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## Students-as-researchers

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**Abstract**

The Students Completing Schooling Project investigated the issues around early school leaving. A students-as-researchers approach was included within the research methodology. The inclusion of a students-as-researchers approach was intended to provide students with an opportunity to research their peers around the topic of early school leaving. At the completion of the project there have been two major products from the students-as-researchers strand of the research. These are the publication of *students-as-researchers approach: facilitating student research into social issues* (DETE 1999a) and the development of a students-as-researchers web site at<http://www.studentsasresearchers.nexus.edu.au> (DETE 1999b). This paper discusses the rationale behind the development of the students-as-researchers approach, the products, and provides an account of how young people reported the experience of acting as student researchers in their schools.

**About the Students Completing Schooling Project**

The Students Completing Schooling Project is a three year collaborative project funded by the Australian Research Council. The partners in the research are the Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching (FIST), the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) and the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE).

**Jay's story**

*There was never a time that Jay would come home from school happy, except when he was young. But now he never says a kind word about a teacher. It's almost like he doesn't appreciate their help. I've told Jay constantly that if he doesn't shut his mouth one day it's going to be too late but we all know Jay. He just thinks I'm being his "know-it-all" big sister. I remember when Jay used to worry about being late to class and he'd never hand up an essay late, nowadays everyone thinks he's having a good day if he actually turns up to class let alone does any work. Maybe I am just a know-it-all big sister but I am still positive that if it wasn't for that Matthew boy he's been hanging around, he wouldn't be in this situation. Ever since Matthew Thomas came to Western High he's been nothing but trouble -showing off, smart mouthing teachers, not turning up to class. He's been suspended twice already and he's only been here since the beginning of the year.*

*Jay is 14 and 8 months and he has been at Western High since year 8. He has always been a pretty well behaved kid, nice, pleasant to talk to, but now, well actually since about March when he got to know Matthew, he's been awful, not only at school but at home as well.*

*My mother blames his age and says if we leave him alone he'll grow out of it. But I know different. He is 14 and 8 months and as he keeps reminding me he's only got 4 months left 'til he can leave school that is. I've heard teachers talk and I know that if he lasts until he's 15 then he'll be lucky. Either way he's out of school, either he leaves or they throw him out. He'll be lucky if they don't throw him out. I know that and I think he knows it too. Sometimes I look at him and his eyes almost tell me that he's sorry but other times he won't even look at me.*

*some time later......*

*Well Jay has finally done it! I'm so disappointed in him. He had so much potential but now he's going no-where but the dole office. Mr Collins was forced to expel Jay last week. Mr Collins is my business studies teacher and he spoke to me after lesson last week. He told me that he didn't want to do it but he was forced to, there was no other way around it. I don't blame Mr Collins or the other teachers I don't even blame Matthew any more. I thought that*

*Jay had enough brains. Well in the end he has to live with what he has done and realise that he's blown his chance and it wasn't anyone's fault except his own.*

*Female 16 years*

## Students Completing Schooling Project

The Students Completing Schooling Project (SCSP) is a three year collaborative project funded by the Australian Research Council (1997-1999). The partners in the research are the Flinders Institute for the Study of Teaching (FIST), the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA) and the Department of Education, Training and Employment (DETE). The research set out to make sense of the complex and interacting factors associated with students deciding to either not begin, or not complete the post-compulsory years of schooling culminating in the award of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). The research methodology focuses on the capturing of 'students voices' and utilises qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Space does not permit a lengthy discussion of the whole project here. The account of the SCSP *Listen to me, I'm leaving: Early school leaving in South Australian secondary schools in the late 1990's*(Smyth, Hattam, Cannon, Edwards, Wilson & Wurst) is due to be released early in 2000.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss

- how we incorporated a students-as-researchers strand into the research and how this articulated with the rest of the research plan
- the outcomes of the students-as-researchers aspect of the research methodology including the print and electronic products
- learning outcomes as described by students

## Students-as-researchers in the Students Completing Schooling Project

In the qualitative strand of the project we interviewed 209 early school leavers and students at risk of early school leaving. We wanted to understand how (ex) students interpreted and made meaning of their lives and how they viewed staying at school and completing the SACE. The students-as-researchers strand within the SCSP was intended to provide another means of understanding young people's experiences of school and their understandings of early school leaving. In particular, we wanted to check out if young people would say different things to their peers than they would say to adult researchers. Had we managed to hear all of the issues? Was there anything we had missed? Were our informants telling us straight? Would they reveal more to each other than they had to adult researchers?

