

**Student disengagement from
primary schooling:
a review of research and practice**

A report to the CASS Foundation

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1. Introduction

I have never liked school at all. Even in primary school I used to come home for lunch because I hated it that much. I was good at primary school but I still hated it.

It was boring. They teach you the same things every year but in a harder dose.

I just won't come to school. I don't see the point.

(quoted in Kinder, Kendall & Howarth, 2000)

The issues raised in these recent, real-life comments from young people are not new. As early as the 1920s, authorities were concerned about the 'psychological problems' of early school leavers (Fuller, 1927). In the 1960s commentators worried about 'youth alienation' from schooling and other social institutions. Today such young people are most likely to be described as 'disengaged' or 'disconnected' from school.

There is a vast literature on high school dropout and policies and programs to improve student retention. Much of this focuses on the teen years and on programmatic interventions at secondary school level. More recently the middle years of schooling and student disengagement during early adolescence have received a great deal of attention.

This report focuses on student engagement and disengagement specifically as they relate to primary schooling. We provide a broad overview of what it means to be disengaged, summarise research relating to the factors associated with engagement and disengagement, and discuss relevant educational programs and practice. The focus is on Australian programs but some notable international examples are also included.

The report is set out in eight sections:

0. Introduction
0. The concept of engagement
0. Factors associated with student engagement
0. Middle schooling and student engagement
0. The disengagement process
0. Programs and practices relevant to student disengagement
0. Recommendations for future research and programs
0. Key Australian personnel and programs in the area of engagement.

We begin by discussing the concept of engagement, which is critical to understanding the forms and causes of student disengagement.

2. The concept of engagement

In defining engagement we ask three questions of the academic literature:

- **How** is student engagement defined?
- **What** counts as evidence of student engagement?
- **Why** does student engagement matter?

Engagement: a multi-dimensional concept

Student engagement can be defined as involving three interrelated dimensions: behavioural, affective and cognitive. In a review of literature on student engagement Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) define these dimensions in the following way:

Behavioral engagement draws on the idea of participation; it includes involvement in academic and social or extracurricular activities and is considered crucial for achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out. *Emotional* [or affective] *engagement* encompasses positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, and school and is presumed to create ties to an institution and influence willingness to do the work. Finally, *cognitive engagement* draws on the idea of investment; it incorporates thoughtfulness and willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills. (p. 60, emphasis in original)

Our own summary of these dimensions is represented in the following table. It highlights participation, commitment and investment as indicative of the dimensions of student engagement.

Table 1: Dimensions of student engagement—key concepts

Behavioural	Engagement is understood in terms of participation . It is evident in actions that may lead to certain visible outcomes , e.g. completing tasks, acquiring skills.
Affective	Engagement is understood in terms of commitment , where schooling engages individuals' emotions, values and beliefs (such as enthusiasm, optimism and confidence) that inform their actions.
Cognitive	Engagement is understood in terms of investment , where tasks engage individuals' thought processes and intellect (such as analysis, synthesis and persistence) in ways that may have meaning and hold interest .

Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004, p. 65) note that many conceptualisations of engagement found in the literature include only one or two of the three dimensions. In this report engagement is understood broadly as including all three dimensions.¹

Other researchers have sought to define engagement beyond these descriptive dimensions. Two examples are presented here. Firstly, some researchers have advanced the concept of small ‘e’ engagement and big ‘E’ Engagement. Australian researchers Woodward and Munns (2003), for example, define small ‘e’ engagement as being ‘in-task’ or engaging in ‘substantive’ ways in class activities. In relation to the three dimensions of engagement discussed above, substantive engagement incorporates high levels of cognitive and operative (or behavioural) engagement. Woodward and Munns contrast substantive engagement with more procedural forms of ‘on-task’ behaviours. Big ‘E’ engagement is defined as ‘an emotional attachment to and a commitment to education: the belief that “school is for me”’ (p. 4). This form of engagement is hence one aspect of affective engagement. Woodward and Munns believe that big ‘E’ engagement is crucial if students are to view education as a powerful resource that is critical to their future.

Schlechty (2002) seeks to characterise the actions and motivations underpinning varied forms of student engagement. He identifies the following forms and levels of engagement and disengagement:

- *Engagement.* The student sees the task as meaningful, interesting, challenging and worthwhile. The student’s concern is to ‘get it right’. The student is able learn at a high level, transfer the learning to other contexts and retain the learning.
- *Strategic compliance.* A student’s goals for undertaking work are instrumental (grades, parental approval, etc). The motivations for engaging are extrinsic rather than intrinsic. While the student may be able to learn at a high level, questions can be raised about the degree of transfer to other contexts and the retention of learning.
- *Ritual compliance.* A task has little meaning for a student. The student is willing to put in the minimum effort required to complete the task and avoid negative consequences. Learning is superficial.
- *Retreatism.* The student does not participate in class activities and sees little relevance in the activities. Learning in relation to task goals is negligible.
- *Rebellion.* The student is disengaged from the goals of the task and acting in ways that disrupt others. Poor work habits and negative attitudes to schooling are common. Learning in relation to task goals is low.

Schlechty’s broad characterisation provides a way of thinking about engagement that goes beyond the simple polarities of ‘engaged’ and ‘disengaged’. Students are not engaged (or disengaged) in every context or even at every moment within those contexts. Such dichotomies can blind researchers and practitioners to the struggles experienced by students deemed to be largely ‘engaged’. Schlechty’s typology is also useful as it draws attention to the reasons why students behave as they do, rather than focusing only on the behaviour itself.

¹ In the literature students are variously described as ‘disengaged’, ‘alienated’, ‘disaffected’, ‘disconnected’, ‘detached’ and ‘at risk’. While some of these terms vary in scope and meaning, for the most part these differences are not important in the context of this report. We use the terms ‘engagement’ and ‘disengagement’, except where we are reporting the work of researchers who adopt different terminology.

In addition, Schlechty's characterisation begins, with its reference to external expectations and norms, to extend thinking about disengagement beyond the individual to their families, communities and the broader society. As we discuss more fully in section 3, much of the literature on engagement has tended to focus on disengagement as an individual, private and personal problem. Increasingly, research and programs are identifying student engagement as a public issue that implicates schools and systems in student disengagement.

As the preceding discussion shows, engagement is an umbrella term that encompasses a complex array of thoughts, actions, and dispositions. This breadth and complexity is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, the concept embraces many important dimensions of learning and student experience. On the other, its imprecision has led to wide variations in the way the concept has been applied and assessed. It is to the latter issue, the way in which engagement has been operationalised and measured, that we now turn.

Evidence of student engagement and disengagement: measures and indicators

Measurement methods and instruments

A wide variety of instruments and indicators have been used to measure student engagement. These vary in breadth: a few attempt to measure all dimensions of engagement (behavioural, cognitive and affective), but the majority measure only one or two dimensions or specific aspects.

Quantitative measures

Quantitative measures of engagement are of two types: questionnaires, checklists and rating scales; and direct observations.

Questionnaires, checklists and rating scales can be used to assess all three dimensions of engagement. Some of them are self-report measures, that is, completed by students themselves, while others are completed by teachers or family members. These methods ask respondents to report on various aspects of students' behaviour, thinking and feeling. Respondents are usually asked to rate their agreement with various items using Likert scales. The following are examples of the types of items that are included:

- 'I look forward to coming to school' (every day/most days/sometimes etc; affective engagement; self-report measure)
- 'Student comes to class on time' (always/usually etc; behavioural engagement; teacher-report measure).

Some studies also include ratings of teacher behaviours to provide a more complete account of classroom processes and interactions.

Direct observations are mainly used to measure behavioural engagement, although they can also be used to measure some aspects of cognitive engagement. The

following examples illustrate the range of phenomena that can be observed and counted or timed:

- students asking questions in class
- student persistence with challenging tasks.

Qualitative measures

Qualitative methods such as focused case studies and ethnographic methods are useful when the investigation is restricted to a relatively small group of students. These allow students' behaviours, cognitions and feelings to be explored in a detailed, open-ended way that is not possible using quantitative methods. In addition, qualitative methods are capable of producing a broader picture of student engagement, as they allow consideration of the wider classroom and whole school context. As Chapman (2003) points out, such methods are concerned as much with the processes associated with engagement as with measuring engagement levels.

The various methods described above can be used for a variety of purposes. While many of the instruments were originally developed for use in research, some were developed as monitoring tools or could be used for that purpose. For example, administrators in Australia and overseas have used questionnaires assessing student satisfaction with school to monitor student outcomes and school performance.

Indicators of disengagement

As previously discussed, student disengagement takes a variety of forms. At primary school level, indicators of disengagement include: not paying attention, not completing school work, disruptive behaviour, withdrawal, underachievement, truancy and school refusal. In Indigenous communities both poor attendance and failure to complete primary school are significant problems (Stanley & Hansen, 1998).

Data on unexplained non-attendance and truancy are used by school administrators as indicators of disengagement. While these are certainly significant issues, such data captures only the most obvious, observable forms of disengagement. It needs to be supplemented by other evidence, such as data on student satisfaction with schooling, to obtain a complete picture of the forms and levels of student engagement and disengagement.

Why engagement matters

At one level, concerns about increasing rates of student disengagement—sheer weight of numbers—have placed this issue squarely on the public agenda. This alone has drawn the attention of administrators, decision-makers and the wider community and stimulated debate about the ends and effectiveness of schooling. Beyond this, however, student engagement is important for at least three specific reasons.

Firstly, engagement makes a difference to achievement. Effective learning requires attentiveness, time on task, persistence, interaction and reflection. Researchers who have documented the relationship between engagement and early achievement include

Finn (1993) and, in Australia, Hill, Holmes-Smith and Rowe (1993) (see also Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004, pp. 70–71 for a review).

Secondly, engagement matters because it embraces important goals of schooling *besides* achievement. Schools where students are affectively engaged are happy places where students feel a sense of belonging and self-worth. Too often the social and emotional dimensions of schooling are overshadowed by the all-important goal of achievement.

Thirdly and more generally, student engagement is critical in an age that values lifelong learning, active citizenship and responsibility for self. Engaged learning is not about passive reproduction of received wisdom. Rather, engaged learners are doers and decision-makers who develop skills in learning, participation and communication that will serve them throughout adulthood.

3. Factors associated with student engagement

For the purposes of this review we divide factors associated with engagement into non-school and school factors. Non-school factors include personal, family, community and social factors affecting students, while school factors are the characteristics and processes of schools. The relevant research literature is vast and in this report we can only provide an overview of important themes and perspectives.

Non-school factors

Table 2 sets out non-school factors that are known to place students at risk of educational disengagement.

