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Educating Generation Y in Alternate settings: What seems to work.

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Abstract

This paper presents one element of our research conducted in a contemporary, yet alternate, school setting. This setting provides ten-week residential programs for Year nine students. Year nine has been identified as a significant time when students become disengaged with schooling. These Year nine students also belong to a group known as Generation Y (Gen Y). This group is characterised as having difficulties with communication, developing relationships and functioning as a community.

However, our research, at the 'Remote School'¹, suggests that the students in this residential school develop skills that enable them to communicate more effectively and establish relationships with others. One of the key aspects of this appears to be the relationships they form with each other and with the staff while on the program. The environment, or the ecosystem developed in this unique setting, allows students to interact more explicitly with the complexity of life and, in doing so, recognise diversity and the shades of grey, which start to colour their worlds. The students talk about feeling challenged in forming relationships and about comprehending more about themselves, how they operate and how others operate.

It would seem likely that there is a gap in understanding the capacities of Year nine students and Gen Y students, who are construed as being difficult to communicate with, form relationships with, or fail to function effectively in communities. It is this gap in understanding, based on the experiences of the young people at the Remote School, which we explore in this paper.

An introduction and setting the scene

This study is focused on students' perceptions of an alternative, yet contemporary, form of education for year nine students. The setting of the school is described, together with a description of the nature of this alternate school and its goals. This is followed by a literature review, which is focused on the problematic nature of Year nine education, Generational theory, with a major focus on Gen Y, and an outline of Residential and Community based learning. We describe our research method and provide our reasons for using Gen Y and Residential and Community based learning as an interpretive framework. We include a substantial body of data, in the voices of the students, to situate the students' perspectives, relating to the three major themes, along with our reflections and analyses. The impact of our research is focused on improving that which is already occurring at the Remote School. It is not our intent to prove what is going on at the school. Much of the experiential and service learning research has focused on this. We are trying to gain a broader understanding of students' perceptions at the school and how our research will improve the impact on the school program, allowing it to continue to meet the needs of young people attending. It is also our intent to provide a greater impact in this research field, in which there is very little research that looks at students' experiences in this type of environment.

Remote School

The Remote School is a State Government initiative that provides nine-week residential programs for small groups of Year nine students from a mix of urban and regional areas. Any student in a State secondary school can apply for a place. Selection is not based on excellence, but on the quality of the students' applications. The school delivers "innovative and high

¹ We have changed the name of the school to protect the identity of students and staff.

quality leadership and enterprise educational programs to school students, and actively promotes enterprise and leadership behaviours in the Victorian School Community” (Remote School Charter, 2004)². The pedagogical approach at the Remote School uses a mix of collaborative and experiential learning, brain theory³, outdoor and environmental activities and ICT technologies. A key focus of the program is to assist young people to “understand themselves and their value to groups and communities to which they belong” (Remote School Brochure, 2006).

Central to the curriculum at the Remote School is the Community Learning Project (CLP). Students identify a project that addresses a significant issue in their home community, for example, issues related to the environment, social justice, community safety or positive youth engagement. Planning and implementing the CLP provides the hinge for developing community, leadership and enterprise skills while at the Remote School. The CLP is one aspect of the program that facilitates integrated and authentic learning, developing students’ creative and critical thinking (Remote School Brochure, 2006).

The residential nature of the program also facilitates integrated and authentic learning. Students progressively take on more of the responsibility for managing and organising the community they live in over the term (Remote School Brochure, 2006). All students have opportunities to take formal leadership roles, running meetings, managing the day to day running of the school and being actively involved in student governance. Students are involved in a large range of activities based on the unique environment. These activities are designed to encourage students to show and develop independence and include overnight bushwalks, white water rafting, mountain biking, first aid and initiative activities (Remote School Brochure, 2006). The approach that the Remote School takes to its curriculum design and delivery reflects the key ideas with regard to appropriate education for Year nine students. It is to this literature that we now turn.

