

# **Pushed or pulled? Secondary school students moving from mainstream schooling to a Big Picture Education alternative**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Mainstream schooling, whether delivered by the government or the independent school sector, does not suit all young people. And yet most young people are effectively required to spend 12 years of their life in the formal education system. What happens when a more flexible alternative is offered to some secondary students – an alternative based on their interests, which supports the students to identify and consolidate their post-school plans, and fosters a more personal relationship with the teacher and a small group of students? In this paper we hear from an unusual group of students (and parents) – a cohort of secondary school students who moved from mainstream schooling into a Big Picture alternative. The Big Picture Academies/inspired schools are located at five government, independent and community based schools, in a low socio-economic, outer metropolitan region. Listening to the students talk about the reasons for their move out of the mainstream provides an important perspective on what students want from school. This in turn provides valuable information on student engagement and aspiration. Unique to this cohort is the diversity of reasons for turning to the Big Picture alternative. At one end of the spectrum are disaffected students who had disengaged and were expunged from mainstream education. At the other end of the spectrum are students who were still engaged and succeeding academically but wanting their education to be different. They identify structural, curricular and pedagogical aspects of traditional secondary schooling that make schooling unsatisfying for some students, and act as a major obstacle to learning for others. Educators can learn a lot from listening closely to what these students and their parents are fleeing from and turning towards. Informed by critical pedagogy this article engages the individualisation of responsibility for student disengagement and highlights the ways broader social, economic and cultural conditions meet the individual student to exclude some and privilege others.

## **Introduction**

Most secondary school students have limited choices as to the form of secondary school they experience. They like it or lump it. The ongoing concern over student disengagement (Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership, n.d.) indicates that many of them do not like it. In this paper we seek to better understand processes of (dis)engagement from the perspective of a unique student body – a diverse cohort of secondary school students who moved from mainstream schooling into a Big Picture Academy/inspired school (collectively referred to as a “Big Picture alternative”). These students are from a low socio-economic, outer-metropolitan region of Australia – the kind of place often seen as likely to have students who are ‘at risk’ of disengagement. The quantitative data in our study<sup>1</sup> indicates that these students want to stay engaged in their education. Almost half of the cohort aspire to a university degree and more than one-fifth aspire to a TAFE qualification. The vast majority

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<sup>1</sup> The quantitative data comes from an initial student survey administered in Term 1, 2014.

of these students indicate that succeeding at school is important to them<sup>2</sup>. They indicate that they regularly try hard at school, even though it is boring, because it leads to a better future.<sup>3</sup>

Listening to these students underscores the importance of reframing the phenomenon of ‘student disengagement’ to that of ‘student/school (dis)engagement.’ Many students feel that it is the school that has disengaged from them. This reframing helps unsettle the powerful psychological theorising around student disengagement which assumes the primary site of intervention as the individual student. Instead we ask educators to turn the gaze on ourselves and ask, what are we doing that makes disengagement a likely outcome for certain students? To learn how best to respond to the needs of *all* students we explore the intersection of three dimensions: structural factors of schooling, the social positioning of each student (class, gender, ethnicity, religion, (dis)ability etc) and each student’s unique history, aptitudes and psyche. Taking seriously the student’s inner world, coupled with a broader sociological perspective, we can uncover important clues as to their choices to hang in at school or disengage.

We know that secondary school student (dis)engagement isn’t evenly distributed across demographic categories. Students from low SES communities and families, rural areas, boys and Indigenous students are disproportionately represented in students not finishing high school (Burns, Collin, Blanchard, De-Freitas, & Lloyd, 2008). Leaving high-school before the end of year 12 is a proxy measure of disengagement, especially given the strong policy and legislative pressures to keep students at school until their 18<sup>th</sup> year (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). For students from marginalised backgrounds, leaving school early severely limits their opportunities, unlike their peers from advantaged backgrounds who are more likely to get a second chance, eventually graduate from high school and be provided other opportunities (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004).

