"School is For Me"

Student Engagement and the Fair Go Project

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A focus on engaging pedagogies in primary classrooms in low socio-economic status communities in south-western Sydney.

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Abstract

This paper reports on a research collaboration between the New South Wales Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) and the School of Education and Early Childhood Studies, University of Western Sydney (UWS). The research partnership, the Fair Go Fair Share Fair Say Fair Content Project (hereafter FGP), has been established to explore, evaluate and describe in detail the kinds of classroom pedagogies that bring enhanced outcomes for educationally disadvantaged students in primary schools in south-western Sydney.
The theoretical and empirical foundations of the research are that student engagement is a pivotal element in classroom pedagogies, both determining and illuminating the quality and effect of student outcomes. In this sense engagement is not narrowly defined as on-task behaviour, but has a wider sense that students feel that school and education is "for them". For students in NSW PSFP schools, this feeling is of critical importance to their future educational identities. Student self-assessment and therefore student voice is utilised as an important way to explore engagement.

The paper is organised in three sections. The first section provides some background to the FGP, which commenced in 2000 in a small number of primary schools in low socio-economic status (SES) communities in south-western Sydney.

The second section provides a brief overview of research into student engagement, seeking to focus on what is most useful for students and teachers working together in linguistically and culturally diverse school communities which also experience considerable economic pressure. How engagement is defined, identified and sustained remains a critical research question for all those involved in the FGP. Within the context of the PSFP, the paper considers what this might mean for low SES kids, their teachers and the learning experiences on offer in their classrooms. There are research links to the 'productive pedagogies' research in the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study. Specifically, the FGP has lifted out 'engagement' to focus on 'engaging pedagogies' in low SES school communities.

The last section locates engagement within the context of the primary school classrooms of teachers participating in the research project. It focuses on the variety of ways the research partnerships, including teachers, students, academics, education consultants and community development officers, are exploring engagement in classroom contexts through literacy, multiliteracies, science and technology, Human Society and Its Environment and student self-assessment.

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**Background**

The issue of student engagement has been a focus of the FGP since the pilot project began in 2000. The project is the result of an ongoing research partnership between the NSW Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP), the University of Western Sydney and low socio-economic status (SES) school communities in the schools districts of Fairfield and Liverpool. Both these school districts are located in the south-western suburbs of Sydney.

The FGP remains part of a statewide student engagement initiative co-ordinated by the PSFP across New South Wales. Its purpose is to identify, investigate and document innovative ways schools are engaging students in learning and school life. This initiative continues to assist school teams to research the complex factors that enhance or impede students’ engagement in learning in primary and secondary schools. It also focuses on the specific learning and social needs of students in socio-economically disadvantaged communities who may be alienated or disengaged from school learning.

The FGP:

- draws on current ideas about pedagogy and considers these from a variety of classroom experiences
- attempts to identify effective practices within the three PSFP action areas of Quality teaching and learning, Home school community partnerships and Classroom and school organisation and school culture
- embodies the PSFP equity principles of fair go, fair share, fair say and fair content
- sees student engagement as a pivotal aim of and critical condition for improved student social and learning outcomes
- defines real engagement in learning as something more than ‘compliance’ or ‘on-task’ behaviour
focuses on a deeper level of engagement that involves long term engagement with school and education: the sense among students that "school is for me".

The FGP draws on a number of theoretical frameworks in attempting to 'explore, evaluate and describe the kinds of classroom pedagogies that bring enhanced outcomes for educationally disadvantaged students' (Munns, 2001). The project has been influenced by the research into pedagogy and students from low SES backgrounds, including Haberman (1991), Newman and Associates (1996), the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS) into 'productive pedagogies' (2000). The latter emphasises the value of teachers framing their work within four key areas or dimensions to ensure a more equitable distribution of educational benefits for students. The four areas are intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environment and recognition of difference. (School Reform Longitudinal Study, 2000).

For students from traditionally under-achieving groups, high degrees of connectedness, supportive classroom environment and recognition of difference are even more necessary to support intellectual quality. In responding to this research the FGP draws on the four 'productive pedagogy' dimensions and considers whether or not it is possible that for these students recognition of difference is a necessary condition for high academic achievement. It may well be crucial for those students most at risk of disengaging from learning, that the richly diverse communities in which they live are recognised, respected and linked to classroom learning (Thomson, 2001).

In particular, the 'student engagement' item, which links to the supportive classroom environment dimension, has become an overarching theme for the project. Since the beginning of the FGP research partners have discussed their work in terms of what constitutes 'engaging pedagogy' in their local contexts. Trying to find consensus about what engagement in learning means and/or looks like has been a focus of many of the professional discussions in classrooms and at collegial network days. As the project has developed, so has the view that engagement might actually be the key to winning students over to a deep level of engagement in learning and a belief in the idea that 'school is for me'.