Implicit in the above questions is the understanding that power differences exist between adult researchers and students, teachers and university researchers and more generally adults and youth. The notion of power is one raised by Kelly (1993) who identified some concerns following her implementation of a students-as-researchers approach in a 'disadvantaged' school. She found that whilst the benefits were many and;

> despite the power plays and compromises....students at Beacon...honed a research problem, reconceptualizing the dropout phenomenon to include conventional schools' pushout practices. They learned what goes into producing a certain type of knowledge, and by surveying their classmates, they mobilized support for four potential policy reforms. *When the students' ideas for action were considered by school adults, they learned more about*

*the uses of knowledge in the context of unequal power relations.* (Kelly 1993: 17 my emphasis)

Amongst Kelly's (1993) student group there were power plays, structures and relations which she found surprising. Previous research projects of this nature 'had failed to sensitize [me] adequately to the ways that inequalities based on class, gender, and race can limit achieving consensus within the research group itself'. This led her to '... anticipate conflict with more powerful outside groups but not among the "oppressed" themselves.' (1993: 14) Power then, had significant effects both within and outside the research group.

> In short, the story of this project is as interesting for what did not get asked, researched, and proposed for action as for what did. ... the role that internal group dynamics played in suppressing certain interests and questions while legitimizing others. (Kelly 1993: 16)

Kelly (1993) continues with an example of external power disempowering the group:

> The students with whom I worked generally wanted to see the high school itself adapt to fit their attitudes and needs. But the project we worked on together, shaped by what those with more power would allow us to do, aimed at encouraging the students themselves to change. None of the 'collaboration' was geared to allowing the high school students to have a direct impact on changing the institution. Instead, with teachers and administrators now in the lead, individual 'solutions' were applied to largely structural problems... (Kelly 1993: 17)

Clearly, the notion of students-as-researchers can be fraught with potential difficulties. We needed to resist closure on the meanings of students' voices during this phase of the research and explore the 'interplay between material, social, and discursive conditions and the construction of individual and collective identities that [ex]students inhabit' (Mac An Ghaill 1996: 300). What we believed to be important was ensuring a process of negotiation between the researcher and researched. The participation of students-as-researchers offered a strategy for such negotiation.

The students-as-researchers strand of the research was intended to provide a more finely nuanced reading of the research problem. Getting access to student understandings was thought to be essential if we were to be sure that the work rang true. Equally, we needed to be sure the work represented human experiences with sufficient detail that our portrayals could be recognised as 'truly conceivable experience'. The inclusion of a students-as-researchers strand was intended to provide such a strategy. The portraits in this paper-Jay and Monica-written by students-as-researchers provides evidence that they were indeed capable of representing their own, and their peers experiences in ways that were genuine and real. These stories are powerful and clear examples of students' voices. Whilst it has not been possible to complete a detailed analysis of the student material as yet, there is agreement amongst the Research Team that the students-as-researchers clearly supported the data gathered through the interviews of the 209 informants of the SCSP.

**Monica's Story**

*Monica had a weight problem. As a small child she had enjoyed a healthy appetite, which pleased her mother who happened to be an excellent cook, consequently there was always plenty of food on the table and goodies in the fridge. It didn't matter being a bit tubby in primary school, "after all its only puppy fat" her parents said. Unfortunately, as Monica's appetite grew so did her size, so by the time Monica went to high school she was rather a large girl.*

*Monica was a bright, sensitive girl, and the first few days at Featherstone High which should have been happy with new people to meet and new friends to make, turned into a disaster, she felt as if everyone was looking her way. Her uniform felt uncomfortably tight, not as smart as the other girls. It wasn't long before there were taunts from the other students, especially the boys. "Fatso", "blimp", "dumbo" and "tubs", were some of the unkind things they said, even her brother wouldn't associate with her. As the taunts continued Monica became more and more withdrawn, her grades dropped. Hated herself, and everyone else, felt ugly, unloved, lonely, with no real friends. She tried talking to her parents who always seemed too busy to listen, even the teachers seemed not to hear. Monica tried to lose weight with diets to no avail, with all the emotional stress, eating seemed to be her only comfort. The time spent at high school seemed endless for Monica she never lost weight and continued to endure the taunts which became an every day torment.*

*The big day finally arrived Monica reached the age of fifteen. To celebrate her birthday she decided to stay in bed, and with a great big sigh of emotion and relief vowed that she would never set foot in Featherstone High School again.*

*Adult student*

After reviewing the literature we settled on two meanings to the term 'student researchers' which described the activity of students conducting research within the school curriculum.

1.  'students doing research in the curriculum' as a part of their course work requirements, and
2.  students-as-researchers working in tandem with trained social researchers, and organised in a way that 'challenges dominant orientations to the relationships between trained social researchers, the problem they select, the individuals they investigate and the practice of research' (Coventry, 1983: 74). For the sake of brevity, this version will be called the 'students-as-researchers' approach from herein.

We believed that a resource based learning model as described above was the most common way that student research in the curriculum was being enacted in South Australian schools. A commonly held view is that students learn a range of skills participating in the resource based learning model of research. These skills include communication; collaboration; organisation; planning; team work; report writing; summarising; analysing; cooperation and group problem solving; organisation of ideas; and developing and presenting arguments.

