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Real Kids, Real Classrooms, Real Learning: An action research approach to enhancing engagement in learning for secondary school students from low Socio-Economic Status (SES) school communities

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Abstract

This paper draws on current professional learning research in the Real Kids, Real Classrooms, Real Learning Project (RKP). The project promotes a whole school focus on student engagement within the framework of the Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools initiative. It involves teachers and students in Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) secondary schools, regional, state consultancy teams, and parents and community members. These research partnerships are investigating ways that teachers can identify, describe, implement and evaluate school and classroom practices that enhance engagement and participation in schooling for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds.

In this paper we consider the implications in focusing teachers' attention on all aspects of student engagement, from collaborative planning of classroom activities to evaluating rich tasks through the collection of authentic assessment data. Here student engagement is not narrowly defined as on-task behaviour, but has a wider sense that students feel that school and education is "for them". The theoretical underpinnings of the research are that student engagement is a pivotal element in classroom pedagogies, both determining and illuminating the quality and effect of student learning outcomes. This paper will support educators to respond to some of the issues around engaging secondary school students from low SES communities.

Background

The NSW Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) assists schools with high concentrations of students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds to reduce the achievement gap. The PSFP is jointly funded by the Commonwealth's *Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes Program* and the NSW Government. The PSFP is underpinned by principles of equity and social justice and focuses on literacy, numeracy and participation as the most critical requirements for student achievement across the full range of education and training outcomes.

During 2003 a number of Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP) secondary schools in the South Western Sydney, Illawarra and South Coast and Riverina Regions designed and implemented classroom-based action research projects that explored ways of enhancing student engagement in low socio-economic status school communities. The Real Kids, Real Classrooms, Real Learning Project (RKP) has been instrumental in focusing teachers' attention on all aspects of student engagement from collaborative planning of classroom activities through to the collection of authentic assessment data.

Rationale

In 2003, the RKP proposed to:
- identify, describe, implement and evaluate school and classroom practices that enhance engagement and participation in schooling for students from PSFP secondary schools leading to improved student learning outcomes
- establish research partnerships between executive members and teachers in PSFP secondary schools, regional, state consultancy teams, students in PSFP secondary schools, parents and community members and academics
- promote a whole school focus on student engagement through the three PSFP areas of action – *quality teaching and learning, home, school and community partnerships and classroom and school organisation and school culture*
- encourage executive members and teachers in PSFP secondary schools to reflect on their own teaching practices, investigate strategies and approaches for enhancing student engagement and share these with teachers in their own and other PSFP secondary schools
- support teachers involved in the project to carry out action research and to encourage them to document, and reflect on, their learning
- support school research teams to disseminate findings across the whole school community, contributing to a whole school focus on student engagement
- enhance the work of the PSFP by identifying and documenting quality teaching practice in secondary schools serving low SES communities

In 2004 the focus of the project continued to be on student engagement but within the framework of the *Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools discussion paper.*

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the *Real Kids, Real Classrooms, Real Learning Project (Real Kids Project: RKP)* drew on the work of the PSFP in the area of student engagement and its focus on whole school improvement through the three interrelated areas of action. The project established links between the PSFP's equity focus (embodied in the notions of a *fair go, fair say, fair share and fair content)* and current educational research into improved classroom pedagogies, notably the *productive pedagogies* research undertaken by the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (QSRLS).

A pivotal element of the RKP theoretical framework was provided by the work of Pat Thomson and Barbara Comber into "literacies, places and identities" (Comber & Thomson with Wells, 2002). This work highlighted the role of students as researchers of their own learning and reinforced the notion that "engaged learning occurs when the lives, knowledges, interests, bodies and energies of young people are at the centre of the classroom and the school."

The theoretical and organisational elements of the RKP also acknowledge the work of the *Fair Go, Fair Say, Fair Share, Fair Content Research Project* (FGP)*,* a research partnership between the PSFP, University of Western Sydney researchers and PSFP primary schools in south-western Sydney (Johnson & O'Brien, 2002). Both these projects were characterised by their focus on identifying factors that could contribute to the enhanced engagement of students in learning, rather than on those factors that lead to student alienation and disengagement. In both instances the emphasis has been on making a difference to the way students are prepared to engage in learning and what schooling can offer students from low socio-economic status school communities.