Table 2: Non-school risk factors for educational disengagement

Individual factors
Poor self-esteem
Low intelligence
Psychological and psychiatric problems
Physical ill-health and disability
Poor academic performance
Repeating a grade
Specific learning problems e.g. poor literacy or numeracy
Learning disabilities
Behavioural problems
Frequent or chronic school non-attendance
Family factors
Large family size
Family dysfunction e.g. conflict and abuse
Family break-up and the formation of new families
High family mobility
Separation from family
Parental illness
Low socio-economic status—low income and educational attainment, unemployment
Social factors
Gender—maleness
Non-Anglo race or ethnicity
Neighbourhood and regional characteristics—low socio-economic status, remote or rural location, negative community norms e.g. prevalence of anti-social behaviour

Sources include Strategic Partners (2001) and Lamb et al (2004).

It should be noted that much of the relevant literature focuses on students at risk of early school dropout, not the broader issue of student disengagement. Early school dropout is clearly one important end point of disengagement, but the narrow focus on this issue may have served to overshadow other important questions. In particular, there has been relatively little research on students whose achievement is satisfactory but who may be affectively disengaged, withdrawn, or passively compliant. These students may be at risk of underachievement or psychosocial problems.

The literature on ‘at risk’ students has also been criticised for promoting a ‘deficit’ model that blames the victim, stigmatises individual students and diverts ‘labelled’ children into special programs. According to this view, the primary focus should be on mainstream schooling and its responsibility to meet the diversity of student needs and perspectives. One such critic states:

As we consider the plight of those students usually assumed to be at risk, we might well begin by recognizing that what put many of them in jeopardy are not just circumstances of birth or environment, but the school itself. They are at risk of failing not because they can't learn but because the school has not adequately engaged them and provided experiences that are seen by those students as worth doing ... [W]hen we make needed improvements in the way we educate all students, we won't need special programs for some students. (Lounsbury, 1996, pp. 213, 212)

School factors

Table 3 lists school factors that may be related to school engagement; the list is not exhaustive.

Table 3: School factors that may affect student engagement

School-level
School leadership
School size
Student-staff ratio
Grade retention practices
Gender mix of school (coeducational or single-sex)
Quality of school infrastructure
Disciplinary climate
Social climate e.g. tolerance of diversity, prevalence of bullying and anti-social behaviours
Staff professional development
Staff workload and relationships
Parental and community participation
Socio-economic status of students and community
Class-level
Class size
Access to learning resources, e.g. technology
Classroom climate or culture
Student-teacher relations
Peer relations
Teacher experience and knowledge
Teacher morale and commitment
Teacher planning and behaviours
Curriculum
Instructional activities
Assessment practices

There appears to be substantial agreement on the characteristics of schools that promote student engagement and disengagement. Table 4 presents a summary of common themes from recent commentary.

Table 4: Characteristics of schools that engage and disengage students

Dimension	In engaging schools:	In disengaging schools:
Connectedness	Curricula and class materials are relevant to students' lives and highlight ways in which learning can be applied in real-life situations.	The curriculum and learning activities are disconnected from students' experiences and interests. Students are not assisted to understand the relevance of learning to the real world.
Control over learning	Students are responsible for and have meaningful control over their learning. They are involved in defining learning goals, choosing subject matter and assessing their own progress.	The curriculum and learning activities are determined by the teacher, school or system. Students have little or no say.
Intellectual challenge and richness	Instructional tasks and assessment are authentic, multidisciplinary and appropriately challenging.	Activities and assessment are narrow and skills-based. They may be too easy or too difficult for large numbers of students.
Interaction	Students learn interactively and in a variety of ways— independently, collaboratively and in whole-class situations.	Students learn passively with limited opportunities for interaction.
Teacher-student relationships	Teacher-student relationships are caring and respectful, with every student known well by at least one adult.	Students feel unsupported and isolated. They may be reluctant to approach staff.
Teacher role	Teachers are facilitators and guides.	Teachers predominantly direct and control.
Student grouping and streaming	Students of all ability levels are educated together rather than tracked or isolated based on special needs.	Students are grouped by ability level. Students with special needs are 'labelled' and diverted into special programs.
Diversity	The school and classroom environments support diversity and varied perspectives.	The school values conformity to a dominant culture.
Expectations	The school and its staff have high expectations for all students, with a clear definition of the knowledge, skills and personal attributes students should gain.	The school has high expectations only for 'successful' students. Academic and social goals are not well defined.

Dimension	In engaging schools:	In disengaging schools:
Professional learning	Teachers are learners. They collaborate with other staff in a professional community and have regular opportunities for professional development.	Teachers work in isolation from their peers and have few opportunities for professional development.
Teacher knowledge and morale	Teachers have a deep knowledge of their subject matter and enjoy their work.	Teachers lack mastery of their subject area and may experience low morale or stress.
Student participation in school life	Students play active roles in all aspects of school life, including school leadership and extra-curricular activities.	Students play little role in the school outside the classroom.
School organisation	Large classes or schools are broken up into smaller learning communities that promote supportive personal relationships.	The school is organised in large sub-units. Classes and/or the school itself may be large.
Disciplinary climate	School disciplinary practices are fair and democratic. Students have a say in establishing rules and procedures.	School discipline is repressive and may rely on potentially counterproductive strategies, e.g. exclusion.
Community links	The school has extensive links to the wider community, including parents. These enrich the curriculum and enhance the support that schools provide with additional services.	The school has poor links with parents and the wider community and is highly reliant on internal resources.

Sources include AISQ (2002), Black (2004), Brewster & Eager (2000), National Research Council (2004) and Perrone (1994).

Empirical evidence in support of these views is of two types, direct and indirect. Direct empirical support comes from research, mostly from the United States, that has measured engagement as an outcome of school characteristics and processes. This body of research is relatively small, particularly at primary school level. A recent literature review by Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) cited fewer than twenty elementary school studies that examined engagement as an outcome of school factors. In addition, much of the available evidence relates only to the upper years of primary school.

Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) identify several methodological weaknesses in the literature on school factors and engagement. These include:

- **Lack of longitudinal models.** The majority of research on engagement is cross-sectional. More longitudinal research is required in order to understand how the various dimensions of engagement change over time.
- **Narrow constructs.** Engagement is a multi-dimensional construct, but most studies examine the impact of school factors on only one dimension of engagement, frequently the behavioural dimension. There is a need for studies that examine how school characteristics affect all dimensions of student engagement.
- **Narrow methods.** Most of the research is quantitative and relies on report data obtained from students and teachers. There is a need for more multi-method research, including observational and ethnographic studies.

To these points we would add the need for further research that focuses on lower primary school. This is important given views and evidence that some students begin to disengage from schooling during the early years of primary school (see section 6.)

Indirect support for current views concerning school factors and engagement comes from a variety of sources. Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) cite a wide range of relevant studies from fields such as motivational research and the psychology of individual needs. The views summarised in Table 3 also converge with findings from other fields of educational research, including the ‘quality schooling’ and effective schools literatures (for a relevant review see Leonard, Bourke & Schofield, 2004).

Student views

If we are to make schools more engaging places we also need to listen to the views of students themselves. As part of a larger study, Potter and Briggs (2003) spoke to 100 Australian children aged 5–6 years about their early experiences in primary school. Table 5 summarises the children’s most common likes and dislikes concerning school and teachers.

While these findings are broadly consistent with views about the school factors associated with engagement, they also underscore the need to pay attention to the changing developmental needs of children. For example, young children have a need for play and may be more extrinsically motivated than older students.

Table 5: Early school likes and dislikes of primary students

Likes	Dislikes
Having choice of activities	Lack of choice
Playing with friends	'Work'—what you have to do even when you're not interested in it; 'boring' activities
Extrinsic rewards and praise—receiving some form of affirmation for effort and good behaviour	Teachers yelling and screaming
Caring teachers e.g.	Punishments such as detention and denial of enjoyable activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being helped with schoolwork • teachers being patient when you get 'stuck' • being spoken to nicely • being hugged • being assisted to make friends • being cared for when you are unwell 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Being blamed and punished unfairly for acts carried out by other children Being humiliated by teachers e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • being shown up in front of others • being told you are the worst in the class • being compared with others

Source: Summarised from Potter and Briggs (2003)

Kinder, Kendall and Howarth (2000) spoke with a sample of 50 disaffected pupils in the United Kingdom. The pupils were aged 11–16 years and had been identified as disaffected because of attendance problems or exclusion. Like Potter and Briggs (2003), the English researchers found that relationships with teachers had a significant impact on the students' attitudes to school. Teachers' lack of respect for students was a common and strongly expressed grievance.

Kinder, Kendall and Howarth (2000) also explored two other important school factors in their study of disaffection, namely peer relations and learning styles. They identified four patterns of peer relations associated with disaffection:

- outsiders—students who identified themselves as victims and/or loners and often reported that they had been bullied
- émigrés—students whose friends and social contacts were largely beyond the world of school or their expected peer group
- colluders and disputants—students who were engaged with their peers at school but whose relationships with peers were not always successfully achieved or sustained and who were often described by teachers as being 'easily led'
- 'alpha male/female status'—dominant students, who often orchestrated disaffected behaviour.

The researchers state that teachers were acutely aware of the social standings and peer 'type' of the disaffected pupils but they point out that debilitating peer relations pose a major challenge for educators:

Do mainstream schools have sufficient time and opportunity—let alone actual solutions—to moderate the powerful influences of peer relations in disaffection? (p. 13)

Kinder, Kendall and Howarth (2000) also identified a number of trends in disaffected pupils' learning styles, although there was no single pattern that fitted all students:

- Students who were non-attenders, had learning difficulties, and/or had poor peer relationships expressed a preference for working alone.
- Various gender differences in learning preferences were seen. Boys, especially those with behavioural problems, expressed a stronger preference for hands-on experiences and computers, whereas girls preferred creative activities and writing.
- Some students, particularly those with learning problems, said that they were more likely to be involved in a task when the teacher came round and assisted them with their work. In contrast, some pupils who had exhibited behavioural problems expressed a preference for teachers 'teaching' at the front of the class.

A commonly expressed view, regardless of differences in learning preferences, was that learning was 'boring'. Students' accounts invariably focused on the repetitive nature of their learning experiences and the lack of variety in their learning tasks. Many expressed the view that there was 'no point' in going to school.

These findings highlight once again the importance of a variety of curricular and pedagogical approaches in order to meet the range of student needs and to make schooling a meaningful and enjoyable experience.

Unfortunately there are few detailed studies giving voice to the views of students. While several Australian researchers have collected evidence about primary students' attitudes using fixed choice rating scales (e.g. Ainley & Bourke, 1992), few have given students the opportunity to voice their opinions in an open-ended manner. This is another important area for future research.

International research projects

The Canadian project on Student Engagement in Learning and School Life

Beginning in 1994, researchers at McGill University carried out a major national study on student engagement in Canadian schools. This study deserves special mention as an example of sustained national research encompassing all levels of schooling. The study was carried out at ten schools—two schools, one elementary and one secondary, in each of five provinces—and is presented in a series of reports consisting of detailed case studies (Smith, Donahue & Vibert, 2001) and a synthesis of project findings (Smith et al., 2001).