Concerned about the social justice implications as well as keen to see all students flourish, we want to understand why students take the radical step of voting with their feet to leave a mainstream educational situation and move to a Big Picture alternative. What caused this move? Were they experiencing a high level of “disengagement” in mainstream school or do they have a great sense of agency? How do these factors come together? What is happening in a student’s life to make such a radical decision make sense?

By listening to these students we can learn something about (1) how schools act in ways that contribute to student disengagement and (2) what students want from their schools. The factors in the first of these two categories act as “push factors” – moving students out of mainstream school. Those in the second category act as “pull factors” – attracting students to a different design for learning and school.

### **What is this different design that students enrolled in?**

Big Picture students learn together in small groups, called advisories, with an advisory teacher who guides the same group for a number of years. A parent or adult advocate of each student is also enlisted as an active resource for the school community. All students help create their own curriculum, a personal one, that reflects and expands their own interests and

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<sup>2</sup> 96.4% of the students indicated that it was at least *sometimes true* that they “believe that succeeding at school is important” with 60% indicating that it was *very true*.

<sup>3</sup> 93.4% of the students indicated that it was at least *sometimes true* that school was “boring but I try hard anyway because it leads to a better future” with 41% indicating that it was *very true*.

aspirations. The school days include off-campus internships generated from each student's interests. This real-life training could be in a law office, an arts studio, a research laboratory, a national park ... anywhere. Big Picture students may also take on further education including courses in various certificates, at TAFE and university. Each term they exhibit their work to their advisory teacher, peers, parents, mentors and others in the community. Detail of the Big Picture distinguishers is contained in the annexure. The four basic principles of Big Picture design are:

1. Learning must be based on each student's interests and needs.
2. Curriculum must be relevant to the student and allow her/him to do real work outside of school.
3. Students must connect to adult mentors outside the school who share the interests and support the learning of the students.
4. Students' development and their abilities must be measured by the quality of their work and how this work changes them.

The schools in this study have necessarily modified the Big Picture design to meet their context, some quite substantially. None is a pure application of the design.

## **The Research Project**

The Big Picture Academy (BPA) research project is part of a larger research project called "MAP4U" or Murdoch's Aspiration and Pathways for University project. The MAP4U project seeks to increase the numbers of students moving into tertiary education from a low socio-economic outer Metropolitan region.<sup>4</sup> The research question relevant to this discussion asks: "How does student engagement, learning and aspirations develop in a Big Picture Academy/school?"<sup>5</sup>

The BPA research project involves five schools. Three of the schools in this research project are large mainstream secondary schools, two government schools and one independent faith-based school. These schools have been supported to introduce a Big Picture *Academy* within their school. The other two schools in this study are small schools and are seen in the local community as alternative schools. One is a community-based CARE<sup>6</sup> school where students have a history of disengagement. The other is a private school with a progressive education approach. The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA)<sup>7</sup> of the two private schools are over the national average (1071 and 1041). The ICSEA of the two government schools are under the national average (963 and 973). The community-based

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<sup>4</sup> This research is funded by the Australian Federal Government as a Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE) Project Grant (2012 – 2016) administered by Murdoch University.

<sup>5</sup> The project is guided by three main research questions:

1. What are the processes and consequences of establishing a Big Picture Academy within existing school structures?
2. How does student engagement, learning and aspirations develop in a Big Picture Academy; and
3. How does the Big Picture Academy influence teacher learning?

<sup>6</sup> Curriculum and Re-engagement School

<sup>7</sup> Key factors in students' family backgrounds (parents' occupation, school education and non-school education) have an influence on students' educational outcomes at school. In addition to these student-level factors, research has shown that school-level factors (a school's geographical location and the proportion of Indigenous students a school caters for) need to be considered when summarising educational advantage or disadvantage at the school level. ICSEA provides a scale that numerically represents the relative magnitude of this influence, and is constructed taking into account both the student- and the school-level factors.

