

# Informal Learning in the Secondary School:

## Behaviour Remediation Programs and the Informal Learning Environment as a Space for Re-engagement

A Final Project Report for the Queensland Government Department of Education and Training

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Prepared by

Associate Professor Andrew Hickey

With

Ms Tanya Pauli-Myler

Ms Carly Smith

*School of Arts and Communication  
University of Southern Queensland*

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*Our task as [educators] is to expose these invisible yet influential forces, the micropractices that shape our children's lives.*  
(Steinberg and Kincheloe 1997: 12)

## Executive Summary

How is it that a group of young people, encountered in a program designed to remedy behaviour issues and disengagement from schooling, can be found to be engaged (and engaging) learners? What does it mean for these young people when the 'regular' classroom becomes a site within which they *cannot* effectively engage in learning? More intrinsically, what might it mean for these young people, and the communities within which they live, when the prospects for those who leave formal education early will likely include extended periods of unemployment, increased probability of reliance on government assistance and a greater likelihood of social exclusion (*The Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth*, 2000; Flint, 2011; Deloitte Access Economics, 2012)?

*Informal Learning in the Secondary School: Behaviour Remediation Programs and the Informal Learning Environment as a Space for Re-engagement* (hereon *Informal Learning in the Secondary School*), sought to respond to these questions. Drawn from empirical evidence gathered as part of a long-term ethnography of an alternative learning program delivered in a secondary school setting, this project outlined how *informality* functioned as a central component of a 'relational pedagogy' within the alternative learning space.

As a defining feature of the alternative learning program investigated here, informality was expressed as an 'irreverence' for the structures and modes of conduct otherwise enacted within the school. A 'looseness' pervaded the interactions and practice of the program and it was with this that a range of inter-relationships different to those typically experienced elsewhere in the school emerged. The case site became a 'disorienting' space because of this looseness and accordingly provoked new possibilities for learning.

The findings offered in this report suggest that informality, expressed as a core aspect of a 'relational pedagogy' and witnessed variously within the *modes of instruction*, *sites of learning* and *practices of interpersonal interaction* that were foundational to the alternative learning space provided a powerful means for extending student learning, enhancing positive inter-relatedness and furthering engagement. From this, the conceptual tripartite 'relationships-behaviour-pathways' was used to position understandings of the ways students came to, and experienced, the alternative learning program. In particular, this report highlights that the informality of the program enabled different forms of relatedness to prosper. By emphasising this connection between informality and the relatedness between students and students and teachers, this report outlines how meaningful re-engagement in school might be made more fully possible through a relational pedagogy of informality.

## Principles Underpinning this Research

This project was designed to respond to the following research priorities as outlined by the Queensland Government Department of Education and Training:

- **Empowered Learners:** a core concern of this project focused on the ways informality within the alternative learning space might be utilised to re-engage students at risk of disengagement from mainstream schooling. To meet this concern the project set out to account for the experiences of a group of students participating in an informal learning program that focused on the repair and restoration of old bicycles; Bike Build. When undertaking the forms of learning encountered in the Bike Build workshop sessions—modes of learning that were distinct from those encountered in the regular classroom environment—it emerged that new formations of inter-relationality and engagement developed. Accordingly, this research demonstrated that via the informality of the workshop space, new formations of *engaged* learning could prosper. Further, meaningful engagement in the forms of learning provoked in the workshop space were found to generate positive engagement in learning, which in turn had the effect of generating positive senses of Self amongst the participating students. An important outcome of this research identifies that the ways in which learning is framed and delivered has effects on student engagement and participation. By opening the range of possibilities for how students are addressed and engaged in their learning, productive engagement in schooling can be positively mediated.

- **Transitions, Pathways and Lifelong Learning:** this project also centered on practical outcomes for the students involved in the Bike Build alternative learning program. The students engaged in this project were in Years 9 and 10; a key point in schooling for determining subject choices for senior years, as well as a major point from which decisions around training and employment beyond school were being made. As one example, a major outcome of the project resulted in several of the student participants finding placements in workplace traineeships and apprenticeships. That the school site, Wilsonton State High School, was able to accommodate and provide access to the workshops that formed the basis of this research is considered a major factor in these students identifying and securing these placements.