Literature Review

Ferguson and Seddon (2007) argue that the sociology of education has “problematised education as a means of both social reproduction and social transformation” (p. 119). This provides a useful starting point to consider the education literature and research, as we attempt to understand the students’ experiences at the Remote School. Much of the relevant literature either explicitly or implicitly has a radical intent, which is orientated squarely toward social justice. The radical intent of the drive to ‘do’ education differently is thrown into stark relief by some of the recent calls for education that re-focuses on the basics, with an emphasis on measurable outcomes. In the current call for focusing on the three ‘R’s’, ‘learning’ is located as a process as distinct from “being in the world” (Ferguson & Seddon, 2007).

Year Nine Education

Year nine has been identified as a decisive year for young people in schools (Cole, Mahar, Vindurampulle, 2006; DEET, 1999) and it is clear that many young people in the middle years of education are disengaged and underachieving (Carrington, 2004). Many reasons are given for the rates of students dropping out of, or being disaffected with, schooling. Year nine

² We have not given the full reference to these documents to protect the identity of students and staff.

³ This refers to Ned Hermann’s Whole Brain Learning Model. This helps students to identify preferred thinking styles and how this influences the way they like to learn, the tasks they prefer to take on, and the way they relate to others. The students set goals to help them develop less preferred ways of thinking to maximise their strengths (Remote School Brochure, 2006).

students are considered to have diverse learning needs and a recent report by the Victorian Department of Education (DoE) identifies some of the implications for policy and practice if those needs are to be met (Cole, Mahar, Vindurampulle, 2006b). These include structures that enable strong bonds to develop between students and staff; curriculum that facilitates deep engagement with learning; student engagement with, and support from, the community and experiencing adult like roles and responsibilities (Cole, Mahar, Vindurampulle, 2006b).

lisahunter (2006) reminds us to locate the current discussion about young people and education within the discourses that shape our understandings of young people. She argues that, “within the relatively recent history of schooling, young people have been conceptualised as deficient, deviant, experimenting, unruly and under the influence of hormone-affected emotions and appearance-changes in relation to essentialised notions of the end point ‘adult’” (lisahunter, 2006, p. 86). McInerney suggests that this allows the problems of engagement and underachievement to be “attributed to the deficits and pathologies of individuals, families and neighbours” (2006, p. 5). Consequently, when solutions are sought for the Year nine ‘problem’, these are seen to reside with “individuals, their immediate families or caregivers and schools” (p. 5). One of the ways in which the ‘problem’ of Year nine is located within this particular cohort is through generational theory.

As suggested earlier by Ferguson & Seddon (2007), learning as “being in the world” encourages a broad range of ways of questioning and understanding education. Students’ experiences, and, in this case, the experiences of Year nine students, cannot be understood merely through the measurement of outcomes. Learning and schooling are social processes in the world and as such both are implicated in social reproduction and social transformation. As agents, “being in the world” these Year nine students, who are the subjects of our research, are a part of the world, learn from the world and are influenced by, and with, the generation in which they live.

Generation Y

According to Codrington (1998), much of the research done on generational theory has up until recently been undertaken in the USA. What’s more, there appears to be few links between the literature on generational theory and research in education. There is also a similar pattern in Australia, where there has been limited discussion on Gen Y within educational research.

Gen Y, the Millennials, are those born between 1980 and 2000. Generation X and the Baby Boomers precede them. The theory of Generation X was first presented to the world stage by Coupland, (1991). The term, which instigated what has now become known as “Generational theory”, is the theory that underlies the classification of people according to broad bands of birth years (Codrington, 1998). Henry, (2006) a business consultant and author, suggests that “each generation has its own distinct set of values, view of authority, orientation to the world, sense of loyalty, and expectations of leaders and the work environment” (p. 5). Alongside this, McCrindle (2006) describes Gen Y as wanting more than just friendships. “They want community, to be understood, accepted, respected and included” (p, 3). It is these Gen Y students that constitute the cohort of our present compulsory and non-compulsory years of education and are those that lisahunter (2006) suggests are the youth who “have been conceptualised as deficient, deviant, experimenting, unruly and under the influence of hormone-affected emotions ...” (lisahunter, 2006, p. 86). While this might be a dominant way of conceptualising Year nine students, Gen Y students are also:

the most formally educated generation ever. High school retention rates to year 12 have more than doubled since the 80's, when they hovered around 35%"....the number of school leavers going onto university has increased by 80% (ABS Youth Australia Report. Cited by McCrindle, 2006).

