![Big Picture EDUCATION AUSTRALIA]

WHAT NEXT?

Options for further development of Big Picture Education in Australia

Academic partners from universities across the nation have carried out much of the evaluation of Big Picture Education in Australia, including the research under the direction of Prof Deb Hayes and Prof Barry Down. The committee overseeing Big Picture's research and evaluation program was keen to involve other academic partners who are aware of the issues in re-engaging young people but who have had less involvement with Big Picture. Accordingly Big Picture Education Australia (BPEA) invited Professors Margaret Vickers and Florence McCarthy from the University of Western Sydney to comment on the future of Big Picture in Australia, basing their critique on the existing evaluation documents and their own backgrounds as experienced educators and researchers.

Chris Bonnor, May 2014

Across Australia, over 40 schools have now partially or fully adopted the Big Picture approach. What these schools have in common is that the students entering them had, for a variety of reasons, disengaged from learning. What emerges from the qualitative and quantitative research conducted to date clearly indicates that Big Picture programs can turn these students around, leading to higher achievements on core academic skills, better attendance, and a renewed passion for learning. The brief statement offered here provides some suggestions for the future development of Big Picture Education in Australia. It is written by critical friends who have read the available BPEA literature and documentation, have had conversations with Big Picture leaders, with researchers, and with teachers, and have participated in national Big Picture seminars.

Three suggestions are put forward. The first is that there should be an increased emphasis on social or peer-supported aspects of learning both within classrooms and in the internships. It is possible, and indeed quite likely, that this approach is already being implemented in some Big Picture schools. However the available Big Picture literature places very little emphasis on cooperative or peer-supported learning. Within the existing Big Picture literature there are few illustrative descriptions indicating whether or how an emphasis on this form of learning is being implemented. The second set of suggestions relates to the implementation of internships in Big Picture programs. Here, we recognise that the extent to which Big Picture schools commit themselves to internships does vary, and that setting up internships is seen by some advisory teachers as difficult and stressful. Third, it is argued that Big Picture needs to develop and implement broader measures that actually show what is being achieved by students in Big Picture programs. At both the local and the national level we need to show parents, teachers, educational leaders and policy makers that Big Picture really does make a difference. Broader measures are needed, for example, to indicate how and to what extent Big Picture Education enhances student engagement with learning, improves student aspirations, and increases the individual's capacity to undertake further education.

1. An increased emphasis on peer-supported cooperative learning

Integral to the Big Picture design is the commitment to educating "one student at a time in a community of learners". Consistent with this, there is a strong emphasis on learning activities for individual students that take place within the local community, through internships that connect the individual with employers, local government, and voluntary organisations. There is also a strong emphasis on community connections in terms of the participation of parents and other adults in student exhibitions. However, not a great deal has been said in the written record about the ways in which Big Picture students could support each other's learning through co-coaching, through sharing interests and aspirations, and through teamwork.

Additionally, there is little discussion in the Big Picture literature regarding the pressure that is put on advisory teachers as they create, implement and sustain community connections that involve internships and community-based learning for students. The work of advisory teachers is essential to the long-term success of Big Picture schools. Their importance is well recognized; what is less well articulated is what can be done to help them adjust to the requirements of the Big Picture design.

Our suggestion is that, within the scope of the Big Picture design, a moderate shift toward more peer-supported and cooperative learning should be considered. This may work to support advisory teachers, especially in the early semesters of the introduction of Big Picture into a school. It is particularly relevant in the construction and introduction of internships – a part of Big Picture that is considered essential, but is not always fully implemented in some Big Picture schools. Helping young people to learn how to connect with other people really matters. Disaffected young people are often marginalised within their peer groups. Learning to listen to someone your own age, learning how to share thoughts, to empathise, to understand others' feelings – these kinds of learning can be achieved through cooperative, peer-supported activities.

