enjoying school and I tell my mum what happens each day.

Even though I was scared on Orientation Day, it has worked out well. We are like a family and everyone gets along, well nearly everyone. There is always someone there for you – either a teacher or another student. The teachers are more like our friends. We call them by their

first name. If I'm feeling down on the weekend I text them and they call me and ask if I'm okay. They call me if I have a day off too. They care about me. You get a bond with your teacher because you stay with them through to the end of year 12. It is like everyone cares about each other. Here learning is made to be fun. Sport is down on the beach, you can kick a football, or go for a walk. It's much more joyful. I'm learning more because I am enjoying it. The class sizes are smaller and there are always people to help us. That makes a big difference. I don't give up just because it's too hard. I also like that we don't have a high class and a low class. At the previous school I was in the lower class. It puts your self-esteem down.

I think the biggest difference with mainstream school in size. Here I know everybody. I think I could name nearly everyone in the school. It is so much better, so much more enjoyable.

I'm interested in doing childcare when I finish high school. I tried hairdressing but didn't like it. In my personal learning plan I have planned the research I will do on child care. I will find out what pathways there are to become a child care worker.

If I was still at mainstream school I would have dropped out and got a job because I couldn't do it.

Productive practises

Based on Chuckie and Rose's portraits, we can begin to identify the kinds of pedagogical conditions that appear to help marginalised students re-engage in learning. Both students describe their alienation from mainstream schooling because it wasn't meeting their needs or interests. They had largely disconnected from school and anticipated that this would have been permanent if they had not found a different way of doing school.

The level of engagement coming through in these students' portraits is a vital precondition to success in school, careers and life. Drawing on these two portraits, we can identify at least four pedagogical conditions that are likely to re-engage young people in learning, among them:

- Schools are small enough for each student to be known well;
- Students' passions and interests are embedded in the curriculum;
- Students have control and ownership over their learning; and
- Student experience, culture and knowledge are valued and respected.

We now consider each of these pedagogical conditions in turn.

Schools are small enough for each student to be known well

Creating small schools by design is an important element of personalisation. Whilst large high schools have been politically and economically expedient, they simply do not work for students like Chuckie and Rose. We are in agreement with Darling-Hammond (2010) when she argues that school districts should have a “portfolio of schools” because choice is better than coercion in the management of education. Furthermore, all students deserve a decent education that not only suits their interests and philosophies but also prepares them extraordinarily well for success in careers, family and life. (p. 267). Smyth et al. (2014) adopt the heuristic of the “socially just school” to describe those schools in which all young people are fully engaged and made to feel welcome irrespective of their backgrounds. Importantly, such schools see young people “at promise” and as having strengths rather than being “at risk”, “bundles of pathologies” or “deficits” (p. 3).

Both Chuckie and Rose are clear that these kinds of personal approaches are essential to their learning. For them, the opportunity to re-engage in learning was made possible only because they felt a sense of connectedness and belongingness in a small community of learners. Education on a “human scale,” as Toch (2003) describes it, whilst not providing any guarantees, does appear to enhance the likelihood of success for some students. By way of example, evidence from the UK shows that the numbers of student “temporary exclusions” are more than three times higher in schools with more than 1000 children (10% of students) than in schools with 1000 or fewer children (3% of students; Pring et al. 2009, p. 26). It would appear that large institutions create significant problems for learning and relationships simply because of their size.

Based on the two portraits described here (and echoed by the other students interviewed), schools are more likely to be successful when they are small enough for each student to be known well and provided with individual attention, care and support (Boyer 1983; Sizer 1996; and Wasley and Fine 2000). For this reason, we argue that the provision of small schools is a distributive justice issue (Fraser 2012). This is especially important in low SES school communities where “one size fits few” (Ohanian 1999). The portraits of Chuckie and Rose are powerful reminders of how small school size and personalisation of the curriculum can support students as they search for a sense of belongingness, stronger bonds and a spirit of mutual obligation.

Students’ passions and interests are embedded in the curriculum

Chuckie and Rose are still exploring their interests and building curriculum around those interests. Both students referred to their personal learning plan and the central place it played in thinking about their future career goals. For example, by

focusing on Chuckie’s interests, the curriculum all of a sudden becomes relevant and meaningful to him in terms of deeper learning. Thus, by giving priority to students’ interests and experience, we gain a stronger appreciation of how learning begins from where students are at (Dewey 1938/1997). Pring et al. (2009) explain:

Informal learning in and out of school, and the learner’s aspirations and motivations, need to be the focus of the educational endeavour rather than be marginalised by it. The evidence for “the learner’s voice” in the planning and the development of learning is considerable (p. 73).

Chuckie and Rose’s teachers acknowledge that they were still exploring the idea of personalisation to ensure students’ interests are at the heart of learning. In other words, they are still some way off achieving fidelity to the principle of personalisation. However, the initial steps taken to ensure students like Chuckie and Rose have the opportunity to explore their interests appears to be paying dividends and supporting their re-engagement in learning. Importantly, teachers themselves have an opportunity to pause and reflect on their own practice. They are starting to generate a curriculum relevant to students’ interests rather than delivering a prescribed syllabus. Within the constraints of time and resources, teachers and school leaders are willing to ‘have a go’ by exploring students’ interests and then back-mapping it onto official syllabus requirements. These practises demonstrate a high degree of teacher autonomy involving professional judgement, innovation, creativity, flexibility and imagination.