Among its major objectives, the study aimed to ‘describe how students engage in learning and school life’ and to ‘analyze context-specific policies, practices and conditions ... that facilitate student engagement’.

‘Context-specificity’ was an important dimension of this project. The researchers eschewed the notion that there is a single ‘recipe’ of programs or practices that will serve to facilitate student engagement across all schools. As two of the chief researchers explain:

One of the conclusions to which the study came was that ‘student engagement’ itself might well be a misnomer, suggesting that engagement is somehow located in students, when in fact analyses of the data we collected argued that students, like teachers and community members, are engaged in schools when schools are engaging places to be ... This analysis argues against a reified notion of student engagement as a phenomenon dislocated from time, place, and intention and ‘reproduceable’ through the introduction of various programs and packages meant to engage students regardless of contexts or ideologies. (Vibert & Shields, 2003, p. 236)

The researchers were nevertheless able to reach a series of general conclusions about the school conditions and practices that promote and inhibit student engagement. These are summarised in Table 6.

This project has now been followed by a program providing funding for engagement projects in Canadian schools. Details of this project are provided in section 6 of this report.

Table 6: Enabling and inhibiting conditions for student engagement

Enablers	Inhibitors
<p><i>Representing students positively:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Attitudes of caring and respect ● Manifest adult confidence in students' ability to share meaningfully in the creation of engaging communities 	<p><i>Deficit mentality:</i></p> <p>Educators believing that students cannot make good decisions for themselves or achieve high standards of academic excellence</p>
<p><i>Constructing a positive self-image:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Adults working with students to help them develop and understand their competence ● Meaningful student involvement in activities such as peer tutoring, peer mediation and student leadership 	<p><i>Negative self-image:</i></p> <p>Experiences that do not give students a sense of becoming more powerful, more knowledgeable, more responsible and more able to participate in meaningful ways in every aspect of school life</p>
<p><i>Engaging pedagogies:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Approaches to curriculum that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● ground learning in local circumstances, concerns and interests ● allow for student voice in topics, processes and assessments ● Collaborative learning in a variety of configurations that cross age, grade, and ability levels and that reduce student isolation 	<p><i>Low academic expectations:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Lack of trust in students' abilities ● Low expectations ● Low academic achievement ● A sense of needing to do 'for' rather than 'with' students
<p><i>Democratic attitudes:</i></p> <p>Ensuring that schools provide enabling conditions for <i>all</i> students, not just those who actively pursue leadership positions, achieve highly or have influential parents</p>	<p><i>Bureaucratic structure:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Formal, bureaucratic and hierarchical governance structures ● Top-down decision-making ● Emphasis on labels and special programs for students with specific problems

Source: Summarised from Smith, Donahue & Vibert, 2001, pp. 129–134

United Kingdom research on disaffected pupils

For over ten years the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) has been researching the causes of pupil disengagement and programs to address it. Founded in 1946, the NFER is one of the leading independent educational research institutions in the United Kingdom.

In 1994 the NFER commenced work on a local government project on school attendance, truancy and exclusion. This study placed a high priority on recording the experiences and perspectives of disengaged young people, their parents and practitioners. The research culminated in four short reports: *Three to remember: strategies for disaffected pupils* (Kinder et al, 1995); *Talking back: pupil views on disaffection* (Kinder, Wakefield & Wilkin, 1996); *Exclusion: who needs it?* (Kinder, Wilkin & Wakefield, 1997); and *With all respect: reviewing disaffection strategies* (Kinder & Wilkin, 1998).

From work in 40 schools and off-site units in 19 local educational areas the final report concluded that the elements or ‘tools of repair’ that effectively address pupil disaffection appear to be threefold. These are set out below.

The elements of programs that effectively address pupil disaffection
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>the opportunity to establish positive personal relations with an adult who can represent and model pro-social values</i> • <i>the opportunity to achieve academic/vocational success, which also offers a sense of coherence for the youngster’s career and learning pathway</i> • <i>the opportunity to appreciate constructive leisure activity, which provides a sense of enjoyment, achievement and self-worth</i>
<p><i>Source: Kinder & Wilkin, 1998</i></p>

Another aspect of the team’s work, exploring pupils’ views about the reasons for their disengagement from schooling, has been summarised earlier in this report.

The NFER’s work on pupil disengagement has continued to expand, both geographically and into new arenas of investigation. In 2004 the Foundation has taken part in a pan-European project aimed at sharing and disseminating information about different national experiences with student disaffection and disengagement. The project aims to:

- explore the causes and manifestations of young people's exclusion or self-exclusion from educational opportunity in the participating countries
- identify the types of young people most vulnerable to disaffection and disengagement
- highlight effective strategies for re-engaging young people in education and learning opportunities.

4. Middle schooling and student engagement

Over the past twenty years the middle years of schooling have become an important area of educational research and practice in Australia. While there is some variation in the ways in which the term ‘middle years’ is used, it usually encompasses the final two years of primary school and the initial two years of high school.

Research both in Australia (e.g. Hill & Russell, 1999) and overseas (e.g. Olson, 2002) has found that average student achievement plateaus or actually declines during the middle years and that there is a decline in students’ enjoyment of school. This pattern is consistently stronger for boys than for girls. Achievement and enjoyment of schooling begin to improve again during years 9 and 10.

It is widely accepted that the middle years ‘slump’ is due to a mismatch between schooling and the developmental needs of young adolescents. Schools are seen as failing students in a variety of ways: disciplinary and decision-making practices and policies deny the emerging adolescent need for autonomy and participation; the curriculum is experienced as fragmented and irrelevant; the transition from primary school to high school is poorly managed; and school life is increasingly orientated toward academic achievement at a time when the social needs of students are complex, changing and strongly felt. According to the most extreme version of this view, all students in the middle years of schooling are at risk of disengagement.

These concerns have given rise to a multitude of middle schooling initiatives, ranging from local projects focusing on single issues to system-wide programs and policies. Many of these initiatives have an explicit aim of improving students’ engagement with and liking for school. While a review of these initiatives is outside the scope of this document the following provides a discussion of selected research and initiatives as they relate to student engagement in the primary school years.

Reports and reviews considered central to the emergence of the middle schooling field in Australia are: *Report of the Junior Secondary Review* (Eyers, Cormack and Barratt, 1992); *From alienation to engagement* (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996); The National Middle Schooling Project (Barratt, 1998; Cumming, 1998); and the Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) Project (Victoria Department of Education and Training, 2002). Collectively these reports have provided the framework for much of the middle schooling movement in Australia.

These studies and others have consistently used broad concepts like engagement and disengagement to capture the ways in which students participate in or withdraw from school activities. The phenomenon of student disengagement in the middle years has become an accepted part of schooling discourse.

Key issues in the middle school literature are presented in Table 7.

Table 7: Key concepts in the middle years of schooling literature

Factors associated with disengagement	Developmental perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young adolescence as a period of intense emotional, social, intellectual and physical change; shift from childhood to adulthood. • Potentially all students at risk of disengagement.
	Socio-demographic factors	Recognition and concern for individuals and groups of students seen to be in high risk of disengagement categories: low socio-economic status, Indigenous students, language backgrounds other than English, rural and remote, students with learning disabilities, boys
	School factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transition from primary school to high school poorly managed • Curriculum fragmented, irrelevant and lacking connection to students' lives • School practices that constrain student autonomy and decision making • Focus on academic achievement at the expense of students' social needs
	Changing social context	New technologies, mass media, consumer culture, changing student identities (Carrington, 2003)
Indicators of disengagement		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Underachievement or declining achievement • Poor attendance, passivity, disruptive behaviour
Programmatic responses	Middle schooling 'signature practices' (Barratt, 1998)	Integrated curriculum, teaching teams, seamless transition between primary and secondary, constructivist approach to learning, focus on pastoral care and social support as well as academic achievement, sub-school organisation
	Individual school or school cluster projects	Varied focus: literacy and numeracy, boys' education, productive pedagogies, integrated curriculum, teaching teams, transition, critical thinking, authentic assessment
	Policy	System-wide policy responses e.g. Victoria: Middle Years Pedagogy Research and Development (MYPRAD), Queensland: Middle Phase of Learning State School Action Plan

The focus on young adolescents notwithstanding, there is much in the middle years literature that aligns with the more general literature on student disengagement and school and classroom practices that encourage engagement. The following points summarise some of the strengths and weaknesses of middle years research in relation to primary school engagement:

1. The middle schooling research is significant in its exploration of a range of factors influencing student engagement and disengagement. It is characterised by a move away from a focus on remediation and 'inoculation' activities for those disengaged to a positive focus on school, curricular and pedagogical change that seeks to encourage engagement and participation in schooling (Carrington, 2003).
2. Engagement and disengagement are, however, commonly used in the literature without any analysis or definition of the terms.
3. While there has been considerable anecdotal evidence and qualitative reportage of student disengagement in the middle years, there have been few large scale studies that have sought to systematically examine, using quantitative and qualitative indicators, student disengagement or student outcomes associated with engagement programs. Some large-scale studies have examined student achievement in the middle years (MYRAD) and pedagogical practices in middle years classrooms using social and academic indicators (Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study).
4. Despite the inclusion of the upper years of primary school in the literature, the predominant focus has been on transition to high school, the early years of high school and changes associated with adolescence as the key underpinnings of disengagement. This focus has resulted in relatively little attention being paid to the antecedents for disengagement and engagement in the primary school.

5. The process of disengagement

Previous sections have provided an overview of factors associated with, student engagement and disengagement. In this section we discuss the disengagement process.

Age

An important initial issue is the age or stage at which students may begin to disengage from schooling. While disengagement can occur at any age, depending on a student's individual circumstances, there may be some particular phases of education or development in which students are at greater risk.

One of these phases is the middle years of school, which was discussed in the previous section. Australian discussion about primary school disengagement has focused predominantly on this phase, that is, on the last two years of primary school.

International researchers studying an important sub-set of disengaged students, early school leavers, characterise dropping out of school as a long-term developmental process that starts much earlier, in the first years of schooling. Finn in his many contributions (e.g. 1989, 1993) is a prominent proponent of this view. Studies by Alexander, Entwisle and colleagues (Alexander, Entwisle & Horsey, 1997; Alexander, Entwisle & Kabbani, 2001) are notable examples of empirical research on the 'dropout process'. These researchers tracked the educational progress of a sample of Baltimore schoolchildren from entrance into first grade, identifying the children's personal qualities, first grade experiences and family circumstances as precursors to high school dropout.

The developmental perspective on disengagement suggests that significant effort and resources should be directed to supporting student engagement during the early years of schooling. This may involve two types of provision:

- **'Engaging schools'**. General features of 'engaging schools' were outlined previously in this report. While these may be applicable at all age levels, consideration also needs to be given to the specific developmental needs of young children. For example, young children may have a greater need for social support and for extrinsic rewards and praise, as noted earlier. Class size is one structural aspect of schooling that appears to have a greater impact on student engagement in early primary school compared with later years (Finn, PannoZZo & Achilles, 2003).
- **Special programs.** Transition to school programs and early intervention programs that do not stigmatise or isolate children can encourage participation in school and foster continuity between home and school.