## Introduction: An Overview of the Project and Its Conduct

The research outlined in this report provides insight into how a group of students, identified as ‘at risk’ of disengagement, negotiated the *informality* present in the conduct of the alternative learning program—*Bike Build*. Bike Build functioned as a component of a wider alternative learning and behavior remediation schedule of programs within the project’s case school, Wilsonton State High School, and was designed to not only engage students in the practical conduct of mechanical repair (in this case, the repair of bicycles), but to also encourage the development of interpersonal skills and effective approaches for collaboration. Further, the explication of pedagogical practices suited to the alternative learning space—practices derived not from “front-loaded, system-driven... classroom learning” (Kolb, 2014: 334), but open, dialogic and student-centred approaches—provided opportunities to consider how *informality*, as central to the workshop interactions, mediated the experience of the program.

This report steps through ethnographic data drawn from three separate, term-long iterations of the Bike Build program conducted in Term 4 2015, Term 3 2016 and Term 2 2017. In presenting its case for the consideration of informality as central to an effective ‘relational pedagogy’ (Reeves and Le Mare 2017; Noddings 2005; Biesta 2004; Sidorkin 2000), this report focusses on the explication of the ‘idiographic’ data gathered as part of an interpretivist ethnography conducted alongside each iteration of Bike Build. The findings outlined in this report draw directly from this dataset, and report on the experiences of the participating students and associated teachers and support staff, as recorded by the authors as ‘researcher-facilitators’.

### The Case Program

Convened as a component of a wider schedule of alternative learning programs at Wilsonton State High, a large state high school located in Toowoomba, south-east Queensland, Bike Build was organised around a discrete unit of work that involved the ‘hands-on’ repair and restoration of a collection of donated bicycles. The authors of this report fulfilled the role of researcher-facilitators, and in conjunction with the school’s Youth Support Officer, Mr Shane Adshead and associated staff from the school, set about designing and convening the program. Following initial discussions that commenced in mid 2015, the first iteration of the program ran in Term 4, 2015, with a group of 10 students. Scheduled within the weekly timetable of classes and afforded a ‘double’ lesson of 90 minutes, Bike Build was centrally focused on students who had disengaged from the regular classroom and who were at direct risk of expulsion. In fact, participants of Bike Build were streamed into the alternative learning program after having been identified as ‘disengaged’ from classroom learning (and who, by extension, demonstrated poor behavior and interpersonal decorum), with Bike Build operating within a larger, organised strategy of alternative programs scheduled by the school for confronting problematic interpersonal interactivity, disengagement and early-leaving.

From the foundation established in 2015, a further two iterations of Bike Build were convened; the second occurring in Term 3 2016 (with 8 students) and third in Term 2 2017 (with 16 students). The Term 2, 2017 version of Bike Build was noteworthy because it contained a further cohort of participants; in this instance, students from partner primary schools. Whereas the earlier versions of Bike Build were focused on the development of interpersonal skills *amongst* the participating students from Wilsonton State High, this most recent iteration involved the students mentoring visiting groups of primary-aged students from ‘feeder’ primary schools. Under the guise of not only providing

opportunities for leadership to the Wilsonton State High cohort, but also an introduction for the visiting primary students to the surroundings of the secondary school they would likely attend, the visiting Years 5 and 6 students became active members of the Bike Build workshops, and during 3 scheduled visits conducted at intervals through the program, set about working in collaboration with the Wilsonton State High students on the repair of the bikes.

For many of the primary-aged students, school had also been challenging, with this group of students coming to the program after having been identified to participate (by their own teachers and principals). Under the guise of a ‘buddy’ system, each primary-aged student was partnered with a Wilsonton State High student under a mentor partnership arrangement.

The authors of this report, and in particular Chief Investigator (CI) Hickey, were responsible for sequencing the program of workshop sessions to ensure that the mechanical repair of the selected bicycles could be completed successfully and within the timeframe of the term. A basic ‘curriculum’ was established, and following the selection of suitable bicycles to provide the focus of the sessions, the program was convened.

