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Reciprocated Learning with “At Risk” Students

Main Description

Recent education reforms in Australia and elsewhere are calling for innovative ways to increase school retention and tertiary participation of students deemed educationally “at risk”. The Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project in Brisbane, Australia, was developed as a response to one school’s concerns about Year 12 outcomes. SARUA, which has since spread to many other schools and is being employed interstate, offers a model with the potential to address some of the issues identified in the school reform programs. In a SARUA project, the high school students research barriers to higher education that exist within their own communities and plan consequent activities. In doing so, they not only increase their skills and knowledge, but they are presented with a forum for their voices to be heard and for their own ideas on school reform to be taken up by their schools.

There are certain risks for the students in undertaking this work and in critiquing their own schools. Encouraging and respecting student voice, however, involves attendant risks for those working with the students in the research process - not only must schools be willing to accept student views on their shortcomings, but teachers and the project’s facilitators must also be prepared to learn from the student researchers.

Using students’ views gleaned from their research reports and focus groups, this paper firstly examines the learning that has ensued from participation in the project for the students in terms of overcoming some of their own educational disadvantage and increasing their confidence as learners and researchers. Secondly, it explores the learning that the university researchers facilitating the project have gained from the students. The paper concludes by considering the advantages of this model for other areas of teaching and learning with relevance to at risk students, with particular regard to recent school reforms and the introduction in Queensland of “productive pedagogies”.

Short Description

A students-as-researchers project with at-risk secondary school students is discussed as a model to support current education reforms.

Keywords

Students as Researchers

At Risk Students

Secondary Schools

Education Reform

Reciprocated Learning with “At Risk” Students

Recent education reforms in Australia and elsewhere are calling for innovative ways to increase school retention and tertiary participation of students deemed educationally “at risk”. The Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) project in Brisbane, Australia, was developed in 1992 as a response to one school’s concerns about students’ post-school options (Atweh, 2003; Atweh & Dornan, 1999). SARUA, which has since spread to many other schools and is being employed interstate, offers a model with the potential to address some of the issues identified in the school reform programs. In a SARUA project, the high school students research barriers to higher education that exist within their own communities and plan consequent activities. In doing so, they not only increase their skills and knowledge, but they are presented with a forum for their voices to be heard and for their own ideas on school reform to be taken up by their schools.

There are certain risks for the students in undertaking this work and in critiquing their own schools. Encouraging and respecting student voice, however, also involves attendant risks for those working with the students in the research process. Further, by participating in the kind of process that Fielding (2001) called “radical collegiality”, not only must schools be willing to accept student views on their shortcomings, but teachers and the project’s facilitators must also be prepared to learn from the student researchers.

Following a brief outline of a local school improvement initiative, Queensland’s Productive Pedagogies (State of Queensland [Department of Education and the Arts], 2001), and the SARUA project, this paper will employ students’ views gleaned from their research reports and focus groups to, firstly, examine the learning that has ensued from participation in the project for the students in terms of overcoming some of their own educational disadvantage and increasing their confidence as learners and researchers. Secondly, we will explore the learning that we, as the university researchers facilitating the project, have gained from the students. We will conclude by considering the advantages of SARUA as a model for teaching and learning with relevance to at risk students, with particular regard to productive pedagogies.

Who are the at risk students?

The term “at risk” is contentious as it problematises youth (Wyn & White, 1998) and is frequently a label placed solely on the individual student rather than on the school system (Franklin, 2000), emphasising negative expectations as opposed to possibilities for success. For the purpose of this paper, however, we employ the term in relation to students from those social groups for whom the education system appears to place them most at risk of non-completion of secondary schooling and least likely to enter tertiary education.

At present, less than three-quarters of young Australians complete senior schooling, with the numbers actually falling from 77% in 1992 to 73% in 2001

(Fullarton, Walker, Ainley & Hillman, 2003). For some subgroups the figures are notably worse; for example, for Indigenous Australians, the apparent retention rate was only 43.6% in 2001 (Herbert, 2002). The major causes of disengagement from school are frequently reported to be on-going histories of negative incidents related to school culture and structure (Australian Centre for Equity through Education and the Australian Youth Research Centre, 2001). In a longitudinal study for the Australian Council for Educational Research, Fullarton et al. demonstrated a net effect of earlier school achievement, gender, socioeconomic background, and cultural background as a major influence placing certain groups at-risk of failing to complete senior schooling. Similar trends in many countries identify and address the problems of under-representation (National Board of Employment, Education and Training, 1996) recognising a need for a shift in emphasis from individual deficit models to policy and systems approaches to overcome premature school-leaving.