The psychological process of becoming disengaged

The middle years perspective on disengagement is based on the thesis of mismatch between schooling and early adolescence. At least two psychological models have been advanced in support of the developmental characterisation of disengagement.

The first developmental model, which Finn (1989) calls the ‘frustration-self-esteem model’, posits that poor school performance leads to an impaired self-view and, in turn, to a student rejecting the context that he or she views as responsible. Finn proposed the ‘participation-identification model’, which describes student identification or bonding with school as arising from sustained participation in classroom activities accompanied by performance rewards. If participation does not become the usual mode of behaviour during the early years, various forms of disengagement may arise including leaving school altogether.

Both of these models incorporate both school and non-school factors. For example, poor school performance may be related to inadequate classroom instruction, while failure to participate may stem from early home socialisation experiences.

Evidence and arguments can be found for and against both models, and a detailed analysis is not possible in this report. Two points are however in order. Firstly, we note that a range of models, rather than any single model, is likely to be needed to account for the variety of forms and patterns of disengagement observed in schools. Secondly, we caution against the notion of unidirectional causal relationships in this area. As Batten and Russell (1995: 50) state:

It is indeed very difficult to define relationships between risk factors and educational outcomes with precision because the relationships are highly complex and, ultimately, not known. One thing is clear, however: the concept of single-cause effect relationships in this area is a nonsense. Even the general paradigm involving several intervening variables which seem to underlie much of the writing in this area is an oversimplification. Relationships need to be viewed as forming a dense and complex web of interrelated, interacting and multi-directional forces.

6. Educational programs relevant to student disengagement in primary school

Given the breadth of the concept of engagement, it could be argued that nearly all school initiatives, be they curricular or pedagogic, academic or social, class- or school-based, are relevant to the issue of student disengagement. Table 8 illustrates the range of relevant program types.

Table 8: Generic program types relevant to student engagement and disengagement

Early intervention
 Transition to school
 Literacy and numeracy
 General curriculum initiatives
 General pedagogical initiatives
 Boys' education
 Indigenous education
 Guidance and counselling
 Self-esteem and well being programs
 Disciplinary policies and procedures
 Alternative schooling programs for students at risk
 Peer support and anti-bullying programs
 School-community partnerships
 Non-attendance and truancy reduction and prevention programs
 Programs for disadvantaged schools
 Programs for gifted and talented students

This breadth and variation has made the selection of programs for this report somewhat difficult. In order to narrow the field we have chosen programs that explicitly aim to ameliorate disengagement and/or to enhance student engagement in primary schooling. The programs selected fall into the following generic program types: general curriculum initiatives; general pedagogical initiatives; self-esteem and well being programs; peer support; school-community partnerships; programs for disadvantaged schools.

In addition we have chosen programs that provide examples across the following dimensions:

1. Program audience: programs for specific student sub-populations (targeted programs) versus programs for all students
2. Program focus:
 - Classroom focus: programs and practices that seek to engage students in classroom activities
 - School focus: programs and practices that encourage student participation in and commitment to the school and schooling
 - School/community focus: practices that foster connections between school and community and encourage community involvement in school activities
3. Program initiation—school, school-community, community or systemic.

We have sought to include representative programs that are distinctive from one another, rather than providing two or three illustrations of one program type. The selection of programs is hence illustrative rather than comprehensive.

We are aware that many primary schools have worthwhile programs that seek to either address disengagement or extend student engagement. In this report we have been limited to those programs that have relatively detailed and accessible program descriptions. We had intended to limit our selection of programs to those that had been evaluated, but after an initial search of programs it was apparent that this imposed too great a limit on the number and type of programs that could be included.

Finally there are some generic program types that we did not include because they are large specialist fields with well-developed approaches to research and programmatic intervention (e.g. literacy, numeracy and early intervention) or because they are currently subject to considerable policy and programmatic intervention (e.g. boys' education).

Student engagement and disengagement is not an educational field in its own right. It crosses various disciplines and there are no journals, regular conferences, or professional societies that focus specifically on this issue. As a consequence, details regarding programs specifically concerned with engagement are scattered. We used the following methods to identify relevant programs:

- Web searches
- correspondence with key program personnel, in order to obtain additional and more up to date data
- personal professional knowledge, in particular of Victorian programs.

Eighteen programs have been included in this report. One-page summaries of each program are located at the end of this section.

Descriptive overview of programs

In order to provide a broad overview of programs reviewed for this report, we have considered them in light of the following: program objectives; strategies; audience; and program sponsorship and partnerships. Following this overview, key issues pertaining to program design, implementation and evaluation will be discussed.

Objectives

While nearly all programs reviewed had enhanced student engagement as an explicit overall aim, the specific aspects of engagement that were addressed varied. Unlike the research on engagement, which is to a large extent focused on the behavioural dimension of engagement, many of the programs reviewed were also strongly concerned with the affective and/or cognitive dimensions of engagement. In fact a number of the programs address a combination of behavioural, cognitive and affective dimensions. This includes Student Action Teams and Schools for Innovation and Excellence, Gresswell Cluster Project. No program was concerned only with behavioural engagement narrowly conceived and all of the projects had the potential to enhance students' feeling of belonging or affective engagement.

Strategies

Broadly speaking, the strategies employed to engage students fall into the following three areas: new pedagogies and curricula; social support and well being; and community participation.

New pedagogies and curricula

Key strategies adopted in programs emphasising new pedagogies and curricula are:

- connectedness between subject areas, and between classroom activities and the ‘real’ world, e.g. Fair Go project, Gresswell Cluster, Pedagogies for Participation and Engagement Pilot Project, ruMAD and Student Action Teams
- intellectual challenge in key curriculum areas, e.g. Piloting Intellectual Engagement in Primary Science
- valuing of diversity, e.g. Fair Go project, Pedagogies for Participation and Engagement Pilot Project
- building positive relationships and communication, e.g. Pedagogies for Participation and Engagement Pilot Project, Piloting Intellectual Engagement in Primary Science.

These particular emphases are not surprising given that some programs have deliberately used either the Productive Pedagogies framework developed as part of the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Lingard, et al., 2001) or similar frameworks.

The chosen strategies align well with the features of ‘engaging schools’ outlined earlier in the report.

Student well being/social support

A number of the programs with a strong emphasis on encouraging participation in schooling are oriented toward relatively small groups of targeted students who are disaffected from schooling or who are perceived as being at educational risk. A number of these projects had a strong welfare focus and some inter-agency participation. The Moreland Outreach Program for School Non-Attendees, the Connecting Through the Middle Years project and the School Volunteers Program are examples of targeted programs intended to build relationships and self-esteem via out of class activities that assist students to build a positive sense of themselves and schooling.

The *You Can Do It* program also aims to build students’ self-esteem and willingness to participate in schooling, but it is intended for whole class use.

Community participation

Some programs have as an important component supporting families and enhancing the participation of families and communities in schools. The New Community Schools program in Scotland, for example, has included a range of ways of involving families in primary schools in low socio-economic areas. For example, breakfast clubs have been a common way of creating a positive social environment for students and their families, as well as supporting parents and promoting healthy nutrition. Similarly, Primary Connect in New South Wales is involved in interagency planning and collaboration in a small number of schools to support vulnerable children and their families. The Primary Connect program places a strong emphasis on family and community involvement in decision-making.

The School Volunteer Program in Western Australia has a somewhat different purpose and set of strategies to build school-community relations. The program involves a large number of mentors, many of whom are over 50 years old, working with students who are having difficulty coping with formal education. The program is intended to benefit children, their families and the participating volunteers.

The Canadian Student Engagement initiative is an umbrella program that supports a wide range of engagement strategies selected by participating schools. One common element across schools is the first step of the program, in which each participating school takes part in an internal discussion about what engagement means for the school. This exercise provides opportunities for student, staff and community participation and for whole school change.

Table 9 provides an overview of the programs, grouping them by strategies and the program audience.

Context specificity

Most of the programs described have been initiated, developed or modified in context specific ways, and in so doing reflect the important point of Smith et al (2001) (see section 3 or this report) that there is no single recipe for program development. Those programs drawing on particular pedagogical frameworks (for example, the Fair Go Program and Pedagogies for Participation and Engagement) have done so in order to meet the specific needs of groups of students. The pedagogical frameworks are invariably modified to suit particular classes, curriculum requirements and curriculum content.

In those cases in which there is systemic funding (for example, the New Community Schools program in Scotland, and Schools for Innovation and Excellence in Victoria) the emphasis is on using funds to sponsor cluster and school-based initiatives that are responsive to the needs of schools, their students and teachers and the local community.

Table 9: Classification of programs

	New pedagogies and curricular	Social support/well being	Community participation
Targeted	<p>Fair Go project (NSW) (socio-economically disadvantaged)</p> <p>Pedagogies for Participation and Engagement Pilot (SA) (Yrs 5–10, low SES)</p> <p>‘How to engage disengaged students’ action research project (SA) (15 students disengaged Yrs 1–7)</p> <p>Making the Difference: Students at Educational Risk Strategy (WA)</p> <p>Student Action Teams (Vic)</p>	<p>Primary Connect (NSW) (children and families in areas of high need)</p> <p>School Volunteer Program Inc (WA) (K–12 students experiencing difficulty with school)</p> <p>Primary welfare officer initiative (Vic) (disadvantaged backgrounds, low SES, high disengagement)</p> <p>Making the Difference: Students at Educational Risk Strategy (WA)</p> <p>Connecting Through the Middle Years Project, Phase 2 (Vic) (Yrs 5–9 students at risk)</p> <p>Student welfare projects on connectedness (Vic)</p> <p>Moreland Outreach Program for School Non-Attendees (Vic) (non-attenders, disaffected Yrs 5–9)</p>	<p>Primary Connect (NSW) (children and families in areas of high need)</p> <p>School Volunteer Program Inc (WA) (K–12 students experiencing difficulty with school)</p> <p>Primary welfare officer initiative (Vic) (disadvantaged backgrounds, low SES, high disengagement)</p> <p>New Community Schools (Scotland) (students from disadvantaged areas and at high risk of disaffection)</p>
All students	<p>Schools for Innovation and Excellence, Gresswell Cluster (Vic)</p> <p>Piloting Intellectual Engagement in Primary Science (Qld)</p> <p>Student Engagement initiative (Canada)</p> <p>Resource Bank for the Pilot Program to Foster Student Engagement in School Life</p> <p>Student Action Teams (Vic)</p> <p>RU Making a Difference (ruMAD) (Vic)</p>	<p>Student Engagement initiative (Canada)</p> <p>Resource Bank for the Pilot Program to Foster Student Engagement in School Life</p>	<p>Student Engagement initiative (Canada)</p> <p>Resource Bank for the Pilot Program to Foster Student Engagement in School Life</p>

Program sponsorship and partnership

There is considerable variation in the ways in which programs described in this report have been initiated and sponsored. These include:

- teacher or school-initiated projects, e.g. the ‘How to engage disengaged students’ action research project
- systemic funding and policy, e.g. the South Australian Pedagogies for Participation and Engagement program, the Western Australian Making the Difference program, and Australian Government Quality Teaching Program funding for the Piloting Intellectual Engagement in Science Program
- multi-agency partnerships between education departments and other government agencies concerned with, for example, welfare, health, community services and justice, e.g. the New South Wales Primary Connect Program, the Scottish New Community Schools program, Moreland Outreach Program and Student Action Teams
- funding from educational foundations and special interest groups, e.g. School Volunteer Program Inc in Western Australia, the Education Foundation in Victoria (ruMAD), and the J.W. McConnell Foundation in Canada
- cross-institutional partnerships. For example the Fair Go Program was a partnership between the New South Wales Department of Education and the University of Western Sydney; Schools for Innovation and Excellence, Gresswell Cluster involves a partnership between a group of schools in northern Melbourne, Latrobe University, the Banyule City Council and Greening Australia.