Associated with, and directly related to, their education is Gen Y's understanding and concept of what leadership is, or should be, for them. They do not relate to traditional styles of leadership centred on 'the superior' or 'the adult' being in control. According to McCrindle (2006), "traditional leadership stresses structure, hierarchy and control - they are looking for relating, mentoring, and guidance....they want direction, feedback and good communication channels" (p, 5). McCrindle (2007) also suggests that what is referred to as a generation gap is in fact a communication gap. "Today in schools, workplaces and households there is much enthusiastic speaking, and equally conscientious listening, but unfortunately not so much understanding" (p, 1). The reason for this would seem to be that Gen Y are not being understood and they struggle to comprehend what is communicated to them. Further to this, as suggested by Tapscott, (1998) the Net Generation, which belongs to Gen Y, is characterised by "interactivity based on participation rather than observation, a tolerance of social diversity, a propensity for challenging the conventions of authority and acceptance of economic insecurity and career changes as norms" (p, 78). As referred to earlier in this paper, we now have a youth generation "being in the world" with their own values, communication style, attitude to authority and viewpoint about leadership.

The authors agree that the characteristics, desires, needs and wants of Gen Y, and indeed generational theory itself, are dealing with generalizations. However, these generalisations do provide a picture of a youth culture, which is seen as significantly different from other generations. Mackay, (1999) the psychologist, sociologist and author, suggests that the present youth culture has "the desire to reconnect with 'the herd', [original emphasis] so that individuals obtain a stronger sense of identity and of emotional security from recreating communal connections that stimulate the 'village life' to which so many Australians aspire" (p. 3). Associated with this notion of reconnecting with the herd is the importance that Gen Y students place on their peers and the relationships that they form with others in groups. This, in turn, links to the literature already 'out there' involving residential and community based learning.

Residential and community based learning

There is currently limited empirical research that critically examines programs such as those offered by the Remote School. Community based learning, which is integral to the school curriculum in the form of service learning, has an established history in the USA (Kielsmeier, Scales, Roehlkepartain & Neal, 2004), yet there is a paucity of research and mixed feelings from teachers about the outcomes of service learning (Seitsinger, 2005). In a review of the service learning literature, Scales, Roehlkepartain, Neal, Kielsmeier (2006) suggest that service learning may contribute to achieving both academic outcomes and the broader developmental needs of young people. The authors suggest one reason for this is that service learning "provides opportunities for students to experience meaningful participation in various life contexts" (Scales et al, 2006, p. 41). The work by Rowan & Bigum, with "Knowledge Producing Schools" (Bigum, 2006), examines the ways some Australian schools have developed school and community projects that are meaningful to students and use technology as a tool. They have found that this approach disrupts the traditional positioning of students as consumers of knowledge as they become producers of knowledge. Thomson (2006) suggested that a Tasmanian initiative, in which schools became involved in community projects, enabled community building to occur - at least for the life of the project,

enriched learning for the young people and the projects also invited the unsettling of identities for those involved. While this is consistent with the Remote School's pedagogical use of the CLP, the projects, which these authors refer to, all occurred within the students' home school and community.

Service learning is grounded in the theories of experiential learning. Much of the research that has been conducted around experiential learning comes from the field of outdoor education. Research in this area has primarily focused on the outcomes of programs (Baldwin, Persig & Magnison, 2004). This points to gains in students' self-perceptions and coping strategies (Rickson et.al., 2004) and an increase in participants' social and interpersonal skills (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997).

