MAP4U Murdoch University

The BIG PICTURE ACADEMY Research Project

Promising practices: what students have to say about learning in a Big Picture context.

Combined School Report 1

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Contents

About the Big Picture Academy Research Project

The Big Picture Academy (BPA) research is part of a larger research project funded by the federal government under the direction of Professor Andrew Taggart of Murdoch University and called "MAP4U" or Murdoch's Aspiration and Pathways for University project. As the name suggests, the MAP4U project seeks to increase the numbers of students moving into tertiary education from a low socio-economic communities in outer metropolitan Perth, Western Australia.

The BPA research investigates the implementation of the BPA project in five schools in the relevant region. In that project, Big Picture Academies are supported in three schools and a whole-school Big Picture orientation is supported in two schools. Also included in the research project are two additional schools which have been following a Big Picture approach for a number of years. We will look at three main questions:

1. What are the processes and consequences of establishing a Big Picture Academy within existing school structures?
2. How does student engagement, learning and aspirations develop in a Big Picture Academy; and
3. How does the Big Picture Academy influence teacher professional development?

This research is made possible thanks to the ongoing support and commitment of schools, staff, students and parents. We trust that the feedback from our study will provide you with some interesting and useful information. Your continued collaboration will allow us to continue this important research into the role of Big Picture Education at the local, national and international levels. What we seek is a better understanding of what works best for students and their teachers in terms of engagement, deep learning, aspirations and success. As well, it will contribute valuable knowledge to our understanding of the conditions that need to be created and more widely sustained to support progressive school reform.

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1. Introduction

This Combined School Report provides a preliminary analysis of the qualitative (interview) data obtained from students at the five core secondary schools in the first round of data collection in the Big Picture Academies research project[1]. Each school has a unique student body and has introduced the Big Picture Academy or whole school orientation for school specific reasons. The ways in which the key Big Picture principles have been applied vary with the context and different emphases exist in each school.

The Big Picture Academy research project sits in a funding context designed to raise and support the aspirations of secondary school students from disadvantaged backgrounds[2]. Young people from all walks of life are engaged in shaping their future in ways which have meaning and purpose for them. They do this in ways that makes sense in their personal, family and community context. It is one role of schools to provide young people with what they need to develop the capabilities to extend and support their aspirations. We thus examine the data in this research project to see how the schools are creating the conditions that allow young people to attend to and further their aspirations. This is a rich interpretation of the notion of aspirations and enables us to understand better what a pedagogy of aspirations might look like. One of the relevant research questions guiding the analysis of the student data is: "How does student engagement, learning and aspirations develop in a Big Picture Academy?"

In Term 1, 2014, four students were randomly selected from each Big Picture Academy/school according to date of birth, making a total of 20 students interviewed across the five schools. The oldest, youngest and two students closest to the median age were interviewed at each of the schools. Where schools had a new Big Picture class starting in 2014 the students were drawn from that class (four schools). One school was not organised in this way and the students interviewed were drawn from across the student body. The majority of the interviews occurred in Term 1 with one student being interview very early in Term 2. The student interviews provide some insights into the experiences of these students and are analysed in the following section. The BPA Research Project has already completed further data collection in term 4 2014 and more is scheduled in 2015. Our initial findings are reported here.

We intentionally set out to listen to what young people have to say about their education and what works best for them and why. If the intent is to enhance the educational experience of young people, then we believe it makes a great deal of sense to hear what students have to say. Importantly, qualitative data especially student stories can serve an integral role in improving the policy making process. It helps us to better describe the dimensions of the problem under investigation, paying particular attention to the manner in which the participants define the issue. Furthermore, insider accounts provide an awareness of the multiple realities of the education system as well as a 'validity check' on statistical data (Rist, 1981)[3]. Like all data, however, care must be taken before generalising to the wider student body.

1. No teacher/school data is included in this report.
2. See description of the MAP4U project at https://www.ncsehe.edu.au/murdochs-aspirations-pathways-university-project-map4u/?doing_wp_cron=1423210648.6372709274291992187500
3. Rist, R (1981). On the utility of ethnographic research for the policy process. *Urban Education*, 15(4), pp. 485 – 494

2. Findings

In this section we report on the general themes and findings of the research. We structure this section around a general description of each theme followed by a statement of the key findings illustrated by a sample of student comments.