Program outcomes and issues

Analysis of the programs reveals a number of important outcomes and issues relating to the efficacy and implementation of program interventions.

Program evaluation and outcomes

As already stated, not all programs presented in this report have been evaluated. Some are in the process of evaluation and in some cases only a portion of the evaluation data was publicly accessible. The following observations can be made about those programs that have been evaluated:

- **External or internal evaluation.** A small number of programs have been subject to in-depth external evaluation. In the remaining cases the evaluations were internal and the available data are fairly general or scanty.
- **Baseline data.** There is usually little if any baseline data that can be used to assess changes associated with program interventions.
- **Long-term outcomes.** All of the evaluations were conducted while programs were being implemented or were still in operation, or shortly after they had come to completion. This meant that it was difficult to assess whether program outcomes were sustained. Only one, the large scale New Community Schools program in Scotland, was evaluated over a sustained period (three years).
- **Student engagement as an outcome.** While most program descriptions and evaluations report generally positive outcomes in terms of improved student engagement, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions about the extent and nature of these improvements because of the paucity of evidence presented to support

these claims. There is typically little data that relates specifically to engagement and/or a very limited number of constructs used to measure engagement. We are not suggesting that the stated outcomes were not real, but instead raising the need for more systematic and detailed evidence of them.

There were a few noteworthy exceptions to this general picture. The 'How to engage disengaged students' action research project used a wide variety of measures and methods to assess program outcomes specifically in relation to student engagement. The project collected both baseline and post-intervention data, and the online report of the project is detailed and thoughtful. The planned evaluation of the Victorian Primary welfare officer initiative will similarly incorporate a range of measures of student engagement and disengagement, including data on school attendance, student achievement, student and teacher attitudes and student exclusion.

It does need to be noted that systematic evaluation of small school-based programs is relatively rare for a number of reasons: limited time and resources; the typically 'one-off' nature of initiatives; and the dominant focus in schools on implementation.

In addition student engagement is, as we have previously discussed, a broad and imprecise concept that is difficult to measure at any level of schooling. There may be a need to assist practitioners with appropriate evaluation strategies and this is an issue to which we return in our recommendations.

Key program issues

When considering the programs described in this document in light of the literature on engagement and the more general literature on school organisation and reform (e.g. Fullan, 1993; Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, 2003), a number of issues emerge relating to the design and implementation of programs.

Program audience and conceptions of students

Comments in the program descriptions and evaluations reflect many of the debates raised in the research literature regarding the efficacy or otherwise of targeted approaches, particularly the need to avoid 'labelling' students. For example:

- The Making the Difference: Students at Educational Risk Strategy (WA) deliberately adopted the broad term 'educational risk' to move away from a 'deficit' paradigm where the concept of risk is attributed to the students themselves (Carrivick & Tognini, 2003, p. 2).
- The participants in the Moreland Outreach Program for School Non-Attendees had concerns about the stigma attached to the students involved in the program. Consequently they decided to adopt a different approach that would meet the needs of a broader range of students rather than singling out those 'at risk'.
- The two programs directed towards students in low socio-economic communities (Fair Go Program and Pedagogies for Participation and Engagement) both operated on the assumption, and drew on research that indicates, that good pedagogy can engage and benefit all students irrespective of background (Lingard, et al, 2001). These two programs did not single out individual students but took a whole class approach.
- Some schools in the Student Action Teams project were keen to avoid the perception that the program was only for 'bad' students. These schools did not

solely target marginalised students for participation but invited a range of students to take part.

Resources and school organisation

Program notes typically contained little detail concerning such matters as funding, the importance of the program relative to other school initiatives, and whether the program was integral to school practices or an 'add on'. Such detail is necessary in order to understand the factors that enable a program to be successfully implemented and, as we discuss later, sustained. The evaluation of the National Community Schools Program in Scotland noted that three year funding was critical to establishing programs and ascertaining their effect. The ruMAD program emphasised the need for congruency between the school philosophy and the program as part of successful implementation.

Leadership and stakeholder participation

While the literature on school reform highlights the importance of leadership and professional communities as part of any reform or change process (Newmann, 1996), relatively little attention was paid in the program descriptions and evaluations to the leadership and teacher involvement necessary to develop, implement and sustain programs.

The evaluation of the Scottish New Community Schools program noted the critical role played by commitment, teamwork, staff development and management structures in the establishment and maintenance of programs. The New Community Schools program and ruMAD both stressed the importance of student ownership and responsibility in the design and implementation of programs. New Community Schools and Primary Connect emphasised the value of family and community participation in not only the delivery of programs but also in program decision-making.

Viability and sustainability

Ascertaining the length of time programs had been operating and whether they were still continuing was often difficult given the available information. This, coupled with the general lack of evaluative detail, makes it difficult to comment on the viability and sustainability of programs.

Some special programs were clearly dependent on funding, staffing, and multi-agency commitment. The Moreland Outreach Program is one example, and it was unable to be sustained. By comparison the Western Australian Mentoring program has become a relatively large-scale operation, perhaps because it targets a well-defined need and is staffed by enthusiastic volunteers.

Other evaluations referred to the difficulty of long-term sustainability given pressures on teacher time and commitment, the need for adequate professional development, and limited funding relative to program goals. Teachers taking part in the Making the Difference: Students at Educational Risk Strategy and the Connecting Through the Middle Years program expressed concerns about the viability and sustainability of the programs due to limited resources and demands upon teachers.

Partnerships

Partnerships can be important in terms of program resources, expertise and coherence. As already noted, some programs had a university partner who provided support such as access to research, assistance with program design and evaluation, and a critical outside perspective. The evaluation of the New Community Schools program in Scotland noted the importance of and difficulties associated with negotiating clear goals and expectations when working in multi-agency partnerships.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion, and the program summaries that follow, provide illustrations of the diversity of ways in which Australian educational programs are seeking to address issues related to student engagement and disengagement. In closing, we wish to highlight the following general observations:

- Program strategies reflected the important point that engagement is as much a feature and outcome of schools as it is an attribute of individual students. Even those programs that sought to identify and assist particular vulnerable students reflected the need to build ‘engaging schools’.
- Collectively, programs addressed all dimensions of student engagement and many single programs addressed more than one dimension.
- Attention needs to be paid not only to identifying effective strategies for fostering engagement, but also to the organisational features of schools that support program implementation and sustainability.
- Better program evaluation is needed to ascertain the engagement-specific outcomes of initiatives and to enable the exchange of effective practice.

List of programs

Connecting Through the Middle Years
Fair Go project
'How to engage disengaged students' action research project
J.W. McConnell Foundation student engagement initiative
J.W. McConnell Foundation Resource Bank
Making the Difference: Students at Educational Risk Strategy
Moreland community non-attendance project
New Community Schools Pilot Programme
Pedagogies for Participation and Engagement Pilot Project
Piloting Intellectual Engagement in Primary Science
Primary Connect
Primary welfare officer initiative
ruMAD
School Volunteer Program
Schools for Innovation and Excellence, Gresswell Cluster
Student Action Teams
Student welfare projects on connectedness
You Can Do It: Program Achieve

Title: Connecting Through the Middle Years Project, Phase Two

Issue being addressed: Disengagement of at risk students

Target group: Students in years 5 to 9, particularly at risk students

Coverage: Systemic

Timeframe: Commenced 2002

Responsible agency: Victorian Department of Education & Training, VicHealth

Websites: <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/mys/engagement/connecting.htm>

<http://www.advocacy.gsat.edu.au/advocacy/advocacy.htm>

Description:

This project implemented an Advocacy Model of student support in which teachers provide individual support for students. The model is based on the belief that one-to-one relationships are an effective way to create student well being and prevent the emergence of problems that disrupt learning.

The aims of the project included:

- improving the social connectedness of young people to schools
- increasing students' self-understanding and developing positive attitudes towards lifelong learning
- promoting the use of individual learning programs and processes.

Advocates were either teachers or school support officers and each took care of 1–6 students.

In most participating schools the support provided was informal, consisting of one-to-one meetings between advocate and student during free time. Meetings took place with varying frequency, ranging from 2–3 times per week to fortnightly or irregularly. Matters discussed included peer relationships, relationships with teachers, time management and organisational skills.

Outcomes:

The program was formally evaluated in late 2002 (Henry, Barty & Tregenza, 2003), using questionnaire data collected from participants. Findings included the following:

- Participants enjoyed their interactions.
- Some students showed signs of overcoming difficulties after some months of 'connecting'.
- Good advocates, enthusiasm and commitment underpinned the success of 'Connecting' programs, while lack of time and support undermined their success.
- Most schools planned to continue or expand their programs.
- Several schools were sceptical about the sustainability of their programs.
- There was a need for continued and expanded professional development.

Overall, the evaluation recommended that the program be more widely implemented in the middle years. It also made a series of detailed recommendations for improved delivery of the program.

Title: Fair Go Fair Share Fair Say Fair Content Project (FGP)

Issue being addressed: The learning needs of students in disadvantaged communities who may be alienated or disengaged from schooling

Target group: Socio-economically disadvantaged primary school students

Coverage: Regional

Timeframe: Commenced 2000

Responsible agencies: New South Wales Priority Schools Funding Program and the School of Education and Early Childhood Studies, University of Western Sydney

Description:

The Fair Go Fair Share Fair Say Fair Content Project (FGP) was part of a research partnership between the Priority Schools Funding Program, the University of Western Sydney and low socio-economic status (SES) school communities in the school districts of Fairfield and Liverpool in south-western Sydney.

The aim of the FGP was to explore, describe and evaluate the kinds of pedagogies that foster student engagement, in particular for socio-economically disadvantaged students. Engagement was defined as encompassing both 'on-task' behaviours and affective attachment to schooling. American and Australian work on 'authentic' and 'productive' pedagogies provided an initial theoretical framework for the investigation.