The framework was influenced by the work on raising expectations documented in the key publication produced by the former Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP): *Raising Expectations: Achieving Quality Education for All* (Ruge 1999).

It is important to recognise that student engagement is understood within the RKP framework and the PSFP to be a critical condition for improved student learning outcomes. Often engagement can be seen as something dissociated from intellectual challenge and real learning. The project focused relentlessly on engagement in learning and that this needed to address the real issues, real interests and real ambitions of students in PSFP secondary schools. It needed to be learning that was something more than compliance, 'on-task' behaviour, busy work or short term 'feel good' activities. In this way students from low socio-economic school communities would have the intellectual capacity and support to achieve curriculum standards recognised by the system and the wider community.

The emphasis of the RKP on student, teacher and parent interaction was an important element of student engagement. This was reflected by a focus on the collection of data through authentic assessment encompassing the notion of rich tasks. Authentic assessment draws on the work of Newmann and associates (1996) through the Coalition of Essential Schools into "authentic instruction". This research underpins the QSRLS model of rich tasks that present learners with "substantive, real problems to solve and engage [them] in forms of pragmatic social action that have value in the world." (Education Queensland 2001). While the Queensland New Basics Project focuses on rich tasks as a culmination of work over a substantial period of time, there is value in exploring the concept of rich tasks as a means of engaging students in shorter term activities that are problem-based, embody significant intellectual and cognitive depth, integrate knowledge from a number of curriculum areas and are connected to the world outside the classroom.

It was also envisaged that the RKP would provide valuable opportunities for participating schools and teachers to engage with the model of pedagogy outlined in the discussion paper Q*uality Teaching in NSW Public Schools* (DET 2003).

School focus questions

Schools explored ways in which student engagement could be enhanced through a variety of perspectives.

School	Focus Area
Fairvale High School	Enhancing numeracy skills by getting students to make connections between learning in KLAs.
Bonnyrigg High School	Engagement through extension - Shakespeare unit. T&D for English faculty on engaging strategies.
Shoalhaven High School	How effective is withdrawal in improving student learning outcomes?
Vincentia High School	Investigate teaching and learning in Maths to engage students in learning. T&D for teachers.
Airds High School	Uniform programming and presenting information to improve student learning.
Sarah Redfern High School	Explicit teaching of literacy strategies to improve student outcomes. How do students review study?
Warrawong High School	How can quality teaching be used by teachers to improve student learning outcomes?
Illawarra Senior College	Student motivation for second chance education
Liverpool Boys High School	Developing a sense of value within the class Can I improve the quality of my classroom practice through use of the Quality Teaching document?
Liverpool Girls High School	How girls can be actively engaged further in their learning?
James Meehan High School	Environmental maths as form of engagement Why are 10A students successful? How can we transfer this to other students in the school?
Lurnea High School	Engaging Year 11 students through developing study skills
James Busby High School	Engage students in higher order thinking through students reflecting on their learning
Cabramatta High School	What are the expectations of students entering mainstream classes from the Intensive English Centre (IEC)? How can we use data about student, parent and teacher expectations to enhance students' engagement in learning?

Birrong Boys High School	How do we engage "at risk" students who have been disengaged from school for an extended period of time?
Corrimal High School	How can changing classroom practice through the use of the Quality Teaching framework affect student engagement and achievement of learning outcomes?
Miller High School	To what extent can students in an IEC, given severe time constraints and limited English language, be taught to identify and demonstrate the concept of theme in a literary text? To what extent can students demonstrate deep understanding of physical changes relating to puberty?
Mount Austin High School	How can students become more engaged in learning and concurrently change the perception of the school through the process of developing a promotional DVD – a 30 second advertisement for the school?
Punchbowl Boys High School	What strategies may be employed by the teacher to help students take greater responsibility for their own learning? What teaching strategies may be implemented to better capture students' attention and interest in the learning content? Can the integration of IT and multimedia technology into the teaching and learning process assist in enhancing students' learning engagement and motivation?
Strathfield South High School	How can we use data to improve student outcomes?

Methodology

An action research project methodology was utilised to conduct the project. Research partnerships were established between the NSW Priority Schools Funding Program (PSFP), teachers in PSFP schools and local officers in the South-Western Sydney, Illawarra and South Coast, and Riverina regions.