What is being done to reform education?

Merely staying on at school is not, however, a recipe for academic success and, indeed, may compound academic failure and economic vulnerability for many students, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds (Teese & Polesel, 2003). The seeming inevitability of the diminished prospects for these students requires consideration of more effective pedagogical intervention. On a systemic level, policies to reform education will increase the risk of students' academic failure and social marginalisation if they are unsupported by strategies aimed at raising achievement and increasing inclusivity (Teese & Polesel, 2003).

Increasing retention rates and enhancing the school experience for at risk students have been motivating forces behind recent school reform policies introduced by education authorities in a number of Australian states. In Victoria, for instance, the *Blueprint for Government Schools* (State of Victoria, 2002) sets out a multi-layered design for reform while Tasmania has introduced a values-based reform for the 21st Century, *Learning Together* (Department of Education, Tasmania, 2003). Also, the Queensland Education Department introduced its "New Basics" (State of Queensland [Department of Education and the Arts], 2001) program and the concept of "productive pedagogy" in an effort to combat the unacceptable school completion rates in that State. The underlying similarity in these reform programs is their emphasis on a wholistic pedagogical approach, engaging all students in more meaningful ways with their education.

Productive pedagogies proposes practices that are able to incorporate flexible and dialogic approaches to teaching and learning that indicate openness and reciprocity, and are grouped under four categories:

Supportive classroom environment is an essential component of productive pedagogies for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds (State of Queensland [Department of Education], 2004). It involves creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and support which allows for taking risks and attempting challenging work.

Intellectual quality includes higher-order thinking, deep knowledge, and deep understanding. It embraces sustained conversational dialogue between students, and between teachers and students, to create or negotiate understanding.

Connectedness includes linking new knowledge with students' background knowledge as well as connectedness to the world outside the classroom through a focus on identifying and solving intellectual and/or real-world problems.

Recognition of difference values non-dominant cultural knowledges and enhances the building of a sense of community and identity and encourages active citizenship within the classroom.

Productive pedagogies are, therefore, critical in nature, empowering students to create their own history and to become agents for democratic, social change (Zyngier, 2003). The four major components of productive pedagogies are also major features of the Student Action Research for University Access (SARUA) Project (Atweh & Bland, in press) which brings the Education Faculty of Queensland University of Technology into partnership with a number of schools in the university's immediate catchment area around Brisbane (Atweh & Dornan, 1999).

What is the role of the SARUA project?

In SARUA, senior high school students from social backgrounds underrepresented in tertiary education work in collaboration with their teachers and staff from the university. In the past two years, around eighty students from four schools in the Brisbane area have participated in SARUA activities. It is principally from focus groups with these students, as well as with students in a Western Australian SARUA group, that the insights gathered for this paper were collected. The students were mainly in Years 11 and 12, with some in Year 10 and one notable exception in Year 8. Around 70% of the students were female, which reflects the general participation in the project.

Using participatory action research, the students investigate local barriers to higher education and plan, implement and evaluate school-based projects to overcome the problems identified. This pattern follows the action research cycle of investigation, planning, action and reflection, and is generally carried out across one school year. The student-produced research has led to the creation of, for example, homework centres in schools where students have inappropriate resources to study at home; tertiary shadowing to introduce junior students to ideas about university life; and projects to increase self-esteem and motivation through the provision of role models.

In a typical year, students initially attend an on-campus training program on social issues, project management and introduction to research methods. The training session concludes with plans for projects for the rest of the year. Students and their teachers work on a weekly basis on their projects at the school and, close

to the end of the year, they return to the university for at least two days to analyse their data and write their reports. Throughout the year, staff from the university provide assistance, advice and specialised training as requested by the school.

What are the risks and learnings for students?

Conversation with the high school students suggests that, for many, taking part in SARUA represents a step into unknown territory. In common with many at-risk students, most had not visited a university campus prior to their involvement in the project, had no family experience of university, and their ideas of university were generally based on hearsay. Further, they at times appear to have been given little idea of what to expect from the SARUA project itself before arriving at the initial training workshop. By participating in SARUA, then, students are stepping outside of their comfort zones, risking the unknown. Not only does it take time to adjust to the unfamiliar environment and to establish relationships of trust to allow a level of risk-taking, but there may be the risk of peer pressure suggesting that it is ‘uncool’ to contribute to and succeed in academic pursuits (McGregor, 2005).