Disengagement – alienating experiences of mainstream schooling

General description: This theme recognises that for a subset of young people mainstream secondary schooling is not a hospitable place for learning. Students can experience intimidation, bullying, exclusion and discrimination, both from students and staff, based on personal factors (such as appearance and language) and social factors (such as class, ethnicity and gender). Furthermore, the pedagogy, curriculum and organisational structures of large high schools can alienate many students who are unable to see the relevance to their lives or future careers.

Finding: A subset of students find it difficult to engage with mainstream school curriculum and instruction. The reasons range from a perceived lack of support, too much pressure, disruptive classrooms, and lack of relevance and flexibility.

Students from all schools commented on this theme with different emphases. At one end of the spectrum there were students who had been expelled or were otherwise effectively completely disengaged. At the other end of the spectrum were students who were hanging in at school, generally because of the promised benefits of secondary schooling, but dreaming of a more relevant educational experience. Students described mainstream schooling:

Well the students in there were disruptive and I couldn't really learn anything… I didn't really get the work … The teachers couldn't control the students as well, they just let them, some of them even egged the students on to do bad stuff… I didn't like it… I couldn't learn anything… I did my work in there but I didn't learn much in there…. I just did it and that's it [3].

In mainstream [I'd be doing] boring work just looking at a whiteboard, copying notes down, stuff like that.

… that pressure, and there's always due dates and always getting told off and detention … once I get over-pressured I just leave it, I just chuck it away. Everything… I wouldn't even finish a test.

Engagement – taking ownership of learning

General description: Engagement is a broad theme and includes how the students feel about their learning, their interest and enthusiasm and their general endeavour and output. A desire to participate is a starting point from which a deeper commitment to learning is possible. This theme recognises the importance of relevance, rigour and relationships to student engagement – both within and outside the school.

Finding: Students are enthusiastic about the opportunity to negotiate curriculum and instruction. They respond positively to having a greater say over what and how they learn.

The different emphases noted in the ways students talked about this theme highlighted that for some students moving to a Big Picture environment meant that they were now actively and enthusiastically taking ownership of their learning. For other students, the process was a more cautious re-engaging. They described the relevance of personalisation of learning and the benefits of engagement:

If I didn't come [to this school] I would probably be sitting on the oval – the private school behind [name of previous school]… smoking, talking to trainers and also wagging and all that.

I like that it's more suited around what I want to learn rather than just what the curriculum says for me to learn. So that's … probably the best thing about it.

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3. The quotes in this report include examples from each of the four students interviewed. Not all possible quotes have been used. The quotes are illustrative of a particular aspect of each theme and are chosen from a number of possible quotes.

[Big Picture is] a lot better than mainstream… I'm getting more work done than I did in mainstream and I'm in less trouble than I usually did over there… And I concentrate a lot more.

Because I'm interested in it, I strive a lot – I spend a lot more time doing it… I'm doing a history project about World War 1 at the moment… because it's something I want to do, so it's got a lot more to do with me and what I'm interested in… Instead of just what you have to do, and the type of assessment you have to do.

I think we achieve a lot more, we get a lot more done and probably learn a bit more 'cause we're more interested in what we are learning… Rather than just doing the work in mainstream…just 'cause we have to, we kind-of want to…

Relationships – respect, trust and care

General description: Relationships refer to the broader beliefs, dispositions and behaviours that exist between and among staff and students. The connection between relationships and learning is a key dimension of this theme. Stable, positive relationships appear to flourish in smaller schools/programs where students have an opportunity to interact daily with their teacher and peers. These relationships provide a secure foundation for learning at school and in the world beyond.

Finding: Students value the closer relationship with their Advisory Teacher because they feel connected and supported.

Students from all schools remarked on the differences they experienced in their relationships with advisory teachers. They described their relationships with teachers and students in the Big Picture context as follows:

You can actually all talk to the teacher about learning and doing all the stuff that you like to do, not sitting there doing a note package that isn't helping us at all and just reading on about stuff that you've already done…

They [the teachers] go more with you, helping get in depth with what you need… we're more closer than in mainstream because in mainstream you just talk to the teachers about the work you're doing. I mean in this they actually talk to you about helping and everything else. What's going on and stuff. Like being friends… It feels better that I can talk to them if I need help with anything… So it's just helped me out a lot more.

