

# The BIG PICTURE ACADEMY Research Project

MAP4U Murdoch University

## RESEARCH BRIEF 7

### Promising Practices: What students, parents and teachers say about learning in a Big Picture context

#### Introduction

These findings are developed from an analysis of interviews of students in years 8-12 who commenced a Big Picture education experience in Term 1, 2014. They attend one of five quite different Big Picture Academies/ Big Picture inspired schools in a low socio-economic region in Western Australia. Most were interviewed on three occasions: (1) Term 1, 2014; (2) Term 4, 2014; and (3) Term 3, 2015. Parents were interviewed for the first time in Term 4, 2014 and some parents were re-interviewed in Term 3, 2015. Teachers were interviewed on three occasions, around the same time as students. The findings contained in this report build on the previous two combined reports (No 1 & 2) by connecting student, parent and teachers perspectives. We have organised these findings around four key questions:

1. Why are students disengaging from mainstream schooling?
2. What are students learning in Big Picture Advisory?
3. What practices support student engagement for learning?
4. How does the Big Picture Education design enhance student aspirations?

#### 1. Why are students disengaging from mainstream schooling?

##### ❖ Disengagement – alienating experiences of mainstream schooling

Mainstream secondary schooling is an alienating experience for a subset of secondary school students. The reasons range from a perceived lack of support, too much pressure, disruptive classrooms, bullying and lack of curricular relevance and flexibility. These students disconnect and are often effectively pushed out of mainstream schooling.

*Year 8 and 9 and half of year 10 I didn't want to be at school. One of the main reasons was because I didn't want to be in my classes because all the kids in my classes would make fun of me and pick on me all the time so I didn't want to be in there so I stopped going at one point and it kind of came like a habit so I stopped going to school.<sup>1</sup> (Student)*

##### ❖ Sub-optimal engagement – students looking for something better

Mainstream secondary schooling is not engaging for many students who perceive a lack of relevance and

1. The quotes in the Executive Summary help make a point and enliven the text but as a set they don't 'cover' all the points being made.

flexibility in the curriculum and a rigidity of pedagogy. They do not disconnect because schooling offers future benefits but are simply looking for something better.

*Loretta's project focused on history, not the kind of decontextualized history covered in the race through the syllabus but a desire to understand 'life to text' rather than 'text to life'. Her research/inquiry question examined the reasons why European families migrated to Australia in the post war period. Loretta wanted to explore her own family history as a means of understanding why historical events happen. Her family came from Macedonia so she decided to undertake an oral history through the use of interviews and by accessing primary documents in the state library as well as family photos. These are real research techniques employed by experts that help students move beyond low-level Wikipedia information gathering i.e., cutting and pasting information into an assignment of dubious value. Loretta is doing much more than completing assignments for the sake of it. (Researcher)*

## 2. What are students learning in Big Picture Advisory?

### ❖ Relationships – respect, trust and care

Students value the closer relationship with their Advisory Teacher (AT) because they feel connected and supported. This relationship is an important cornerstone of their learning. For many students the acceptance and interest shown by the AT is unusual, facilitating a sense of belonging and trust. A few students found their relationship with the AT had low moments during the research period. Even so, they preferred it to the usual teacher/student relationship. Students felt more connected to their Big Picture peers than in mainstream school settings, arising out of the smaller class size and increased time together which facilitated openness and trust.

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

Students feel happier, have greater self-worth and offer increased support for each other in a Big Picture environment. Students feel better about themselves and this often extends to improved relationships with their families and beyond. For some students this appears to be coming from increased academic success and enhanced social connection both at school and in learning out in the community. An enhanced sense of well-being is especially marked in those students who were most alienated and disengaged from mainstream schooling. However, students at all schools demonstrate enhanced well-being and happiness in their Big Picture environment.

### ❖ Deeper learning – facilitated by a personalised approach

At this early stage, we are beginning to see some evidence of how personalised learning approaches can develop deeper learning. Students are starting to learn about the language, key concepts, tools, and the 'ways of working' of their interest. This is achieved by: starting from where students are at and what they are interested in; exploring real world standards; developing authentic research methods; linking to academic knowledge ('the subjects'); and working one student at a time.