As academics from the University of Southern Queensland, the novelty of the author’s presence as workshop facilitators *and* project researchers combined with the unfamiliar surroundings of the workshop space for the students. This sense of unfamiliarity is noteworthy and is drawn upon as a thematic marker of the analysis contained in later sections of this report. It was with the ‘disorientation’ that these new surroundings, people and activities provoked that the effects of the informality of the space were most felt. The ‘looseness’ of the curricula, combined with the ‘disorientation’ of the workshop spaces, provoked interactions dissimilar to those encountered in the regular classroom, and it was with this that the tenor of Bike Build became most visible.

#### Partnerships

The delivery of Bike Build drew on the input and support of several community and institutional partners. The ‘Youth Connect’ team of the Toowoomba Regional Council Community Development Branch, and in particular Youth Development Officer Rebecca Schroder, volunteered as community facilitators for the program, whilst also providing ‘in-kind’ support through the provision of a tool-kit of materials and tools for the repair of the bicycles used during the workshop sessions.

Via this association with Youth Connect, further connections with staff in the Toowoomba station of the Queensland Police Service were formed, and it was with this connection that the provision of bicycles—unclaimed bicycles recovered and held by the Police—was offered for the workshops. Once the provision of materials, tools, and donor bicycles was arranged, a partnership was brokered with the Wilsonton Agricultural Field Study Centre (WAFSC). It was in the WAFSC—a facility adjoining Wilsonton State High School, and within which a demarcated workshop space and an area to store the bicycles was found—that the sessions were convened. This space was crucial to the conduct of the sessions and provided a major point of differentiation for the project; the space was visibly ‘different’ to the regular classrooms the students encountered in other aspects of their schooling and consequently afforded the opportunity to consider what effects space had on learning and interpersonal interaction.

The researcher-facilitators were all research staff at the University of Southern Queensland (School of Arts and Communication), with two of the researcher-facilitators (Chief Investigators Hickey and Pauli-

Myler) having also served terms on the Toowoomba Regional Council's Youth Advisory Committee—a committee tangentially connected to the initial brokering of this project. In conjunction with convening the workshops and organising the format and delivery of the Bike Build sessions with Wilsonton State High School's Youth Support Officer, Mr Shane Adshead, the authors also undertook the conduct of the research as participant-researchers. The authors refer to their role throughout this report as 'researcher-facilitators' to draw attention to the dual role (and tensions) that this placement as both program facilitators *and* researchers entailed.

Within the school, support from the Principals, Mr Chris Zilm (through 2015-2016) and Mr Marcus Jones (2017) and Deputy Principal: Head of Junior Secondary Ms Therese Sippel enabled the scheduling of the Bike Build program into the school timetable. In particular, Youth Support Officer, Mr Shane Adshead provided support as a co-facilitator, but also fulfilled the role of 'local contact' for the development of the workshop sessions and negotiation of program schedules. Shane was integral to the conduct of the sessions, and was the key contact for the scheduling of session times, booking of the workshop space, and confirmation of student enrolments. Shane was also actively present in the delivery of the workshop sessions. Staff from the WAFSC also maintained interest in the program and 'stepped in' on occasion to assist with the program—including, for example, hosting the final 'breakup' celebrations for the Term 3, 2016 iteration of the program in the workshop space. This gesture provided an indication of the 'good-will' that staff of WAFSC had for the project (and also the effect the students participating in Bike Build had on them).

As a major initiative that drew together a diverse range of partners, Bike Build represented, even at the early stages of its development, an example of an effective school-community partnership. This aspect of the program also led to the speculation around how informality might be considered in terms of the involvement of non-school, community based partners in programs such as Bike Build, with this a centrally important component of the Bike Build program's success. As a program convened in an out-of-the-ordinary space (the WAFSC workshops), convened by facilitators who were *not* teachers, and with visits at points through the sessions by representatives of the program's partner organisations (the Youth Connect staff specifically), the Bike Build workshop sessions were able to assume a sense of 'distance' (and difference) from the encounters and modes of behavior the students experienced in the regular classroom and spaces of the school. This point is discussed further below.

