Schools and the city: Engaging middle years students in learning

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Abstract
SOCIOECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE CONTINUES to be a strong determinant of the educational outcomes of young Australians. In particular, middle years students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are persistently at risk of disengagement and early leaving. This risk can be ameliorated by engaging, student-centred learning that is connected to students’ lives. This article considers the findings of an independent review of Education Foundation’s Cityscape program, recently rebranded as the Classroom to Community program. It provides insights into the learning experiences that foster middle years engagement in low socioeconomic contexts as well as the challenges inherent in reformatting teacher practice along more student-centred lines.

Educational achievement and social inclusion
One of the greatest challenges for Australian schools and school systems is ensuring that socioeconomic disadvantage does not equate with educational disengagement or underachievement. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Australian educational landscape reflects the deepening economic and social divide at work across the country. At one end of the spectrum, our school students are reportedly performing well in relation to the OECD average. At the other end, there is strong evidence to indicate that educational outcomes are worsening for many young people and that significant numbers are either underachieving or in danger of opting out of the schooling process. As the panorama of work, family and community undergoes sweeping change, Australia is becoming a high performing but low equity country.

This is partly due to the strong nexus between education, social background and geographic location. Research commissioned by Education Foundation, now a division of The Foundation for Young Australians (FYA), notes that Australian students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are increasingly clustered in schools with poor educational outcomes located in economically depressed areas with high rates of early school leaving and poor transition rates to tertiary education and employment (Education Foundation, 2005; Kettling & Landh, 2004). The most recent How Young People Are Faring report, released by FYA, shows the persistence of the relationship between socioeconomic and geographic disadvantage and lower levels of educational engagement, participation and achievement (Lamb & Mason, 2008).

The research also shows a worrying trend for schools and schooling to continue to reproduce and reinforce existing patterns of privilege and disadvantage. While the larger, framing issues of school systems, structures and funding cannot be overlooked (Black, 2008; Keating, 2009), an extensive and long standing literature shows that curriculum and pedagogy can play a specific role in exacerbating and perpetuating educational inequity (Grant, Badger, Wilkinson, Rogers & Munt, 2003; Haberman, 1991; Smyth & Fasoli, 2007; Teese, 2000; Teese & Polese, 2003; Thomson, 2002). As Wyn notes, ‘students from disadvantaged backgrounds (are) the least likely to benefit from narrow approaches to learning’ (2007, p. 45). One of the clearest manifestations of the tension that can arise between curriculum and pedagogy and the lived experience of students is educational disengagement. Previously termed ‘disconnectedness’, ‘detachment’, ‘disaffection’, ‘low attachment’, ‘alienation’ and even ‘school regression’, disengagement is arguably the biggest challenge confronting today’s secondary teacher, whether demonstrated actively in such forms as truancy, disruptive behaviour, persistent lateness and peer conflict or passively through withdrawal, persistent switching off or simply failing to learn.

Perhaps the most extreme indicator of disengagement is early school leaving (Hill & Runnymede, 1999). The reality is that lower levels of education have been estimated to represent a national annual cost of $2.6 billion in higher social welfare, health and crime prevention costs and lower tax revenue, productivity and gross domestic product (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2005). At the individual level, the impact of early leaving can include lower lifelong income and greater financial insecurity as well as the raft of economic, social and wellbeing issues that accompany this situation (Vinson, 2004). While some research challenges the assumption that early leavers are unambiguously at risk of negative outcomes (Stokes & Wyn, 2007; Teese, 2006), early leaving prompted by disengagement from schooling and accompanied by disadvantage is highly correlated with reduced life opportunities and poor social inclusion (Thomson, 2002; Watson & Considine, 2003; Zappala & Considine, 2001).

This paper explores the role of Education Foundation’s Cityscape program in engaging middle years learners in low socioeconomic contexts and providing their schools with a workable model of student-centred learning to counter disengagement and underachievement. A qualitative study undertaken in Victoria in the second half of 2008 examined the impact of the program from the perspective of students, teachers and school leadership in three government secondary schools, all serving low socioeconomic communities and all seeking new ways of improving student outcomes in the middle years.

The study
Research shows that schools in disadvantaged communities need models of proven practice and the tools to implement them in their own local context in a sustainable way (Black, 2007). Cityscape was developed by Education Foundation in 2004 to provide government schools, particularly those serving disadvantaged communities, with a proven model of pedagogy and curriculum that engages students in the middle years. Previously called the City Centre, Cityscape arose from a four-year trial of innovative middle years practice conducted by Education Foundation in five Victorian schools. Funded by The William Buckland Foundation, the Lighthouse Project aimed to generate models of best practice in educational programs that increased the engagement of middle years students in low socioeconomic government school settings. Two of the five initiatives involved precursor models to Cityscape implemented by schools for their own students. In response to an evaluation by the Australian Youth Research Centre that indicated the efficacy of these initiatives (Wyn, Shaw & Smith, 2003), Education Foundation founded Cityscape as a resource for all Victorian government schools.

Cityscape uses the city as a resource to provide meaningfully interactive, real world learning experiences for Year 9 and 10 students. The program articulates and subscribes to the educational principles underlying the Victorian Essential Learning Standards: Learning for All, Pursuit of Excellence, Engagement and Effort, Respect for Evidence and Openness of Mind. It caters annually for more than 3500 young people from more than 50 Victorian state secondary schools. The majority of these schools serve disadvantaged communities.
schools and the city
Improvement and equity in student learning outcome and assessment

Role and purpose of standards in the context of national accountability and performance evaluation

Introduction

The following is an introduction to the concept of standards in student learning outcomes. The concept of standards is an important aspect of educational quality assurance and performance evaluation.

In this article, we will examine the current context of standards and performance evaluation in student learning outcomes.