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TRAINING YOUNG PEOPLE AS RESEARCHERS TO INVESTIGATE ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT IN THE MIDDLE YEARS

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Abstract

This paper reports on the first stage of a study that used *Young People as Researchers* to investigate the phenomenon of middle year student engagement and disengagement. The first stage of the study focused on a two day workshop that provided training for students and teachers from four secondary schools in conducting research in their schools. An overview of the three stages is presented and the workshop procedures and example activities for Stage one of the *Young People as Researchers* model are described. Further to this, the paper reports on data collected in the workshop to address the research question: How do middle year students describe engagement and disengagement?

Keywords: Young People as Researchers; disengagement; re-engagement; middle years; student voice

TRAINING YOUNG PEOPLE AS RESEARCHERS TO INVESTIGATE ENGAGEMENT AND DISENGAGEMENT IN THE MIDDLE YEARS

Introduction

An Australian report (Australian Centre for Equity through Education & the Australian Youth Research Centre, 2001) found that disengaged young people saw education as offering the potential to open their future prospects but frequently felt devalued by their schools. The young people were also aware that the pathways generally offered to them were less valued and their negative school experiences mostly ruled out the option of completing senior schooling and, by extension, university education. These are students who 'are not necessarily troublesome, but for whom the middle class institution of schooling has become completely banal, meaningless and without purpose, except as a reasonably pleasant place in which to meet and socialize with one's friends' (Smyth, 2006, p. 286). The potential meaninglessness of formal education has been taken up by Levin (2000) who cites a considerable body of evidence showing that 'disadvantaged students tend to receive the least interesting, most passive forms of instruction, and are given the least opportunity to participate actively in their own education' (p. 164), leading from low levels of engagement with education to high rates of dropping out. Similarly, McInerney and McInerney (2006) state that 'many secondary classrooms are crushingly dull places in which to learn' (p. 239). The boredom created by such pedagogy 'conveys a deep sense of disappointment' (Fallis & Opotow, 2003, p. 108). Where school becomes alienating and irrelevant to students' aspirations, they may 'see themselves as having little choice other than to walk away from it' (Smyth & Hattam 2001, p. 403), investing their interest and motivation elsewhere.

Klem and Connell (2004) suggest that disengagement increases as students progress through school. Research in Australia consistently points to the middle years (grades 7-9) as a time when students start disengaging from education (Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers & Rumberger, 2004) and highlights the need to examine the student perspective on what is valuable in school. Recently, there has been a swell of research in western countries focusing on student voice.

The field of 'pupil' or 'student voice' was pioneered in the United Kingdom by Jean Rudduck (1937-2007) whose writings have been internationally influential. Fielding (2007) presents an overview of Rudduck's work that established the importance of engaging with young people in school review and development. Rudduck's work suggested that what pupils say about teaching, learning and schooling is not only worth listening to but provides an important foundation for thinking about ways of improving schools. She suggested that the social maturity of young people

involved in school review and development significantly outstrips many teachers' pre-conceived ideas about student capabilities and interpersonal realities. Therefore working with young people in projects where students have a voice can break down traditional assumptions about students in schools and promote dialogic relationships between teachers and students. This approach is necessary if student perspectives are going to be listened to and contribute to change.

The authenticity of encouraging the voice of young people in school settings is an issue that needs consideration (Fielding, 2001). Levin (2000) developed a set of arguments for a sustained and meaningful role for students in defining, shaping, managing and implementing reform, and outlined some ways in which such involvement might occur (p. 155). He saw the arguments for student participation as embodying one or more of five principles:

1. Effective implementation of change requires participation from all those involved (students and teachers);
2. Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve their implementation;
3. Students' views can help mobilise staff and parent opinion in favour of meaningful reform;
4. Constructivist learning, which is increasingly important to high standards reforms, requires a more active student role in schooling; and
5. Students are the producers of school outcomes, so their involvement is fundamental to all improvement. (p. 156)

The Young People as Researchers model used in this study draws on a framework that promoted the positioning of youth as full research partners, valued for their own knowledge and skills, as opposed to being positioned as research assistants or informants (Kirshner & O'Donohue, 2001). The model also builds on previous work involving student forums and visual narrative methodology to inform school review and development (Carrington & Holm, 2005; Carrington, Allen, Osmolowski, 2007; Carrington 2007) and the Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project (Bland & Atweh, 2004; Bland, 2004).