#### Pedagogies

It is important to note that the workshop sessions were intended to be inquiry-based and were planned to encourage students to take charge of their own learning. The approach taken in these sessions emphasised that "it is essential for...students to feel that their contribution to the group is of importance" (Bjontegaard 2015: 33), and worked to instill the ethic that the participating students *did* hold the capacity to direct the workshops and conduct tasks.

Accordingly, the materials (and in particular the weekly worksheets) designed for the sessions were geared toward broad categories of task and did not contain specified, sequenced and detailed *instruction*. The workshop sessions, albeit in some instances 'unruly' occasions, functioned as 'negotiated' spaces within which the students were actively encouraged to determine what was required in the repair of *their* bicycle. This approach to the conduct of these sessions encouraged the students to investigate what was 'wrong' with their selected bicycle and to undertake the development of a plan for completing the program and, ultimately, the production of a functioning and safe bicycle.



This open pedagogy was important for a number of reasons. Firstly, the bicycles themselves, as donated bicycles, were in various states of disrepair. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to develop a sequence of tasks that corresponded effectively to *all* students in the group. The establishment of any fixed schedule of activities and set of instructions was consequently jettisoned as not possible and an ineffective way to engage a student-led approach.

Secondly, and more importantly, these workshop sessions were focused on re-engaging students who had found the modes of instruction that they had encountered within the ‘regular’ classrooms of their schooling stifling. To simply replicate modes of instruction similar to those enacted in other areas of the school would have held the risk of further reinforcing approaches to teaching and learning *that were not working* for these students. Instead, the focus in the Bike Build workshop sessions was to allow the participating students the space to determine their own ‘curricula’ agenda as this related to their specific bicycle. Of course, a risk presented in taking this approach; the possibility that the sessions would fail if the students decided to disengage further and not participate was very real. In some instances, individual students did opt-out and left the program (for example, through the second iteration of the program an initial cohort of 10 students became 8 when 2 students left within the first 3 weeks, noting that they did not see the point or purpose of the activities).

Similarly, engagement from week to week by those students participating did wane on occasion. Perhaps expectedly, some days were more focused than others, but it was noted that student input and engagement mapped closely to other pressures present in their schooling—during periods of assessment, for example, focus and attention was sometimes lesser than at other times. Further to this and significantly (and as will be discussed further in the latter sections of this report), stressors from beyond school also had an effect on the levels of engagement witnessed as each workshop session progressed. Instances where pressures, conflict, and stresses from home and from within peer networks did emerge as significant to how the students participated in the workshops. By-and-large however, the space to negotiate the repair of the bicycles *on their own terms* did provide the participating students with the opportunity to set the course for their own learning.

Given that it was largely the routine, compression of time and structures of the regular classroom that participants of Bike Build found overwhelming, the ‘open’ informality of the workshop represented an effective, *alternative* way of engaging in learning. If, as Otero and Chambers-Otero (2000) suggest “the relevance of the traditional school...and its effectiveness is diminishing” in the face of “rapid, pervasive change and increasing interconnectedness” (n.p) within changing social contexts, then consideration of how learning both responds to the changing nature of the world is vital. Providing students with the skills to successfully negotiate *their* worlds stands as a singularly important consideration for how learning should be mediated within school. Responding to the stark reality that the bulk of students participating in Bike Build had *agonistic* relationships with(in) their schooling, and that the structure and form of the ‘regular’ classroom invoked problematic forms of participation and interaction, Bike Build set out to meaningfully ‘open’ consideration of how learning could be engaged by manipulating the space within which this learning was convened and the modes of address by which it was conducted. In Bike Build students had available to them the real, immediate and meaningful ability to assert themselves and direct their learning. The contention underpinning this approach argues that if students are disinterested in schooling, the likelihood of engaging in that schooling is diminished. Inversely, if

students are interested in the meaningfulness of an activity, then the likelihood of engagement is greatly enhanced.