We wanted students-as-researchers to mean a little more than the resource based learning model and particularly wanted young people in schools to replicate the approach used by the SCSP research team. We envisaged young people being enlisted as co-researchers and involved at every stage of the research including the publication of, and dissemination of findings. We also saw the possibility for students to negotiate the curriculum through being engaged in decisions about the topic under investigation and envisaged young people being empowered by this approach. Oldfather (1995:135) develops this theme further and speaks

of 'honoured voices' where '...the voices of students were invited, responded to, acted upon, and honoured...' In order for their voices to be honoured, we believed that students needed to be taking an active role in identifying curriculum content.

The relevance of the school curriculum in these times and the extent to which youth get a say remains a vexed question and probably goes to the heart of the research problem. Without spaces for youth voices in curriculum decision-making, it is possible to argue that schools cater for the conformists, or those described as 'hanging in' or 'staying on' (Paterson and Raffe, 1995). The Research Team began to be concerned about those students who are 'hanging-in', in the sense that they have not physically left school but have internally 'dropped out' (Farrell, 1990:10). Boredom is an expression of the internal dropping out process which is described as '...a result of the process as well as the content of teaching. Boredom is linked to the pressure students feel because they are so often judged inadequate.'

Young people were often being judged as inadequate against a dull, uninteresting curriculum in which they have no say. Therefore, teachers and schools 'consistently under-estimate the enormous potential of children to participate in the construction of their own learning environments' (Taylor 1993: 3). Students are the experts on their own lives in and out of schools and their experiences as learners. They are the 'only authentic chroniclers of their own experience' (Delpit, 1988: 297). 'Yet adults (both teachers and researchers) more often than not leave students out of the dialogue about educational concerns and underestimate the potential that students have in contributing to our understandings' (Oldfather 1995: 31). Students are often left out of the discussion about what happens in schools. Often consultation with students over issues is tokenistic and students are not ignorant of this. They understand that '... in the midst of expanding the boundaries of knowledge, authority and scholarly research, we are generally leaving out the primary stakeholders of education: students'. (Oldfather 1995: 31). Students can and should participate, not only in the construction of their own learning environments, but as research partners in examining questions of learning and anything else that happens in and around schools.

We thought about how what students learnt about early school leaving from acting as students-as-researchers could influence changes to schools. The process could be cyclical in nature where real change results from research, which in turn results in actions, which then results in change. Students needed to be active participants in this process to change their daily reality and experiences of schools. We saw the use of students-as-researchers in decision-making around the curriculum is one way in which silences can be filled and the voices of students can be honoured. It seemed that curriculum reforms tend to be meaningless without the insertion of students' voices into what gets talked about and how it gets talked about within the daily arrangements, in and out of class in schools.

That the curriculum is 'dull, uninteresting and unrelated to life' was a matter for exploration in the qualitative strand of the research. It was also apparent from the qualitative strand of the research that students we interviewed felt powerless in schools. Student Representative Councils, for example, were often seen by students as only reflecting the dominant voices within the schools. Students implied that the student voices invited within the school were teacher sanctioned, that is, the student voices that were invited, listened to and honoured were those voices that reflected the views of the powerful groups in the school (the staff) and were often the voices of the students who possessed the social and cultural capital (Bordieu 1986) valued in the school. Our interest in the students-as-researchers strand of the research was the creation of spaces within the valued curriculum for students' voices, that is, those voices that were outside of the dominant discourse of the school.

**Issues for consideration**

In our initial discussion paper we identified these as issues that we needed to consider further in implementing the approach and after the completion of the project. Many of these questions were answered through the trial of the approach.

- the viability of the students-as-researchers approach continuing after the life of the project (Oldfather, 1995)
- students-as-researchers managing the ethical issues that are non- negotiables for trained social researchers, such as confidentiality and informed consent (Atweh and Burton, 1995).
- how will students-as-researchers manage 'self-disclosure' in the interests of protecting themselves? One possible solution is to demand all interviews are conducted in small groups and using pairs of student researchers to manage the group interview process.
- how to deal with the inherent power differential between the Research Team and the students-as-researchers-especially in relation to choice of research problem, and how the information will be represented and disseminated?
- how will the Research Team manage an ongoing negotiation of the account with the students-as-researchers after the end of the semester? One possibility is to convene a Student Reference Group.
- it will take some time for the students to develop research skills (Atweh and Burton 1995).

Each of these will be dealt with briefly and in turn.

**Continuing the approach**

The publication of _students-as-researchers approach: facilitating student research into social issues_ (DETE 1999) and the _students-as-researchers_ web site resolves the issue of continuing the approach after the end of the project. The print document also engages with a number of the other questions, for example, the issues of ethics, confidentiality, self disclosure and the conduct of ethical and moral research are stressed heavily in the print document. The print document also provides the basis for thorough and sequential skill development in research skills. Teachers implementing the approach require little personal knowledge of research to implement the approach successfully. The web site and discussion list can also provide support in assisting students-as-researchers and teachers implementing the approach. However, the approach outlined in the students-as-researchers print document is time consuming and does require commitment on the part of students and teachers.

**Managing ethical issues and self disclosure**

It is not possible for us to comment from personal observation about how students discussed and managed these issues. The evidence in their written accounts (reports and evaluations) supports the view that students did take these matters very seriously. Teacher case studies published on the web site support this view.