I don't know [why I have confidence to talk with the 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.

It's been about eight weeks now and we all get along really well. We all know each others' names and if we wanted to have conversation with one another, we could do so easily… Working in the small environment together, you have to learn to get along and embrace others' differences.

Affective – well-being, self-worth and self-efficacy

General description: The affective dimension refers to the connection between a young person's sense of self-worth, self-efficacy and general happiness, and their capacity to be a contributing member of a school community.

Finding: Students feel happier and able to support each other. Students feel better about themselves and this often extends to improved relationships with their families.

Students who were most disengaged when entering the Big Picture program had most to say about this topic. They described their feelings about themselves as follows:

If one person's down everyone will try and pick them up…I've helped other people… Everyone's similar so we all 'get' each other.

You enjoy working here, because they make it like fun… – yeah it's much more joyful…[It feels] so much better; more enjoyable… more happy.

Last year I wasn't a very good daughter at home… I was rude to my mum and my dad… [Now, things are going] great…When I started school [at Big Picture] I was a lot more happier. Everything was just rolling, going and going. It felt good to like get things done.

Transformation – developing independence

General Description: Transformation refers to the idea of a fundamental change in the way students perceive themselves and their experiences with the world. Transformative learning is when students become aware of having a limiting or distorted view about themselves or others. It involves interrupting the way things are and instead, imagining alternative identities and futures.

Finding: Students recognise the importance of directing their own learning and behaviour. Students describe increased confidence in dealing with school and their futures.

Students drawn to Big Picture due to the curriculum and pedagogical choices were most aware of their learning how to learn. They articulated the ways in which they are transforming as follows:

I used to be really bad at paying attention in class, I use to talk all the time, but in here even if I am sitting next to my best friend, I'm still not talking that much… which is a big improvement.

You're very independent in here… I know I am getting a lot better and doing my work by myself, which I couldn't use to do. I use to be trying to get the teacher's attention all the time and trying to help me because I wasn't paying attention, while they were talking… But I can work by myself now.

[BP] has helped me greatly [in confidence]. I could never use to speak in front of a classroom at all. I have anxiety and I usually literally can't speak in front of a class, but now say when we have check-ins I can confidently speak and tell them [class] what's going on with my day. And I'm really excited for exhibitions. It's a forty minute speech, but I get to tell everyone what I've been learning … And I can tell them because I don't feel like they're going to judge me, and that's how I felt in the regular classes.

Real-world learning – connecting to people in the community

General Description: This theme describes the ways in which students are learning in community-based contexts that allow them to interact with people, places and objects outside the school. Students learn how to negotiate their way in the adult world through a range of strategies including informational interviews, shadow-days, internships with expert mentors, authentic tasks, and exhibitions.

Finding: Students identify valuable learning as taking place when they move into the community and engage with people and authentic tasks.

At this early stage of development students' enrolled in a Big Picture environment have had limited engagement with the real-world learning features of Big Picture design. Making their way into the world though has already demonstrated some important learning as students expressed here:

I'm going to go to the day care centre [for my first shadow day] and help out there… I went down and I sorted it out. It was a bit scary because I'm not very good at speaking to people – I get a bit nervous but it was good once I had done it – to know that I did it and was responsible and independent.

Well, they've gotten me to talk on the phone to a [local] councillor... They've asked me to do that and...they've helped me find what to say... So now I know what to say next time I have to do something like that... And it can be pretty scary doing that... I'm still a bit scared but I'm happy to do it so... they helped me, they got me to write down what to say... They asked me 'what do you think they're gonna say' so I just wrote it down...

Post-school plans – looking to the future

General description: This theme captures the students' plans and goals for their imagined future. It includes the ways in which students' think about their future careers and the extent to which schools support them or not. It describes some of the conversations, strategies and experiences that appear to assist students by linking their present learning with future possibilities. .