(Dis)Engagement, Early Leaving and Pedagogy

Armed with the notion that “attitudes to school have a strong association with early school leaving” (Australian Council of Education Research 2000; 3), the pedagogies central to the conduct of the Bike Build workshops materialized. The dual application of pedagogical tenets derived from Freirean critical pedagogy and constructivist inquiry-learning underpinned the approach to the workshop sessions and framed our attempts to reengage students by refocusing their attitudes to school and learning. While in no ways incompatible, critical pedagogy and inquiry approaches offered a particularly useful lens for considering how students in Bike Build came to learning, but also in how informality could be deployed as a pedagogical device. Accordingly, the engagement central to the Bike Build workshop sessions began with the assumption (perhaps an obvious one to those who have worked within schools) that “the teacher-student relationship at any level, inside or outside the school, [is] fundamentally narrative” (Freire 1970: 71). This deeply Freirean consideration provided the ethic by which the sessions were conducted and through which interactions with students were convened.

It was through an *expectation* for participation, activated via an engaged and relational pedagogy that drew on dialogue and shared responsibility for the success of the sessions that Bike Build proceeded. As facilitators of the sessions, the role of the authors as researcher-facilitators was *not* to direct, but to engage via dialogue and undertake a process of shared problem-solving. In a Freirean (1970) sense, the role of the authors was prefaced by the ethic that a teacher’s “efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them” (75). As facilitators, the authors undertook to position themselves as co-creators of knowledge, and deployed as part of this ‘problem-posing’ inquiry that formed within the Bike Build sessions, an ethic toward collaboration and shared inquiry.

Building from this Freirean ethic, inquiry learning, and in particular approaches to ‘collaborative inquiry’ (Bell, Urhahne, Schanze and Ploetzner 2010), provided the rationale by which interactions within the sessions were mediated. Extending the relational dynamic informed by Freirean critical pedagogy, the authors as researcher-facilitators maintained an approach to convening the workshop sessions that asserted that the students should, indeed, *lead*. In light of concerns raised by Kolb (2014) that formal education often ‘abstracts’ knowledge, the approach taken in Bike Build sought to engage students in a topic of interest—namely, the repair of bicycles—while emphasising “personally relevant questions that inspire students to learn and create unique ways of sharing what they have learned” (Kulthau, Maniotes and Caspari 2015: 4). The bikes provided the ‘in’; the means by which interest could be initially sparked, and from which a prompt for further learning could be developed.

It is however stressed that the Bike Build program did not automatically engage *all* students who participated, and that for some students the prospect of working on (greasy, old and broken) bicycles was not in itself a provocation for immediate engagement (let alone *excitement*). The novelty of the sessions and unfamiliarity of the space did nonetheless ‘re-set’ the students’ expectations around what school could be. This was not a regular classroom experience; not least because it did not ‘look’ like a regular classroom, but equally because the students were actively encouraged to determine the course of action they took, all the while working with materials and people that were different to those typically encountered in the regular classroom space.

In conjunction with the repair of the bicycles, and in an effort to provide several streams of activity within the workshop sessions, optional activities were also negotiated with the students. Some students, for instance, identified that they would like to capture a video record of the workshops and undertook to prepare a ‘video log’ of the sessions (with this occurring during the second iteration of Bike Build, in Term 3 2016). Also during this iteration of the program, another student took responsibility for liaising with individual students to coordinate the collation of ‘parts lists’ of materials required for the finalisation of each bike. During the Term 2 2017 iteration of the program, one student took the role of being ‘spokesperson’ for the group and took it upon herself to formally open each workshop session, introducing the authors and other facilitators, welcoming the students and conveying a review of progress to date in a welcoming address for each week.