Students have control and ownership over their learning

Both Chuckie and Rose feel as though they have some control over their learning and are supported by the school to achieve their goals. As a result, they are actively engaged in learning. Such approaches are consistent with the social justice principles espoused by the United Nations on human development: “Putting people at the centre of development is much more than an intellectual exercise. It means making progress equitable and broad-based, enabling people to be active participants in change...” (United Nations Development Programme 2010, p. 9). Linking the idea of participation to Chuckie and Rose’s portraits, it is apparent that their teachers are endeavouring to remove barriers to learning by giving students greater power and control through the notion of negotiated curriculum (Boomer 1982). In other words, these teachers are trying to break deep-rooted “banking” approaches to education in which the “teacher teaches and the students are taught” (Freire 1970/2000, p. 73). Instead, they are exploring student-centred, participatory and cooperative forms of instruction. In this way, Chuckie and Rose are able to experience less

hierarchical and authoritarian ways of learning by sharing power with their Advisory Teacher (Shor 1996). What we see, then, is evidence of students becoming active participants in decision-making about their own education, a key ingredient in achieving “curricular justice” (Connell 1993). In Connell’s words: “the criterion of curricular justice is the tendency of an educational strategy to produce more equality in the whole set of social relations to which the educational system is linked” (Connell 1993, p. 47).

Students feel trusted, valued and respected

For the first time in many years, Chuckie and Rose feel trusted, valued and respected as individuals. By the age of 14, both students had disengaged from mainstream schooling because they saw it as inhospitable and irrelevant to their lives. Despite having supportive families who wanted the best for them, it appears their cultural and social capital put them at odds with the social patterns, norms and behaviours associated with middle-class families and schools (Lareau 2003). Historically, the social institution of schooling has been caught up in the cultural processes of advantaging and disadvantaging of different classes of students (Bourdieu and Passeron 1981). In this context, personalisation of learning can play an important role, no matter how modest, in terms of interrupting the wider historical, cultural and economic forces of social exclusion.

The simple act of getting to know students well and including their interests into the curriculum appears to be making a difference to both Chuckie and Rose. Bryk and Schneider (2002) call this “relational trust” by which they mean a form of exchanges that bring with them “respect”, “personal regard for others”, “competence” and “integrity” (pp. 22–26; see Smyth et al. 2010). Students like Chuckie and Rose appreciate how personalisation puts them at the centre of learning by giving them a greater say in what they learn, how and with whom. In other words, the school is willing to create a set of “humanising relationships” (Bartolome 1994) in which students can explore a range of questions, like: Who am I? Where do I fit in the world? What do I want to be? What are my choices? How do I get there? These kinds of questions open up new possibilities for students to re-engage with each other and the world. Herbert Kohl (1998) refers to these learning environments as “schools of hope”:

Schools of hope are places where children are honoured and well served.... They are safe and welcome places, comfortable environments that have a homely feel. They are places where students can work without being harassed, but also places where the joy of learning is expressed in the work of children and in their sense of being a part of a convivial learning community. They are

places where teachers and staff are delighted to work and free to innovate while at the same time they are willing to take responsibility for their students’ achievement. If you talk to children in schools like these, they express a pride and sense of ownership that are also manifest in how the rest of the community regards the school (p. 332).

As we bring together the lessons from these two student portraits, we gain a clearer sense of how students are granted recognition, respect, dignity and basic human rights. However, as noted above, while engagement is a vital precondition to success in school, careers and life, it is not sufficient. We need to be vigilant to ensure that the kind of learning that goes on is robust and capable of linking students’ interests to powerful forms of knowledge associated with the subject disciplines (Connell 1993; Young and Lambert 2014). This work is ongoing.

Conclusion

Chuckie and Rose’s experience offers some important clues into the ways in which schools can make a difference in the lives of students. Personalised learning and knowing each student well are some of the key pedagogical shifts that allowed Chuckie and Rose to re-engage in learning. Without this opportunity, it is unlikely that either of them would be at school and more likely find themselves among the growing ranks of disaffected young people who no longer believe in the promises of education, training and employment. Furthermore, their portraits highlight the failure of entrenched ways of ‘doing’ school for large numbers of students.

Whilst we acknowledge the limitation of generalisation based on two portraits, we believe this approach adds a richness and authenticity to the kinds of arguments being mounted. In short, we have argued that the idea of personalisation of learning provides a small window, primarily from the point of view of students, to explore the potential benefits of ‘doing’ school differently. To this end, we have tried to develop a much deeper appreciation of why young peoples’ accounts of schooling really matter and what works best for them (Kozol 2005, p. 12).

In the process, we also alluded to the work of Fraser (2012) and Connell (1993) to argue that this is fundamentally a social justice issue requiring an imaginative and courageous educational response. Furthermore, when schools fail students, the students are vulnerable to the harsh realities of what Bauman (2004) describes as “wasted lives”. The costs of school failure and disengagement to both the individual and society are staggering in terms of a range of indicators around mental illness, health and well-being, anti-social behaviour, alcohol and drug abuse, crime and unemployment. Governments and education

systems not only need to listen more deeply to what young people have to say but respond in ways that lead to a fundamental redesign of schools for learning.

In this article, we have identified four starting points for ongoing self-reflection and investigation: (a) schools are small enough for each student to be known well; (b) students' passions and interests are embedded in the curriculum; (c) students have control and ownership over their learning; and (c) students are trusted, valued and respected. Based on the positive change evident in the lives of Chuckie and Rose, we can conclude that a more optimistic and humane future is possible when schools pay close attention to these fundamental pedagogical principles. However, it is important to recognise that schools cannot do it alone in terms of addressing wider structural injustices (Anyon 2005). Nonetheless, it is a small but modest step towards creating a more personalised pedagogy.

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