The model has three distinct stages.

Stage 1: Two day workshop for students and staff

The first stage involves 1) Establishing expectations of roles and responsibilities; 2) Shared understanding of overarching research focus; 3) Training in research methods; and 4) Planning for school-based research projects. The details and activities of this workshop will be discussed below.

Stage 2: School-based projects

This stage involves teachers working with student groups in each school to implement a school-based research project. This stage usually works across the year and is school driven but supported by the university academics. Each school's project operates quite differently depending on the research focus. For example, some schools embed the student research projects within school class time, while in other schools, students meet intermittently and are taken out of regular class time for the project. University staff visit the teachers and students regularly during the year to assist with project design, data collection, analysis and reporting.

Stage 3: Sharing conference

The final stage provides an opportunity for the students to share their work in a one day conference. The students prepare presentations that involve powerpoint, photographs and video displays. Each presentation covers an overview of the project, research questions, data collection, analysis and presentation of findings. Each student group then considers implications for future change from their research and considers future research projects. Each school invites senior education staff, parents and community members to share in their presentations.

This paper firstly reports on the detailed procedures and activities of Stage 1—a two day Young People as Researchers workshop with approximately 30 students from four secondary schools. The workshop provided students and teachers with training and experience in conducting research for implementation in their schools. Secondly, the paper reports on data collected in the workshop to address the research question: How do middle year students describe engagement and disengagement?

Methodology

This Students and Teachers Achieving Re-engagement (STAR) study uses a Young People as Researchers model to study the phenomenon of middle year student disengagement and provide possible solutions from the perspective of the young people themselves. The research is grounded in a strong constructionist theoretical framework which has been designed to allow the researchers to strive towards a social justice ethic (Aronowitz & Giroux 1991). Constructionism is based on the

view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context (Crotty 1998).

The Participants

Four government secondary schools, catering for a broad range of students, were invited to participate in the study. These schools serve outer-metropolitan communities with comparatively low progression to senior schooling. While two of the schools are in traditional 'working class' suburbs, the other two are in fringe development areas, one of which draws on semi-rural as well as suburban communities. Student populations range from 840 to 1200 and are predominantly Anglo-Celtic with small but significant Indigenous and Pacific Islander cohorts in the most outlying of the schools.

At least two teachers facilitated the student group from each school with approximately 20-30 students drawn from the middle years. Each school invited students to participate in the project and many schools selected students who were seen to be 'disengaged' in schooling. Selection of students was a school-based decision. School student groups had a reasonable gender balance, although this was not specified formally. School, parent and student consent were gained to participate in the project. The university researchers who worked with the school groups in this project have a history of working with a range of secondary schools in the metropolitan area and have experience in employing the Young People as Researchers model.

Stage 1: Two day workshop for students and staff

A two day workshop was held at the university to provide training for approximately 120 students and eight teachers. The aims of the workshop were to give an overview of the two year project; to establish students' perceptions and understandings about engagement and disengagement in the middle years; to provide training in research skills for school-based projects; and to plan the school-based projects.

Establishing expectations

Clear expectations were presented to the students with a focus on valuing the following principles:

- Promoting student voice;
- Respect for others;
- Listening to what others have to say;

- Group problem solving;
- Team work;
- Having fun;
- Learning new things; and
- Keeping records of everything.

Shared understanding of overarching research focus

In the first session, an audio grab from the following website was played to the students. http://www.boreme.com/boreme/funny-2006/becky-demolition-p1.php. The audio is a recording of a spoof phone call that a young girl called Becky from Dublin makes to a demolition company. Becky wants to blow up or knock down her school – with the teachers inside. She is obviously very unhappy about what happens at school. The audio is very funny and appeals to the students, leading to discussion acknowledging that on some days students might feel like blowing up their school and the challenge emerges- how can we make school a better place?

The terms 'engagement' and 'disengagement' were presented to the students. There was some discussion about what might influence whether a student is engaged or disengaged and the following issues were suggested: physical environment of the classroom; what is taught; how it is taught; relationships with teachers; problems at home; peers; and other things. The students were then invited to participate in a 'snowballing' data collection exercise. Coloured pieces of paper were distributed with the following words printed on the front and back of the paper. 'I am engaged in learning when……' and 'I am disengaged in learning when….'. Students were asked to write on one side of the paper and screw the paper up and throw it around the room. The process continued for a number of minutes with students picking up a 'snowball', adding their own response and throwing the snowball to the other side of the room. As well as being a fun activity, perhaps challenging students' preconceived notions of research, it helped students to clarify their own thoughts on the central issues of engagement and disengagement. The data collected in this activity was also used to address the research question, How do middle years students describe engagement and disengagement?