*At the beginning [of the year] I wanted to be a tattooist. Learning the history of that was fun and how they do it... Now I'm studying psychology because it has always interested me. In particular, I'm studying post-traumatic stress disorder. For my Exhibition, I did a timeline of psychology from 1500 BC to 2000 A.D. Psychology isn't just about mental illness. I made a PTSD fact sheet and people asked me if I'd just cut and pasted it but I had written it all down and then put it into a document. It was my own work, including the compare and contrast of two different PTSD cases. (Student)*

### ❖ Engagement – taking ownership of learning

In the Big Picture learning environment, 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. Student engagement was noticeably enhanced in the Big Picture contexts, as observed by teachers, students and parents.

*We've had students working on fantastic topics... we had one student last year who was learning all about the issues in Palestine and Israel and it was all off the cuff comments from the news... she found it fascinating and she had no idea and she just ran with it really. She was not the student you would have expected to go there and I remember her mum coming in for one of the Exhibitions and she said "I've never seen her talking about the news and tuning into it." But she is quite a high level and performing student. The whole research thing... she was very good at putting that together... and it wasn't planned it was just how it went. (AT)*

### ❖ Transformation – developing independence and agency

Students recognise the importance of directing their own learning and behaviour. Students describe increased confidence in dealing with school and their futures. They value the opportunity to present their learning to others and engage in out of school experiences.

Students demonstrate a growing sense of self-reliance, responsibility and agency. Most students appreciate the challenges, although a couple of students found the degree of responsibility too much in their school and wanted more scaffolding.

*The other day they were studying for their upcoming assessments and the way that they did it was sophisticated. They were challenging each other. They knew each other's strengths and weaknesses so they knew when to lean on someone or when to let someone lean on them during that process. (AT)*

#### ❖ Learning about learning – self and others

A subset of students were able to take a “bird’s eye” view of their learning and describe their meta-learning. Being placed in the Big Picture learning environment where they are required to be more responsible for their learning and articulate their learning strengths and limitations has helped them learn. They identify increased understandings of themselves as learners and how this knowledge will help them in future.

*I have found it hard to manage myself with the TAFE course. It has shown me how much motivation matters. I didn't understand the commitment of a Cert IV. I just need to put my head down. It has helped in the Cert IV that I have had the experience in Big Picture because there is lots of talking to lecturers and group work. Taking feedback in Big Picture is essential. That has helped me at TAFE as we all have to get up and talk to the class. How we do this matters as we need to get the class engaged in our joint project. (Student)*

### 3. What practices support student engagement for learning?

#### ❖ Advisory – like an extended family

The Big Picture Advisory provides a place where students felt safe and had a sense of belonging. They got to know and understand other students and the AT really well. The image of the advisory being like ‘family’ emerged. Students dealt with the inevitable tensions of the group and became adept at being more inclusive of other’s views.

*In Big Picture it is great that you don't have to do everything on your own. If there's a problem or something on my mind I can talk to the Advisory teacher or the other students. The advisory teacher knows me as person and I know him well enough to talk to him about anything. It's amazing. There is a lot interaction between students and no problems we get*

*on really well. We help each other and work together on any decisions. Any conflict is over by the next day. (Student)*

#### ❖ Advisory Teacher – supporting, extending and deepening

The AT featured strongly in all student responses about themselves as learners, as young people, and as members of the community. They talked about the AT as someone to go to for help whether about school or outside school matters. They saw the AT as someone who cared for them, challenged them, and supported them. They understood that over time the AT was asking them to take more and more responsibility for their work and learning.

*Like she knows my strengths and weaknesses through my time in Big Picture, so I can sort of trust that she knows when to step in and help out, unlike other teachers that will just watch me struggle in other classes. (Student)*

#### ❖ 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. At this early stage, Internships were only operating effectively in a few schools and only a small number of students were able to engage in fully developed Internships. Those who did engage were inspired, clarified their career goals, and learnt many important skills. Students who were not able to participate in a fully developed Internship often found the experience unsatisfactory and disengaging.