The PSFP also provides a framework by prioritising the work of teachers to support student engagement and student learning, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy. In addition, the PSFP promotes the equity principles of fair go, fair say, fair share and fair content as an ethical framework to support student participation in learning and school life.

NSW Board of Studies primary syllabuses and the K-6 curriculum provided another framework through which teachers have investigated student engagement in learning. This has focused teachers on developing outcomes-based classroom programs that help contextualise learning for all their students.

Through these frameworks teachers, in co-researching partnerships with academics, education consultants and community development officers, are investigating what engaging pedagogies look like and how they have the potential to generate high levels of student commitment and achievement.

**Researching engagement - what are the issues?**

Student engagement in learning and school life in low socio-economic status (SES) communities is an ideal much prized by teachers, students and parents. Yet engagement has been identified in the research literature since the 1970s as a source of tension for many
children and young people. Disengagement and disconnection of students from school seem to present as a daily issue for anyone involved in education whether as a teacher, student, school principal, parent or community volunteer or member. It has both immediate and long-term social and economic effects. In terms of retention rates we know that students are voting with their feet and opting out of post-compulsory education offerings. They are not 'buying it' (Munns, 2001; see also Full Service Schools conference papers, 2000 for statistics on student retention rates: 1-2).

Too many students do not engage purposefully and deeply with their learning. It is not just an issue for the students defined as 'at risk' of disengaging from completion of school to Year 12. Just as there are 'cruising schools' (Stoll and Fink, 1998) there also students who could be described as simply cruising through the daily routine of school. Cusick (1973) described students as mere 'spectators' of their own learning. Research by Goodlad, Sizer and Powell et al (quoted in Whelage et al, 1989) reported on the 'passivity' of students in classrooms in the USA.

Other research would explain this passivity as students 'going through the motions' in complying with teacher demands and that this is a form of resistance, albeit covert. Students are positioned as unequal partners in the classroom where teacher expectations are relatively low and there is the deficit view that the most that can be expected of these students is to keep them busy, on task and compliant (Dent and Hatton, 1996).

The long term UK study (Rudduck et al, 1996) of students' views about learning and schools provided valuable insights into how students saw themselves as learners and what schools did effectively to support this. Interviews were conducted with students over a period of 5 years. Significantly, student voices offered valuable data in revealing whether or not schools were hitting the mark with engaging students in learning and school life. The idea of student voice is a key element of the FGP and will be developed further later in the paper.

For a number of students, engaging in learning and school life is a challenge. Disconnection from school may manifest itself in many ways including truancy, absenteeism, non-compliance, under-performance and risk-taking behaviours. It may also occur at different periods during a young person's education.

Critical transition points such as the move from primary to secondary school, or into the post-compulsory years of schooling, can exacerbate the degree to which students are prepared to engage with what schools have to offer. Older students particularly, face issues of personal identity and peer acceptance which can influence how they see themselves as a learner in the classroom and at school.

The South Australian research on students in the middle years identified key areas which caused students to disengage from schooling. The middle years of schooling were often the 'lost years' for young people aged 10 to 14 years (Cormack and Cumming, 1996). For many students at this critical transition point schools and classrooms were alienating places. School structures, curriculum options, teaching styles and expectations were factors in this sense of alienation. Significantly, the lack of intellectual challenge can impact on students' readiness to commit to the demands of secondary school. It is not enough to provide a welcoming environment if the learning is not challenging and purposeful.

Repetitive and unimaginative lessons only communicate low expectations to students in their first years of high school. Barber (1999) argues that students need to be motivated and excited about learning. Teachers need to make 'their heads spin' (13) and provide intellectually challenges and appropriate support. The idea of intellectual challenge also links to the QSRLS 'intellectual quality' dimension. Therefore, a focus on intellectual challenge
ensures both the learning and the learner are valued. This remains a key focus for the work of FGP research partners.

The lack of understanding about the specific needs of students is an identifiable area of concern for teachers. Schools often invest considerable time and resources into highly visible organisational structures. Often the quality of the relationships between students and teachers that characterise effective teaching practice in classrooms and schools may be overlooked. Insufficient time is spent on considering the prior learning and life experiences of students. The FGP project sees relationships within classrooms with teachers and students as a key element of pedagogy. In this sense it reflects research on students' need for identification with their school. They need to experience a sense of membership with schooling if they are to engage. Quality relationships between teachers and students are fundamental as evident in:

School membership is created through reciprocal relationships between pupils and the adults representing the institution; it involves active efforts by teachers to communicate with individual pupils and help them with their concerns. (Rudduck et al, 1996:85)

Teachers can certainly make a significant difference in reconnecting young people to school life and educational opportunity. Peter Hill in Victoria (1996) referred to three key elements which impact on students' engagement with and attentiveness to literacy instruction. The most important elements were structured teaching, effective learning time and high expectations.