On arrival at the introductory workshop, the students are frequently hesitant and keep to their school groups, offering little response to the facilitators’ comments. By the end of the second day, however, they are generally more relaxed, talk more freely and critique each other’s research proposals. By the end of the project, they are happy to provide constructive criticism of the project itself and feel confident about openly critiquing their schools – a risk they may not have taken in the early stages. A further challenge was issued to the students in 2004, by asking them to present their research findings and talk about their SARUA experiences at a one-day conference at the university. The notion of speaking to a lecture theatre comprising “really educated people” (Year 8 male) was daunting but their presentations were well constructed and those who presented declared some empowerment from the process. It has been reported that the high incidence of absenteeism among Indigenous youth may be a risk avoidance measure, protecting themselves from the risk of “shame” (Bourke, Rigby & Burden, 2000). It was, therefore, gratifying that for the Indigenous student presenters at the conference, SARUA was an empowering process that earned them the respect of their audiences as they faced people from academia as well as schools.

Through their engagement in research activities, SARUA students develop particular skills and knowledge in a variety of areas that go beyond classroom learning. Using the voices of the participants gleaned from their research reports and focus group interviews, those learnings can be roughly grouped into

- learning about post-school options
- enhancing academic skills
- developing confidence in team work
- developing critical reflection skills

Learning about post-school options. As would be expected, their encounter with a university leads to direct learning for the students about life on campus and they are more able to picture themselves in this world. For many, this has led to a strengthened decision to attend university, while for others it has opened previously unconsidered future options that realistically include university:

I have also learned more about universities and alternate ways to access entry. I believe that I can go onto higher education and I will succeed in whatever I do. (Year 11 female)¹

I have had the opportunity to view university life from the inside and have gained information about the access of university that I have not been able to acquire through school. (Year 12 female)

I gained personal knowledge, a head start from the rest of the people my age into university life. (Year 12 male)

Enhancing research and curricula-related skills. The research processes have helped to develop the students' academic skills and, in particular, their knowledge of research methods. One group of SARUA students won a Novice Researcher Award at the Queensland Institute of Educational Research, in competition with, among others, postgraduate university students. For some, research was not completely new to them but SARUA enlarged their research experience, such as implementing and analysing focus groups. As stated by one student, it was a deeper and more rewarding experience that led to a feeling that they had "achieved something from all this research, it wasn't just doing all this stuff for nothing" (Year 11 female).

The learning curve has, of course, not always been positive; one group of boys, for instance, declared research to be a "tedious process" (Atweh, Cobb, Crouch, et al., 1995, p. 29) though they did acknowledge that they had developed their skills in report writing and computer work. Although not developed as a discipline-related activity, we do claim that SARUA has benefits directly related to the students' schoolwork (Atweh & Bland, in press), including in mathematics and literacy. There has also been skill development in scriptwriting and performance for one group of students involved in drama who performed their research findings as a play. The real world focus of the research activities means that the students often find themselves in new situations in which communication and negotiation skills are essential, such as dealing with the media and with school or university officials:

We had many dealings with the general public and university officials so our telephone and communication skills were put into practice ... There was also the need to negotiate with school administration and staff, university staff and people in authority. (Blashak, Proctor & Pym, 1997)

¹ Unless otherwise sourced, the comments of students quoted in this paper are extracted from focus group interviews conducted for evaluative purposes by the first author with participants in the SARUA project.

I am now a more confident speaker and I approach more tasks with a positive attitude. (Year 11 female)

Developing confidence in team work. Frequently, the ability to work in teams and to learn from each other have been highlighted by the students as major benefits of their participation in the project. They have reported a sense of enjoyment in group work, identifying those aspects that led to successful collaboration, such as self-discipline, delegation, “spreading the workload, allowing others to feel involved and encouraging others” (Blashak, Proctor & Pym, 1997, p. 5). One recent, culturally-mixed group of senior students from one school revealed that they had never previously talked with many of their new research colleagues and that SARUA had brought them together. A major benefit often reported by students is in working across cultural and friendship groupings:

When I came here I just hanged around the, you know, my people, the Vietnamese people, and I did not really socialise with other people and I thought those people must be bad and all this. But now that I have done the survey, [I realised that] there’s heaps of people that [are] real nice. (Year 11 female)

Team work also led to a sense of pride in their work and the satisfaction of doing something that was helping others. This was a strong motivator for a number of participants:

It was the biggest thrill to look at [the report] and say “That is mine!”... It has boosted my self-esteem a lot. I’m very proud of myself for this... (Year 12 female)

...knowing that the report I have participated in will help future Polynesian students for years to come. (Year 12 male)

Developing critical reflection skills. The groups’ research reports have demonstrated an ability to reflect critically on problems encountered through their research. They have, for example, reflected on the advantages of the different methods of data collection, identified some of the practical limitations that they had encountered, and ventured to provide their extrapolations from the data as well as their own hypothesis about its meaning and causes. For example, in noting that 71% of the boys and only 29% of the girls in their school had university aspirations, in spite of the fact that girls indicated that they enjoy school more than boys, students hypothesized that this may be due to a “lack of female role models who have completed university other than teachers, as was early motherhood, which is common in [this suburb]” (Atweh, Christensen and Dornan, 1998, p.126-127).