Throughout 2003-2004 a total of twenty research partnerships operated in 18 secondary schools. In each case the research partnership consisted of teachers, school leaders, state and regional equity consultants and community development officers, parents and academics. It could also be argued that the secondary school aged students were engaged in actively researching the link between engagement and learning. They, too, were partners in the process of identifying quality teaching practices.

The school partners included very different secondary schools. The schools ranged in size from student populations of around 300 to over 700, with both metropolitan and rural schools participating. Each school's low socio-economic status community was characterised by high levels of linguistic and cultural diversity. The research focus in each of the schools involved in the RKP was determined by the particular context of the school and classrooms involved.

Research partnerships collected a range of data to document the action research project. This included data on student engagement from teachers, students and parents. Types of data depended on the context of each school and focus group of learners but generally included focus group interviews, lesson observations, reflective journals and surveys. Overall in the 2003-2004 project data collection included:

- graphs reporting student learning across the stages and faculties
- student self-reflection journals
- assessment tasks
- focus group interviews
- teacher reflective journal
- lesson observations
- teacher professional dialogue
- guided discussions with students and parents
- questionnaires/surveys
- examination of ELLA and SNAP results
- analysis of classroom assessment tasks
- photographs and video recordings
- teacher professional learning sessions
- observations made at school visits
- student work eg. writings, drawings
- analysis of student results·

Baseline data was gathered to inform the development of the research question and focus group. This included teacher observations, Secondary

Numeracy Assessment Program (SNAP) and English Language Literacy Assessment (ELLA) results and data relating to students' attendance, behaviour and participation in school and classroom activities.

Research partnerships were encouraged to collect examples of authentic assessment of student learning using qualitative assessment procedures. These included observations of student behaviours, interactions with students, monitoring of learning using annotated work samples linked to syllabus outcomes and student self-assessment.

Members of the PSFP team were available to support RKP schools at all stages of the project. The nature of this support was negotiated by individual schools according to their particular context. Assistance included the interpretation of baseline data, observation and coding of units of work utilising the Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools support materials and providing professional learning for groups of teachers or parents on student engagement and quality teaching in PSFP schools.

An Evaluation Conference was held in November 2004 to enable research teams from participating schools to share and critically reflect on the results of their action research projects. Schools completed project reports and presented displays to highlight the results of their research and engage in a process of providing warm and cool feedback to assist each other to identify strengths and areas for future development. State and regional equity consultants and community development officers were part of the evaluation process.

Data collection was followed by data analysis based on collating the quantity of qualitative data to manageable amounts. Data was categorised under the organisers of student engagement, quality teaching and action learning which served as an approach in which the data could be sorted. This enabled the researchers to identify the link between the research partnerships and draw conclusions from the data. Common themes and differences among the research partnerships were identified.

Findings

In general, evidence that the overall project moved towards achievement of the planned outcomes included:

- All schools designed and implemented action research projects to explore aspects of student engagement and action research methodology.
- Schools were involved in project and local network activities to explore the theoretical underpinnings of the project and report to each other on the progress of their action research, collection of data and achievement of outcomes.

- Research partnerships in participating schools used the participant resource folders to design authentic assessment tools, document collection of data and record professional reflections.
- Teachers accessed support materials and professional readings and incorporated key concepts into classroom practice.
- Teachers participated in decision-making processes about classroom action research projects.
- Students reflected on their learning through learning logs, journals, student self assessment procedures and focus group interviews.
- Students made connections about their learning across KLAs.

Specifically, with the challenge of enhancing student engagement in mind, the project team was strongly influenced by the findings of the *Fair Go* project which implied that active student engagement involved a long term relationship with school. It created in students an excitement about their learning and a sense of identity or belonging within the culture of the classroom. In fact, students were able to see themselves as 'insiders' in their classrooms. Substantive conversations, student-led innovations, problem-solving, critical reflection and intellectual risk taking characterised the learning environment that genuinely engaged both students, their teachers and also students' families in learning.

Engagement in RKP secondary classrooms was evident when student learning went beyond the immediate context of a specific teacher and task and students were pushing boundaries, transferring learning to different times and contexts.

The quality of student engagement was not necessarily instantly observable or measurable. Through the RKP student work and the conversations that occurred in classrooms around learning appeared to offer a true indication of the degree to which students were actively and critically engaged in their learning. In this way, student voices were a critical measure of engagement in terms of the findings of the RKP.

