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Young People, Imagination and Re-engagement in the Middle Years

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Abstract

This paper reports on the first stage of a study that uses *Young People as Researchers* methodology to investigate the phenomenon of middle year student disengagement. The study obtains student perspectives on the meanings of engagement and disengagement using a variety of innovative research methods. The first stage of the study focused on a two day workshop giving students and teachers an overview of the project and providing training and experience in conducting research in their schools. The process employed by the study provides spaces and resources for critical thinking and encourages imaginative responses to the real life problems confronting the students and their peers and affecting their educational engagement. This paper describes ways in which engagement is viewed both theoretically and through the empirical work of the student researchers, and how various applications of ‘disciplined imagination’ connect with methods of investigating and understanding engagement.

Keywords: Engagement, middle school, students as researchers.

Introduction

The right to learn and to learn with joy would empower through active engagement in thinking differently, imaginatively [...] This is a teaching toward liberation through a teaching toward imagination, for at the root of anti-oppressive pedagogy is the vitality and art of imagining different ways of being in the world, and finding opportunities for their realization as lived. (Swanson, 2005, p. 5)

Disengagement from education increases as students progress through school, with a particular escalation of the problem in the middle years (grades 7-9). For students from low income backgrounds, the consequences of disengagement are potentially the most serious and can be manifest in poor school attendance, academic failure, and early school-leaving, with subsequent social and educational disadvantages. The consequences for the wider community may include health and welfare costs and increased crime.

Definitions of disengagement are generally informed from an adult perspective; for example, through the eyes of education policy-makers, school administrators and teachers. Rarely are the views of students themselves sought or considered. By contrast, the research project that is the focus of this article was undertaken by middle school students who investigated the phenomena of engagement and disengagement in the context of their own schools and peer groups. Using a variety of research methods and processes designed to stimulate their creative, empathic and critical imaginations, the novice researchers were able to add students' voices to the debate on preventing disengagement and improving educational outcomes for students at risk of academic failure.

This article will discuss the initial stage of the project with an emphasis on the design of the introductory workshop attended by the student researchers and teachers. It is proposed that this workshop design not only increased the participants' knowledge of research methods, but was in itself a model for engagement. The workshop provided students and teachers with training and experience in conducting research for implementation in their schools using processes that animated and drew on the students' imaginations. A description of this initial period will illustrate the level of engagement of their imaginations in creative, critical and empathic modes. Finally, the article will discuss ways in which the processes developed for this project may be applied to more general educational settings to enhance student voice and academic engagement.

Background to the STAR Project

Growing student disengagement leading to exclusion from schooling continues to be a major problem for education systems, teachers and families (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Disengagement increases as students progress through school (Klem & Connell, 2004) with a particular escalation of the problem in the middle years of education (grades 7-9) (Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004). There is a pervasive view that young people are themselves to blame for academic failure and dropping out of school (Smyth & Hattam, 2001). The problem, however, is mostly defined 'from the outside' (p. 401). Perhaps a better way of understanding disengagement, and its counterparts of resistance and exclusion, can be based on the voices of young people themselves. By excavating the meanings of concepts such as disengagement from the inside, new understandings can help to construct more accountable school regimes that can make a difference to the lives of the most disadvantaged (Smyth, 2006, p. 288).

While students may be low in the official structures of power within the education system, they have extensive and long-term knowledge of the immediate problems as well as the contexts in which they occur, and local knowledge about relevant sources of essential information (Bland & Atweh, 2004). Listening specifically to the voices of those who are the most at risk and, therefore, the least likely to be heard on issues that directly affect their educational outcomes (Thomson, 2004), is an issue of social justice. As stated by Fielding and Rudduck, (2002), 'there are many silent or silenced voices - students who would like to say things about teaching and learning but who don't feel able to without a framework that legitimates comment and provides reassurance that teachers will welcome their comments and not retaliate' (p. 2).

A legitimating framework for student voice was provided by the project that is the focus of this article. In an Australian university and schools collaboration called "STAR: Students and Teachers Achieving Re-engagement¹", the phenomenon of middle years disengagement was investigated from the perspective of the students themselves. Utilising a 'students-as-researchers' approach, the project drew on the earlier work of Kincheloe and Sternberg (1998), the Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project (Bland & Atweh, 2004; Bland, 2004) and work by Carrington that focused on the engagement of student voice in school review and development for more inclusive schooling (Carrington & Holm, 2005; Carrington, Allen, & Osmolowski, 2007).