Figure 1. ‘Snowballing’ exercise

Training in research methods

Students were presented with an overview of research, with a focus on action research. The nature of a research question was explained and examples were provided. We discussed a range of data collection methods such as interviews, surveys, observations and image-based research. The university staff presented role plays of conducting an interview and gave explicit examples of each method using visual resources such as powerpoints and video.

Students worked in school groups (five groups of six students) to practice the research methodologies involving data collection and analysis. Students engaged in a range of practical activities in groups and their work was facilitated by the teachers and university staff. Activities were presented in a clear and scaffolded way to ensure students could practice the methods of data collection and analysis. For example, the first group was required to analyse the snowball data using theme-based categories. Their research question was: How do students describe engagement and disengagement? Activity Sheet 1 (Appendix 1) indicates this research question. A set of instructions was then provided to enable the students to analyse a bundle of the snowballing data. Student groups also completed research activities to practice the skills of data collection and analysis for the research methods: interviews, observations, and image-based research using video cameras.

Students were required to present their findings to the whole group of students and staff after the various research activities. This process presented opportunities for students to share and consolidate their learning with the group about the various research methods and develop

presentation and public speaking skills. The practical activities provided opportunities for group discussion, team work, problem solving and hands on learning about conducting research.

A further focus of the training was on ethical considerations in conducting research. This component took the form of a short talk covering the participants' own rights within the research project and how they must respect and protect the rights of others. An emphasis was placed on the importance of informed consent and confidentiality, particularly as the project involved the collection of visual data through photography and video. For the majority of the Year 9 students at the workshop, standing up to speak in front of around 140 people was a novel and fairly daunting task. All the students, however, undertook this final plenary session, in which small groups presented their findings, in the same spirit of cooperation that they had applied to the whole event. To be sure, this experience may have been assisted by having access to the audio-visual technology available to them in the university lecture theatre. It consisted of touch-screen computer hardware and large double screen projections. Even so, this equipment was treated with respect despite its novelty value.

Figures 2 and 3: Students analysing data

Figure 4: Students prepare report of findings

Figure 5: Students present their findings

Planning school based projects

The second day of the workshop focused on planning for the school-based research projects. A presentation by the university academics demonstrated action planning strategies to enable the groups of students from each school to develop a number of action research projects in their school. Each student group worked together with teacher facilitation to develop an action plan that covered the following areas:

- List of group members;
- What is the problem we want to investigate? What is our research question?;
- What are we going to do? How will we collect data?;
- Why are we going to do it? Why is it important?;
- Where and when are we going to do it?;
- When will we start?;

- Who will help us?; and
- What resources will we need?

One of the final acts of the workshop was to name the project. Maintaining the principle of democratic decision-making, wherever possible, underpins the Young People as Researchers model. Students were invited to write their suggestions on a white board and then votes were cast. Whilst not the first choice of the project facilitators, the majority vote was for 'Students and Teachers Achieving Re-engagement' (STAR) and this title was duly adopted. The next section of the paper will report on data collected in the workshop to address the following research question: How do students perceive engagement and disengagement?

How do Students perceive engagement and disengagement?

The snowballing exercise described earlier in the paper collected data from the 120 students in the workshop about their perceptions of engagement and disengagement. The analysis of the data is based on a grounded research approach (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) where properties and themes were allowed to emerge from the data. In this research approach, the focus is on unravelling the elements of experience. From a study of the elements and their interrelationships, a theory is developed that enables the researchers to understand the nature and meaning of experience for a particular group of people (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This necessitated careful analysis of the data that expanded the students' basic analysis of the data in the workshop using the process presented in Appendix 1. Data was coded into categories making constant comparison among the categories with the aim of ultimately constructing theory.

The snowballing data were organised into the following categories and are listed in order to indicate the frequency of student comments:

1. Pedagogy (218 total responses);
2. Content (139 responses);
3. Teacher (69 total responses);
4. Self or peer issues (51 responses);
5. Other (44 responses); and
6. Environmental issues (22 responses).