CARE school does not publish an ICSEA. This clear division of school populations along the lines of socio-economic status exemplifies the increasing spatial ghettoisation: those who can afford to send their children to private schools or more prestigious government schools are doing so. As Bonner notes (citing Preston, 2008):

In 1996 there were around 13 low-income for every ten high-income students in our public school playgrounds. Ten years later there were 16 for every ten. The opposite trend occurred in private schools. This gap is increasing. (Bonner, 2010, Fast facts: The widening gap section)

## Student Voice

The students interviewed moved into a Big Picture alternative at the beginning of 2014. They were in years 8, 9 or 10. Twenty students were interviewed – four from each school – selected according to birth date.<sup>8</sup> The student voices used in this paper come from the first round of semi-structured interviews conducted at the beginning of 2014. The parent contributions come from semi-structured interviews conducted at the end of 2014. The transcribed interviews were condensed into a student portrait, reviewed by the students and amended in line with the student's feedback. The portions of the portraits used in this paper are seen as providing an important perspective on school rather than being an objective truth. We all see the world through our particular conditioning and psyche. Not all students interviewed are included here although care has been taken to ensure all perspectives are incorporated.

In this paper we focus on what the students had to say about the reasons they left mainstream school and the reasons they choose the Big Picture alternative. Students also described the other differences that they find between the Big Picture alternative and mainstream. They talked in depth about their appreciation of the close and supportive relationship with their Advisory Teacher, the improved relationships with other students, the choices they have as to when, what and how they work, their increased motivation and application. That is grist for another mill.

A subset of the students moved from mainstream education to a Big Picture alternative either because they were expelled/asked to leave or because the environment was so hostile for them, that they were effectively pushed out. They articulate a range of “push factors” that caused them to leave their mainstream school. Their experience of those “push factors” generated a range of emotional reactions and behaviour from anger and rage, to withdrawal.

Sally, Anita and Rose<sup>9</sup> highlight mainstream school as an unreceptive environment that they didn't fit into. One of the students was asked to leave due to her behaviour and was now in the CARE school, her last resort. The other two fled a hostile environment and opted for the small alternative school.

*I really didn't enjoy mainstream high school. There were too many students and they would push into kids and call them foul names. That included me. Here the classes aren't so daunting. It is much quieter and the teachers are able to go round and help everyone.*<sup>10</sup>  
(Sally)

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<sup>8</sup> Youngest student, oldest student and two students closest to the median student age.

<sup>9</sup> The students choose the pseudonyms used here.

<sup>10</sup> Interesting to note Sally's awareness of there being structural reasons that get in the way of teachers being able to help in a mainstream environment. She doesn't blame the individual teachers.

*I had a hard time in mainstream school. It was picky and mean. The teachers were 'at me' all the time. I'd get suspended for not wearing the right uniform. And then I wouldn't go to school and so would get a full suspension. I didn't want to do any work last year. Here it is different. I actually come to school now, it's better. (Anita)*

*I came to this school because of the bullying I experienced at the mainstream high school I attended. The bullying started at the first high school where the girls chased me out of school. So I tried another mainstream high school. That didn't work out either. The kids were bullying me because I had red hair. By Year 9 I had stopped going to school a lot of the time. I'd come home from school in tears or just not talking. (Rose)*

Jarrad, was also asked to leave the mainstream school he attended. He encapsulates a number of reasons that resulted in him being “pushed” out: school uniform requirements, difficult relationships with teachers and the competitive environment.

*I moved here from a private secondary school because I didn't obey the uniform rules. One teacher made my life hell. The learning there was more structured and the whole situation was more competitive.*

Chuckie describes an emotionally charged situation in which he retaliated, eventually resulting in him being asked to leave. He acknowledges his role in the difficulties he experienced at mainstream secondary school where his needs were not able to be met.