Engaging student imagination is a key focus of this approach, acknowledging that the student participants may be reluctant to enter dialogue with teachers and researchers on matters to which they have previously had little input. Moreover, students who have previously been marginalized and prevented from contributing their voices to educational forums, may have difficulty in adjusting to the novelty of collaborative research with adults and may be disinclined to question and correct adults, uncertain of their own place in the power relationship (Rudduck, 2003).

Such reluctance may not be confined to students, with teachers also likely to be understandably hesitant to place themselves in a position of openness to personal criticism and challenges from students to the traditional, and comfortable, hierarchies of educational structure (Flutter & Rudduck, 2004). Further, teachers and professional researchers may be tempted to avoid the voices of those who appear ‘incomprehensible, recalcitrant or even obnoxious’ (Bragg, 2001, p. 70). As asked by Fielding and Rudduck (2002), ‘where *do* students talk about injustices that they experience or observe in the classroom and which they do not feel they have power to act on at the time?’ (p. 3). Novel, engaging and imaginative methods were, therefore, required in the STAR project to assist students to express their concerns openly and freely while teachers could feel unthreatened by the possibilities of hostile student views.

Project design

In consultation with key personnel in the four participating schools, a students-as-researchers project was designed, involving groups of around 30 middle years students from each school. The project consisted of three distinct stages:

1. Two day workshop for students and staff
2. School-based projects
3. Sharing conference

The first stage was a two-day workshop that involved establishing expectations of roles and responsibilities and shared understanding of the overarching research focus. This event introduced the participants to a range of research methods and commenced basic training in them. Planning for school-based research projects concluded this stage.

The second stage involved teachers working with student groups in each school to implement a school-based research project. It was designed to work across the school year and was school driven but supported by the university academics. Each school’s project operated quite differently depending on the research focus. For example, some schools embedded the student research projects within school class time, while in other schools, students met intermittently and were taken out of regular class time for the project. University staff visited the teachers and students regularly during the year to assist with project design, data collection, analysis and reporting.

The final stage provided an opportunity for the students to share their work in a one day conference. The students prepared presentations that involved PowerPoint, photographs and video displays. Each presentation covered an overview of the project, research questions, data collection, analysis and presentation of findings. Each student group then considered implications for future change

from their research and future research projects. Each school invited senior education staff, parents and community members to share in their presentations.

This paper focuses on the detailed procedures and activities of Stage 1 - a two day students- as-researchers workshop attended by all the student participants with at least two teachers from each of the four schools, and a small team of university researchers. Four government secondary schools, catering for a broad range of students, were invited to participate in the project. These schools served outer-metropolitan communities with comparatively low progression to senior schooling. While two of the schools were in traditional 'working class' suburbs, the other two were in fringe development areas, one of which drew on semi-rural as well as suburban communities. Student populations ranged from around 840 to 1200 and were predominantly Anglo-Celtic with small but significant Indigenous and Pacific Islander cohorts in the most outlying of the schools.

Other than year-levels, no criteria were given to schools regarding student selection for the project. Each school then invited students to participate using their own processes and most schools selected students who were seen to be disengaged in schooling and achieved a reasonable gender balance. Parent and student consent was gained to participate in the project. At least two teachers from each school acted as project facilitators. 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 students-as-researchers methodology.

Methods that engage imagination

The collaboration between the young people and the university commenced with the two-day workshop at the university campus (see Carrington, Bland & Brady, in press, for full details of this event). The setting represents both a physical and metaphysical 'dialogic space' (Noone & Cartwright, 2005), removed from the daily restraints of schools, providing more opportunity for critical imagination and engagement with real issues than the normal school classroom environment appears to allow. While cross-fertilisation of ideas with other school groups was one of the advantages for students attending the introductory workshop, the main objectives were to orient students to the project, introduce concepts of research, and establish the foundations for teamwork. Over the two-days, the students were trained in the conduct of basic research to implement in their own schools and to collect data through visual narratives (photographs, video, and drawings); surveys; observations and interviews.