The RKP allowed schools to research effective strategies which build student engagement in PSFP secondary schools. The action research project impacted positively upon patterns of student engagement in the learning process and upon their participation in education. It has provided an important platform for incorporating an action learning approach into all PSFP activities at the school and classroom level. Opportunities for reflective practice enhanced the professional learning of teachers.

In relation to the key organisers of this project, the following results emerged:

Student Engagement

Teachers have identified the following characteristics of projects that have been successful in improving student engagement:

- establishing a culture of learning, not welfare
- building relationships between students, teachers and parents
- connecting student engagement to high levels of intellectual quality
- raising and maintaining high expectations for student outcomes by students, teachers and parents
- focusing on quality teaching and learning as a tool for teacher reflection on pedagogy
- working within the three interrelated action areas of home, school and community partnerships, classroom and school organisation and school culture and quality teaching and learning
- collaborating with students on their learning and valuing student voice
- increasing awareness of how students think
- targeting learning to the specific needs of students
- recognising achievement
- providing specific criteria for assessment tasks
- providing activities that connect with real life experiences.

Quality Teaching in NSW Public Schools (QT) Framework

Teachers reflected on their work, as individuals and as a school community, in the project in terms of the QT framework. Successful projects engaging with the QT framework involved:

- taking responsibility for student learning, not " blaming the kids"
- teachers having ownership of the project as against imposition
- the use of reflective journals
- faculty advocates for the QT project
- teacher partnerships, critical friends
- flexibility to review and refine existing projects
- allocating sufficient time for project implementation
- seeking whole school support, including support staff
- preparing to take risks
- valuing input from parents
- embedding the project into the school culture
- using it as a basis for programming, assessment and monitoring/evaluation
- offering students a connection between their lives at school and their lives at home
- building on the data analysis skills of teachers as baseline data to inform teaching and learning.

Action learning

To enhance the action learning community, the research partners have reported the need for:

- true partnerships involving teachers, students and parents
- a connection to the real work of teachers
- the study to be contextualised
- the provision of ongoing professional learning
- no hidden agendas
- teachers to be flexible and prepared to take risks
- support from a valued colleague

Conclusions

As co-researching partners it was found that one of the most effective ways to provide professional learning was to investigate factors, through action learning, that were significant to the focus areas identified by teachers themselves.

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 secondary schools involved in the project revealed that a range of different perceptions existed about what may be termed 'engagement'.

Munns et al (2001) suggest that 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.

Researchers responded to this by "problematising the terms 'off task, on task, and in task" (Johnson & O'Brien, 2002). 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.

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.

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 and take ownership of their own learning. There are many

references in the data to the improved participation by students; to their increased ability to transfer knowledge and skills to different contexts. These factors have helped teachers to make connections between classroom activities and the experiences out of school.

Future implications

The following components have been identified for further exploration in 2005 and beyond:

Focus on the link between student engagement and improved student learning outcomes
While the research partners reported on increased levels of student engagement, rarely was the link made explicit between student engagement and improved learning outcomes.

Ensuring the link between student engagement and intellectual quality
Learning that it is of a high intellectual quality needs to accompany student engagement. This is critical in low SES school communities where students rely heavily on schools and teachers to create learning experiences that present an intellectual challenge so that students can achieve the outcomes expected of all students. It is misleading and ultimately a social justice issue if students are engaged in learning that is fun, interesting and supposedly relevant but is not about real learning.

Establish collegial teams across the whole school
School teams in the research partnerships often involved small number of teachers within the same faculty area. Teachers have expressed the need to engage additional teachers with the focus on quality teaching in all faculties and in all stages of learnings. The focus, clearly as noted by the teachers, is for whole school commitment to the QT framework as a tool for reflection on their classroom practices. The collegial teams would continue to collect data on student learning to inform future teaching and learning. This commitment to the QT model would assist in raising the expectations for all students and "change the culture of average".

Enhance partnerships with parents
Effective home and school partnerships were clearly identified by the research partners both as an outcome for the 2003-2004 project and, as an area for future development. Partnerships between the home and school are based on two way communication processes and strong relationships. The roles of parents and other family and community members as co-educators and co-learners are used to enhance what the teachers and schools provide. Teachers suggested the idea of students presenting their work to parents as a means of encouraging greater collaboration between students, teachers and parents.

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 appears to be closer relationship 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, and improved student learning outcomes.

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