While there is an increasing body of research about residential programs, experiential and service learning programs and outdoor learning experiences, the findings remain ambiguous. There are some suggestions of a range of impacts these programs may have on students, but it is unclear what aspects of a program may contribute to these and how enduring any changes are. Much of the research to date has been on outcomes focused, and primarily interested in, what can be conceived of as only the positive outcomes of programs. Few studies have explored students' perceptions or experiences of alternative educational opportunities. This, in turn, is what identifies our study as being unique.

Research Method

The Remote School invited the researchers to undertake work at the school to enable the school to enhance its understanding of the program and continue developing the curriculum to meet the needs of the students. The researchers have gathered a range of data each term since the beginning of 2006. One part of the study involves focus group interviews with the students toward the end of each term. The researchers ask students questions around how they have found their time at the school, what they have liked and not liked about their experience at the school and some of the things they feel they are taking away with them. These interviews have been transcribed and we are drawing on these transcriptions for this paper.

The analysis of the data for this paper has been based on the themes of communication, relationships and community because the authors recognise these themes as being significant to Year nine students and to the generation known as Gen Y. While the young people in this study talk about many things in relation to their experiences at the school, the focus of this paper, and the data presented from interviews, is orientated around these three themes.

Results and discussion

One of the themes to emerge from the interview data is that many of the students find the Remote School a more positive learning environment than their home schools. Three aspects of their experience that appear to contribute to this positive experience are as follows:

1. the relationships they build with each other and the staff,
2. communicating with others
3. a sense of community.

In this paper, we explore how the students understand these and consider how communication, relationships and community work to promote what the students perceive as being an overwhelmingly positive learning environment.

Communication

Gen Y have been characterised as having difficulty communicating with others. The students in this study talked about learning to communicate more effectively while at the Remote School. One student commented that he was learning to communicate, when asked what he thought he had got out of the time at the school.

Neil⁴: *How to communicate, just keep intact and discuss ideas like when to have group inclusion.*

Built into the school curriculum are activities on learning to communicate effectively and how to resolve differences and conflicts. One of the aspects of the program, that many of the students refer to when discussing how they communicate with others, is the 'Brain theory' to which they are introduced at the school. As Karen said, when asked what were some of the things she had found useful;

Karen: *Brain theory and how like how people learn easier and all of stuff like that.*

Interviewer: *Why is that good to know?*

Karen: *Cause then you can figure out what other people are like, what to say to other people, how they can help you and your team.*

In another interview, a student explained how she found the brain theory particularly useful in understanding her behaviour and the behaviour of others.

Alice: *Because if you're in a group and you have all red brains, that's more social, everyone's just going to keep talking. And see no one back at home knows what they are. So you could be in a group full of them, but you don't know. And see, here you can prepare for it and grab a group of red, green, yellow and blue... Yeah, and even if you don't have a group of everyone, like I know that I'm red brain dominant, so I know that I've got to try and work on the others and be a bit more organised sort of thing. See even my group's all full of red and maybe one blue, the blue can maybe feel a bit excluded and you learn to sort of work around. It's pretty easy to pick someone's character.*

Another student summarised this theme and made the point that many others make in the interviews.

Sean: *Everyone's really different here, like no one person is the same. We're all individuals and we all have to respect each other in our beliefs.*

One of the ways in which the Remote School appears to allow the student to experience meaningful participation is through having to resolve conflicts and support each other while living at the school. Living in such a small community requires the students to keep interacting.

Karen: *It's hard if you have disagreements up here. It's hard.*

Interviewer: *Why is that hard?*

Elliot: *Because you're always going to see that person.*

Karen: *Yeah, and you can't really avoid them or anything.*

⁴ We have given the students pseudonyms to protect their identities.

In another interview, the interviewer asked the students if there had been any issues with living together.

Kate: *Like little arguments though.*

Bob: *You can't just have a fight and for like a couple of weeks after you're still pissed at the same thing. You've just got to sort of like build a bridge.*

Kate: *Get over it.*

As some of the service learning and experiential education literature suggests, one of the opportunities that these forms of education provide is for students to experience meaningful participation in various life contexts. An example Bill and Gill discussed was learning skills to get on with people and deal with conflicts. This was not something abstract, but it was something they had to deal with to live at the school.