The breakdown of categories and sub-categories and numbers of comments are represented in the following tables along with an interpretation of the data. In considering the data, it needs to be

noted that although 120 students participated in the snowballing exercise, the snowball process required students to continuously and randomly record their comments on a piece of paper and throw the screwed up piece of paper around the room. This exercise continued for approximately three minutes in order to exhaust student comments about engagement and disengagement. See figure 1.

Table 1: Pedagogy (218 total responses);

Students become disengaged when:	**Comments (n= 90)**	**Students become engaged when:**	**Comments (n= 128)**
Undisciplined environment	37	It was fun	63
Boredom	26	The teacher made it interesting	23
Too much writing	15	It was a disciplined environment	15
Other reasons	12	Learning was active	12
		They were able to be independent	10
		They worked in groups	6

Almost 50% of student comments in the Pedagogy category (engagement) suggested that students were engaged when they were having fun in the classroom. 18% of the comments indicated students were engaged when the teacher made learning interesting. In contrast, 29% of comments about disengagement in this category showed that students were disengaged when the classroom was boring. Interestingly, the issue of a disciplined or an undisciplined environment was noted in both descriptions of why students were disengaged and engaged: 41% of student comments indicated that students were disengaged when the environment was undisciplined and 11% noted they were engaged in a disciplined environment.

Table 2: Content (139 responses);

Students become disengaged when:	**Comments (n= 68)**	**Students become engaged when:**	**Comments (n= 71)**
They did not like the subject	54	Like the subject	63
The work was too	7	It was easy	8

hard/easy			
Other reasons	7		

Content was the second highest category with the main focus on whether students liked or did not like the subject.

Table 3: Teacher (69 total responses);

Students become disengaged when:	**Comments (n= 49)**	**Students become engaged when:**	**Comments (n=20)**
Dislike the teacher	28	Like the teacher	20
Teacher talks too much	16		
Other reasons	5		

Positive relationships were obviously important for students to be engaged in learning. 57% of student comments in this category suggested that students were disengaged when they did not like their teacher and 100% of the comments about engagement in this category showed that students were engaged when they did like their teacher. It is worth noting that 33% of the comments about disengagement were about the teacher talking too much in the classroom.

Table 4: Self or Peer issues (51 responses);

Students become disengaged when:	**Comments (n= 10)**	**Students become engaged when:**	**Comments (n= 41)**
They were in class without friends	3	They are interested	8
They were having problems with friends	3	With friends/people they like	7
Friends were teasing	1	They are able to participate	6
There were social matters on student's mind	1	They are happy	6
They get left out	1	They want to listen	6
Feel people hate them	1	They feel focused	2

		Other	6

The comments reported in this category are fairly spread over different sub-categories that explain disengagement and engagement. Personal issues about friendships or difficulties with peers were important, along with motivations to engage such as listening and being focused.

Table 5: Other issues (44 responses)

Students become disengaged when:	**Comments (n=31)**	**Students become engaged when:**	**Comments (n=13)**
There were hot guys or girls in the room	11	The guys are hot (or there to impress)	4
Tired	9	It's lunch (or lunch is next)	3
Hungry	4	Going outside to play	3
Other issues such as family problems or not feeling like learning	7	Other issues are being able to think clearly, not being tired, doing the roll	3

Relationships with the opposite sex are important in this category. 35% of comments in this category said the students became disengaged when there were 'hot' guys or girls in the room and 30% of the comments related to engagement in this category were also about peer attraction but focused on the need to make a good impression. Other personal issues were noted in both categories were about how students were feeling (tired, hungry, lesson close to lunch-time, family issues etc)

Table 6: Environmental Issues (22 responses).

Students become disengaged when:	**Comments (n= 12)**	**Students become engaged when:**	**Comments (n=10)**
It's hot (and/or sticky or stuffy)	10	They are comfortable	5
It's a nice day	1	The weather is cool/nice weather/ air-conditioning/not hot	5
kids playing outside	1		

There were only 22 comments about the impact of the environment on engagement and disengagement. The expected issues related to the weather were reported in this section with a focus on hot sticky weather as a major cause of disengagement for students.