What were the risks and learnings for the facilitators?

Sharing power with novice researchers may lead the professional researcher to lose some direction over aspects of the design of the project and data collection (Robson, 2002) and, as noted above, the SARUA participants developed over time a willingness to reflect critically on the project and offer suggestions for improvement. Here, we suggest that the principles of democratic processes and

open dialogue necessarily place project facilitators at risk of critique and, at times, negative comment. Students' views are, however, essential components of the project's development, offering perspectives that we, as facilitators, may at times find counter-intuitive. One group suggested, for instance, that the food we supplied on training days at the university was inappropriate. Where we considered that pizzas would be well received by the students, they commented that we should provide healthier food "so that students can concentrate better" (Cupitt, Hill, Solar, Solar, Waters & Yourell, 2003, p. 17). On the surface, this may seem trivial; it did, however, challenge our possibly demeaning assumptions about the students' priorities. The same group also believed that we should make SARUA meetings more formal "so that more work can get done". Other students felt that they had been "stuck in a classroom all day" and that more should have been said and done to help them to get to know university: "We need to know, like, what goes on really, and instead of just stand there and show us." In a recent focus group the students felt that their university training consisted of too much time in the classroom. While it may have provided them with adequate "theory" to do the research, they did not feel that they were able to have enough experience of the life of the university.

Such suggestions contain mild criticism of our understanding of the students' level of commitment to the project and of our organisational skills but were legitimate and very acceptable. Indeed, the principles of shared decision-making and parity of esteem (Grundy, 1998) are central to the SARUA project and, we would argue, their criticisms demonstrate that the students are claiming ownership of the project. Harder to accept, although just as valid, were the more negative critiques about our level of input as facilitators. For instance, some students felt that we were, at times, overly critical. Some felt that their own words were being rephrased during the report-writing process and, as one student put it, "there is a fine line between guidance and criticism". At a more recent focus group, one student commented: "And I also think that we should have less input from other people, because, well, we just kept on getting stuffed around...". This student went on to suggest that a common lesson on writing surveys might have been helpful and that students critiquing each other's work might have been more effective. Later she added, "[i]f we ask for help then give it!" Undoubtedly, these are some very valuable lessons for us. Another student agreed, "we did that report thing, like, you kept changing our work, and we'd change it again and then you'd change it back again – it should have been more of our own work that went into it".

Professional researchers need to be aware of how easy it is "to slip into taking over, especially when others are insecure, inexperienced and impatient with the process" (Whitmore and McKee, 2001, p. 401). We have learned from the students comments and made appropriate changes to the way in which SARUA operates. Our approach now, for instance, is to limit the theoretical input in the early stages so that planning can commence sooner. Considering the major issues of ownership and quality, Whitmore and McKee (2001) question the extent to which "experts" should revise and edit students' research questions and reports.

They assert that the keys to avoiding unwarranted intervention are “sufficient time, adequate resources, a lack of rigid rules around measuring ‘results’, the consistent presence of trusted staff, and a solid commitment to ‘pass the stick’ to the youth” (p. 401).

What were the risks and learnings for the schools?

In opening up spaces for student voice, schools and professional researchers may be tempted to avoid the voices of those who appear “incomprehensible, recalcitrant or even obnoxious” Bragg (2001, p. 70). For instance, speaking of unwelcome feedback from students, Bragg suggested that not enough attention is given to “the implicit contract to which students must agree; that they take seriously the invitation to participate and speak responsibly, intelligibly and usefully” (p. 70). As noted previously, however, at-risk students may have disengaged from mainstream education and may have been prevented from contributing their voices to educational forums - it takes time for them to adjust to the novelty of having their voices respected in a meaningful collaboration with adults.

