Transforming schools: All of the design, all of the time, all of the way through…

The Implementation of Big Picture Education in Five Schools

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Abstract

This brief identifies the key findings from research into the initial years of the implementation of The Big Picture Education (BPE) design for learning and school in five quite different high schools. We were keen to learn how school communities effectively implement a Big Picture Academy or Big Picture Education orientation within an established school. A previous report[1] explored the outcomes of research into how student engagement, learning and aspirations develop in a Big Picture Academy or School. We have included the key findings from that report in a table on page 3 of this brief.

The full report can be found online at https://www.bigpicture.org.au/big-picture-academy-bpa-project-map4u-murdoch-university

Introduction

This report provides an analysis of the processes involved in transforming schools through the experience of teachers and school leaders engaged in the implementation of a design for learning and school called Big Picture Education. It expands on an earlier report[1] which identified, described and explained the experiences of students and parents attending these same academies and schools.

This empirical data advances our understanding of how various participants perceive and experience new ways of doing school. Drawing on their stories this report identifies the approaches to the implementation of this innovation that worked but also describes the obstacles and interferences to school transformation. In the process, it identifies a set of key understandings and strategies to support educators interested in pursuing a more meaningful, engaging and authentic education for the students and families they serve.

The field of school change is awash with all kinds of advice, tips, tactics, and checklists about what needs to happen. While well intentioned, much of this work has failed to shift the ways in which schools operate[2]. In short, school reform efforts have come and gone over the decades with little fundamental change to the assumptions, beliefs, behaviours and rituals underpinning the ways in which schools organise and perform teaching and learning.

There is mounting evidence that something is awry with the experience of schooling as we know it. Whether disengagement from learning[3] or the way we do school – even for high achievers [4]. Despite the best efforts of dedicated teachers and education systems to alleviate the persistent and protracted problems of student (dis)engagement, the processes of schooling remain stubbornly resistant to change.

So, to draw on the experiences of real teachers, in real schools and in real communities to map some of the major elements of school transformation – where it worked, worked for a while but not sustained or landed somewhere in-between – is a valuable contribution to those thinking about 'transforming school'.

This Study

Data collection included:

(i)   Three rounds of one-on-one interviews over two years – at each site (5) - with selected students (4 from each site); their Advisory Teachers (at least 1 at each site); School Leaders (generally 2 typically the Principal and a Coordinator); and Big Picture Coaches (1 for each site) as well as a parent/family (at least 1) of each of the selected students.

(ii)   Field observations and reflections of researchers.

(iii)   Research Circle reports by participants - both individual and group - from a series of regular 1 and 2-day workshops held over two years. At these events participants described and documented their practice and their learning with the group.

The data was examined through the lens of: (i) student learning; (ii) school change; and (iii) each school's stage of development. Analysis involved identifying and describing emergent themes from these reflective processes.

Big Picture Education

The BPE design for schooling aims to provide a personalized and engaging experience for students and teachers in order to rediscover the joy of learning. The BPE design is both a process and a product. The context and the design interact to produce an innovative approach around the following key elements:

(i)   Practice: Student interests first, self-reflection, internships out of school with mentors, student-led projects, autobiographies, portfolios, and post-school plans.

(ii)   Culture: Every child known well, led by same advisory teacher over 2 – 4 years, connected to mentors, and where values, beliefs and relationships are created and shared among teachers, students, families and the wider community.

(iii)   Structure: Spaces, places and time intentionally created by schools for these practices to occur and the culture to become manifest.

As I'm learning, I'm a lot more focussed. I do a lot more study. I do a lot more engaging with the work. I do a lot more work. I do a lot more sports and other things as well. Student

I don't know [why I have confidence to talk with my Advisory Teacher here], it's hard to explain… they treat us how I want to be treated… With respect and stuff, like the way they would want to be treated. Student

The development of student engagement, learning and aspiration in a BPE Context

The study found that students were either looking for an education experience that would allow them to pursue their interests or they felt they had been pushed out of mainstream schooling. Over the two years most students found their hopes and expectations for a different kind of education were being realised. They were successfully engaging in a more personalised approach to learning with the guidance and support of their Advisory Teacher[5] who knew them well. The outcomes described in Table One on page 3 were from across all five schools in the study. They were more robust in the schools that had strongest fidelity with the BPE design but importantly, *there was evidence of them in all schools.*

I'm only 15 but I've learnt so much that I never would have thought… about working with adults… and how things can be flexible and I think it helps you grow up as well because… you're expected to be able to be mature enough to do things and … it's just helped me grow so much. Student

Being able to negotiate time has helped me academically. It takes the stress out of it. I'm doing really well. It also helps me that we sit down with the teacher and discuss (my work). This one-on-one feedback helps me know what I can do differently in the future. Student

If I weren't in Big Picture I wouldn't be attending school. Big Picture provides a safety net. The Portfolio Entry to Uni is really helpful. I think my learning at Big Picture is deeper than in mainstream. Student

Table One: The development of student engagement, learning and aspiration in a BPE context

Student Learning

Students articulated an awareness of the new relational environment being created in their Advisory and how it contributed to engagement with learning.