The project consisted of a series of research partnerships consisting of primary education academics, teachers, school leaders, district curriculum and equity consultants and community development officers. Each partnership implemented classroom initiatives and collected data that was in turn shared with other project members.

Research areas investigated by different teams included student self-assessment, multiliteracies and technology, and home and school literacies.

Each team documented:

- pedagogical changes implemented as part of the project
- indicators of student engagement
- indicators of other student outcomes including learning.

Outcomes:

Several papers (Cole, Apostolovski & Foord, 2002; Johnson & O'Brien, 2002; Woodward & Munns, 2003) have documented outcomes and achievements of the Fair Go project. According to Johnson & O'Brien (2002), project findings:

- justified the decision to focus on 'engaging pedagogies' as the key strategy for improving learning and social outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds
- affirmed the importance of classroom structures and processes that enable students to negotiate their own learning, for example, self-assessment
- illustrated the value of technology and a multiliteracy approach to increasing student engagement
- demonstrated in a variety of ways the link between enhanced student engagement and improved learning outcomes.

Title: 'How to engage disengaged students' action research project

Issue being addressed: The use of technology to engage disengaged students

Target group: Disengaged primary school students

Coverage: School-based

Timeframe: 2003

Responsible agencies: Hackham East Schools a three campus K–7 school in South Australia with funding from the Technology School of the Future, a staff training and development centre within the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services

Website: <http://www.tsof.edu.au/Projects/PLICT/Grants/Reports03/thiele.asp>

Description:

This project was prompted by teachers' concerns about a number of students who were withdrawn or disruptive. The school had already had successful experiences with student video productions, so a research project was established to investigate whether this technology could be used to achieve the same outcomes with disengaged students. In particular the researchers wanted to know whether technology could be used to motivate students to write.

Four members of staff worked with 15 students spanning years 1 to 7. The students were given instruction in the use of the technology (iMovie) and assistance with strategies for recording their stories, such as story mapping and storyboarding. Production of the videos involved a wide range of activities and skills including group writing, reading, collaboration, problem solving and negotiation as well as filming and editing.

Data was obtained from a variety of sources both before and during the project. Baseline data included teachers' notes and observations and a survey of student attitudes to writing. Data collected during the project included log books of story drafts and scripts; observations, including measurements of 'on task' behaviour; and comments from students, teachers and parents.

Outcomes:

The report on the project documents a variety of positive outcomes:

- There was substantial improvement in student enthusiasm, level of engagement, attitudes to writing, literacy skills and confidence.
- The students were proud of their products and received significant acknowledgement from their peers.
- Positive relationships developed between students and teachers.
- In most cases, the project had positive outcomes for student learning in mainstream classroom activities.
- Staff not involved in the project became interested in the technology, with the result that the school allocated additional funding for purchase of equipment and staff training.

Some staff were critical of the project because they viewed using computers and video as rewards rather than legitimate learning experiences.

Title: J.W. McConnell Foundation Student Engagement initiative (Canada)

Issue being addressed: Student engagement

Target group: Primary and secondary school students

Coverage: National

Timeframe: Commenced 2002

Responsible agency: The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

Website: <http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca/initiatives.e/engage.html>

Description:

Since 1995 the J.W. McConnell Foundation has been funding national research and programs on student engagement in Canada. Established in 1937, the foundation funds a wide variety of projects consistent with its broad mission of improving Canadians' quality of life and their ability to help themselves and one another.

The Foundation funded the Canadian project on *Student Engagement in Learning and School Life*, which is described earlier in this report. It has since launched the pilot of a new national program to foster student engagement in school life in elementary and secondary schools.

The new program has three purposes:

- to provide funding to schools for activities that foster student engagement
- to promote discussion and build on existing practices, knowledge, and expertise in student engagement
- to support, connect and profile schools and projects involving student engagement through a recognition program, funding exchanges, and other initiatives.

The program has two steps. Step 1: schools are invited to apply for a \$1500 grant to undertake a discussion exercise based on the statement *What student engagement means in our school*. Schools are encouraged to involve as many students and teachers as possible in the exercise. The purpose of this exercise is to broaden understanding of what student engagement means to a particular school. Step 2: following the discussion exercise, the school may apply for a second grant of up to \$5000 to extend and sustain student engagement in the school.

Other elements of the project include:

- a Resource Bank available on the internet and in print form (see next summary)
- funded exchanges between schools and other mechanisms that encourage learning and collaboration among schools
- a recognition program for outstanding school projects.

Outcomes:

As part of the pilot, 14 schools from across Canada were selected for grants to carry out a discussion exercise in their school. The schools used a variety of methods to involve students and teachers—a town hall meeting, focus groups, round table discussions, a school conference and written surveys designed and directed by students. These activities were conducted during the 2002–2003 school year. On completion of the activities, half of these schools were awarded a second grant for follow-up projects to be conducted in the 2003–2004 school year.

Title: Resource Bank for the J.W. McConnell Foundation Pilot Program to Foster Student Engagement in School Life (Canada)

Issue being addressed: Student engagement

Target group: Canadian schools and school students

Coverage: National

Timeframe: Commenced 2002

Responsible agency: Canadian Students Commission on behalf of the J.W. McConnell Family Foundation

Website: http://www.tgmag.ca/resbank/index_e.htm

Description:

This project was established to support the Canadian pilot program on student engagement, described in the preceding summary. The Resource Bank was created to make material easily available to schools and to share the experiences and expertise of participants. The website is designed for schools and individuals at all phases of project readiness, from initial thinking to follow-up stages.

The website includes:

- Information about the pilot program: This includes application forms, guidelines and detailed information for potential participants, and a list of participating schools.
- Written Resources database: This includes a wide range of material for schools working on engagement issues, including planning and implementation tools, theoretical articles and reports on projects. Despite its name, the database contains graphics, video and other formats as well as written information. The database is both fully searchable and indexed. Topics covered include 'ice breakers', engagement strategies, evaluation, case studies, student-adult partnerships, and school and community.
- People Resource database: This can be used to find organisations and individuals that can help facilitate or be involved in school discussions and projects.
- Participants Discussion Area: This is a place for participants in the engagement program to share ideas, successes and problems. This part of the website can only be accessed by schools participating in the pilot program

Title: Making the Difference: Students at Educational Risk Strategy

Issue being addressed: Educational outcomes of students at educational risk

Target group: Students at educational risk

Coverage: Systemic

Timeframe: Implementation phase: 1998–2005

Responsible agency: Western Australian Department of Education and Training

Website: <http://www.eddept.wa.edu.au/saer/about/index.htm>

Description:

The Students at Educational Risk Strategy (SAER Strategy) is a system-wide initiative designed to improve the educational outcomes of students at educational risk in government schools in Western Australia. 'Educational risk' is defined as including students who are not engaged in their schooling as well as students whose achievement or behaviour differs noticeably from past performance, from that of their peers or from expected learning outcomes. Previous government-funded research had found that at least 20% of students might fit this definition.

The major components of the SAER Strategy are:

- development of policy to support students at educational risk
- development of guidelines and procedures for teachers to assist in identification and intervention
- strengthened accountability processes to demonstrate that the needs of identified students are being met
- dissemination of good practice
- co-ordination of services to ensure improved provision of appropriate programs
- professional development to support the implementation of the strategy.

At the school-site level, three key outcomes are sought during the implementation phase:

- implementation of procedures for the identification of students at educational risk
- development and implementation of appropriate educational programs for individuals and groups of students at educational risk
- demonstration of accountability for the educational programs of individuals and groups of students at educational risk.

Outcomes:

In 2002 a survey-based evaluation of the implementation phase (Carrivick & Tognini, 2002) reached the following conclusions:

- Uptake of the Strategy by schools appeared to be progressing well, with most respondents indicating that it was a priority. Uptake of the Strategy by individual practitioners was more variable.
- There was a widely shared perception that funding and resourcing of the strategy was inadequate.
- A specific concern related to funding was the fact that many schools could only support the most 'needy' low achieving students at educational risk, not necessarily all those that were identified as being at risk.

Title: Moreland Outreach Program for School Non-Attendees

Issue being addressed: School non-attendance and lack of school connectedness, parenting difficulties, social isolation

Target group: Primary and secondary school students

Coverage: Local community

Timeframe: October 1999 to April 2000

Responsible agencies: Moreland City Council and Moreland Community Health Service, with funding from the School Focused Youth Service, an initiative of the Victorian Department of Human Services and Department of Education & Training

Website: <http://www.sfys.infoxchange.net.au/resources/public/education.shtml>

Description:

Schools in the Moreland area of Melbourne were concerned about a group of children who were not attending on a regular basis. The aim of the program was to give the children a sense of belonging and connectedness to the school community and thereby give them a reason for attending school.

The program provided a youth worker and transport to pick up a group of children three days a week. The children were aged between 10 and 15 years. The role of the youth worker was to pick the children up, organise breakfast and involve the children in enjoyable outings prior to taking them to school. These activities included arts and crafts at the school, swimming and attending a local youth centre.

Moreland Community Health Service offered family support. This service provided parents with appropriate parenting strategies in setting realistic family guidelines and rules.

Outcomes:

According to the online description, the program had a number of positive outcomes:

- Peer relationships improved as a result of the children's increased school attendance.
- The children saw that people were interested in their well-being.
- The schools developed collaborative relationships with the provider agencies; these have been sustained beyond the duration of the program.
- The families gained access to and awareness of community resources and programs.

The providers were unable to sustain the program on a continuing basis. In addition, the schools had concerns about the stigma attached to children participating in the program. They decided that it would be better to work with services that meet the needs of young people broadly rather than singling out those at risk.

Title: New Community Schools Pilot Programme (Scotland)

Issue being addressed: Social exclusion, student disaffection and underachievement

Target Group: Students in disadvantaged areas

Coverage: National

Timeframe: Three phase trial commenced 1999, all school rollout commenced 2002

Responsible agency: Scottish Executive Education Department and multi-agency partners

Website: <http://www.hmie.gov.uk/documents/publication/dicss.html>

Description:

The broad goals of this program include:

- modernisation of schools and the promotion of social inclusion
- increasing the attainment of young people facing the 'destructive cycle of underachievement'
- early intervention to address barriers to learning and maximise potential
- raising parental and family expectations and participation in their children's education.

Key components of the program include:

- integrated services for young people in disadvantaged communities through multi-agency provision focused on education, health and welfare
- school cluster development of programs that seek to address student disaffection and extend individual, family and community engagement.

Cluster programs and strategies have focused mainly on behaviour and welfare. They have included: breakfast clubs; peer support and buddy systems; group work for positive behaviour; transition programs; self-esteem, anger-management and anti-bullying programs; after-school programs; holiday programs; and student councils.