_Students expressed pleasure and surprise that their past experiences, previously seen only in a negative context, were now being valued as real data for the promotion of positive changes. They revelled in the requirement to maintain anonymity, using imaginative pseudonyms for all names including those of teachers and schools._

_Teacher One_

**Power differential**

The power differential between the researchers and students did not arise as an issue, however, one teacher case study reports that students were cynical that what they found out would not matter anyway. It can therefore be assumed that students were cognisant of power differences. Despite our wanting to be involved with the students working in schools, we (the research team) were only invited in to the school to speak to each class once. We are reasonably sure that some teachers prefer to have the classroom door closed. The teachers who worked on the students-as-researchers approach were competent professionals. The material generated by students-as-researchers attests to this fact. Clearly they felt competent in teaching the approach from the draft materials and did not feel the need to involve us further. However, it does make it difficult for the Research Team to provide observations or comments about how the students engaged with each other and the material generated through the approach. Teacher reflections within the teacher case studies on the web site provide a source of data and observations.

*Students were initially wary about being involved in a research project. Many asked questions like 'Who will see the results?'; 'Will I be recognisable?'; 'How will the findings be used?' Questions appeared to stem from reasons of concern for personal safety, cynicism toward academia or bureaucracy, or a feeling of disempowerment expressed in comments like 'What difference will it make what I find out?'*

*Once students saw the merit of the rationale behind interviewing peers, they were also able to see how their findings could feed into a wider effort to improve the SACE and schooling, and thus success and retention for fellow students at traditional high schools.*

*Teacher 0ne*

**Ongoing negotiation of the account**

The power of the student stories we think makes them stand alone. Since the decision was made to publish the material as authentically as possible it did not seem necessary to negotiate with the students. We did negotiate in terms of acknowledging student work and the use of students' work. We acknowledged the efforts of students by attending an end of year function at one school and presenting letters of thank you to each of the students-as-researchers. Students-as-researchers from other schools were sent a letter of acknowledgment for their participation in the project. Students were invited to provide permission for the use of their material and were given an option to be named as the author. The difficulties with this have already been discussed. Students retain ownership of the material and where the material has been used outside of the SCSP, additional permission has been sought. For example, student insights have been used to support some other work of the department. One student-as-researcher wrote in the personal reflections story about being a transient student. Insights from students who are transient are rare and with the students permission this story was published in DETE's monthly magazine, Xpress to support an article about transient students (Edwards 1999). The student reflections provided a statement about the impact of transience which was very powerful.

**Time to develop skills**

Students have reflected in the evaluations section of the web site about the challenge of developing the skills required to be students-as-researchers. All of the accounts by students attest to the fact that they developed a broad range of skills through the approach.

**Clare's evaluation**

*When we first started it seemed to be quite easy until we actually had to find people to interview. It was difficult because they had to be a certain age and have left school within a specific time line. ...We found it hard to get lengthy responses to the questions asked. Our first interview was quite lengthy, the information given was informative and clear. This helped to transcribe the notes with more detail. ....We found the study useful because we found out a lot of different reasons associated with people leaving school. The advice we would give other students starting a study like this is to have a good preparation and action plan. try to stay within the time limit set. Always work together as team. Confidential guidelines should always be set down and followed through. ..... We found [the interviews] enjoyable and of valuable use in future communication studies.*

**How we incorporated a students-as-researchers strand**

In conceptualising how students-as-researchers might get played out in schools we were confronted a range of issues and topics for consideration. This excerpt from the discussion paper written at the beginning of the project provides a starting point for continuing this discussion in this paper;

> What we have in mind is establishing teams of student researchers within schools in which the research work will be a substantial part of a semester credentialled SACE course (for instance, within a Community Studies framework). In this way we can ensure students will be able to gain credit for their work on the project as accreditation towards the SACE. We also overcome the problem of time for students to be involved in this type of work. Where possible, the insights of students are intended to be published so that these begin to be included in the literature that will inform future work on the topic, and more importantly assist in the development of curriculum and schooling which is inclusive of the views, aspirations and needs of a range of students.
>
> The approach we are proposing offers the possibility for students to engage in research in schools aimed at constructing knowledge about their lives within the context of the valued curriculum in collaboration with an outside school research group. This methodology integrates students doing research in a curriculum context with students-as-researchers connected to the production of knowledge by institutions outside schools. (Hattam & Edwards 1999: p 3)

In the initial statement and conceptualisation we made some commitments. These were;

- students needed to gain credit for their work within the valued curriculum through accredited SACE Units
- where ever possible students retained authorship of their work and that these should be published wherever possible under the students name where the appropriate consent was given.
- students being involved in the production of knowledge.

At the time of making these claims we had not envisaged how any of these might occur. I will discuss each of these now focussing on the implementation of the approach which included working with schools, SSABSA and the Research Team.