- Learning to relate differently to each other and to their Advisory Teacher;
- Much happier and developing stronger self-worth and self-efficacy;
- Developing independence;
- Learning to reflect on their learning and on others' learning; and
- Enjoying the opportunity to go deeper into their area of interest through starting with their interest; using real world standards and methods; linking interests to other disciplines, practices and further research.

The promising practices leading to these stronger outcomes included:

- Advisory
- Advisory teacher
- Learning in community with mentors
- Developing Post-School Plans
- Exhibitions
- Family engagement

The evidence in this research challenges traditional deficit views that young people lack aspirations. Rather it shows that providing the conditions in which aspirational capabilities develop is key. That is, enabling the following:

- focusing on strengths and assets;
- providing an alternative framework for understanding success and failure;
- having opportunities to think about their future post-school and make concrete plans;
- having the experience of 'leaving to learn'; and
- social networking in the adult world.

Implementing the BPE design

Five key themes are identified in the report. The first three themes relate to the phases of school transformation – (i) Engaging, (ii) Getting Started and (iii) Implementing. We framed a set of conclusions and recommendations for each phase. These are outlined in Table Two on the following page. The remaining two themes examine (iv) Push/Pull Forces that all schools must navigate and (v) the External Support necessary to assist the implementation process. Three key drivers for this work are then outlined – Leadership, Advisory for Advisory Teachers and finally, the unrelenting commitment by all involved to use *All of the design, all of the time and all of the way through.*

> *I've had a feeling for quite a while that schools aren't really doing what schools should be doing. They're not helping students learn. They're indoctrinating them into set boxes and students aren't naturally learning so for me it was really exciting to get involved.* School Leader

Table Two: Phases of Implementation

Engaging

The phase where School Leaders find out about the BPE design, begin to explore ideas, and connect with BPEA as an organisation leading to the school's commitment to implementing the BPE design over a multi-year period.

Schools that spend time questioning and understanding the design do better and have greater fidelity to the design in practice	• Review, rethink and then reimagine schooling and learning. • Understand and explain your reasons for change. • Fully explore the design – workshops, conferences, professional learning, school visits. • Explore how the context (community, school) will influence the design. • It's a long-haul process – five years and beyond

Getting Started

In this phase, staff begin to make decisions, teacher planning starts, information is made available, and students are enrolled. This period of involvement ends as the first school term begins with students.

Schools that plan with the intention to go 'deep' and 'use all of the design, all of the time, all of the way through' do better than schools that try to fill gaps.	• The BPEA Foundation Program undertaken by all leaders, teachers & support staff concurrently with the development of an implementation plan. • Development of collaborative and well thought out implementation plan that includes realistic timeline, understanding of culture, structure & pedagogical practice, and describes the roles and responsibilities of School Leaders, Advisory Teachers and support staff. • Staff to apply for key positions in accordance with implementation plan. • Enrolment process for students includes interview with family, Advisory Teacher and student.

Implementing

This phase begins as the first group of students commence in the inaugural Advisory classes. It continues until the first group of students graduate. It ends when staff, students and the school community are able to describe what they do, how they do it and why.

The BPE Design should be used to review, reflect, plan and inform action.	• Design distinguishers evident in the planning for and implementation of BPE • Key elements of design can be described and explained by students, teachers and leaders. • Review implementation progress using distinguishers, implementation plan and key elements. • Establish a learning community and use the design to plan for and resolve issues and problems as they arise. • Continue to train and develop interested staff ahead of future staffing need • Unconditional kind regard and generosity of spirit towards everyone. Difference is valued across the school. • The design is used to influence the wider education community.

Navigating the Push/Pull Forces

The research identified a number of push/pull forces that lead people back to what is most familiar and comfortable. We found that paying attention to these forces and learning to navigate them, is pivotal to successful implementation of the design.

All schools in this research confronted a range of push/pull forces that might be externally generated, come from across and within the school and/or even from those directly involved with the students. Some examples:

(i)   External issues –

- pressure on the sustainability of staffing and advisory class sizes due to reduced funding support for government schools;
- school staff imagine the worst about what system authorities are thinking when no public statements are made about their work;
- seeking to align the BPE design to state mandated curriculum/courses;
- existing system school graduation requirements that require conformity to the norm if followed.

(ii)   School issues –

- lack of support by leaders to facilitate the work required to implement the BPE design;
- structural pressures in the timetable of the larger school;
- staff turnover and change of roles;
- competition for available resources;
- dual roles for Advisory teachers leading to inadequate class and planning time provision.

(iii)   Personal issues –

- a lack of understanding of the BPE Design leading to inadequate implementation of the design e.g. doing a class project instead of finding student interests.
- retreating to old classroom behavior management processes;
- untested fear about what the 'authorities' might think or do when they are not following mainstream practices.