Teachers' expectations have a considerable impact on student achievement and their willingness to engage in classroom and school practices in a purposeful way. Low expectations lead to student underachievement and disengagement.

Research into expectations conducted by the NSW Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP, PSFP since 2000) in the late 1990s pointed to the fact that teachers' expectations are an important factor in student achievement but so too are parents' and students' expectations. Students have expectations of themselves, their teachers and their schools. Therefore, engagement and high expectations are critical for students:

...to see the connection between the choices they're making today and their opportunities for tomorrow. They need to see how today's decisions can be investments in their own future, but they also need awareness and support to set personal goals and consciously and conscientiously work toward them. (DET, 1999)

Another angle on student engagement involves students and their families. Engaging students means connecting with the significant others in the lives of children and young people. Parents have a significant role to play in supporting their children to engage in learning outside the school setting (Henderson and Berla, 1994). Many parents need more support with practical ideas for supporting children's learning in ways that strengthen relationships between the home and school. How exactly can I help my child with reading? What is required at high school when my child has an assignment to submit? My child won't do his homework - what should I do? All these questions can create consider anxiety between family members leading to a mismatch of expectations between the home and school. The PSFP has consistently promoted the importance of developing positive home school community partnerships that can strengthen reciprocal relationships and shared understandings about learning in school communities. The FGP has focused on the link to home literacy practices in a number of the research partnerships. By considering the context
of students' lives beyond the classroom, it has focused teaching and built on the idea that difference is a strength.

**Giving students a fair say**

For many children and young people, learning and the school environment are experienced negatively. Recent research into young people's perspectives about schooling and their futures (DETYA, 2001) provides insight into what it is that causes them to disconnect from school. Many young people value learning but do not value the idea that 'school is for me'. Negative relationships with teachers and peers as well as inadequate school organisational practices accounted for many young people's concerns. These concerns 'included teachers 'not listening', students feeling that 'the teachers did not want them there', that teachers were 'arrogant', 'too busy', 'not maintaining confidential comments' and 'in bad moods'. Teaching methods were also identified as a barrier to engagement and continuation". (7)

Other research on early school leaving (John Smyth et al, 2000) reveals that some school cultures have the potential to deny students a voice on issues that matter to them. Power is vested firmly in the interests of 'adults' and the more compliant students in the school. In negative school cultures which fail to recognise youth cultures, classrooms 'end up producing what can only be described as a set of oppressive pedagogical relationships between students and teachers' (290). They become 'fugitives', unable to be visible in the places and spaces that school offers. In such school cultures engagement is understood in a limited way. It centres around the ability of the student to comply with school routines, teacher demands and the rules of appropriate behaviour. Students who resist are penalised or 'placed in situations where they have to consciously place on hold their personal views about respect, authority, dignity and fairness' (291).

The FGP argues through the work of teachers that the quality of teacher-student relationships in classrooms is critical for deep level engagement in learning. In discussions during the first stage of the project, teachers spent considerable time talking through their definitions of student engagement. Compliance was not seen as the ideal state of engagement. This is borne out by the 'productive pedagogies' dimensions as well which highlight the importance of recognising cultural differences. The PSFP also focuses on the equity principles of a 'fair say' 3. Both validate and promote the idea of students having a say in their learning. Student voice through student self-assessment has been a powerful feature of the FGP in charting the learnings of students.

'School is for me' - socially just places to learn

By the time young people have experienced the compulsory years of schooling, many are prepared to make the jump. Frequently, it is the student groups who depend most on education that are finding schools unsatisfactory places.

Pat Thomson (1999, 2001) argues that in order to genuinely engage students in learning and school life, schools must be socially just places where children and young people 'are provided with the social, emotional and physical space' to become themselves. Martin Thrupp (1999) argues that schools, particularly in low socio-economic status communities, need to address both academic and social needs. Schools need to be caring places focused in providing intellectual challenge for all students.