Bill: *There are people, but I know that, just everywhere you go to, there's going to be people that you're not going to get along with.*

Interviewer: *So do they spend time here giving you some skills about how to get along with each other and deal with conflicts?*

Bill: *We learnt the skills like if someone approached us with a problem we could help them get through it.*

Gill: *Based on the outcome and not burden ourselves.*

Bill: *Yeah, we learnt how to discuss the problem and then learnt how to go to the options and then the outcomes, then there's choice and how it went.*

The literature on Year nine students suggests that curriculum that facilitates deep engagement with learning, and the opportunities to experience adult like roles and responsibilities, is more likely to meet their learning needs. The ways in which the young people talk about communicating with each other suggest they perceive the school as a site where they can take on more 'adult-like' roles and responsibilities, as they realise they have to find ways to function together. The characterisation of deficient young people, with an inability to communicate, offers little in terms of understanding these students' experiences. In the context of the Remote School, it appears these students enhance their understanding of communication and their ability to both understand, and include, others. Students also recognise that positive communication builds relationships in the school.

Relationships

For many of the students, whom we interviewed, the best aspect of the Remote School is the relationships they form with each other and with the staff at the school. The Year nine literature and the Gen Y literature both identify that this group of young people want to build strong bonds with each other and with teachers. One student commented about the students who were at the Remote School with her from her home school;

Toni: *Yeah. It's really amazing the friendships that come out. Even back at school, like me and the three boys weren't, all of us weren't really that close except the boys sometimes. And me and the boys have been in the same class for the last three years.*

Another student said, when asked what he had got out of being at the Remote School:

Jeremy: *Definitely more friendships, plenty of them and I'm kind of more open to things now.*

Developing positive relationships is not seen by the students as something that automatically happens. Rather, they begin to recognise that relationships require work and a personal commitment.

Jack: You also have to be sort of be nice to everyone else and you can't just be rude to all the other people around you or else you're just going to end up in a bit of a hole, put yourself in a bit of a hole. So you have to be like nice to everyone and all the teachers.

In another interview, the students were talking about some of the conflicts and misunderstandings that had occurred during the term.

Georgia: It's really easy to cause controversy without even trying too. It's really easy to like start a problem without realising it in the community.

Interviewer: Right. So there have been a few issues that have come up?

Jake: Yeah, I think everyone has started something, somewhere along the way.

Georgia: Yeah, because everyone just gets really touchy about things, because when we're living so close that it matters what everyone says to everyone.

Interviewer: And have you found ways to deal with that?

Jake: Ignore them.

Sam: Yeah, get over it.

Jake: Don't bring your problems to class

Sam: Build bridges.

A number of the students talked about the responsibility they had for developing and maintaining relationships as outlined by Georgia, Jake and Sam. Research within experiential learning suggests that students do increase their social and interpersonal skills, which are reflected in the ways these students talk about realising they have a responsibility in maintaining relationships and that their actions do have impacts. The ways in which the young people talk about their understanding of relationships does call into question of the deficient discourses around young people, which present essentialised notions of 'teenager' and 'adult'.

Many students comment on the positive relationship they have with the teachers at the school. For many, this is a very different experience to the sort of relationships they have with their teachers at their home schools.

Interviewer: How do you find the teachers here?

Sue: I like them so much more

Interviewer: Why?

Margaret: Because it's so like friendly and talking like a conversation.

Sue: They talk to you like a person and not a student.

Margaret: They care about what you think sort of thing, like the other teachers do too, but they're focussed on the class and making money or whatever.

Sue: Just getting the work set out done, but up here it's like flexible so you can do, and this is what they love to do and they're happy doing it.

Margaret: Yeah, and they want to like know about you. Yeah. Some of these teachers probably know more about me than any of my teachers at [the name of the home school] for like three years. One teacher doesn't even know my name and I've been in

his class for three years. But I mean up here I've known some teachers for like seven weeks now and they all know my name.