Outcomes:

The Pilot program was formally evaluated in 2002 (Sammons et al, 2003), drawing on surveys, case studies of representative sites, and statistical indicators of pupil attainment, attendance and staying on. Key outcomes relevant to student engagement included the following:

- The program had a positive effect on student attitudes, particularly disaffection and amongst vulnerable young people.
- Student participation through school councils was valuable as a way of taking account of young people's views.
- There was no significant improvement in school attendance and retention.
- There was some evidence that the most vulnerable students were able to stay in mainstream schooling because of personal support.
- Curriculum initiatives were typically 'add ons' or targeted at students at risk of disaffection rather than changes to mainstream classroom practice.
- The program had variable success in increasing family and community engagement.

Title: Pedagogies for Participation and Engagement Pilot Project

Issue being addressed: Participation, engagement and achievement of students from low socio-economic backgrounds

Target group: Students in years 5 to 10

Coverage: Systemic

Timeframe: 2003–04

Responsible agencies: South Australian Literacy and Numeracy Network, (Department of Education and Children’s Services), with funding from the Commonwealth Strategic Assistance For Improved Student Outcomes Program

Website: <http://www.thenetwork.sa.edu.au/educators/projects/pedagogies.htm>

Description:

Educators and learners from 13 South Australian primary and secondary educational sites took part in this pilot project. The overall research question was: Which pedagogies make a difference to participation, engagement and achievement for learners from low socio-economic backgrounds? Each of the sites investigated this question by undertaking a specific research task relevant to the local context.

The project focused on curriculum transformation using the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability (SACSA) Framework. Four dimensions were investigated:

- curriculum design and content
- curriculum delivery
- connectedness
- classroom ethos.

The participating teachers sought to democratise the project by acting as co-researchers with students. Students were encouraged to speak with multiple voices that reflected their sex, gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, ethnicity, (dis)ability, and location.

Outcomes:

The project was being formally documented at the time that this report was prepared. However according to the project website significant conclusions include the following:

- Students are a prime resource of information and knowledge about schooling, participation and engagement.
- Students are motivated by participating in the research process and being involved in the promotion of their own success.
- It is not only the perceived disengaged who benefit; the process also draws in students who sit quietly at the edges or are compliant but not challenged.
- Relationships are strengthened and scaffolded by explicit teaching and choice for learners.
- Authentic learning motivates learners to contribute and makes them more independent and willing to take risks.

Title: Piloting Intellectual Engagement in Primary Science

Issue being addressed: Student intellectual engagement in science

Target group: Primary school students

Coverage: Regional

Timeframe: 2002

Responsible agencies: The Western Alliance, funded by the Australian Government Quality Teaching Programme

Websites: http://education.qut.edu.au/~hanrahan/wa/WA_QTP_science.html
<http://www.qualityteaching.dest.gov.au/Content/>

Description: This was a pilot project for the Western Alliance, a group of five primary schools in Brisbane. Two teachers from each school, one each from upper and lower primary, met for regular workshops over two school terms to support one another in improving science teaching and learning in their classrooms. Each teacher undertook an action research project and reported progress to the other members of the group.

The action research projects included:

- Using student questions to engage students in reflection
- Skilling students to critically evaluate their work
- Evaluating software for science learning
- Engaging all students in class activities
- Investigating ways students participate in class
- Encouraging observation and deduction beyond school.

At the final workshop the teachers presented their action research to the group and to invited guests.

Principals and deputies also attended the workshops and produced reports on their action learning during the project.

Outcomes:

A member of the Faculty of Education at the Queensland University of Technology acted as project facilitator and documented the teachers' views on the outcomes of the project. Outcomes relevant to student engagement include:

- greater awareness of students' needs
- allowing thinking time for students to develop intellectual engagement
- greater responsiveness to the 'directions that students want to go in' and to active student participation
- more exciting and extensive scientific inquiry
- more explicit understanding of intellectual engagement, both in general in specifically in relation to science.

Title: Primary Connect

Issue being addressed: Support for vulnerable primary school children and their families

Target group: Children aged 5-12 years old and their families in areas of high need

Coverage: Regional

Timeframe: Ongoing, commenced 2002–03

Responsible agencies: NSW Office of Children and Young People, NSW Departments of Education and Training (lead agency), Community Services, Housing, NSW Health

Website:

http://www.youth.nsw.gov.au/youth_workers/research/connection_to_education

Description:

Primary Connect aims to identify and support students aged from 5 to 12 years and their families, and to assist students to build connections with their families, schools and communities. The project targets students and families who are potentially at risk, in particular of disconnecting from school, drug use, offending, self-harm or mental and physical health problems..

At the end of 2003, Primary Connect programs were operating in seven government schools in areas of identified need.

Primary Connect programs embrace a range of strategies and activities. These include: social support programs for vulnerable students; parental education on issues such as nutrition and the importance of reading time; family counselling; drug education; and crime prevention activities.

The key features of the Primary Connect are:

- interagency planning and collaboration, focused on outcomes
- an emphasis on creating service networks that can support vulnerable families
- an early intervention approach
- a community development approach, including community and family involvement in planning
- local management structures
- a strengths-based approach.

The program also aims to achieve increased understanding of risk factors, to help in earlier identification of vulnerable children, families and communities, and of protective factors that can be enhanced to improve the resilience of at risk children.

Outcomes:

Initial evaluation of the program indicates that Primary Connect is providing benefits to schools, communities, children and their families, including:

- lower suspension rates
- increased community participation in school events
- increased numbers of students starting school on time
- increased positive communication between school staff and parents. (NSW Department of Education and Training, 2003, pp. 96–97).

Title: Primary welfare officer initiative

Issue being addressed: Student disengagement and underachievement

Target group: Students in primary schools that meet program criteria and apply for funding

Coverage: Systemic

Timeframe: Ongoing, commenced 2004

Responsible agency: Victorian Department of Education & Training

Website: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/mentalhealth/training/camhs-school-project.doc>

Description:

The purpose of the Primary welfare officer initiative is to enhance the capacity of schools to support students who are at risk of disengaging from school and are not achieving their educational potential.

In the first (current) phase of the initiative schools are selected for funding on the basis of criteria that include socio-economic status and level of non-attendance.

Selected schools use their funding to employ a welfare officer whose task is to assist with the implementation of the Framework for Student Support Services in Victorian Schools. Schools decide themselves what specific tasks the welfare officer will undertake, although expected priority areas are non-attendance, literacy and numeracy. To date, the activities of Welfare Officers have included breakfast programs, lunchtime programs to reduce bullying and create a safe environment, resilience programs, and the development of individual educational plans.

It is intended that activities funded under the program will:

- build mutual respect and safety at school
- implement a comprehensive curriculum to engage all students
- enhance school attendance
- practice inclusive teaching and learning
- encourage supportive relationships
- involve parents/families and communities
- ease transitions.

Outcomes:

This is a new initiative and it is anticipated that a full evaluation will be undertaken in 2006–07. Data collected from the first phase and subsequent rollout will be analysed to determine the impact of the initiative across individual schools, networks and regions. The initiative will be evaluated on the basis of:

- student attendance figures
- Curriculum and Standards Framework literacy and numeracy outcomes
- student opinion survey results
- staff opinion survey results
- student suspension and expulsion data.

Title: ruMAD? (Are You Making a Difference)

Issue being addressed: Student engagement, participation and action in the community

Target group: Students K-12

Coverage: Victoria public schools. Currently over 50 schools involved.

Timeframe: Ongoing, commenced in 2001

Responsible agency: Education Foundation

Website: <http://www.rumad.org.au/>

Description: Supported by the Education Foundation, the ruMAD program has the following aims:

- the active participation of young people in the community through action research projects
- supporting student leadership
- creating the conditions for identifying core values
- building social competencies such as self-esteem and confidence
- building the skills and knowledge to solve real world problems.

The ruMAD organisation provides schools with curriculum materials and resources that enable students to design, implement and evaluate action projects within their community that will 'make a difference'. Examples of projects developed in primary schools include: building links between the school and a local nursing home; anti-bullying strategies; supports for homeless people; support for children with cancer; environmental degradation and restoration projects.

ruMAD days and conferences are organised to provide schools with an opportunity to work together and exchange ideas.

Outcomes:

A recent evaluation of ruMAD (Bell and Shrimpton, 2004) concluded as follows:

- Students developed organizational and leadership skills, greater community awareness and sense of responsibility, and self-confidence.
- Schools developed partnerships with the local community.
- The projects brought about real community change that students could see and feel part of.

The evaluation noted that enabling factors associated with 'implantation' of ruMAD in a school include: a high degree of student ownership; congruence between school philosophy and ruMAD aims; broad-based participation by students and teachers; key people in the school (teachers/leaders) being committed to the program. Future directions for the program include exploring ways in which ruMAD projects can be integrated into the school curriculum.

Title: School Volunteer Program Inc (Western Australia)

Issue being addressed: At risk students

Target group: Students in years K–12 who are having difficulty coping with formal education

Coverage: State wide

Timeframe: Ongoing, commenced 1991

Responsible agency: School Volunteer Program Inc

Website: <http://www.svp.org.au/index.html>

Description:

The School Volunteer Program (SVP) is a mentoring program that assists at risk school students who are having difficulties coping with schooling. The target group includes all students who have been identified by their school as most likely to benefit from having a caring volunteer role model in their life.

The program has expanded significantly since its establishment. It currently has over 2000 registered mentors assisting approximately 3500 young people in 217 schools, of which approximately half are primary schools. The mentors range in age from 16 to 90 years, with the vast majority being over 50 years of age.

SVP's core program involves a volunteer mentor going into a school for one hour per week, usually the same time and day each week. The mentor works with the same student for at least a minimum commitment of one school term (10 weeks). The program aims to ensure that 'young people are provided with the most important service that our overburdened educational system cannot always deliver—one-on-one interaction with an adult.'

In 2003 the organisation ran a pilot Student Community Attendance Monitoring Program (SCAMP) in which mentors rang parents or guardians of truanting children to ascertain the reason for their absence. Parents or guardians were given the opportunity to inform the school of any underlying reason why their child was skipping school, e.g. bullying.

Additional aims of SVP include:

- adding meaning and purpose to the lives of seniors and retired people
- enhancing community involvement in schools.

Outcomes:

The program is regarded as highly successful and has received several state and federal awards. However there does not appear to be any publicly available formal evaluation.

According to the program's website the SCAMP pilot program resulted in a significant decrease in truancy.

Title: Schools for Innovation and Excellence, Gresswell Cluster

Issue being addressed: Student participation, engagement and achievement

Target group: All students in cluster schools, consisting of three primary schools and one P-12 college

Scope: Regional

Timeframe: Commenced 2003

Responsible agencies: Cluster schools, funded by Victorian Department of Education & Training

Website: <http://www.gresswell.vic.edu.au/>

<http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/mys/innovationandexcellence/I&Einthemiddleyears.htm>

Description:

The Schools for Innovation and Excellence initiative provides support for primary and secondary schools to work closely together in clusters over three years. By 2005, every Victorian government school will be in a cluster, with a total of 247 clusters.