Through education young people gain keys to their own personal futures as well as a role in civic life. Without an emphasis on social justice too many students disengage from school. Our system fails to support students to engage successfully in a 'fair share' of the full benefits of education and training. Thomson (2001) observes that these benefits are not
distributed evenly at present. To address this and enhance educational opportunities for young people it is critical that schools recognise the inequalities that low socio-economic circumstances produce and avoid deficit views. Instead she proposes a strengths-based or 'assets-based' approach to supporting the needs of students in low SES school communities.

Making connections or 'getting a fix on the local' and working with the rich diversity of differences and identities within the school community is a key to engaging students in learning and school life. Pat Thomson argues that schools

must work on finding, appreciating and using the local resources, the knowledge, skills, talents, passions and interests and local institutions as the means of both shifting and ensuring access to, participation and achievement in the formal school curriculum, the knowledge that counts. (Thomson, 2001: 6-7).

Levels of student engagement

What does engagement look like? How can we define student engagement? These types of questions have been a focus for professional dialogue among the FGP research partners since the beginning of the project in 2000. The research literature has been helpful to a certain extent in considering the role engagement plays in learning and school life.

Wehlage (1989) suggests engagement occurs on a 'continuum' and is essential for knowledge and skill acquisition. Rudduck et al (1996) see engagement as 'meaningful', (58) involving 'personal identification with the process of learning' (63). Engagement is also about 'that sense of social context which can help both teachers and pupils find a common social purpose as to what learning is...' (68). The FGP certainly picks up on this notion of engagement, seeing relationships as central to learning and student achievement.

Elaine Chapman (2000) has described how engagement might be considered in terms of levels. 'Procedural engagement' refers to the student co-operating with daily school routines with 'completion of homework assignments, on-task behaviour, punctuality, and preparation/organisation for class' (4). 'Substantive engagement' refers to 'students' levels of cognitive investment, active participation, and emotional involvement in the specific learning tasks prescribed by the school curriculum' (3).

The FGP has challenged this narrow view of student engagement, defining it as little 'e' engagement. The FGP also challenges the idea that engagement is always necessarily observable. Munns et al (2001) suggest the it is student work and the conversations that occur in classrooms around learning that offer a true indication of the degree to which students are actively and critically engaged in their learning. In this way, student voices are the true measure of engagement.

The importance of student engagement in their learning was also a strong theme in the literature underpinning the initial development of the FGP, and became one of the contextual frameworks for examining classroom practices in the schools involved in the pilot study. In a paper presented at the AARE symposium in December 2000, Munns et al describe some of the early classroom observations in this area and the way in which they shaped the direction of the project in terms of student engagement. It was found that there were difficulties associated with observing whether or not students were engaged in classroom activities or just on task. Discussions with teachers from the four primary schools involved in the pilot study revealed that a range of different perceptions exist about what may be termed 'engagement'.
Researchers responded to this by "problematising the terms 'on task, compliance and engagement'" (AARE paper, 2000). This allowed them to more accurately identify classroom situations where student engagement could be discerned. While this made the research task clearer there were still problems associated with observing, or knowing, whether students were engaged in their learning in situations where they were not involved in co-operative groupwork.

While it was easy to observe a certain level of student engagement in terms of on task behaviour, a more important level appeared to be some sort of longer term, deeper engagement with school and education. Here is a sense among students that "school is for me". The FGP research team termed the latter 'Engagement' (that is big 'E') and the former 'engagement' (small 'e'), recognised that there might be significant pedagogical connections between the two and saw Engagement as an important aim for students from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds. This level of Engagement fitted ideas about students, classroom discourse and critical literacy, as shown in the following definitions that engagement:

"...involves becoming identified and identifying oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group playing a socially meaningful 'role' within that discourse community" (Gee, 1990 in Munns, 2001).

" ...finding ways of enabling and encouraging learners to enter into communities of practice, discourse and inquiry to become an 'insider' in the culture of the classroom" (Durrant and Green, 2000 in Munns, 2001)

Within this more refined focus and more in depth definition of engagement, research discussions sought to discover ways of finding out whether students were engaged. What became increasingly apparent was that perhaps the learners themselves were the only ones able to completely determine whether they were engaged in their learning. This had important implications for classroom assessment, and in particular student self-assessment and self-evaluation.

The following features of classroom engagement (that is, how can we tell if students are engaged?) emerged from earlier research discussions and continue to inform investigations into student engagement in the FGP.

These discussions suggest that engagement is indicated for students when:

- their learning extends beyond teacher, task and time and they are pushing boundaries, transferring learning to different times and contexts
- they are reflecting on their learning
- learning interactions move beyond classroom and school.
- there is a focus on continued and recognised student achievement
- students demonstrate long term satisfaction with the learning process
- there is social and cultural support for all learning
- students demonstrate self-understanding of short and long term learning purposes.