This theme appears in many of the interviews. Another student said this about the teachers;

Bruce: They're much more like relaxed and like they don't give off the impression that like - oh we're better than you because we're teachers.

The ways in which the young people talk about their relationships with the teachers supports the arguments in the Year nine and Gen Y literature. Strong bonds between students and staff seem to encourage and support young peoples' learning and engagement. The ways in which the young people talk about the teachers at the school reflect McCrindle's (2006) argument that young people are looking for relating, mentoring and guidance rather than the more traditional styles of teaching that many students have experienced in their home schools. It is important to note that students work in groups of six with a teacher. This is a point that many of the students make when discussing some of the reasons for the different relationships they form with the teachers at the Remote School. The relationships that the students experience at the Remote School contribute to the notion of community that they develop while living there.

Community

The staff talks about the school as a community and the curriculum is directly linked to the CLP. Students are required to consider community in relation to the school while they live there, but they must also keep in mind an awareness of their home communities as they work on their CLP. Students refer to the school as a community and talk about themselves as a community.

Daniel: I've learnt lots being away from home, been learning to live independently, do all your own washing and that kind of stuff. Teamwork and leadership, learning to live with other people.

Interviewer: Is that something you have to learn?

Daniel: Living with other people, yeah.

Interviewer: It doesn't just happen, does it?

Daniel: You've got to compromise with people.

Anna made a similar point when she said:

Anna: and with the community thing, we just learnt so much just being able to live with each other, do our own washing.

It could be argued that the Remote School is a site where students experience meaningful participation in various life contexts. This ranges from learning how to do their own washing, to learning how to live with each other. As the school is a community for the life of each term, students have to engage in community building and grapple with some of the challenges that living in communities presents. Many students describe living in a community as being one of the things that they found most challenging about being at the Remote School. Walter sums it up in this way;

Walter: I think the most challenging thing was living with 44 other people, like strangers because I was never friends with anyone back at normal school, so coming

here and living with 44 other people was really hard and different because you have to respect everyone and their things and what you do effects everyone.

One of the things that Sally said she was going to take away from the Remote School was the experience of living in a diverse community.

Sally: And like, I think it's helped me learn how to deal with different types of people because like back at home my friends are kind of all same and we kind of all like the same stuff, we all agree on the same thing, but up here, everyone's different. Like some people, my music is completely different to the others. I still got to know and I love their music now. I dunno, I've learnt to accept things better, to understand people more. Just can get along with anyone.

Both Walter and Sally's comments call into question one of the assumptions made about Gen Y. Tapscott (1998) suggests that this generation is characterised by a tolerance for social diversity. While they may support the concept of diversity, these young people do not necessarily find living with diversity a straightforward proposition. Another student highlighted that living with 44 other people did not mean that students always felt part of a community.,

Jeremy: But another thing, like even though we're living with each other 24/7 type of thing and you're surrounded by people all the time, it's still easy to feel like left out or lonely, because you're used to your friends back home and things like that and you're used to things running a certain way. And when they don't, you feel kind of out of place.

This comment suggests that community may not be a straightforward thing, but rather community is contextual and relational. Thomson (2006) suggests that community projects enable community building, which may only occur for the life of the project. Notions of community and community building do not necessarily cross into other contexts. This is a question for further research into the approach of the Remote School and community building.

While much of the literature talks about community building as a good thing, the students in this study highlight some of the challenges and problematic aspects of community. An aspect of living in this community, that many find challenging, is a certain lack of freedom and the difficulty of finding private and personal space.

Interviewer: What has been the worst thing (about being at the Remote School?)

Greta: Probably like not having the freedom to just do what you like, because you have dinner and then you have class, so not having the freedom to like change around a bit. You have class at a certain time and it's like there's definitely a class after dinner.

Another student picked up this theme later in the same interview;

Jack: Probably not having the freedom just to be able to, if you go home from normal school and you have homework you have to do, you might say no, I'm going to do it an hour later. I'm going to do what I want for an hour. You can't really do that here because you have to have set classes you have to do the classes.