Discussion

The focus on fun was noted as an important factor that enhances engagement for the 120 students in the snowballing exercise. Suggested professional traits of middle school teachers often include a focus on humour: Middle school teachers are encouraged to display a sense of fun, humour, and connect with students (National Middle School Association, 1995). This focus on connecting and engaging in positive ways with students also supports the ongoing emphasis on developing constructive student-teacher relationships. This important issue has been highlighted by researchers such as Klem and Connell who suggest that students 'need to feel teachers are involved with them – that adults in the school know and care about them' (2004, p. 262) and go further by saying 'students who perceive teachers as creating a caring, well-structured learning environment in which expectations are high, clear, and fair are more likely to report engagement in school' (p. 270).

While we note that boredom is a sub-category in the data about disengagement in the category, Pedagogy, Fallis and Opotow (2003) also note that, for students, the term 'boring' means more than tedious and dull and is a student shortcut term used to label 'alienating aspects' (p. 108) of schooling. These feelings can represent a perception of devaluing of student contributions and a disrespect for their pedagogical preferences. Fallis and Opotow (2003) also suggest that these feelings convey a deep sense of disappointment in student-teacher relationships. Students can be invited to be 'co-constructors and co-creators' of their learning experiences rather than passive consumers of the curriculum (Smyth, 2000). This means that students' perspectives, cultures and experiences come into the centre of the curriculum which is aligned with an approach that supports student voice in review and development. A pedagogy that gives students a sense of belonging can only enhance classroom relationships and engagement and therefore influence positive learning outcomes. The Young People as Researchers model has the potential to highlight stagnated approaches to teaching middle year students and suggest ways that can enhance choices and opportunities that are more engaging.

The issues raised so far about pedagogy for fun and engagement, the importance of positive student-teacher relationships and student centred learning reinforce Rudduck and Flutter's respected view that students enter a partnership in learning when they feel they have a stake in school and are

respected enough to be consulted at classroom and school level (2000). The Young People as Researchers model can be used in schools to harness student perceptions and ideas for future improvements to middle school curriculum and pedagogy.

The social aspects of the learning environment also appear to be important and reflect the emotional, social and psychological development of youth in the middle years (National Middle School Association, 1995). The Young People as Researchers model provides opportunity for peers to work together in social ways to address issues that are of concern for them. As Levin (2000) suggested in the five principles presented earlier in the paper, if schools want to make a difference and effect change, students and teachers need to be involved working together. The Young People as Researchers model has a strong participatory focus in all stages and assumes that students and teachers will actively participate.

Conclusion

Nationally, the underlying philosophy of the middle years of schooling has provided a strong impetus for programs to focus on effective and positive experiences for students that will motivate and support further learning. Our experience suggests that it is time to focus more strongly on the issues of engagement and disengagement from the viewpoint of the students themselves. Indeed, as Smyth (2005) points out, the often disparaged voices of those most marginalised have unique perspectives that deserve to be heard. Further, as noted by Thomson (2004), at risk students have themselves appealed for opportunities to demonstrate their strengths in addressing 'the ways in which their education is (not) working for them' (para. 28).

If the goal is to develop more engaging curriculum and pedagogy in the middle years, then students should be more valued and respected as citizens in a school community. They can successfully participate in school review, planning and action through the Young People as Researchers model. This paper has presented an overview of the stages of the model and in particular, the details of a training workshop for students and teachers. We share this information to enable more respectful cultures in schools where students value their relationships with teachers and can contribute to overcoming the traditional power relationships that create barriers to achieving more inclusive classrooms. Data gathered in the training workshop, provides an authentic perspective of how a group of secondary students perceive engagement and disengagement. We hope that by including students in planning for reform in the middle years, traditional roles, relationships, expectations and meanings within a school community can be challenged from a different perspective.

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Appendix 1

Activity 1: Snowballing

Research Question:

How do students describe engagement and disengagement?

Instructions

1. Get in group of 6 students
2. Read all of these instructions before you begin
3. Tip out the snowballs and spread out into a couple of piles
4. As a whole group read through what the students have written about engagement and sort into categories. Give each category a name and record below.
5. In each category, give some examples of the types of comments students made.
6. Repeat the same process for disengagement.

I AM ENGAGED IN LEARNING WHEN…

Category Names	Examples of Student Comments

I AM DISENGAGED IN LEARNING WHEN…

Category Names	Examples of Student Comments