**Locating schools**

In our plan we had identified the need to locate 3-5 schools which would be interested in running such a program. In terms of the interests of the research partners, these should be schools where early school leaving is an issue requiring examination. The projects Experts Group and our working knowledge of schools provided us with a number of possible sites and teachers where we might trial the approach. Teachers needed to be prepared to work with draft curriculum materials that we were developing. We needed teachers unafraid of taking risks and hence, where the outcome would be unclear. As researchers, we trusted that it would be OK, but we had each conducted our own research projects and were involved in a significant process of interviewing early school leavers across the state. Classroom teachers chosen to participate in the approach, whilst having considerable skills, did not have the same level of understanding of the research process. They expressed a lack of confidence in research methods, therefore, the draft materials needed to be written in such a way as to provide teachers with all of the information they needed to feel confident in operating the class as a group of students-as-researchers. We developed a 'work required' description of the approach that had the following learning tasks;

Learning Opportunity 1: Developing understanding

Learning Opportunity 2: Critical examination of knowledge

Learning Opportunity 3: Concept mapping of the issues

Learning Opportunity 4: Preparing for fieldwork

Learning Opportunity 5: Research ethics

Learning Opportunity 6: Final fieldwork preparations

Learning Opportunity 7: Conducting the fieldwork

Learning Opportunity 8: Presenting the findings

Draft teaching materials were prepared and received positively by teachers. These materials have since been refined and will be released by DETE early in 2000. This has been a major outcome of this strand of the research plan and the SCSP as a whole. _Students-as-researchers approach: facilitating student research into social issues_ (DETE 1999a) provides teachers with ready to teach materials through which students can explore a range of social issues of importance to them.

**Outcomes**

Skilled teachers were un-phased and excited by the students-as-researchers approach. Some difficulties were experienced in terms of the commitment we had made that students would gain credit for their work through SACE-accredited units. In South Australia, the State's assessment and credentialling body, the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia (SSABSA), has a range of personnel who scrutinise each teacher's assessment plan outline for Year 11 and some Year 12 subjects to ensure that it complies with the outline in the relevant curriculum statement. The process is known as Assessment Plan approval. In the case of students-as-researchers, teachers were trying a new approach

to Year 11, and in one case to Year 12, subjects while still having to meet the requirements of the relevant curriculum statement. This proved difficult in some areas.

Although SSABSA was an industry partner on the SCSP, and it was hoped that information about the approach had been conveyed to the relevant people, more communication and negotiation with curriculum and assessment personnel prior to the commencement of the work were obviously needed. The difficulties resulted in one teacher feeling part way through the topic that the only way to manage her and the class's commitment to it and to the approach was to ask students to complete a 'double load'. Another teacher trialed the students-as-researchers approach in Social Studies at Year 12 level in 1998. At the end-of-year moderation process, this was initially met with some surprise and concern by SSABSA's Curriculum Officer. The DETE Research Officer was invited down to the moderation venue to 'please explain'. There were a number of concerns expressed including that students had investigated the same topic for the research assignment, which left the moderator concerned that they had been required to do so rather than being given a free choice as indicated in the syllabus. As well, there was some concern that students might not have been able to meet the syllabus objectives in relation to the research assignment because they had undertaken some of the work in common while the syllabus required individual engagement and achievement. Once the difficulties were cleared up and the moderators had a clearer understanding of what had occurred, students' work was moderated and marks assigned.

Clearly there are many issues at stake in assessment and credentialling approaches, however, there appears to be a general reluctance at the senior secondary level to have students working in groups and collaborating and cooperating in producing work for assessment. Fortunately, at the completion of the study no students who participated in the trial were disadvantaged in terms of their SACE results. We are, however, indebted to students and their teachers for believing in the topic and the approach and persisting with it despite difficulties.

## Commitments to students

At the outset of the project we had not thought about what material might come from students, nor did we have any ideas about how it might be used. We were however, committed to the notion that where student work was used, students retained authorship of the work and where possible, these accounts would be published. We had seen a range of journal articles where students had been listed as coauthors with academics. It is clearly necessary to get work published to list a 'hot shot' professor as first author. We were interested to know how the process of coauthoring papers with students might play out in practice and especially whose voice gets heard.

When the first school sent in work from students we were particularly impressed with what we saw. As one teacher put it, the students really 'cut to the chase', that is, they tackled the topic with enthusiasm and did not hold back at all. The work that was so impressive were pieces of writing approximately 3/4 of a page in length that were personal reflections about early school leaving. Monica's and Jay's stories provide evidence of the powerful portraits developed by students. Students wrote their stories from their own perspective or events that they witnessed occurring to another person. Some adult students who are parents wrote about their children's issues, others wrote recollected pieces, others were more personal. Two important things occurred as a result of reading these personal reflections.