Current research partnerships

In 2002 the FGP has ten research partnerships operating in eight primary schools in south-western Sydney. In each case the research partnership consists of primary education academics, teachers, school leaders, district curriculum and equity consultants and
community development officers. It could also be argued that the primary aged students are engaged in actively researching the link between engagement and learning. They, too, are partners in the process of identifying what it is that 'gets them in', that has them feeling that 'school is for me'.

The school partners include eight very different primary schools located in the suburbs of south western Sydney, an area where many in the community are under considerable economic pressure. The schools range in size from student populations of around 250 to over 700. Each school low socio-economic status community is characterised by high levels of linguistic and cultural diversity. The research focus in each of the schools involved in the FGP has been determined by the area of expertise of university partners and the particular context of the school and classrooms involved.

Each research partnership implements initiatives in classrooms and collects data which is shared with the FGP team through the project networker and at collegial network days each term. This data also informs publications and other products which celebrate the findings and achievements of the project.

**Snapshots of engaging pedagogies**

The following information provides a series of snapshots from some of the classrooms which are shaping learning experiences in ways that support students to find the 'piece in the puzzle'. The snapshots represent the voices of teachers critically reflecting on the challenges and successes of their pedagogy. Each of the research partnerships has provided information framing their work within the context of:

- pedagogical changes
- data about student learning
- indicators of student engagement
- indicators of improved student outcomes

The key research areas include:

- **Visual Literacy** - integrating literacy across KLA's with a focus on visual literacy and technology at Cartwright Public School
- **Students as insiders in their classroom** - engagement and student self-assessment at Carramar Public School
- **Giving learners a 'Fair Go' in HSIE** at Ashcroft, Cartwright and Liverpool Public Schools
- **Science and Technology in a relevant context** at Ashcroft Public School
- **Multiliteracies and technology** at Cabramatta West
- **Home and school literacies** at Fairfield West Public School
- **Computers and learning: children as multimedia authors** at Ashcroft Public School.

**Carramar Public School**

**Partnership focus:** Students as "insiders in their classroom" - exploring student self-assessment and negotiated curriculum driven by student reflection on what they want to learn.

The partnership aims to explore how classrooms can become learning communities where students and teachers talk and think differently about their learning and where students have
greater control over their own learning leading to a more powerful engagement with school and education.

Students are introduced to ways of having meaningful conversations with their peers and their teachers about their learning. At the same time they are shown strategies to assess and evaluate their classroom learning experiences.

Findings so far indicate that students are more likely to engage with learning when:

- frameworks, structures and examples for student self-assessment are developed
- greater opportunities exist for students to take control of their own learning
- students identify with and evaluate their own learning
- different patterns of classroom discourse are explored.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical changes:</th>
<th>Data on student learning:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>changes to classroom discourses - teacher/student,</td>
<td>classroom observations</td>
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<td>student/student</td>
<td>student self-assessments</td>
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<td>focus on sharing classroom power</td>
<td>learning journals</td>
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<td>purposeful 'rich' tasks</td>
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<td>negotiated curriculum, assessment, space, time</td>
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<td>structure and scaffolds for student self-assessment</td>
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<td>- reflecting on content and process</td>
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<td>visibility of classroom pedagogies</td>
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<tr>
<th>Indicators of student engagement:</th>
<th>Indicators of improved student outcomes:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wanting and having a say in the teaching/learning process</td>
<td>students able to discuss their own</td>
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<td>being involved in purposeful, 'rich' tasks with high</td>
<td>learning in relation to the content and</td>
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<tr>
<td>relevant, 'rich' tasks with high intellectual quality</td>
<td>process</td>
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<tr>
<td>taking up opportunities to discuss and make decisions</td>
<td>students using self-assessment as a</td>
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<tr>
<td>regarding their own learning</td>
<td>means of identifying what learning</td>
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<td>asking questions regarding the content and process</td>
<td>needs to occur</td>
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<td>transfer of content to different contexts</td>
<td>students able to transfer knowledge</td>
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<td>and skills to different contexts</td>
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<td>students able to analyse data for</td>
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Cartwright Public School

**Partnership focus:** Visual Literacy - integrating literacy across KLA’s with a focus on visual literacy and technology within the theme of “Australian Identity”.

This partnership aims to refine a visual literacy framework, including the use of technology, as part of an integrated literacy program which is also informed by the productive pedagogies principles.