Necessarily, a good deal of preparatory work set the groundwork for the students to begin collecting data on engagement from the first day of their participation in the project while simultaneously immersing them in a variety of research methods. Figure 1, for example, shows how research questions relating to the issues of engagement and disengagement were pre-determined and that instructions for the students to follow were formulated. All 120 students were involved in the first research activity which, as well as collecting base data for further research, was also an ice-breaker and an introduction to the notion that research could be imaginative and fun. The ‘snowballing’ technique’ involved the roomful of students writing responses to the questions: ‘What engages you in learning?’ and ‘What disengages you from learning?’ on either side of a piece of paper, screwing the paper into a ‘snowball’ and, on a given signal, hurling it across the room. Each student then randomly caught or collected a snowball, responded to what had been written and then threw it again. Using this technique, a large volume of data was collected for analysis and later shared with each school (Carrington, Bland & Brady, in press). To further ignite students’ critical imaginations, a brainstorming exercise was introduced with cartoon drawings of possible paths for middle school students to take which included further education at school, university or TAFE, or dropping out. Students worked in their school groups and created drawings and flow charts on butchers’ paper that described how they viewed their school experience with consideration of future aspirations.

Students then engaged in trialling a variety of research methods. Some students conducted focus groups enquiring into what students like about school, their teachers and their school subjects. Another group observed the ways in which their peers were working, investigating whether working in a group helps to engage students in learning or leads to disengagement. Using image based research, other groups focused on the research question, what learning environments and/or resources help to engage students in learning? These students used video and digital photography to highlight key issues from their own perspectives and engaged in image analysis.

Designing for imagination

The design of the project workshop not only expanded the participants’ knowledge of research methods, but was in itself a model that engaged the students with an educational initiative. As such, it was an empowering event, with students reporting being surprised that their own thoughts, and the thoughts of other students at their school, could be used to make the world a better place. In a post-event evaluation, they also reported greater empathy for the role of the teacher and a greater likelihood to go on to university following their participation in this project.

A key aspect of the project design was the range of opportunities for students to draw on their imaginations in a variety of ways and the provision of dialogic spaces that allow and encourage students to ‘ask ‘why’ and to think differently’, engaging their imaginations in ways that re-connect them with formal education and ‘helping them to deal with the current requirements and constraints of their school education, while imagining “that things could be otherwise” (Noone & Cartwright, 2005, p. 2). The workshop provided both physical space (i.e., the novel surroundings of the university campus) and, through supportive scaffolding of the activities, the mind-space for such imaginative thinking to occur.

During the workshop, many of the groups involved in the brainstorming activity drew on pictorial representations, collectively developing their own visual metaphors. One group, for example, used a spider web metaphor, dividing their page into four segments, each representing a stage of school life. The students described their image as follows:

1. Preschool: the students are looking up to the teacher. The teacher is the spider in the centre of the web, the children are individuals looking to the teacher and spread around the web.
2. Primary: the teacher is the spider in the middle of the web. The focus is on group learning while the teacher remains the primary focus for the students even though they are now working in groups.
3. Middle phase: the teacher is no longer the spider in the centre. The teacher is replaced by a redback spider signifying the bully. The bully is making the students disengaged. The students are once again individuals and some are standing up to the bully (note: it appears they are doing this as individuals).
4. Senior: many different paths to choose. The web is now fractured with the students clustered together in the central position with the various available options in fractured segments. They are: TAFE, arts, jobs, music, university, miscellaneous. (Note: the spider is no longer evident).

The brainstorming technique, as can be seen from this example, is effective in engaging students’ critical imaginations, providing the opportunity to consider new perspectives on issues of significance to their school lives. Two other groups used a ‘journey’ analogy, with one of these illustrating cars and trucks of ever increasing sizes with corresponding ages of 6, 10, 20, 30 years, and finally death. They noted that people’s brains are like the engines of these vehicles and they need fuel to get along. The fuel, in this case, is learning and knowledge. They stated that the more knowledge or fuel the brain has, the further the person will go. It was interesting to note in this and

other visual representations that the students depicted misunderstandings of post-school life and what is entailed in obtaining a university qualification. There was also a simple dichotomy of earning versus laziness stated in one group's explanation of the pathway they had drawn: 'Instead of lazing at home and earning no money [the depicted student] decided to earn money in the end and he learnt with a job how to spend his money efficiently. And decided to earn his money use to retire and go to a retirement home and let his family visit him every week.' Such insights into students' (mis)understandings gleaned from their images could be investigated to inform and improve careers counselling at the school level.