*The mainstream high school didn't work out so well. I used to have fights and get into trouble. Even though I would sit in the corner and keep to myself, so many kids would come and pick on me and start fights. I have anger management issues. It's as if there is a little switch that gets triggered in my head and I start retaliating, first verbally, then physically. I was swearing at teachers, walking out of class, throwing chairs, the kind of things teenagers do. I did a bit of work but not much. I didn't really like it. If I didn't come here I would probably be sitting on the oval, smoking and wagging it with the other kids. This school has given me a chance and got my head out of my arse. I wish I'd been to a Big Picture school all my life.*

Chuckie's mother gives us a sense of a system in which the individual disappears.

*It was distressing to see where Chuckie was heading in mainstream school. He was enrolled but not attending and it was getting worse. He was heading down a path to nowhere. The attitude of mainstream school was that he was one of umpteen students – one of a crowd – not noticed.*

Mary was asked to leave her mainstream school, in part due to a violent incident. Her mother's description exposes the intergenerational nature of school disengagement and echoes Chuckie's mother's description of a system in which the individual student is not seen.

*I didn't like it at the mainstream school I was at. The teachers didn't help with my work and there were too many kids. Things started going wrong at the end of third term in Year 9 and in fourth term I stopped going. Now, I come every day except when I'm sick. Mary*

*When Mary was asked to leave the school she was at, I told her she couldn't drop out of school altogether. She really wanted to. I'm very happy that she did try this school. I don't want her ending up a statistic – a teenage mum with no job, getting benefits. I wish this school was around when I was at high school – I left school at 14 and haven't been back since... The majority of kids here haven't been given a chance. Here they feel that they are*

wanted, that they are somebody. In mainstream school they are just another person in a class. Mary's mother

Mickey fled the pressure of mainstream school where she would react by fleeing a situation she found too stressful.

*In mainstream I was always getting told off and detention. Once I get over-pressured I just leave. I chuck it away. Everything. I wouldn't even finish a test. Here that's hardly happening at all... When teachers tried to undermine me and tell me what to do and pressured me I felt they were treating me like a really young child. I feel that I should be treated equal.*

The “push factors,” were so strong for these students, that prior to starting at the Big Picture alternative, they had effectively ‘dropped out’ (at least in their heads and hearts) or actually been expelled from school. Expulsion and choosing to leave a school is the end-product of a long process of disengagement in which both school and student are active participants. The students clearly articulate how their disengagement is in response to the system itself (Washor & Mojkowski, 2014). The students were in a process of mutual rejection with mainstream education. They were rejecting what was offered by mainstream education and also feeling rejected by it. Some felt rejected by the student body, others by the teachers and for some the rejection came in the form of expulsion by the institution itself. Rejection is a wounding experience for all involved.

Forty years ago many of these students would have left school when they turned 15. It was never intended that school should provide more than a basic education to these children from low socio-economic communities. They were off to get a job. Well before 2014, the youth job market dried up (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013). Now these students are required to remain at school, and schools are required to provide them with an education. The results are less than satisfactory both for the students and presumably for the mainstream schools they attended.

Another subset of the students interviewed left the mainstream school environment and moved into a Big Picture alternative due to a combination of “push factors” and “pull factors.”

Camileo is a motivated student wanting to do his best who was failing in the mainstream environment. He identifies an unsupportive pedagogy and disruptive classroom environment as key factors for him leaving.

*The students in mainstream were very destructive... I'm taking more responsibility here. In mainstream teachers just give you the work and you do it. Most of the time they don't give you the right answer and I still don't understand what they are trying to say. In mainstream I was shy and didn't like talking up, so I just stayed in the back and did my best. I didn't like being there. I did my work but couldn't learn anything. I decided to get myself in to Big Picture to better me.*

To his picture, his mother adds:

*Mainstream school didn't work for him. He didn't want to come to school and was afraid sometimes. He said "I need protection on me".*

Bob was interested in learning but finding the mainstream environment, pedagogy and curriculum uninviting.