- the use of portraits to represent youth lives in the report to the SCSP *Listen to me* (in press)
- renewed commitment to find a way to publish student accounts

**The use of portraits**

The research team had been grappling with how we might represent the lives of the 209 young people interviewed for the qualitative strand of the research. A research team member was experimenting with Robert Barone's work, in particular, The Case of Billy Charles Barnett (1983). He wrote a powerful piece about a young man he interviewed 'Race' using Billy Charles Barnett as a model. We were searching for a powerful way to represent these lives and the portraits developed by the students provided the genesis of how this could occur. The portraits have become central to the work of the research team and to the account of early school leaving and are a powerful way of representing young people's lives. We see the portraits as having a range of uses in representing young people's lives. For example, these portraits are also central to the professional development materials being developed for DETE. They could be used with groups of students and staff. Students could dramatise the portraits in performance, whilst teachers could use the portraits as a way of examining and thinking about students in their own schools.

**Renewed commitment to publish student work**

To not use the material generated by students would have been an injustice and a betrayal of the trust of the students who had so generously provided their insights. Print products can be expensive and remain static products. Once the decision had been made to publish _students-as-researchers approach_ it was thought that other students using the approach after the completion of the project might generate equally powerful pieces of writing about a range of topics. It therefore became apparent that to be seen to be listening to students' voices and honouring students' voices may not be enough. There needed to be genuine ways to include the voices of students and make these voices available to the other students, teachers and the broader community. Publishing the accounts by students-as-researchers appear to be the only real way to honour students' voices. It was here that the idea of a web site had its genesis-web sites are much cheaper to produce than a print product. We were committed to the notion of young people 'owning' the work on the site and in particular, being known as the creators of that work. It is possible that in future we will find a way for students to manage the site. The Commonwealth Literacy Program Team, Equity Standards funded the print product and the web site.

The web site evolved into something a little more complex but initially it was intended to;

- provide a forum for the voices of students
- engage future students-as-researchers in thinking about issues
- assist future students-as-researchers with their research assignment
- provide a forum for teachers using the approach to share their work
- include a discussion list so that students-as-researchers might write in with their research dilemmas
- get the education community talking to students about the issues of importance to them
- publicise the print product

As the student work began piling up through 1998 (there were now 5 classes of students working on the approach which represented about 80 students) DETE employed a writer/editor to assist in the refinement of material for the site. We agreed that student work was to be minimally edited (typing errors and grammar) and that the writer/editor would write up to 5 critical questions for each account, and an abstract. As we proceeded we discovered that in fact there were three types of work from students and it was all useful. The personal stories we agreed were the most powerful, others had written reports and students had also evaluated their experiences which provided insights into their learning through using the

students-as-researchers approach. We also agreed that this was an opportunity to support the print product through providing students with examples of how to thematise their work and draw out conclusions from their evidence. We agreed that a small number of personal stories and reports would be thematised so that student could see the cognitive processes behind research. A simple web site became more complicated but serves some useful purposes. The site map below provides information on the other content elements of the site.
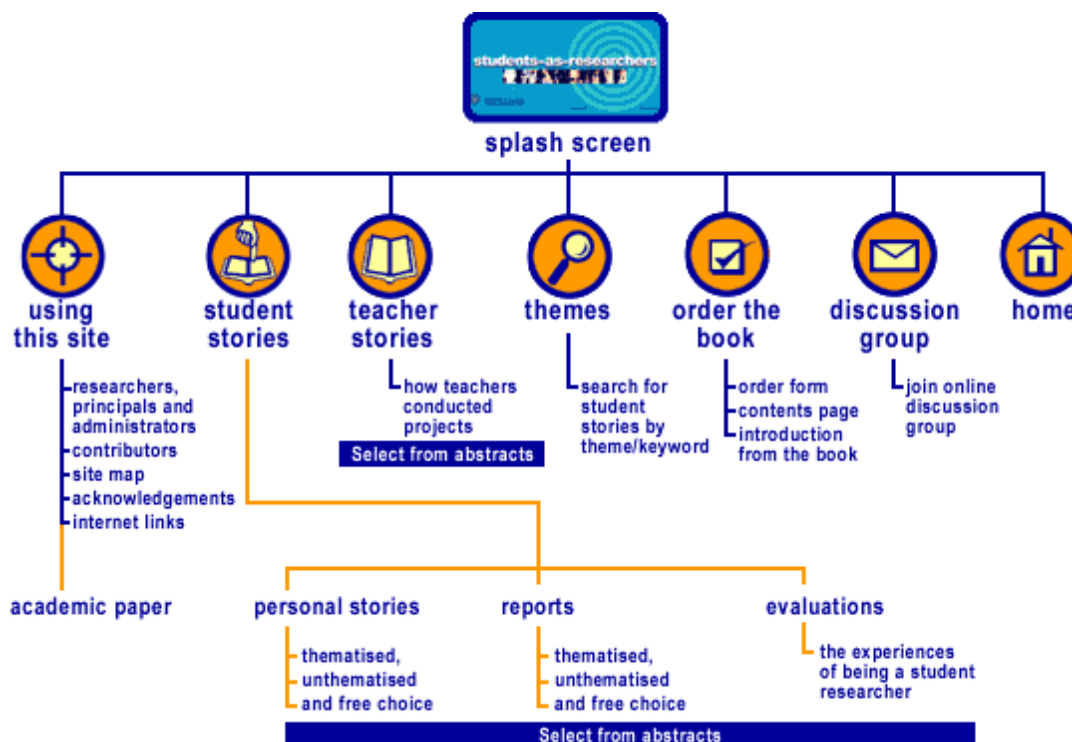


## Teacher Stories

A further feature of the site is the inclusion of teacher stories. These are the accounts of teachers who implemented the approach in their schools. There were a number of reasons for including this material on the site. They included, teachers having an opportunity to document and publish from their classroom work, teachers having an opportunity to learn for each other through shared best practice, and importantly as a further way of honouring student voices. For example, teachers were invited to submit their accounts and were encouraged to document how the school had responded to the findings and voices of students-as-researchers. School responses to the issues are documented on the web site.