*Rick is a Year 12 student with a passion for basketball. He worked on a project that required him to analyse the shooting techniques of famous players. He represented his finding using parabolas. Throughout the project Rick also investigated the scientific principle of force in relation to the vertical leaps of some of the best known players that can slam dunk a basketball. Rick combined his project work with an internship at an NBL club working closely with his mentor to explore the world of professional sport. The work in school informed by the work at his internship. Rick is currently completing his Certificate III in Gym Instruction and Fitness (AT)*

#### ❖ Post-school plans – looking to the future

Students explore their interests and future career aspirations. Over the research period many students appeared to gain greater clarity around future pathways to achieve their chosen careers. For others, the possibilities have widened thus making choice more difficult. Some schools emphasised the importance of students

becoming experts in the pathways available to them. Students had mapped and implemented plans including completion of relevant Cert IV qualifications. Some students had left Big Picture to implement the next stage of their career pathway (e.g. moving to TAFE or moving into an ATAR pathway in mainstream school).

#### ❖ Exhibitions – a site of learning and connection

Exhibitions play a key role in enabling students to gauge their learning and develop new skills and confidence in presenting their learning to others. Some students found Exhibitions to be very stressful experiences. Exhibitions are highly valued by parents who were consistently impressed with their child's learning and capacity to express their learning.

*I did an Exhibition in front of a big group of visitors to the school. I was really nervous because I am scared of public speaking but it benefited me in the long run. Getting the feedback from so many adults was good. I was stressed but afterwards I was glad that I had had the opportunity. (Student)*

#### ❖ Family engagement – families are enrolled too

Students and parents identify increased levels of engagement with the school and improved family relationships. Families play an important role in students' education. From helping students develop their Learning Plan to participating in events, parents show a deeper understanding about their child's learning and interests. Parents were involved in quarterly learning plan meetings and student exhibitions of learning throughout the school year. There was a unanimous valuing by parents and students of the enhanced relationship facilitated through increased parental involvement.

*I feel like I'm a lot closer with the (family)...(they ask) how was school today and that kind of stuff ...I am probably telling them more about what I did because it's interesting for me and its just like I write this and this and this and I'm doing this next week and can you come along to that because I kind of need you to. I feel like it's closer – like me with them with school. (Student)*

*My relationship with William is changing. When he was in mainstream he'd arrive home angry, drop his bag down. I'd ask how his day was. He'd just say "bad." Now he wants to talk to me because he's interested in being at school and loves it when I listen to what he's doing. The Exhibitions are good for him to push him a bit more and good for his confidence. They give him an opportunity to reflect on how he's going... The other*

*kids give him positive feedback and are encouraging. At his first Exhibition he was sweating, breathing fast... now he can talk confidently. I wish that I'd had Big Picture when I was at school. I would have stayed at school rather than dropping out in Year 10 and going into a low paying job. Now I'm 38 and at university at last. I had the potential back then but just didn't want to be there. (Mother)*

## 4. How does the Big Picture Education design enhance student aspirations?

At this early stage of implementation we are starting to see how student aspirations for the future develop. Students are provided with opportunities to explore their interests and then go deeper around the things that really matter to them. In the Big Picture Advisory there is a focus on acknowledging the strengths and assets students bring to school rather than weaknesses and pathologies. The AT creates a context in which students can think differently about their imagined futures. This involves identifying the barriers and obstacles they face and developing the skills and knowledge that will enable them to lead the kinds of lives they desire. In pursuing this goal students are provided with opportunities to 'leave school to learn' through Internships and social networking in the adult world in order to explore future pathways and careers. Whilst these practices were still being developed in most schools there was strong evidence that when enacted well, these promising practices enable students to move from aspiration to implementation.

All students interviewed could describe their interests (and for some how they stick and others how they've changed). Students interviewed were able to name pathways and careers that they were considering and exploring. Most of the students were quite clear about the next step they were taking. They were clarifying the sort of life they wanted to live. Others were still searching.