*I researched Big Picture and liked the way they do learning instead of how they do it in mainstream classes. I like how you can research your own passion instead of just doing work in class. I've had a lot of operations recently and had to take time off school. With this program I can work from home more easily. It isn't so stressful... There is one-on-one teaching and you can research things you actually care about instead of worrying about stuff that really isn't helping you or you're just not interested in. In mainstream you might see a teacher once a day for about an hour, but there are 30 odd kids in one room all yelling and not doing their work. You can't really talk or connect to anyone because it is pretty much mayhem... I feel I have greater control of my future, instead of having a curriculum saying what I can and can't do.*

William and Mia describe an unappealing pedagogy and curriculum in mainstream schooling and their desire to have greater freedom over what and how they learned.

*In mainstream class I have been told off for talking about what I am interested in! Here are can explore my interests. If I were in mainstream I'd be doing boring work, looking at a whiteboard, copying notes down, stuff like that. In Big Picture teachers aren't hammering me with homework I don't care for. I can do my own thing at home. I can follow in-depth one thing all term without jumping from one subject to the other. I have the power to choose what I do... It is frustrating in high school constantly having to meet new teachers all the time.*

William

*I decided to apply for the Big Picture program mostly because it's a different way of learning and was based on your interests. It wasn't like you sit down, open your book to this page, do this work and stuff. We got to choose how we did it... This approach suits me. When we do normal classes the teachers come around and say "Alright you're not up to this part, you've got to do that for homework, and then study for your test and do all this and that." You get stressed out. In Big Picture I'm more comfortable because I can work at my own pace.*

The students here clearly articulate what they don't like about mainstream school: curriculum that is not interesting or relevant to them; teaching from the book/board; regimentation and conformity. In contrast, stronger engagement and empowerment through interest-based learning and greater flexibility in the Big Picture alternative comes through their words.

A final subset of the students were primarily motivated to enrol in a Big Picture alternative by the promise of being able to "do school" differently. They were succeeding at school and reasonably engaged. A range of "pull factors" come through the following students as they describe what they were wanting from their education.

Jones describes wanting his own learning goals and how they were different to those prescribed by mainstream schooling.

*It's a lot less stressful in terms of deadlines and other things. I like that it's more targeted at what I want to learn rather than just what the curriculum says I have to learn. That's the best thing about it. I'm interested in anything to do with science – I really love science. Already this term I've looked at quantum physics... I feel that what I'm learning actually has some importance to what I want to do with my learning goals as opposed to learning for the sake of curriculum – things that are not ever going to be of any use in any realistic situation in the future.*

In a similar vein, Jon articulates his pedagogical and curriculum reasons for moving.

*I was really happy when I heard about Big Picture and how it is about following your interests. I wasn't really very interested in the sort of the school where everybody learns the same thing. I also like independent learning... It's not that I didn't enjoy school before but it's just I'd rather learn about what I want to learn than what I have to learn. With Big Picture you just come with what you're doing by yourself and you structure your own learning pretty much.*

These students had clear ideas on how they wanted their education to be. They want to be supported to achieve their own learning goals. They give a clear sense of thoughtfully choosing an alternative that will provide them the kind of education they want. Making this move, they are actors in the world rather than being acted on.

## **Discussion**

Any institution is going to generate disaffection from time to time in some of the people it serves. The resulting disaffection will be influenced by the structures of the institution as well as by the individual life factors of the 'beneficiaries' of the institution. We see this at play in schools. The structures of schooling have been fashioned through historical processes dominated by the experiences of white, middle-class, well-educated men and more lately women (Pascarella & Girona, 2007). Notwithstanding efforts over the last 50 years to incorporate greater sociological understanding and cultural awareness in teachers, the naturalising effect of one's own culture means that schools implicitly anticipate students from white, middle-class backgrounds (Kincheloe, Hayes, Rose, & Anderson, 2007).