Related to the structured nature of the program was the way in which students were unable to do some things by themselves or to take themselves to a private space.

Gloria: *Sometimes it's annoying because like in the morning if you want to go for a run, you have to go with two other people, whereas at home I just always go for a run by myself in my own time kind of thing. Up here you can't go anywhere by yourself.*

Mary: *The hard thing, like when you need space you can't get out anywhere.*

Interviewer: *So there's no sort of that personal space?*

Gloria: *That's the thing, sometimes you just need to get away.*

Mary: *Like you can't even sit on the top of the hills. It's like you can see us from school, but it's like they need to know where we are.*

Later in this interview, this group of students came back to this topic saying that the reason for not being able to go away by themselves was that the school was responsible for them and it was a safety issue. These comments highlight some of the tensions inherent in living in communities and also the inevitable tensions of being in a school, which espouses the values of giving young people responsibilities and adult-like roles, while also being required to take responsibility for their welfare on a very pragmatic and instrumental level.

One of the points of tension, which was aired in a number of interviews, across a number of the terms, was a contradiction some of the students experienced in the rhetoric of responsibility. The staff told the students that they were responsible for the well being of the community, and for the day to day running of the community, but the students felt they had to do things a particular way. A student described it in this way;

David: *I think that one thing I don't really like is that they tell us that we're going to be running the show and everything, like we're going to be doing everything, but there's so many rules and there's a lot of restrictions and it just, you feel like, well I don't feel like, there's a lot of people that are saying they don't feel like we're running the show still because all the teachers are doing things. We keep being told not to do this or that. We don't see the reason for some of the stuff but we don't see the point in making a huge fuss over it either. But the teachers do and it sort of, it's not frustrating but it just you think well, how are we running the show? They get on your back about everything we do.*

This comment highlights that if students are to be given 'adult' like roles, and if this is going to be meaningful to young people, they must be seen as 'real' to the students involved. While many claims have been made in the literature about the ability of service learning, experiential education and project based learning to provide opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful ways in various life contexts, there is very little research that explores to whom these experiences are meaningful and how they might be meaningful. The things the young people are saying here also challenge us to explore the effects of teacher's actions and educational policies on the lived experiences of students.

It appears likely that the dimension of community, together with a sense of responsibility for their own learning and their own life, makes the experiences of the Remote School significant to the students. To the authors, it seems that the students recognise the challenges of living in a community and begin, perhaps for the first time, to see the shades of grey. They come to know how to personally deal with a range of tensions because they are being "in the world."

Concluding statements

We have gathered evidence that suggests that Year nine students at the Remote School, who belong to the group known as Gen Y, can do, what it is claimed that they do not, do well. We have identified three key themes, or underpinning elements, that seem to make a difference in this very different educational environment.

They are: Communication
 Relationships
 Community

Because these three elements are incorporated into everything that happens in the Remote School, the students come away from the school possessing a different way of looking at themselves and the 'others', with whom they have been living, and forming community. The fact that the school is a fully residential community contributes to this, as do all the activities, in which the students are engaged. The students, in this setting recognise the need to know themselves, the power of communication and the need to learn how to communicate effectively with others.

The generation gap can be seen as a communication divide, which does not have to exist between generations and can be overcome through educational opportunities that focus on 'being in the world' rather than on process. The Gen Y students, at the remote school, value the sense of belonging to a community, the taking of responsibility for their own lives and learning, and the different level of relationships with their peers and the staff at the school.

Part of our ongoing research is to follow up with the exit students of this program, so that we can gather evidence about the residual value of their learning, while at the Remote School. Our preliminary findings, which will form the basis of a further paper, suggests that the Community Learning Projects are seldom being implemented by the students on return to their home school communities. However, on a very positive note the students recognize the unique opportunity that the Remote School was to them and talk about it as one of the highlights of their schooling experiences. They express this in terms of being more confident to take on challenges, recognizing the power of relationships and their place in the larger community of the world.

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