One group added an insight to their brainstorm on disengagement which is worth noting. After listing three reasons for disengagement (family situations, low self-esteem, and an inability to adapt) they made the following comment:

So in the end the student becomes an outcast from the other students that may cause the student to not even attempt to do things when they're older like try to get a job or live a happy life and they're always depressed.

From this example, it can be seen that the students' empathic imaginations were engaged in the consideration of how external factors influence academic achievement and interest in school.

In another example of empathic imagination, specific solutions to local issues relating to disengagement were offered by one group for their school to consider. This included seeing problems from the point of view of marginalised and absent others (Grundy 1996), such as students with a disability and those with limited sporting skills, and drawing them vicariously into the research. Their statements included observations on sport in their school and recommendations to make the sports oval "for everyone not just sports", "let girls play boy sports and boys play girls' sports" and "let disabled people join in games and sports". This group created themes that showed a high awareness of many instances of exclusion within the school and a strong sense of fairness and equity, demonstrating an ability to visualise a problem from the point of view of the absent other (Grundy, 1996).

Metaphor and mental imagery are key components of students' "toolkits for learning" (Egan, 2005, p. 1) and the combination of these tools through the construction of visual metaphor, particularly in a group activity, is a powerful way for young people to develop their own rich understandings. The use of visual narrative techniques not only gave licence to students' creative imaginations in the choice of image and framing the image to evoke a particular message, but also required the students to activate their critical imaginations in delving deeply into the thoughts that led to the initial

construction or choice of image. As well as the visual representation, students were expected to elaborate and communicate their ideas through verbal descriptors. For example, in expanding on photographic images, they were asked to consider why they chose a particular image, what was it about that image that excited/interested them and what was it about the image that connected with the message they wanted to convey? Similarly, students analysing drawings used to communicate student ideas were asked to describe the design aspects of the drawings that they believed helped communicate the message (eg, colours, shapes, lines relative proportions, etc.) as well as the figurative representations in the work.

Possibly the most direct connection with students' imaginations was forged through image based research. This novel approach to data collection can extend opportunities in schools for student voice and engaging imagination to contribute to change and progress towards more inclusive, democratic schools. Various forms of peoples' understandings and perceptions (in the way of visual images and narratives) are of significance in social life because they are integrally connected with the activities in which students engage in their school community. Visual images 'provide researchers with a different order of data and, more importantly, an alternative to the way we have perceived data in the past' (Prosser, 1998, p. 1). This type of research requires higher order thinking incorporating critical perspectives and reflection of the social, cultural and political environment of school (Carrington, 2008).

Normalising imagination

How, then, can the understandings developed through this project be applied to more general educational settings to enhance student voice and academic engagement? The design of the project workshop demonstrates opportunities for students' imaginations to be activated across four broad and overlapping categories (Bland, 2004):

- fantasy, including daydreams, wishful thinking and reverie, which may be generally unproductive but can play a role in problem-solving;
- creative/aesthetic, including problem-solving, poetic and pragmatic abilities;
- critical/social, which can be investigative, disruptive, hermeneutic, and challenging; and
- empathic/ethical, which includes questioning from the point-of-view of marginalised others and recognises the right of the other to be recognised and heard.

Each of these types of imagination has a place within education practice and can contribute to an engaging pedagogy where the necessary scaffolding and supportive spaces are in place. For example, imagining a better future is not only an act of wishful thinking but a product of the

creative imagination that permits students to see alternative possibilities and overcome “the inertia of habit” (Dewey, 1934, in Greene, 1995, p. 21). Greene (1995) and Saul (2001) saw such creative imagination working together with rationality, ideally in a state of equilibrium with qualities such as common sense and ethics to avoid a decline back to fantasy. Further, the application of critical imagination to a consideration of the education system permits marginalised students to gain a better understanding of the socio-cultural contexts of schooling (Bland, 2008). Finally, empathic imagination implies an ethical consideration of the voices of others including those who are absent from the collaborative process (Grundy, 1996); for marginalised students, engagement in learning can grow from the opportunity to participate in purposeful activity that can help others in similar situations (Bland, 2008). Importantly, empathic imagination can also assist students to see themselves through the eyes of others and this can play a significant role in classroom relationships.