Finding: Students want to engage in learning that allows them to explore their interests and their future career aspirations. There is important learning from this supported exploration.

The ways in which students were discussing, researching and having their career plans supported comes out as they describe their post-school plans:

I want to be an architect, carpenter, engineer... Right now I'm learning about designing ... for my project. Architecture. [I'm] designing a house plan. And taking photos of different modern houses and old houses, comparing them...seeing how they change...and the other buildings that are like horror housing, so why they did that... bad houses.

When you are studying at [mainstream] school you don't feel like you are close to getting to a job or anything but since I've been in Big Picture I feel like it's actually going somewhere.

At first in mainstream I just wanted to do dancing as a career.... But then I came here and realized there wasn't much variety of dancing things I could do and decided I just didn't want to do that... So then moved to Marine Biology and, I'm still not sure if I want to continue that next term. I still like it, but I think there might be other things I want to try first... It feels better [trying this and trying that] 'cause I know a bit more about what I'm thinking about doing.

3. Concluding remarks

The powerful message that we hear from these students is that their new way of 'doing' secondary schooling is helping them to engage and make sense of their learning in terms of both the content and process.

At this stage the research highlights what can only be described as 'promising practices'. Students are telling us a great deal about what we describe as an emerging 'pedagogy of aspiration'. We are interested to see how these promising practices evolve over time. We are interested in pursuing this idea with our school-based colleagues in our Research Circles because it helps us to better understand what works best for kids and their teachers. It's interesting, so we want to find out more. We don't have all the answers and for this reason we believe asking questions is crucial as we seek to change school culture, structures and practices. In other words, we have some very promising leads that help us to generate new questions to guide ongoing conversations and lines of inquiry around school change.

As we start to identify, map and describe these promising practices students themselves have alerted us to the importance of the following elements of the Big Picture design:

- the small size of the school or Big Picture cohort within schools;

- greater time and interaction with a teacher who knows them well;

- increased decision making about what, how and when they learn;

- being encouraged and supported to take steps outside the classroom and engage in learning in the community; and

- the engagement with post-school plans and options.

What strikes us most about the stories we have heard so far is the ability of students to talk about their learning in ways that we don't normally find in schools. Students appear to be gaining a much greater sense of agency and control and this translates into new ways of being and becoming as learners, citizens and future workers. In short, these remarkable young people are developing aspirations – sometimes tentative, sometimes unambiguous. We see evidence of growing confidence as they explore their present and future in a supportive environment.

Above all, these initial findings suggest that student engagement and deeper learning are possible in schools that are flexible, responsive and respectful of young lives. Given the structural and systemic obstacles and barriers in changing schools this research highlights the pivotal importance of listening deeply to students' voices. The noticeable difference a more personalised approach to learning makes in students' lives is apparent from the evidence gathered so far.

The next phase of the research will add new knowledge and insights that will enable us to dig deeper as we start to unpack some of the key elements of 'a pedagogy of aspiration' within the Big Picture Academy schools.

Executive Summary of Findings

From the first round of interviews with students some common themes across schools are beginning to emerge. These are general themes that are significant to participants in this study. The themes resonate in different ways for each participant in their school context:

Disengagement – alienating experiences of mainstream schooling

A subset of students find it difficult to engage with mainstream school curriculum and instruction. The reasons range from a perceived lack of support, too much pressure, disruptive classrooms, and lack of relevance and flexibility.

Engagement – taking ownership of learning

Students are enthusiastic about the opportunity to negotiate curriculum and instruction. They respond positively to having a greater say over what, when and how they learn.

Relationships – respect, trust and care

Students value the closer relationship with their Advisory Teacher because they feel connected and supported.

Affective – well-being, self-worth and self-efficacy

Students feel happier and able to support each other. Students feel better about themselves and this often extends to improved relationships with their families.

Transformation – developing independence

Students recognise the importance of directing their own learning and behaviour. Students describe increased confidence in dealing with school and their imagined futures.

Real world learning – connecting to people in the community

Students identify valuable learning as taking place when they move into the community and engage with people and authentic tasks.

Post-school plans – looking to the future

Students want to engage in learning that allows them to explore their interests and their future career aspirations. There is important learning from this supported exploration.

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