Using the notion of rich tasks, the classroom pedagogy has focused on linking learning experiences to real world experiences. Teaching and learning activities included peer assessment, personal reflection on learning activities and hands on activities with a mixture of teacher directed and scaffolded learning experiences. The resultant multiliteracies processes and products showed development of students’ literacy and assessment skills, as well as reflecting relevant outcomes from integrated KLAs.

Findings so far indicate that:

- students have developed metalanguage to critique their own and others visual and multimodal texts.
- students are engaged and enthusiastic and this is evident in the use of technology to manipulate text and image, as well as in their development of critical literacy
- students’ understandings have increased about the constructed nature of texts and images
- real world purpose of task, combined with ongoing assessment and personal reflection is a key aspect of pedagogical changes.

**Pedagogical changes:**

- inclusion of visual literacy as stimulus and also as a source of critical engagement with visual and related Australian identity concept
- co-operative learning
- developing student self-esteem through self-reflection and participation in oral and written presentations
- involving students in self-reflection on their learning

**Data about student learning:**

- reflective journals
- student paintings
- discussion of paintings from the gallery via www (video)
- written presentation - descriptive response to artists’ work
- oral presentations about their own art work
- reflective critique on their learning
- interviews with students

**Indicators of student engagement:**

- ability to reflect - positive reflections on the unit
- original aspect of their paintings
- involvement in discussion/level of interest (from video)
- development of written skills after studying art work

**Indicators of improved student outcomes:**

- learning journals - language use reflecting critical thinking
- teacher observation of increased involvement and interest
- involvement of boys and linked improvement in literacy activities and tasks
Cartwright Public School

**Partnership focus:** The partnership explores the Storypath (McGuire 1997) strategy for designing and implementing HSIE focused units; the integrated, active and intellectually challenging pedagogies inherent in the strategy; and outcomes for students in terms of their "engagement" and learning.

This partnership aims to "engage" students more in HSIE learning experiences by involving them in a Storypath approach that connects and problematises HSIE learning, and to investigate the particular teaching pedagogies within the approach that positively influence the students' engagement and learning outcomes.

The HSIE units have been focused around a story connecting HSIE concepts that students may find disorganised and difficult in more traditional units of work. Students become characters within the story and develop deep conceptual understandings about the topic through "rich", or complex, activities and engage in solving problems based on citizenship within the context of the story.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical changes</th>
<th>Data about student learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>implementing Storypath narrative structure</td>
<td>work samples and charts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involving students in problem solving of critical incidents so they use their knowledge</td>
<td>interview transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>implementing expert groups so students are sharing knowledge and valuing each others' contribution - idea of a 'community of learners'</td>
<td>student self reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students directing and organising their learning more</td>
<td>peer assessment</td>
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<td>observations of classroom experiences</td>
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<td>social skill checklist</td>
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**Indicators of student engagement:**

- pride in the 'character'
- role playing in the job interview showed immersion in character
- the characters created were a reflection of their context e.g. fathers, teachers
- students reprimanding each other for being away and letting the group down
- ownership and wanting to complete the

**Indicators of improved student outcomes:**

- quality of student research in their brochures
- evaluation that using their own words more than the authors was a difficult skill
- choice of country 'engaged' students leading to more in depth
travel brochure
• 'on task' and completed work at home e.g. looked for information for other groups
• students discussed their work with parents, friends of family
• believed the letter from the Mayor was entirely real

knowledge on their chosen country

Cabramatta West Public School

Partnership Focus: Scaffolding multiliteracies through students' learning of and about newspaper texts and the multimodal (visual and written) texts in children's magazines.

Students learned about the visual and written construction of a range of texts in newspapers and children's magazines in preparation for the production, using technology, of their own class-based school magazine.

This unit focused on the integration of the explicit teaching of the structure and composition of visual, spoken and written texts in a meaningful way in a unit on media. Technology was used to enhance the manipulation of multimodal texts as well as a tool for collecting images and constructing multimodal magazine pages.

Pedagogical changes:
• Integration of technology into curriculum Reflection on the value of grouping and groups of students
• Reflection and varying of the amount of scaffolding provided
• Trying a variety of approaches eg problem solving, thinking hats, multiple intelligences, explicit teaching/scaffolding initially a lot and then realised less required as students "knew" what to do
• Visual and multiple literacies part of daily curriculum
• Using every opportunity to engage students in multiliteracies
• Using children's everyday texts - popular culture in the classroom
• Flow over of visual language into visual art curriculum.