## Other commitments

Students retaining authorship of the work and providing permission to be named created some problems but only of an administrative nature. For example, DETE has very clear publishing guidelines and there were also the principles of Information and Privacy and Confidentiality to be considered. It was not possible to include in a DETE product any material that might identify a student or a particular school or, in the case of students interviewing others, the confidentiality of these people also needed to be protected. It was therefore decided that rather than identify a piece of student writing with the students name, a general acknowledgments screen carries the names of all the students who agreed to have their names published. This dilemma created some issues for organisation of data. We developed a data base of student names, school names, and psydenoms to ensure that no

identification of any participant or school can be made. As new material is added to the site 'old' material can be removed or repositioned to keep the site fresh. The data base therefore needs ongoing (minimal)management. This may sound trivial, but we did note within the personal stories how some students had been creative and named the school using the principals last name, or the suburb or a range of other strategies. In the interests of confidentiality these need to be monitored and changed.

## Addressing DETE's concerns

After beginning the development and discussing the web site and product with a range of DETE personnel, some began getting nervous. A report was provided on the publications to the Materials Development Group of the department and to the DETE Research Council. We were publishing the accounts of young people who were often not enamoured with our schools (on the DETE web site). A legal opinion was sought from Crown Law through the Legal and Risk department about the implications of publishing student accounts that may be critical of the department on the World Wide Web. Crown Law provided the opinion that the official disclaimer below should appear on the site to protect the Department.

> The information herein does not reflect the view of the Crown or its agents, nor does the Crown or its agents necessarily agree with the statements herein.

As developer of the products and an individual who believes in student voice, I hope the disclaimer does not disempower the voices. The department has a traditional disclaimer on its web site, as do all others. I believe that the disclaimer is unobtrusive and will be unnoticeable to most others. It seemed to be a choice of publishing with the disclaimer or not publishing the web site. However, it does raise some interesting questions. Is the inclusion of the disclaimer evidence that the system is interested in hearing particular students' voices and disregarding others? In effect, does the inclusion of the disclaimer negate the fact that the voices are there? These are clearly topics for further discussion once the site is open to the public.

## Learning outcomes as described by students

The web site provides evidence of student learning using the students-as-researchers approach. On the web site the student stories are organised under three headings. These are;

- personal reflections (see Jay and Monica)
- reports
- evaluations

We had collected a huge amount of material, all of it was valuable but for different reasons. Personal reflections were powerful, but so were the sections on students reflecting on their own learning within the study. Reports seemed to be to us a summary of the collection and an analysis of the data. For example;

## Adriana's Report

*For the past weeks I've been researching about the contributing factors for students staying at school. The interviews were conducted at school and also the distribution of surveys around the school. The main factor which was discovered in my survey band in the*

*interviews was that 60% of the students are staying at school because of their parents and 40% of the students are staying at school because of wanting to go onto further studies.*

*Most parents only want the best for their child. One can understand why the percentage is higher. Some parents have had little education making them more conscious of their child staying at school, not wanting their child to turn out like them with little education. Social acceptancy is also the cause of students staying at school.*

*Friends are also a factor for students staying at school. Without friends people would probably go insane, making their schooling depressing. I would have to say that friends make school more enjoyable, without friends you wouldn't have any fun, you would be in pure boredom. They inspire you and make you stay at school. Most students find school boring due to subjects that they are doing and depending on the teacher they have. A good teacher is vital to make the subject interesting and enjoyable, most teachers drain you out with work, making school very tiring.*

*Also some subjects are irrelevant to what students want to do making the students do subjects in hate and boredom.*

*It seems to me that students want to go onto further studies, but some students end up dropping out because of the pressures in stages 1 and 2. Maybe the schooling system should be changed to suit the students dropping out of school.*

*Something interesting that I found was that most students that I surveyed and interviewed wanted to finish year 11/12 and then go overseas for a year break and then return to university.*

*Staying at school gives you a better education, gives you job prospects, security if you're unsure about the future and provides a better future for yourself.*

*From my observation many students wanted to go onto further education to get a job opportunity, but most of them are at school because of their parents. Students enjoy school because of friends and having a good teacher makes subjects more enjoyable. School is very important in life, it determines whether or not you have a future in what you want to achieve or not. I think staying at school gives you a better chance of getting a job without it, you have little hope.*

*Surveys and interviews are a good way of making people think what things need to be changed. This researching experience has made me realise that most of the students want to have a career don't want to be on the unemployment dole for the rest of their lives.*

Evaluations were different to reports in that the evaluations were more about students evaluating the approach and their own learning through acting as students-as-researchers. this rather lengthy excerpt shows how Jason evaluated his involvement as a student researcher.