It comes as no surprise that the students in our study who were "pushed" out of mainstream are predominantly not from middle-class, white, well-educated families. Only one of the students in this category had a parent who had studied at university. Whether they were encouraged/required by the school administration to leave, or driven out, due to the behaviour of other students and teachers, for these students, school was hostile, daunting, excluding and scary. Their highly emotionally charged reactions confirm V.J. Furlong's (1991) suggestion that disengaging from school is a strongly emotional experience. The emotions that are held within the words of the students include anger (Chuckie), fear (Rose) and feeling excluded (Sally). We are given some glimpses of challenging and even unacceptable behaviour by some of these students, presumably caused, at least in part, by such intense emotions. Rejection lies at the heart of the experience of these students who ultimately leave mainstream education. To show up day after day in an environment where they are not known, let alone accepted, is a fundamentally undermining experience. And yet even with the intense emotions, resistance, and at times aggressive behaviour, these students none the less care deeply about their futures and want an education.

Excavating to discover what might lie beneath the complex set of desires, emotions and behaviours, we find descriptions of injuries students suffer within the school environment. Not surprisingly, at times the students cover up the hurt of these injuries through expressions of indifference. Our identification here of what are usually "hidden injuries" (Sennett & Cobb 1977 cited in V. J. Furlong, 1991) come both from the students who were "pushed" out of mainstream school and those students who were "pulled" into a Big Picture alternative. Students name:

- Wanting a relationship with teachers and/or students and it not being available (Elizabeth/Bob)
- Being subject to physical violence and name calling/bullying (Sally/Rose/Chuckie)

- Uncaring teachers (Anita/Jarrad)
- A hostile/daunting/stressful environment (Elizabeth/Sally/Camileo/Bob/Mia/Mickie)
- A desire to learn not being fulfilled (Camileo)
- Being treated like a young child (Mickie)
- Feeling powerless (Bob)
- Not being helped (Camileo)
- Not being seen, being treated as a number (mothers)

In addition to the injuries above, many of the students “pushed” out of the mainstream education system also experienced academic failure. Through the hierarchies of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (Teese, 2013 cited in Slee, 2014) these students were rejected or passed over while others were being affirmed. The injuries were not isolated incidents but continued over time, increasing the harm. Along the way some students had withdrawn from their family, some had been driven to tears, some exited school periodically, some had shut off emotionally and others had retaliated violently. Leaving mainstream schooling was not their first response.

Of course it is not only the students who leave who experience injuries. Others continue to live with the injuries caused, “repress[ing] the emotion and carry[ing] on with the business of schooling, perhaps finding another more acceptable outlet for their feelings” (V. J. Furlong, 1991, p. 305) and perhaps not. The students here have been able to move away from the source of the injuries and try an alternative educational approach. For those who don’t have such an option, the intensity of these injuries is compounded by high youth unemployment where the option of dropping out of school and getting unskilled or low-skilled work has effectively disappeared (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013).

Behind each of the injuries identified above are various actions of teachers, students, school administrators and education policy makers. For example, having a sense of “not being helped” comes about through repeated, behaviour in the classroom – both of the student, the teacher and other students. Structural factors such as large numbers of students and subject based teaching makes it difficult for teachers to know each student or have time to help those students who are interested in learning. Some students are less likely to seek help, their psychological make-up operating to inhibit behaviour which will draw attention to themselves in this way. A teacher who doesn’t know the student well is unlikely to anticipate that the student needs help.