Data about student learning:
• Video
• Work samples
• Focus group of students
• Observations notes term 2/3/4
• Notes from talks/meetings between teachers and academic
• The final product of the magazine

Indicators of student engagement:
• Still interested in completing tasks related to media and magazines after 2 terms
• Willing to attempt tasks which was not

Indicators of improved student outcomes:
• Write and understand a variety of non-standard text types.
• Critiquing of text types
apparent for all students in term 1

- Desire to complete the task not just 'have a go'; requesting time to complete task eg job applications
- Speed with which they do a task
- Decrease in 'whinging' - > persistence
- Boys more engaged in discussions and offering ideas - more willing to participate in most activities more than previously

- Participation in group discussions from a wider range of children
- Able to critique/comment on visuals - layout/images/colours and the use of them
- Text written for magazine selected by students
- Students not as accepting of the texts they read
- Use of a language to talk about the texts - multimodal - visual/written texts as individual texts and as a whole text
- Technical language being used by students in their own discussions of texts

Fairfield West PS

Partnership Focus = Student engagement + self assessment

**Pedagogical changes:**

- Initiating a tighter programming focus on integrating the Multiple Intelligences and Bloom's Taxonomy
- Making outcomes and expectations more clear to students so they are not 'guessing what they are required to do
- Giving students the chance to critically reflect on specific learning experiences
- Providing students with more opportunities to negotiate their own learning
- Making learning experiences more diverse in that they cater for different learning styles e.g. Musical/ Rhythmical, Logical/ Mathematical
- More group structured activities. Students have roles to fulfil and targets to obtain.
- Producing more open-ended activities opposed to 'proforma' format
- "Domino effect" of other staff taking on board ideas generated by the project

**Data about student learning:**

- Self reflections have been collected
- Teacher reflections matching lessons that students have reflected upon
- Focus groups with parents about Literacy

**Indicators of student engagement:**

**Indicators of improved student**
Children keen to demonstrate how they can complete their own research and how parents and community are also key educators.

- Children making suggestions as to where we should go next with our learning.
- Appear proud of their work and the classroom they have helped to design.
- The children want to involve their parents/family more at home and want them to come into the classroom.

**Outcomes:**

- Talking about their learning at home and school.
- Bringing knowledge and understandings from home and sharing these with the other children.
- Work samples are more detailed and demonstrate achievement of intended outcomes.
- Students taking more ownership over their learning.
- Able to articulate purpose behind activities and make generalisations.
- Students use reflective language to discuss learning and make suggestions as to how they can acquire more knowledge.

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**Liverpool Public School**

**Partnership Focus:** Community Story Path

**Pedagogical changes:**

- Opportunities were provided for students to engage in substantive conversation.
- The children were often placed in cooperative learning groups when discussing content or a particular issue: for example, recycling.
- Classroom activities driven by student interest - many of the students were passionate about the issue of recycling as one way to keep our communities clean. And were keen to share their options with anyone who would listen. Some of the children were heard telling others in the playground that their rubbish should have been recycled. As a result the discussion was raised in class.
- Literacy activities driven by student concerns - the class are currently writing letters to the principal requesting recycling bins for the playground and the possibility of establishing a compost heap and worm...
farm. The students came to this conclusion themselves as the most effective way to approach the issue.

### Indicators of student engagement:
- Children were able to draw clear connections between what they were learning in class and the school and wider community they live in.
- Lessons encouraged "real world" problem solving - the children were able to find relevance in the classroom work and connect it to their real life experiences.
- Students felt successful. They were always happy and wanting to share their work with others. Eg when Jodie came to the classroom the children would all want to show her their latest piece of work.
- Students are free to experiment and more willing to take risks.
- Students have the opportunity to build upon existing knowledge which drives the formation of lesson planning.
- Student driven lessons with consideration of the direction, pace and assessment.
- Assessment tasks built into learning, student devised assessments, making children aware of the outcomes being assessed.
- Lessons constructed to cover operational fields in depth.
- Students built a common identity as we worked towards a shared goal.

### Indicators of improved student outcomes:
- The story path idea provided for students a problem-based curriculum through knowledge integration meaning incorporating outcomes across KLA's. The strategies and activities supported the children in working towards outcomes in all KLA's. The integrity of all outcomes was preserved at all times regardless of the dominance of a particular key learning area.
- Pre and post assessment of outcomes showed marked improvement.
- Improvements in collaborative group work - Children previously lacking confidence in group situations are doing so, more sharing of group roles in group learning.
- Students more focused when engaged in tasks. Less prompting was required from teachers to stay on task, discussion was more focused on the topic.

### Common Themes
Examination of the data provided in this paper by a number of the FGP research partnerships indicates the emergence of some common themes concerning student engagement. These themes build on earlier discussions among teachers, academics and consultants which determined the direction of the project. They justify the move to focus on "engaging pedagogies" as the key influence in improving learning and social outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds.