Small group student learning has additional advantages: specifically, it encourages students to interact with one another, learn personal skills in social encounters, learn from each other, and construct an appreciation of the approach to learning that Big Picture is attempting to implement. In their report for Big Picture Education Australia, Hayes, Down, Talbot and Choules (2013, p. 23) noted that students found "... The focus on learning about each other through learning interests builds understanding and respect [for each other]..." In terms of the internship component of Big Picture, group-based work at the very beginning may actually ease students into understanding what a project is, how it is related to real life, and how jointly managed student projects may stimulate interest and collaborative learning among the members in a group.

Initial community-based activities involving two or three students could be expanded and extended if an individual student became committed to some aspect of the topic. Two or three students sharing the same interest in water quality in local streams, for example, could carry out both joint and individual activities. As the project evolves, each individual might take responsibility for a particular aspect of the water quality project.

For students, the demands of group work provide a learning environment of give-and-take with peers, encourage mutual enthusiasm and interest in a topic, and engage students, helping them to gain confidence in social interaction with other students and with adults related to their projects. However, because it is a sheltered experience, the student is free to make mistakes, learn by doing but not in the limelight, and shift interests and project topics without stressing the advisory teacher and requiring the creation of another individual placement for each student.

These introductory placements could acquaint students with community activities, link classroom learning to community

activities and provide a venue for students to learn from each other. This creates a natural lead-in to a Big Picture internship that is, by design, personalised. However, if two or three students chose to work in the same context on related questions, the internship may involve a group of two or three or four students. Over time, however, a greater emphasis would be placed on individual responsibilities for investigation and report writing.

To the extent that Big Picture schools do routinely involve peer-supported learning, then it is important to document these activities and discuss their impact. In a series of recent Australian and US studies, it has been found that when less-engaged students are deliberately connected with peers who are highly engaged, their academic engagement and achievements tend to increase substantially (Crosnoe, Cavanagh & Elder, 2003; Frank et al., 2008). Naturally-occurring peer groups also have positive effects on student engagement. For example, in a study that controlled for factors that might contribute to changes in engagement - such as teacher and parent involvement, gender, and achievement levels - it was found that students who were members of more engaged naturally-occurring groups sustained their levels of engagement, while those who belonged to less engaged groups became less engaged over time (Kindermann, 2007).

2. Internships and the work of advisory teachers

The current status of internships finds they are considered critically important to the Big Picture design but remain only partly implemented in some schools, essentially because of the substantial coordination required. In some localities it is difficult to arrange internship placements that offer a genuine pedagogical challenge. For example there may be plenty of hairdressing salons, but fewer opportunities to link students with sympathetic professionals in the community. While most students flourished in internship contexts provided for them, in some cases it was not clear that students were gaining a great deal from their placements. Advisory teachers are expected to straighten out these problems, but unfortunately it appears to be the case that some of them are not fully familiar with what is available to the community, or have limited contacts with people who would be capable of providing effective learning environments for students outside the classroom.

When the demands on an advisory teacher for finding and establishing agreements with mentors and agencies is multiplied 15 times, it is not surprising that the promise of high-quality internships will sometimes fall short. Small group projects such as those discussed above might allow the advisory teacher to arrange for four projects a semester rather than 15 or 16 projects. These projects could, for example, be tied to the work of local councils, to not-for-profit groups, or to other community based activities. For example, an advisory teacher may establish a link with the State Emergency Service, which would involve a group of students in fire prevention work. A group of four students may work with the SES on surveying the fire readiness of certain homes, or surveying the encroachment of grass along roadways, or checking on the status of water sources in case of fire. Students working together could contribute to a joint report, but each would also be responsible for an individual account of their learning.

While some schools have a teacher who carries some responsibility for coordinating internships, the burden of managing these arrangements usually falls on the advisory teacher. In addition, the advisory teacher is responsible for all other aspects of the Big Picture design: linking student interests to the curriculum, presenting curriculum content, facilitating family-student conferences, and working with students in preparing learning plans, project outlines, details, and summary reports.