Using External Support

In this research the intellectual, financial and moral support provided by BPEA national and international networks had a positive effect on the practice and wellbeing of Advisory Teachers and School Leaders. The Big Picture staff and networks offered invaluable moral and educational resources with which to implement the key elements of the BPE design, and navigate the push/pull forces as well as the personal-professional challenges of changing the schools.

These external resources included: the BPEA National Network; the Big Picture Learning (BPL) International Network; BPEA materials; professional learning experiences including topic specific workshops, school visits, and seminars; National and International Conferences; the BPEA Foundation Program and the BPEA School Coach.

> *…the really smart thing we did from the get-go was to all go to (the Foundation Program)… it gave us a week to really think about what we were going to do and how it was going to start up properly. And so (the staff) started that academy the right way. (School Leader)*

> *…if you can go to other schools do it; if you can go to other countries that are doing it go; if you can go to the conferences do it. Just get involved in the community…and don't be an island…you've got to make your own natural connections.* Advisory Teacher

Leadership

Successful implementation of the BPE design requires school leaders and teachers to be passionate about fostering deep learning by everyone. This means challenging some cherished orthodoxies – assumptions, habits, rituals, beliefs and values - around the ways in which schools approach learning. This requires a preparedness to engage with the hard intellectual and emotional labour of doing school differently.

School leaders have to navigate context - people, places and communities - and the complexities of power relations within existing social, political and institutional arrangements. Furthermore, school leaders have to interrupt what they already know about curriculum and pedagogy as schools are re-organised around student interests and how this generates new kinds of work – for everyone.

For this reason, the BPE design embeds the practice of action learning and reflection for everyone in a community of learners. It advocates a persistent cycle of action, reflection, re-planning and then to 'go again' in order to improve practice. This requires the capacity to be vigilant, observant, resolute and yet ever ready to seize the opportunity that comes with this focus. That is, every-one involved is a leader.

The implementation moves more quickly when School Leaders know and understand the design. They need to understand the process of change and implementation. They need to create the conditions which will allow structures, culture and practice to change by supporting their Advisory Teachers to do things differently. They need to be interested in the students, their learning plans and their passions. They need to share leadership with teachers, students and family.

> *I certainly want to see Big Picture grow, not only within the school but within the state so I want more people to see the value of it for our kids, for our future in terms of getting more people actually working areas that they're passionate and interested in.* School Leader

Advisory for Advisory Teachers

> *It is virtually impossible to create and sustain over time conditions for productive learning for students when they do not exist for teachers. (Sarason, 1990[6])*

Advisory teachers benefit most from time each week to meet, share, review, plan and to get and give feedback on each other's work. More than that they need time to participate in the wider network of schools doing similar work. That is, Advisory Teachers become part of a learning community within the school, locally, nationally and internationally.

> *…(I saw) my role was to basically run an Advisory for my Advisory Teachers…so every week I would meet with them… I'd often take them to learn away offsite…(to) find out what were the burning issues for them, what were the things that they were concerned about or worried about.* School Leader

> *I think the biggest thing is – and it's the trickiest part – is time and space for conversations with the adults so that they are taken along further, that shortcuts aren't made, so that we don't just make assumptions that we're all approaching something from the same perspective but with enough scope for individuality and initiative.* Advisory Teacher

All of the design, all of the time and all of the way through…

BPE provides a robust, flexible and innovative design for schooling. It flips school as we know it:

- by starting with student interests;
- connecting them to people and places outside the school;
- engaging students in work that really matters to them;
- assessing the work for its quality rather than as a comparison with other students.

Changing school and doing school differently involves creativity, imagination, leadership, courage and a commitment to persist. And having:

> *The understanding that real learning comes slowly, through the construction of meaning, the recognition of patterns and the creation of relationships. (Pace-Marshall, 1999[7]).*

Our primary finding then is that when schools implement the BPE design and they implement *all of the design, all of the time and all of the way through* – **they do better.**

Footnotes

[1] Down, B., Choules, K., Hogan, J., with Carr, D., and Stone, H. (2018) Promising practices: What student parents and teacher say about learning in a Big Picture context. Murdoch University.

[2] Tyack, D. & Cuban, L. (1995) Tinkering toward utopia. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

[3] For example, Goss, P. & Sonnemann, J. (2017) Engaging Students, Creating classrooms that improve learning. Grattan Institute.

[4] O'Connell, M, Milligan, S., & Bentley, T. (2019) Beyond ATAR: A Proposal for Change. Koshland Innovation Fund: Melbourne, Victoria.

[5] Each student is in a group called an Advisory and each Advisory has an Advisory Teacher.

[6] Sarason, S (1990) The predictable failure of educational reform: Can we change course before it's too late? San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

[7] Pace Marshall, S (1999) A possible new story for learning and schooling – Enabling a new mind for the new millennium. The School Administrator, December 1999, AASA.