Through the words and behaviour of the students in this study we see students pushing-back against the way schools exercise power by constructing young people and asking them to change themselves (V. J. Furlong, 1991, p. 298). This student resistance, most evident in those students “pushed” out of mainstream school, helps us gain insights into counterproductive educational practices (Te Riele, 2010). Stronger resistance to schooling has been found to come from students who are male, from an ethnic group other than white or Asian or from lower socioeconomic levels (M. J. Furlong & Christenson, 2008). With the exception of gender, this mirrors what comes through in our data. For students who are not white or middle-class the school’s exercise of power in constructing young people will be a more alienating process, at odds with their sense of who they are. And even for students from white, middle-class, university educated parents, while the identity work may be less challenging, we have seen that school is not necessarily engaging for them. Their social positioning simply renders sufficient the payoff that is offered (a path through university education to well-remunerated professional work) for remaining at least minimally engaged.

The counterproductive aspects of mainstream schooling against which students are resisting include implicit norms, values and expectations imposed on the students (Shor, 1992). We find the students interviewed rejecting different aspects of how mainstream schooling expects them to be, to think and to behave. They resist the imposition of a curriculum that they are not interested in and don't perceive as relevant. They reject being told what knowledge is valuable and having what they care about ignored. They disengage from teacher-centred pedagogy in which submission to a distant authority is required. They resist conformity such as through school uniform requirements. They resist disempowerment through expectations of obedience to an imposed schedule and timetable. Some resist a competitive environment, others being treated as a young child. These students don't want to change themselves to fit a prescribed model of the desirable student. And the stronger the conflict between their existing identities and what is being asked, the more likely we are to see strong emotionally charged resistance. The presence of these counterproductive practices mean that school is likely to be alienating a sizeable group of students. For these students they amount to "schools at risk" of causing disengagement (Fulton, 2007).

In making a move to a Big Picture alternative, these students are rejecting what mainstream education offers. However, as Atweh et. al. (2008) note: "They reject not learning in general but what is deliberately taught in school" (p. 10). This is shown by their engagement in the Big Picture alternative. In addition to curriculum, the students here are rejecting traditional pedagogy and school structures.

Those students who made an informed choice, or were "pulled" into a Big Picture alternative, were predominantly white, middle-class and had parents with higher levels of education. These students were complying with what mainstream school asked of them and were generally succeeding in the system. They were hanging in there, on the expectation that they would succeed in the system and progress to socially recognised higher education. But they too wanted something different. In a clear exercise of their agency, these students, empowered by their social situation and facilitated by the individual capabilities made well-considered decisions to leave.

We note the factors that are keeping the students engaged in the Big Picture environment. Through this we identify what would have helped these kids stay in mainstream school. The "pull" factors students describe, to be explored in future papers, include:

- flexibility in the schedule of the day;
- connected relationships with a supportive teacher;
- personalised curriculum; and
- smaller class size.

## **Conclusion**

Secondary schools are asked to perform a challenging role and the results show that they do it in a way that enables some students flourish – generally those from white, middle-class, well-educated families (Tozer, Gallegos, & Henry, 2011). As McInerney (2007) advises, social justice requires "specific objectives for improving access, participation and educational outcomes for marginalised and disenfranchised groups" (p. 266). In a situation where "schools do not control all of the factors that influence students' academic engagement" they have the capacity to reduce disadvantage of some students by providing "an engaging school community with high academic standards, skilful instruction, and the support students need to

pursue their educational and carer goals” (National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, 2004, p. 1).

Our interest is to support secondary schools enable more students to flourish, especially students who have not traditionally fared well. As a school renewal initiative Big Picture education questions the existing structures, power relations and purpose of schooling. It has the potential to contribute to transformative change, supporting the life chances of students not easily accommodated by mainstream schooling through enhanced engagement in learning (Silcox & MacNeill, 2006). This school renewal initiative provides an important corrective to the preponderance of market-driven school reform which has been shown to contribute to increasing inequality (Perry & Southwell, 2013).