There are recurring references in the data to student self assessment. This is documented in a "structured and scaffolded" context (Carramar PS) but also in constant references to
students’ desire and enhanced ability to talk about what they are learning and "critically reflect on specific learning experiences" (Fairfield West PS). The Liverpool PS researchers refer to opportunities for students to engage in "substantive conversation", providing a clear link to an important element in the productive pedagogies dimensions. All the schools cited here indicate an increased willingness by students to participate in discussion, whether as part of scaffolded "learning interviews" (Cartwright PS) or through "taking up opportunities to discuss and make decisions regarding their own learning" (Carramar PS). The importance of providing students with the metalanguage to reflect on their own learning reflects key pedagogical changes in FGP classrooms involving structures and organisation which support students to "negotiate their own learning" (Fairfield West PS) through "changing classroom discourses" (Carramar PS).

A further link with the QSRLS research is the emphasis in FGP classrooms on "rich tasks" to provide students with experiences that build on their prior learning, involve solving real life problems and are intellectually challenging. The research partnership at Liverpool PS comments that:

"It was the first time that either of us had been involved with Storypaths. We were enthusiastic about narrating a HSIE unit and felt that it did provide a real sense of relevance and connectedness for the students and ourselves."

(Jodie Hayes and Kathryn McLean 2002)

This comment also serves to illustrate the importance of relationships within FGP classroom, not only between members of the research teams but between teachers and students. A real sense of enthusiasm for the learning of all participants permeates the data from all the schools involved. The Liverpool team goes on to comment that:

"It made sense to us that the more interesting a task is the more immersed in it the children become. We endeavoured to design a unit of work that engages students by building on their prior knowledge and interests as well as drawing them more deeply into the process of learning."

A powerful area for exploration by a number of the research partnerships involves the use of technology and a multiliteracy approach to engaging students in classroom activities. This focus has provided a strong stimulus for "getting students in" as demonstrated by their enthusiasm for using technology to "manipulate text and image" (Cartwright PS) and willingness to become involved in media related tasks (Cabramatta West PS). It has also had an impact on students' critical literacy skills by encouraging them to "develop a metalanguage to critique their own and others' visual and multimodal texts" (Cartwright PS). It also provided them with the tools to identify and describe visual elements of media texts such as layout, images and colour and the way they are used in visual and written text types (Cabramatta West PS).
The data also provides clear links between indicators of student engagement and improved student learning outcomes. There is evidence that as students become more engaged in discussing their learning they are able to "make suggestions as to how they can acquire more knowledge" (Fairfield West PS) and take ownership of their own learning. There are many references in the data to the improved quality of work produced by students; to their increased ability to "transfer knowledge and skills to different contexts" (Carramar PS); to students’ use of technical language in their own discussions of texts" (Cabramatta West PS). These factors have helped teachers to make connections between classroom activities and the achievement of syllabus outcomes across a number of KLAs.

**Conclusion and future directions**

In summary, early investigations into student engagement in the project pointed out that here is a critical area for teachers interested in pedagogical change to improve student outcomes. Engagement continues to open up as a worthwhile focus for collaborative inquiry for improving teaching practice in low SES school communities. Certainly there appear to be closer relationships between engagement and all aspects of empowering pedagogies than at first imagined. Indeed there are persuasive arguments for suggesting that engagement is a pivotal element (rather than just another element) in classroom pedagogies, both determining and illuminating the quality and effect of student outcomes. The work of research partners in this project has much to offer those committed to the social justice and equity ideal of engaging students on a long term basis in schooling, lifelong learning and the idea that 'school is for me'.

**References**


1 The NSW Priority Schools Funding Program is an equity program supporting low SES school communities in 40 districts across the state to improve student literacy, numeracy and participation outcomes. 545 schools are supported with funding, additional staffing and consultancy support. The program promotes a school improvement model whereby schools develop strategies within three inter-related action areas to support whole school change and improvement in student learning outcomes. The action areas are Quality teaching and learning, Home school community partnerships and Classroom and school organisation and school culture.

2 The social justice and equity principles promoted by the PSFP are Fair Go, Fair Share, Fair Say and Fair Content. A detailed elaboration of each of the principles, including strategies schools implement, is provided in the support sheet published by the program entitled Social Justice and Equity Principles.

3 'Fair Say' is one of the four social justice and equity principles promoted by the Priority Schools Funding Program.

4 Comment for male student on video which has been used as a recording tool by the research partners. This student spoke of his learning as being something that was meaningful, as being able to 'find the piece in the puzzle'.