This role specialisation also worked within the intra-dynamics of smaller groups as work on the bikes progressed; for example, instances emerged where individual students identified expertise in a specific aspect of the repair process—like wheel bearing adjustment, or drive-chain alignment. While the students were encouraged to consider their place within the teams of which they were a part, and the expertise they might have within these teams, it was important for the success of the sessions that the students had space and opportunity to also *demonstrate* these specific skillsets. It was with the public recognition of expertise that individual students found a *place* within the broader cohort and dynamic of the sessions. This not only had an effect on the successful conduct of the sessions, but also (and arguably more importantly) the development of confidence and self-esteem amongst students who were, in most cases, unsure of their place within school and their abilities to succeed.

This aspect of the dynamics of the group also emerged as a major feature of the relational pedagogy at work in the sessions. Not only did the relationships between students-facilitators and students-teachers stand as a marked site of *disorientation* from expected interrelationships experienced elsewhere in the school, but the development of re-newed interactions *between* students also stood as a major outcome of Bike Build. Several of the students taking part in Bike Build were there because of issues associated with problematic (and in some cases, physically violent) interpersonal interactions. Instances of bullying behavior were also identified. Although early sessions of the Bike Build workshops invariably had existing networks of friends associating with each other, one method for encouraging wider interaction and participation involved identifying (and celebrating) areas of expertise and skill possessed by individual students. When the expertise of individual students was showcased, and subsequently called-upon by the wider group, engagement beyond immediate friendship networks developed and new relationships built around differential expertise formed.

It also occurred that a sense of camaraderie developed from participation in the Bike Build sessions, with this facilitating a group dynamic across the cohort. Students came to see themselves *as* members of the group, and as a sense of the shared identity that participating in Bike Build generated came to be realised, the group began to bond as a collective. One crucial demonstration of this dynamic, beyond the activities of repairing the bicycles themselves, involved ensuring that the workshops sessions were concluded with a group lunch. It was in these sessions that the group stopped to reflect on what had been achieved during the preceding session/s, and from which opportunities opened for students to ‘talk’ and develop friendships. The relational pedagogy in this instance was not merely a top-down activity deployed by the research-facilitators—that is, this was not a space in which instructions were *issued*. Instead, this was an ‘irreverent’ space where students spoke ‘openly’ (and were encouraged to

do so) about their experiences with the program, what next steps might occur in the repair of the bikes and what considerations needed to be given for ensuring the bikes were complete by program's end. Importantly, these lunch sessions also provided space to consider the students' 'place' in school and aspirations for life after school. During these informal lunch sessions conversation around career pathways, certain types of job, employment opportunities and training requirements emerged as prominent discussion points. For example, during one of these lunch sessions in the second iteration of Bike Build (Term 3, 2016), a discussion regarding the qualifications required for, and rates of pay (a key point of interest for the students) received by automotive mechanics and trades assistants emerged; this conversation then sparked interest in how this line of employment might be pursued.

It was with the 'relational' nature of these sessions and the interactions they provoked that significance emerged. Reeves and LeMare (2017) offer a useful summary of relational pedagogy when highlighting that "children's positive development depends, to a considerable degree, on whether the contexts in which they develop, including schools, are reliable sources of supportive relationships" (86). In Bike Build, emphasis on ensuring that relationships were nurtured resulted in a renewed sense of place experienced by each student. When mediated through demonstrations of expertise and renewed interpersonal associations with other students and teachers, the relational nature of the workshop sessions achieved the development of a pedagogical dynamic that promoted "academic, social and emotional growth" (Reeves and LeMare 2017: 86).

#### Curriculum

It is stressed that, even though the Bike Build workshop sessions were convened as inquiry-based and student-led undertakings, a *semblance* of a curriculum was still apparent. These sessions were far from being a 'free-for-all' of chaotic activity, and consequently required a base of content from which to proceed. Neville's (1999) questioning of the role of the 'teacher' within the student-centred classroom offered a useful touchstone for our own approaches, particularly in terms of Neville's (1999) claim that "the role of 'teacher' requires revision" (393) with regard the place teachers come to assume in these contexts, and perhaps more pertinently, within the practice of *organised* activity.