The Gresswell Cluster of schools, situated in Melbourne's north, is developing a model for leading edge pedagogy and curriculum innovation. The model uses student leadership, learning technologies and environmental citizenship to increase student engagement and improve attitudes towards schooling.

In partnership with Latrobe University, the Banyule City Council and Greening Australia the cluster has established the Gresswell Forest Project. The project provides students with real world, hands-on learning opportunities through managing and monitoring the nearby Gresswell Forest, the largest remaining river red gum forest close to Melbourne. An example of the project's work is the Lizard Lounge, which involves restoring habitat to create homes for colonies of skinks.

The Forest projects endeavour to:

- provide students with meaningful learning experiences
- increase levels of student engagement
- allow for teaching and learning to extend beyond the confines of the classroom
- challenge students to make connections between subject areas
- develop transferable skills.

The Forest Project is only one of a variety of cluster activities, which embrace hands-on learning, online communication and development, teacher professional development and student-teacher partnerships.

Outcomes:

According to the cluster website, project activities have:

- improved levels of student engagement and attendance
- improved student achievement and information technology skills
- increased real retention
- fostered the skills and values of active citizenship and environmental responsibility.

Title: Student Action Teams, Phase Two

Issue being addressed: Student participation and engagement in school and the community

Target group: Students in years 5 to 11

Coverage: Systemic

Timeframe: Commenced 1999

Responsible agencies: Victorian Department of Education & Training, Crime Prevention Victoria, Victorian Department of Justice, VicHealth

Websites: <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/mys/engagement/studentactionteams.htm>
http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/EPM/YRC/publications/research_reports.shtml

Description:

The Student Action Teams program was established in Victorian secondary schools in 1999. In 2001 it was extended to include primary schools.

Student Action Teams are small teams of students who act on local issues of safety, cultural understanding and alcohol and drug abuse. They identify, research and act on an issue of interest. Teams receive initial training and a small grant and work in conjunction with one or more teachers.

Student Action Teams are based on the belief that students can make a difference in the community, that students have valuable skills and knowledge relevant to local issues, and that community research and action is an appropriate educational approach for schools.

The membership and operation of Student Action Teams varies. Some schools have invited particular students to form a team, because they are marginalised or have relevant knowledge or skills, while others have simply advertised for participants. In some schools the activities of Student Action Teams are incorporated into the curriculum, while in others the teams meet out of class.

One notably successful team involved collaboration between schools. A cluster of schools in the northern suburbs of Melbourne worked on ways to improve safety on busy local roads. The students co-operated with local councils and transport authorities on issues such as road markings and tram timetables.

Outcomes:

The program has been evaluated, using survey information from students and teachers (Holdsworth, Cahill & Smith, 2003; see also Holdsworth, 2004). The evaluation's conclusions included the following:

- Participation brings about substantial positive changes in students' knowledge, skills, attitudes and connectedness to school, which the students and teachers attribute to the program.
- Students who believe that their project has a strong meaning and purpose benefit most.
- Teachers spend up to 160 hours on their projects. Student Action Teams are not sustainable without some form of financial, staffing or curriculum support.

Title: Student welfare projects on connectedness

Issue being addressed: The role of social support in enhancing student connectedness

Target group: Students at risk of becoming socially isolated and disconnected from schooling

Coverage: School-based

Timeframe: Term-length projects, 2003

Responsible agency: University of Melbourne

Website:

<http://dozer.infodiv.unimelb.edu.au/subjectresources/subject/34/all/swcocurricular.htm#phoracek>

Description:

Students undertaking the Post Graduate Diploma in Educational Studies (Student Welfare) carried out two research projects on the theme of student connectedness.

Peter Horacek carried out an action research project titled *Finding Friends—Reducing Social Isolation in Schools*. He documented over 10 weeks the establishment of a lunchtime games room at a Melbourne school. The purpose of the intervention was to give students an opportunity to mix with other students in a friendly, safe and non-competitive environment.

His findings highlighted the need to provide staff with the necessary knowledge, skills and strategies to minimise social isolation and respond effectively to known cases. Horacek also emphasised the importance of ensuring the longevity of such interventions so that their benefits are not transient.

Paul Muling's project was titled *Student Companionship Program In The Primary School—Student Connectedness*. The aim of the project was to develop a primary school program in which adult companion mentors worked with students identified as 'at risk' in order to build their confidence, connectedness and resilience. School staff were invited to become the adult companion mentors and half of the staff took part, forming a collaborative working group.

The entire school staff took part in professional development in the area of helping skills. This was provided by an outside agency.

Data was gathered to investigate the needs of identified 'at risk' students. The students and their mentors then set goals for improving important social skills and the students chose an activity club, such as gardening, art/craft and games, in which they would like to be involved. The staff mentors and students took part in the weekly activity clubs and met fortnightly during further goal setting sessions. The collaborative team held fortnightly meetings.

Outcomes from the program included:

- development of meaningful adult-student mentor relationships
- improved student connectedness and confidence and the development of skills in goal-setting
- greater staff skills and involvement in student welfare
- identification of new 'at risk' students
- establishment of ongoing planning for 'at risk' students to develop their confidence, connectedness and resilience.

Program: You Can Do It! Education

Issue being addressed: Student social-emotional well being

Target group: Students aged 5 to 18+

Coverage: All schools that choose to adopt the program

Timeline: Commenced in Australia in 1991

Responsible agency: Australian Scholarships Group

Website: www.youcandoiteducation.com

Description:

You Can Do It! Education was founded in Australia in 1991 in response to a perceived epidemic of underachievement and poor motivation. The founder of the program is an American psychologist, Dr Michael Bernard.

You Can Do It! Program Achieve is the organisation's primary product. It is a commercially marketed educational package that aims to assist children to develop a positive outlook and to maximise their potential through instruction in a set of core values, principles and behaviours. The core of the program is a curriculum that seeks to instil in children four so-called foundations: confidence, persistence, organisation and getting along. Central to the development of these foundations is explicit instruction in eleven 'habits of the mind': playing by the rules; thinking first; being tolerant of others; planning my time; setting goals; working tough; giving effort; I can do it; being independent; taking risks; accepting myself.

The program consists of a series of teacher/parent manuals in the primary years covering years 1/2; 3/4 and 5/6. Further materials include a range of school/home collaborative programs, videos, additional books and CD-ROMs.

The program has been implemented in many Australian schools, but statistics on the number involved are unavailable. You Can Do It! Education also has representatives in New Zealand, the United Kingdom, France and Canada as well as the United States.

Outcomes:

A number of evaluations of the program have been conducted (Day, 1998; Hudson, 1993; Pina, 1996) and these are cited in the program manuals. However none has been formally published.

7. Recommendations for future research and programs

Based on our analysis of the relevant literature and programs we have formulated the following recommendations and principles for practice.

Areas for future research and other activities

- **Voices of students.** Primary students' views on school are rarely heard in the research investigating school engagement or in the evaluations of programs. Such views are a critical source of data for understanding student engagement and disengagement and for planning programmatic interventions. In particular there is a need to consider and compare the perspectives held by primary school students across different year levels and age groups.
- **Voices of other key players.** If there is to be greater understanding of the factors that make primary schools engaging places, research attention also needs to be paid to the voices of other key actors—teachers, school leaders, and family and community members.
- **Longitudinal studies.** There is little longitudinal research that charts how student engagement changes over time or analyses the effects of interventions over time. In particular there is a need for research that begins at the early primary level and tracks students through to upper primary or later.
- **Peer relations.** Peer relations are acknowledged in the research as an important factor influencing engagement and many schools have introduced programs that aim to improve peer relations. However there is little detailed analysis of the ways in which peer relations affect different forms of engagement and disengagement, and more particularly the ways in which, and the extent to which, peer support programs support student engagement.
- **Multiple forms of disengagement.** Research and program interventions concerned with disengagement typically focus on those students demonstrating the most obvious behavioural indicators—disruptive behaviour, low achievement and poor attendance. Other students may be disengaged from school, in particular affectively disengaged, in ways that are less noticeable. Research that focuses on all forms of disengagement is necessary in order to plan programs that are relevant to a wide range of students.
- **Engagement and social justice.** A number of programs described in this report have targeted students from low socio-economic communities. Socio-economic disadvantage is only one aspect of social justice. Others include race, ethnicity, gender and disability. Research has tended to focus on all of these factors as individual risk factors for disengagement. Less is known about the role of the school: Do the programs that schools put in place to address social justice issues, or the absence of such programs, make a difference to student engagement?

- **School and program governance and administration.** Little research attention has been paid to the operational and administrative aspects of schools and school programs that may affect student engagement. An examination of the role of school governance and administration, including staff and student participation, would provide valuable insights into ways in which programs can be improved, sustained and made relevant to individual school contexts.
- **Multi-method and multi-disciplinary research.** Much research on engagement has been psychological in orientation and has relied on quantitative measures. More qualitative research is needed, as well as studies that use a variety of methods, both quantitative and qualitative.
- **Information dissemination and exchange.** The literature on student engagement is scattered throughout a wide range of academic journals and websites. There are few central points for the sharing of research and practice. A website that acts as a clearinghouse for policy, research and program development pertaining to student engagement would provide a means for the exchange of knowledge in this area. The J.W. McConnell Foundation's Resource Bank described in this report provides one model.
- **Engagement evaluation protocol development.** Program evaluation is a clear weakness in the literature, in part because of the difficulties of measuring engagement. The development of a set of protocols or tools for evaluating programs related to engagement would potentially improve evaluations, both formative and summative, and facilitate exchange and dissemination of key knowledge in this field. It would be important to develop a set of tools that are sensitive to context and user-friendly.

Principles for student engagement research and programs

The following represent a list of key programmatic principles emerging from the analysis of the research literature and descriptions of school programs:

- **Making schools engaging places to be.** The most fruitful projects and programs are likely to be those that focus on making schools engaging places for all students, rather than singling out individual students. Such an approach is inclusive, multi-dimensional and context specific.
- **Broad-based involvement in programs and their development.** Programs and research projects should involve as many stakeholders as possible, and stakeholders should have a real voice in decision-making. Cross-sectoral partnerships can also be a valuable way to extend program goals.
- **Making programs viable and sustainable.** Viability and sustainability are always potential problems in educational interventions. Critical factors affecting viability and sustainability include: whether programs are integral to school organisation rather than 'added on'; the availability of appropriate resources and time to plan, implement and evaluate programs; program leadership; and attention to teacher professional learning needs.

- **Program development.** The educational literature contains many examples of programs that have been rolled out on a large scale only to fail. Successful programs often start with a pilot program or small-scale developmental exercise to test the program design, uncover unanticipated problems or provide an initial body of information that can be used to plan and refine interventions. The stepped project process adopted by the J.W. McConnell Foundation in Canada is again one possible model of how this can be achieved.

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