Advisory teachers need considerable understanding and practice in acquiring the knowledge and experience they need in creating effective learning placements and internships for their students. These skills are not inherent, nor are they necessarily rapidly learned. At a minimum, advisory teachers require ongoing support and coaching in developing an appreciation of what placements and internships are; they require time to learn about community resources, including both the people and organisations that provide good learning contexts for their students. We also argue that they should consider alternative means of structuring the community learning of students, utilising small groups to lessen the stress they experience.

3. Strategic communication and the need for broader measures

Strategic communication is essential at the local level, since almost all Australian public schools are operating in a competitive environment. Indeed, competition between schools is encouraged through devices such as the My School website. Unfortunately this website only allows schools to demonstrate what they achieve in terms of their NAPLAN scores. It is important, therefore, that BPEA helps schools across the network by providing strategies that will assist them with their strategic communications at the local level. If these strategies can be agreed upon across the network then the data gathered could be aggregated and would contribute significantly to a national communication strategy.

Some work along these lines has been achieved through the publication and distribution of the BPEA National Research Framework (NRF). This document provides survey instruments to be completed by students, advisory teachers and school principals. However the completion of these instruments places additional burdens on school staff and in many cases schools have not responded at all, or the quality of the data submitted has been patchy. It is suggested that this framework should be reviewed and simplified. It should be relatively simple for schools to assemble data on daily attendance, discipline issues, suspensions and exclusions, and overall student retention. Ideally, schools should seek to provide both 'before' and 'after' indicators in relation to each of these measures for students who have attended a mainstream school and subsequently moved into a Big Picture program. In addition it would be important to compare data on these indicators for students in Big Picture programs and students in mainstream schools.

Data on student transitions from school to further education and work are notoriously difficult to carry out and do impose burdens which most schools cannot sustain. A possible solution to this problem would be for BPEA to implement a limited research project that would involve constructing a representative sample of students across several schools, and following the sample two or three years beyond school

completion. An independent researcher would need to be engaged to make periodic contact with the students in the sample in order to follow their post-school pathways. This is a costly exercise and may not be the highest priority for BPEA.

A strategy that is likely to be both feasible and cost-effective would be the adoption of a broader common measure of student engagement that could be administered to individual students at their point of entry to a Big Picture program, and administered again, one or preferably two years later. At present such information is not being collected and is therefore not available at either the local or national level to assist with strategic communication about the outcomes of Big Picture programs. One objective of Big Picture is to function as a catalyst for better-informed conversations about schools in Australia. Arguing that we should widen the available measures of student and school achievement is one way to achieve this objective.

There are a number of alternatives worth considering. Across the nation, existing Big Picture research projects have developed measures that could be used more broadly. These include the individual student surveys being developed by Murdoch University for the Big Picture Academies project (Down, Choules, Stone & Hogan, 2013), and the survey used in the Secondary Engagement Evaluation project (see page 30; Down & Choules, 2012). If additional survey instruments have also been developed and are being used by Big Picture researchers in other states and territories, this would obviously complicate any effort to establish a common approach. Nevertheless, efforts should be made to keep the number of survey instruments to a minimum, and to involve as many schools as possible in their use.

4. Conclusion

Three suggestions have been put forward in this paper for the consolidation and further development of BPEA. The first is that there should be an increased emphasis on co-operative and peer-supported learning both within classrooms and in the internships. The second set of suggestions would lead to some refinements in the approach taken to the implementation of internships. In particular, we suggest that small group activities leading into individual internships may lighten the load on advisory teachers, while at the same time building peer support and teamwork skills among students. Finally, as BPEA consolidates and expands, it is essential that a system of common and broader measures be established in order to ensure that teachers, parents, educational leaders and policy makers are provided with clear and compelling data that indicates what Big Picture is capable of achieving.

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