*I have responsibility as a year 12 to uphold what is needed and pass it on to the year below. I try to be an all-rounder and keep the respect level for everyone. That's part of being a leader, at school and outside of school. Life is getting a hold of me. I've worked at a number of jobs – at a cycle shop, at a nightclub and at a restaurant/tavern. I also do footy umpiring. This is my third season and I have been chosen to be the league number one boundary umpire for the grand final. I worked hard to ensure this place – training hard every week and being focused on game days.*

*Although my main focus is school, I like having a life outside school. I am still doing Mixed Martial Arts twice a week. Because I'm 18 and I find that I'd get loose on the weekend and come back to the week refreshed – having a bit of fun on the weekend helps – not to the extent of destroying brain cells.... Hopefully I'll start a clothing brand. It's been a little idea in the back of mind for a while... I still don't know what I want to do, whether I should move out, whether I should travel... I just like to go with things. (Student)*

*Loretta (see page 1 of this Executive Summary) continued to flourish in Big Picture. She floated in working on developing her passions and interests and was lost. Her work on her family history posed more questions than she answered and she had to battle her own personal demons whilst balancing the demands of school. If it was not for Big Picture, who knows what Loretta would be doing now. Then, out of the blue, she came to her advisor and talked to him about learning about child birthing techniques. She said that she always loved children and that she found the medical side of it fascinating. She went about working on developing an authentic project. She worked closely with her peers, the child-care teacher at the school and the Big Picture School Coach. Her research became an in depth exploration of her passion and her exhibition and final product was something to be proud of. This young lady, who in her first exhibition broke down with anxiety and fear, got up in front of her parents and peers and was able to talk about the childbirth process, in graphic details. She then applied and was admitted to the nursing pre-placement programme in Nursing. Her research skills that she developed in her personal history project gave her the ability to develop a real research question, to find the valid sources and communicate it carefully. The successes, and sense of flow (c.f. Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi) allowed her to get excited and intrinsically motivated to work towards her goals. If she was in mainstream, she would have been stuck with labelling diagrams of the human body and would be demotivated and, well, lost. Instead, she found her sense of purpose and a dynamism that most young people do not have. Her parents, and Loretta, are grateful for the Big Picture programme. Her mother often commented that she now how a daughter that wanted to come to school and wanted to learn. Prior to this, they had a said daughter who hatted school and what it brought to her life. School became meaning and purposeful. (AT)*

## Concluding remarks

By way of concluding remarks we can make a number of general observations relevant to this research project.

First, statistical data (e.g., ATAR, NAPLAN, PISA) collected by education systems cannot adequately capture the benefits of engaging in more authentic and personalised approaches to learning. We can only properly comprehend the work of teachers and students by getting up close and personal to their daily lives and practices. Paying attention to the realities of students' lives provides a much richer insight into 'doing' school differently and the implications for student learning.

Second, there is an acknowledgment that mainstream schooling or a 'one size fits all' approach to education is not working for a growing number of students. In response, some students actively choose to enrol in a different way of 'doing' school where they feel a greater sense of ownership, belonging, and mattering. Others are simply "pushed" out of mainstream schools and searching for an alternative kind of education.

Third, personalised approaches provide numerous benefits in terms of student engagement, deep learning, aspirations, and wellbeing. Throughout this research we heard time and time again about the positive effects of personalisation. The attempt to implement the Big Picture design for learning has resulted in students re-engaging in learning with a greater sense of purpose, relevance and rigour. Furthermore, there is evidence of enhanced relationships with family and peers, growing self-confidence and the development of capabilities to manage their own learning and futures.

Finally, such outcomes can only be achieved through a deliberate approach to changing school culture, structure and pedagogy. This kind of change takes time, perseverance, resources and leadership. Pivotal to this process is a willingness to engage in self-reflection with a view to better understanding and improving practice. Along the way, there are tensions and contradictions as participants negotiate alternative ways of thinking and acting. We hope this report based on the stories of students (and their teachers and parents) provides a foundation for ongoing conversations based on a spirit of optimism and hope.

*If I weren't in Big Picture I wouldn't be attending school. Big Picture provides a safety net. The portfolio entry to university is really helpful. I think my learning at Big Picture is deeper than in mainstream. I wouldn't have gone into the Cert IV and if I had just done ATAR and failed, I'd be screwed. (William).*

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