In the regular classroom, methods based on these forms of imagination are beneficial in creating better learning environments in which the students can engage with learning and with the teacher. For example, a summary of the project students’ interview findings suggests that the interpersonal relationship aspect is the most significant feature of school for these respondents. While physical comfort, as indicated by comments about air-conditioning, is of importance, they found that students are looking for teachers who can create an enjoyable learning environment. A teacher who is animated and clear is an essential aspect of this. Students also want concrete examples and opportunities for hands on learning and suggested that this can possibly be achieved through group work (which takes advantage of reinforcing the interpersonal relationship aspect of school). The students stated that teachers talking too much may indicate that they are teaching to the lower end of the class. By teaching to the mid to high range in the class and then offering extra help to those who need it, the students who want to get on with their work without further instruction are free to do so without interruption and the extra talk and help is directed more efficiently to those who need it.

Without the ability to use imagination, according to Saul (2001), students are likely to disconnect in frustration. He calls for the ‘normalisation of imagination’ and its re-centring ‘on something real’ (p. 155). Students may disconnect and become passive recipients of activities that can reinforce alienation and lack of agency where a techno-rational (Vibert & Shields, 2003) learning environment predominates. Here, it should be noted that disengagement resulting from boredom, or a lack of appeal to their imaginations, is not confined to students who may be struggling academically but can also lead gifted and talented students to demonstrate resistant behaviours (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathune & Whalen, 1993; Kanevsky & Keighley, 2003). With little to appeal to

their imaginations or a sense of relevance, students ‘turn off’ mainstream education through various acts of passive or active resistance (Bland, 2008). When schooling becomes an alienating and irrelevant experience, students ‘see themselves as having little choice other than to walk away from it’ (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p. 403), withdraw their labour (McInerney, 2006) and actively exercise ‘their right to resist, which means they are making choices to ‘not learn’’ (Smyth, 2006, p. 282).

School disengagement is often constructed in terms of deficit in students, implying the need for special remedial activities by teachers or the school to solve the problem. Such a view is typical of a ‘techno-rational’ lens which illustrates how the construct of engagement can be viewed as superficial and assumes that programs *on* students will fix the problem of disengagement (Vibert & Shields, 2003). Engagement viewed through this lens is defined by student compliance and being ‘on task’, requiring little engagement of students’ imaginations through, for example, reflection on their own learning. A second ideological lens is ‘interpretative/student-centred’, emphasising student choice and active learning in the curriculum (Vibert & Shields, 2003). This perspective reflects the process of constructing opportunities for students to apply their creative imaginations to their own educational engagement in the classroom.

The third lens, ‘critical/transformational’, locates engagement in communal and social interests and can raise political issues, viewing engagement as experiences that may lead to a more just and democratic community. It is here that the design of the STAR project resides. Students’ empathic and critical imaginations (Bland, 2008) can be fully engaged through attending to activities that meet this view of engagement. Students, who may normally be constructed as the recipients of education’s benefits, can become active agents and have a direct impact on education systems. In addition, empathic imagination enables students to step into the shoes of those unable to participate in the process. Through their local knowledge and understandings of their peers and their communities, the students are able to suggest authentic perspectives and possibilities. This third lens requires a commitment by schools to listen to the voices and value the imaginations of students.

The voices of the students offer the key outcomes of the project of value to their schools. In contrast to meanings of disengagement couched in instrumental terms that bear little relationship to the ‘messy realities of school practices’ (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 226), the students’ views about engagement at school, as expressed in their research at the STAR project workshop, confirm that they are able to offer perspectives based on ideals of social justice and empathy. Smyth (2006) points to the need to understand disengagement in terms of “the process that gets to be played out in the relationship between young people and the schools” (p.290). Students’ voices can offer key

insights into those relationships and, when given due hearing, can radically alter the ways in which students and teachers work together.