There is, then, an inherent risk for schools and teachers in that they may receive unwelcome feedback through the SARUA process. Generally, students’ negative observations are phrased constructively, such as from a group investigating the problems facing Pacific Islander boys in their school, who noted that adverse behaviour and inappropriate classroom humour often masks students’ resentment of teachers’ lack of cultural understanding. This group recommended the establishment of a forum to discuss discipline and teaching issues with the staff, while another Indigenous group recommended that their school establish mechanisms to deal with discrimination.

At times, the students’ comments demonstrated a strong dislike of the school or of particular staff. For instance, in researching how Indigenous students got on with their teachers, one group wrote in their research report that

More than half responded ‘some’ or not at all, while about a third stated that this affected their learning. Reasons given were that the teachers were “idiots” who “stick their noses where they are not wanted”, “because they make you mad” and “because if I don’t get along with a teacher, I don’t show interest”. (Allberry, Borey, Morris, Cobb & Jarrett, 1996, p. 8).

Equally strong views were expressed by students in a SARUA focus group concerning the perceived failure of their project. This group had anticipated failure due to past experience, expressing the view that “our school’s crap” and likening the administration to Orwell’s *1984*. Similarly, an Indigenous group, whose research supported the establishment of an Indigenous Room in the school, felt that their school administrators had prevaricated and effectively wasted their time:

Yeah, every room that we’d get, we’d be like, yeah, finally get a room, start to go to work in that room, and then we’ll get told ‘no you can’t have that room’. So then we’re back to square one again, like, we’ve got no room. (Year 12 female)

There can be, in these situations, some conflict between the duty-of-care requirement of the adult participants and the rights of students to express their own voices in authentic ways. Atweh and Burton (1995), noting "mismatches" between the novice researchers and their professional co-participants, believed work has to be done in the establishment stage to overcome any cynicism and to assure the students of the principle of parity of esteem.

What can the SARUA project offer school reform?

Fielding has suggested that students' perceptions have a great capacity to "alert schools to shortcomings of their current performance and possible ways of addressing the deficiencies" (2001, p. 123). In what Fielding calls "radical collegiality", teachers' learning "is both enabled and enhanced by dialogic encounters with their students in which the interdependent nature of teaching and learning and the shared responsibility for its success is made explicit." (2001, p. 130). Teachers may be wary of risk taking in the current climate and some may tend to avoid innovative practice. This understandable reluctance can, perhaps, be offset by some of the learnings of the SARUA project and we shall now turn our attention to the intersection of SARUA with productive pedagogies.

The productive pedagogies concept is a welcome move towards creating supportive strategies and, we believe, SARUA can offer a relevant model of practice in support of its basic components:

Supportive environment: The SARUA model provides the dialogic spaces Halpin (1998) considered necessary for students to participate in meaningful engagement with their schools and educational practice. Students are treated as adults and equal partners in the research process and in all decisions.

Intellectual quality: SARUA's action research approach to learning ensures higher order thinking is promoted as students gain deep understanding through reflection on their learning. In this process, students engage in substantive conversation with each other and their teachers.

Connectedness: In SARUA, students deal with real world problems of social significance and of importance to them personally. The research contributes to something meaningful and is not just an exercise of academic interest.

Difference: The nature of SARUA is supportive of student direction and self-regulation. This creates the basis for strong social support and the enhancement of a sense of community among the participants. Recognition of difference is a key principle of SARUA, and every effort is made to ensure cultural knowledges and inclusivity are paramount in decision-making. All students are recognised as having worthwhile opinions and ideas.

In participatory action research, it is the type, source, and extent of knowledge that provides the starting point for equality and is the foundation of a parity of

esteem whereby all participants work to develop a reciprocal sense of trust and respect and a shared common commitment towards the content of the research. Schools that agree to commit to such projects need to ensure the support of the executive of the school in order that the work is regarded as serious learning and that tokenistic participation is avoided. As illustrated above, where the students believe they lack that support, the experience can risk a reinforcement of the experience of failure that so often underscores the education journey of at risk students. But, while the SARUA facilitators have the benefit of novel and temporary engagement with the student researchers, and can therefore be more removed from critical comment, the question for schools and teachers is whether they are ready to expose themselves to the attendant risks of criticism as a consequence of increasing retention and inclusive school practice.

Working with students in this mode is not without its risks, requiring continual self critique and reflection (Atweh, Cobb & Dornan, 1997). It challenges the normal demarcations of power between teachers and students. It opens the door for challenges and new opportunities to work in productive ways. The supportive environment provided by SARUA enables at risk students to engage with their education through reflecting and acting on real world problems that are of concern to them so that they can “positively transform situations where they see disadvantage or unfairness in their own and other’s lives” (Zyngier, 2003, p. 43).

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