**Jason's Evaluation**

*...Conducting an interview is the best way to find out about the interviewing process. Other people can gather advice from the people who have already conducted interviews.*

*The two interviews that were conducted provided information on why the participants left high school. The interviewees were frank and honest about why they left school. Although hesitant in some respects, the interviewees did not hold back on any information. This is quite an achievement when the interviewee is talking about their medical conditions and about how they felt emotionally at school. It is important for the interview to be conducted in such a way that the interviewees will feel free to talk in such a manner. The questions for the interview must also be suitable for the task of the interviews. Since the reason for conducting these interviews was to discover why people left school before completing SACE, it would be pointless to ask questions about their favourite sports. The only time such questions should be used is just before the interview, so that the interviewee will hopefully become relaxed and speak more freely. A lot of thought must go into the preparations for the interview, if the interview is to yield the information that is wanted.*

*The methods used for the interview could do so with some improvements. When the interviews are conducted by two people with equal say in how the interviews are to be held, a number of difficulties can arise. If one of the partners are absent, the other is left holding the ball. They cannot do anything, because the other partner must be notified before hand. Another problem that arises from having two people is that the two people must be in agreement on all the different aspects of the interviewing process. This can cause friction between the two interviewers. This can be remedied only having one interviewer or giving one of the partners overall control of the project.*

*When doing the interviews, I found that my communication skills were being improved. To be able to create questions during the interview, I had to listen carefully to what the interviewee was saying, so that I knew what had to be said to coax the information out of the interviewee.*

*The intervening process, from creating the questions to the actual interview is not as easy as was originally thought. The questions themselves, took a considerable amount of time to create. To make sure that questions yielded the right answers took a lot of consideration and thought. What sort of person that is suitable for interviewing was also different to what was expected. Close friends are not the best subjects. They assume that you already know a lot about them, and therefore hold back information in the interview. Although doing the interview was thought to be easy, it was a difficult task. The effect on your nerves when the tape starts is quite considerable, even for the interviewer. This makes the interviewing process much more difficult. Conducting an interview was a lot different to what I thought it would be like.*

*Any person considering doing an interview, should put a lot of forethought into the interview before conducting it. They must put a lot of thought into the questions and how they can get the interviewee to elaborate on them. If they are doing the interviews with other people, they should take into consideration the difficulties of working in a group. All up though, conducting an interview can be a very rewarding activity.*

*Male student*

We have presented the material on the web site in three ways. For some of these stories and reports we have underlined text which we felt indicated certain themes were present. In the right hand column, beside the underlined text, we have provided keywords to identify the

themes to show how we have analysed the stories. These stories we have called thematised. The themes and our definitions of these themes are included on the site so that future students-as-researchers and their teachers can use the site as a resource when they begin to think about making sense of their own data.

For other groups of stories and reports we have suggested themes but have not suggested which part of the text is linked to them. These you can read through and match the themes to the relevant part of the text. We have called these stories unthematised.

Finally, there are some stories and reports where we have left for students to identify themes themselves. We have called these 'free choice'. Students are encouraged to develop their own themes from the stories on the site.

**Conclusion**

We found the students-as-researchers strand of the research to be particularly valuable, and whilst time consuming, we recommend the including such an approach to other researchers committed to voiced research.

The students-as-researchers approach offers the possibility that young people can be genuine participants in the construction of knowledge in and around their own lives around a range of topics such as homelessness, poverty, substance use, racism, unemployment or any issue currently confronting youth. The approach assists young people to investigate how others are making sense of their own lives and interpreting their realities. The student-as-researchers approach, we believe should be incorporated into studies in middle schooling and the post-compulsory years. The approach we advocate *students-as-researchers approach: facilitating student research into social issues*(DETE, 1999a) could be adapted by teachers at all year levels.

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**The Production Team** who worked on *students-as-researchers approach: facilitating student research into social issues* and the *students-as-researchers* web site were;

Jan Edwards, DETE Research Officer, Students Completing Schooling Project, developed the concepts and managed the project, including the development of the *Students-as-researchers approach: facilitating student research into social issues* (print document) and the *students-as-researchers* web site.

Susanne Koen of Infoquest Pty Ltd edited the student and teacher material on the site, contributed to the refinement of concepts and provided valuable advice about the architecture of the *students-as-researchers* web site.

Aron Hausler of Runtime Development Pty Ltd developed the architecture of the *students-as-researchers* web site, enacted the concepts and provided valuable advice.

Tim Saunders developed the graphic designs for *Students-as-researchers approach: facilitating student research into social issues* (print product) and the *students-as-researchers* web site and provided advice on design and layout features of both products.

Gunta Groves edited *Students-as-researchers approach: facilitating student research into social issues* (print product) and provided editorial advice on the web site.

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