By attending to what students want, schools have greater chance of increasing deep and sustained student engagement. Putting student expectations as the design imperative for an education system has been proposed by Washor and Mojkowski (2014) who have the benefit of 30 years of working in the implementing Big Picture Learning in the USA (<http://www.bigpicture.org/>). We see a clear difference in the culture of the Big Picture alternative in which the focus is on enabling each student to flourish in his or her own way. There is a move “from a problem-focused deficit model in which only a few kids are considered intelligent enough to become well-educated to an empowerment model in which all children are validated for their unique strengths and abilities” (Bernard, 2012, p. 25).

As the school system becomes more and more segregated according to class and race, the schools which have a population that is non-white or Asian, of low socio-economic status and with parents without a university education become institutions which are culturally in greater conflict with their student population. With a one-student at a time approach, Big Picture education diminishes the power of the institution’s cultural bias and as a result diminishes the conflict and resistance from students. The student becomes the driver of their education, supported by the teacher.

The students in this study have found an alternative to mainstream school that they believe will support them to flourish. They are clear in identifying what they want in their education. Our desire is that in listening to the students, educators are emboldened to take action both at the level of individual schools, but also at a systemic level. As McNerney (2007) says:

[S]uccessful school reform [grounded in social justice] ultimately depends on a capacity to marginalise the more regressive elements of external reforms or to strategically appropriate them in such a way that they can support socially just curriculum... Although local action may be a necessary element in working for socially just schooling, it is difficult to see how the oppressive aspects of neoliberalism can be contested within the perimeters of schools alone... Widespread and enduring reform for social justice demands collective action across the public education system and society at large. (p. 262-3)

We can pay attention to what the students tell us and do something about the way schools are organised or we can continue along the current trajectory, disengaging large numbers of students, limiting their subjective sense of possibility as well as their objective future options.

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## **ANNEXURE**

### **1. Academic rigour: ‘Head, heart and hand’:**

Powerful learning goals are set for each student:

- Quantitative Reasoning
- Empirical Reasoning
- Social Reasoning
- Communication skills
- Improving Personal Qualities

### **2. Learning in the community**

We build in adult world immersion-learning. Each student works two days a week in an interest based internship with a mentor from the community on an intellectually rigorous project connected to their learning goals. This is known as Learning through Internship (LTI).

### **3. Personalisation: One student at a time**

Students all have a personal learning plan which is based on their specific interests. It is developed with input from the students, their advisor and parents. It includes an individual project.

### **4. Authentic assessment**

Each term the students exhibit their work, providing evidence of achievements of their learning goals and reflecting on the process of their learning.

### **5. Collaboration for learning**

Students work in one-on-one or small group learning environments around their interests both inside and outside the school. Through the LTI the community plays an integral role in the education of the students.

### **6. Learning in advisory**

Students are in an advisory with up to 17 other students with one teacher advisor for the whole of their secondary education. The teacher advisor manages students’ learning plans and ensures that all learning goals are covered in these plans.

### **7. Trust, respect and care**

One of the striking things about Big Picture Schools is the ease with which students interact with adults. There is a culture of trust, respect and care between students and adults, as well as among students themselves.

### **8. Everyone’s a leader**

In Big Picture Schools, leadership is shared between the principal, staff, students and family and relevant community partners. Opportunities for leadership are provided and created for everyone.

### **9. Families are enrolled too...**

Big Picture schools aim for real family engagement. Parents and families are regarded as essential members of the learning team, starting with the application process, through to learning plan development, exhibitions and graduation.

### **10. Creating futures**

All students are expected to graduate from school to further learning. They are prepared for and connected to opportunities for learning at University and/or TAFE.

### **11. Teachers and leaders are learners too...**

New ideas are constantly required as the learning cycle is constantly being reviewed. Teachers and leaders need to deal with new ideas and learn new ways of working and develop reflective practice and find ways of sharing this learning with others.

### **12. Diverse and enduring partnerships**

A Big Picture School has a strong focus on building and creating external partnerships. These include partnerships with the family, mentors, local councils, businesses, corporations,

Universities, TAFEs and other training providers. These partnerships enable students the opportunities to pursue their learning and achieve their goals