Rudduck and Flutter (2000) have stated that students will 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. The STAR project students have demonstrated that they are more than willing to enter such a partnership and to respond to such an initiative with commitment and equal respect. Indeed, a number of the teachers attending the workshop expressed pleasant surprise that their students were not only fully engaged in the workshop tasks, but demonstrated cooperation and better than expected behaviour across the two days. Furthermore, the students made unsolicited votes of thanks to their teachers and the other adults who had contributed to the workshop.

Bland (2008) reported on an earlier students-as-researchers project that offered such an opportunity for teachers to be involved in a meaningful enterprise with students that enabled them to work with and understand students in new ways, resulting in positive changes to the entire school culture. One participant, who was facing suspension at the time of his initial involvement in that project, stated that it led to

... great relationships with staff members - because my attitude has changed and I'm not so much of a problem student as some teachers might call you – they see me as someone they can have a friendship with. I'll show them respect, they show me respect – they help me when I need help because they know that I want to succeed. (Bland, 2008, p. 9)

The students-as-researchers approach employed by the STAR project offers ways for young people to engage with the educational issues that are of direct concern to themselves. The experience, in which students begin to understand the ways that unseen forces act on their lives, allows students to 'imagine new possibilities for themselves' (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998, p. 230). As Greene (1995) observed, 'it takes imagination on the part of the young people to perceive openings through which they can move' (p. 14). Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) noted that this approach cultivates empathy with others and that it provides opportunities for imagination to be released in a way that posits new possibilities. The insights gained assist the participants to 'place themselves hermeneutically within the often messy web of power relations' (p. 230) represented by their schools.

Necessary to creating the circumstances in which such imagination can thrive was to remove the students from their everyday school environment and provide opportunities to 'jar' them out of their

usual ways of thinking (Noone & Cartwright, 2005, p. 3), as was achieved through the snowball process. These features reflect the use of non-traditional research methods and the creation of ‘safe and imaginative spaces’ called for by Lietch and Mitchell (2007, p. 69) in which student voice can mix with teachers’ views in non-threatening ways. The challenge, following the introductory workshop, was to maintain the engagement of students’ imaginations as they continued their research projects in their own schools and classrooms. Egan (2005) suggests that, where removing students from what may be emotionally sterile classrooms is not feasible, their imaginations can be ignited by disrupting the expected routines. Changing the context of their learning through, for example, introducing an element of surprise or fun, as illustrated by the snowball process, helps maintain students’ focus and sense of anticipation.

The workshop reported here was only the beginning of the STAR project. The work of the students became the foundations for action research projects in their individual schools that were evaluated and reported at a subsequent student conference. Possibly the most important outcome is that the project has provided opportunities for teachers and students to explore new relationships built on new ways of working together that can be carried into the classroom. It is in such relationships of mutual trust and parity of esteem that Vibert and Shields (2003) third lens, the critical/transformational, is located, enabling engagement as re-imagining education ‘in the interests of a more just and democratic community’ (p. 236). In this environment, students can be empowered to exercise the “right to learn and to learn with joy” and both students and teachers can find “the vitality and art of imagining different ways of being in the world, and finding opportunities for their realization as lived” (Swanson, 2005, p. 5).

¹ The project name, STAR - Students and Teachers Achieving Re-engagement, resulted from a list of student suggestions at the workshop and was overwhelmingly selected by democratic vote.

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Activity 5: Video or Digital Camera and Narrative

Research Question: What learning environments and or resources help to engage students in learning?

Instructions

1. Get in your group of 6 students
2. Read all of these instructions before you begin.
3. Consider what visual images would represent your understandings and ideas about learning environments and or resources enhance learning for students?
4. In pairs, small groups have a look around the area and take photographs/video (**)
of learning environments and/or good learning resources. Consider your time- you may only be able to take a couple of pictures today.
5. View your photographs/video for quality and analyse (sort) into your areas of focus.
6. Prepare a short narrative (story) that explains one of the following:
 - a. why you have taken each photo or;
 - b. why you felt the visual image was important or;
 - c. the message you want to convey to accompany your photo.

** If you have taken a video, you can record your narrative while you are filming.
7. Prepare to share your video/photographs to the whole group. You will need some teacher help with this.

Figure 1: Prepared information for image-based research