Initially, the Bike Build workshop sessions were geared as a response to issues of engagement and behavior amongst an identified group of students who had been selected precisely because of their disengagement and poor behaviour. As a program scheduled within a wider alternative learning agenda, Bike Build provided a space for students who resonated with the idea of mechanical repair of bicycles and for whom this interest not only provided a space for the development of a skillset that might be used as the foundation for later employment and further traineeships, but also as an opportunity to develop skills in interpersonal interaction. As such, some time in planning the sessions so that the program would meet the remit set by these two points of orientation was required. While the possibilities for students to chart their own course through the program was paramount, the orientations provided by the dual purpose of the program offered a broad structure from which to proceed.

At the level of the workshops, the students were provided (simply enough) with the brief to have, by program's end, *working bicycles*. They were also issued with 'micro-activities' along the way—challenges that they were encouraged to respond to, including, for example, determining the distance of 'roll-out' that one complete revolution of a wheel would travel, or the force required to move a back-wheel via calculations of crank arm length, gear settings and wheel diameter. In these cases, formal mathematical principles were incorporated into the informality of these sessions, with Bike Build

demonstrating capacity for the incorporation of formal (Australian Curriculum) curricula material into the inquiry undertaken by the students. This was important, again, not only in providing a foundation point for the program, but also the demonstration of how an alternative learning program might directly incorporate ‘formal’ material. While the mode of engagement may have been *informal* and different to the forms of delivery encountered in ‘regular’ classrooms, Bike Build did nonetheless pose the opportunity to integrate material directly from the Australian Curriculum into its structure<sup>3</sup>.

In taking this approach to the use of a ‘loose’ curricula structure, a clear focus on the intent of the program to respond to the students’ (dis)engagement stood as paramount. In this sense, the sessions drew from an approach similar to that specified by Shor (1992):

When students co-develop themes for study and share in the making of syllabus, the class dialogue sometimes moves faster than I can understand it or organize it for academic study. Finding a *generative theme*, that is a theme generated from student conditions which is problematic enough to inspire students to do intellectual work, can produce a wealth of student expression. (5; emphasis added)

Shor (1992) makes an important point about the need to consider context-appropriate ‘generative themes’ when engaging students in the co-development of their own learning. By using bicycles as a prompt for a ‘loose’ curriculum set within the broad expectations of responding to issues of behavior and interpersonal interaction, the ‘generative themes’ core to the Bike Build emerged. It was with the student-led inquiry that framed the conduct of the workshop sessions that the pedagogy *and* curriculum of Bike Build gained structure. For instance, as the students undertook the task of repairing their bicycles, discoveries emerged; discoveries relating to technical aspects of the bike’s design and manufacture, technical proficiencies required for repairing aspects of the bike, and the way the space of the workshops mediated this process. These discoveries set in train new lines of activity, with these in turn generating their own inquiries and points of investigation. It was with the task of *simply commencing* that the generative themes of Bike Build took shape and directed where the sessions would lead.

However, it is important to note that this approach to the structure of Bike Build did not automatically result in engagement from the beginning. In his reflections on how his own practice proceeded within a student-centred context, Shor (1992) explains:

On this first day, I wondered what would happen in class. I always bring a plan and know what I want to do, but what would the students do? I had been experimenting for some time with “student-centred teaching”, hoping to engage students in critical learning and to include them in making the syllabus. But they came to class wary and uninspired, expecting the teacher to tell them what to do and to lecture them on what things mean. (1)

Just as with Shor’s (1992) experience, each iteration of Bike Build took some time to ‘get going’, with the students coming to the early sessions variously wary, (in some cases) confused (as to why they were there), sometimes resistant and initially skeptical. The assumption that this was *yet another* program was evident in the students’ early engagement. However, attitudes did change, and across the three iterations of Bike Build, a sense of how the Bike Build workshops were configured and what the sessions would require of the students occurred generally by the third week of the program. The students

warned to the idea that this was a space within which (the authors as) the facilitators didn't *care* if they participated or not (but in which they would have a far better time of things if they did), that they were in charge of directing the sessions and that how the activities came to be experienced was, largely, up to the students. But just as Shor (1992) found, the students too had to learn that they *could* take charge of their learning. In many ways this was a new experience; the Bike Build sessions provided a disorientation from expected ways of engaging in schooling. In Bike Build, the students may well have been in charge of determining where the learning 'happened' and in which directions it went, but it did take some time for this capacity to emerge.

This did of course necessitate the deployment of, what is cast by the authors here as, a *responsive pedagogy*. As the experiences that Shor (1992) identified assert, once the students learned the dynamics of the workshop sessions and became 'involved', the self-directed nature of the repair of the bicycles combined with a responsiveness required by authors as researcher-facilitators to keep the sessions progressing. As the setting of tasks and direction of the sessions was mediated by the students, points of inquiry that derived from discoveries made by the students emerged as further 'generative themes' that provoked new directions of discovery, and which formulated nuance in the curriculum needed for the sessions to proceed. The authors, as researcher-facilitators, consequently fulfilled the role of *provocateurs*, posing questions for further inquiry—with these questions sometimes derived from material in the Australian Curriculum—and from which learning in the workshop sessions proceeded. This was, in a Freirean sense, a dialogic 'problem-posing' approach to learning in which the authors as researcher-facilitators did not necessarily assume a role in *leading* the inquiry, but took on the position of co-formulating activities defined by the students and linking this to further tasks, bodies of knowledge (for example, material from the Australian Curriculum), and modes of inquiry.

#### The Role of Facilitation

The role of the authors as facilitators was somewhat more complex than the term 'facilitators' would suggest. Although the authors were responsible for the initial shaping of the workshop 'curriculum' and defining the broad parameters by which the sessions would proceed, two substantive positions were maintained by the authors as research-facilitators during the program: that of workshop 'guide', and (more intrinsically) that of 'responsive pedagogue'. Both 'positions' (although the separations between either is not clear cut) were crucial to the conduct of the sessions. In instances where the participants were unsure, for example, of how to proceed with a specific repair or mechanical task, the authors-as-*guides* were on hand. This role corresponded in particular to specific instructional tasks and matters of processual conduct in the sessions (for instance, in the safe handling of the tools used in the workshop sessions).

Concomitantly, and perhaps more significantly, the authors also fulfilled the role of 'responsive pedagogues' and used opportunities within the workshop sessions as they arose to demonstrate specific applications, to "problem pose" (Freire, 1970), and more generally fulfil the role of provocateurs for further lines of inquiry. This position required the teasing out of lines-of-inquiry, and recognising opportunities for learning (as the examples noted above, including inquiring into wheel roll-out or crank ratios, suggest). It was in these moments that generative themes were worked with, and in which new lines of inquiry developed. The responsiveness of the pedagogy developed according to how these lines of inquiry might be deployed to engage meaningful learning that connected with aspects of formal curricula material and points of significance for the students at the time.

This problem posing pedagogical position provided an important component of the approach taken and defined the ‘responsive’ nature of the pedagogy deployed the Bike Build workshop sessions. As the remit of the workshop sessions rested with the deployment of learning that emerged according to what the students decided was required in the repair of their bicycles, opportunities to not only engage in the discovery of knowledge drawn from specific instances encountered in the class, but to also incorporate formal curricula material into the sessions required a certain level of agility from the authors-as-facilitators. It was in the ways that lines of further inquiry filtered into the sessions, provoked as these were by activities undertaken by the students and mediated through dialogue between students and between the students and authors as researcher-facilitators, that the curriculum and pedagogy for Bike Build was most clearly defined. This responsiveness was rooted in the *moment* of the workshop sessions, and corresponded directly to the students’ inquiries, as these arose.

It is noted below in this report that a major opportunity exists to further consider the role of such a problem posing, responsive pedagogy for programs such as Bike Build. Curricula prompts that emerge from student-led inquiry offer a powerful means for both responding to student interests and meeting the demands of competency-based curricula. Such an approach maintains the ethos of a student-led approach, whilst still covering formally recognised (and mandated) curricula material. The discussion outlined in the *Findings* below discuss the implications of this consideration further.

#### Outcomes

It was through the possibilities provided by the out-of-the-ordinary space the Bike Build sessions provided that new forms of interpersonal relationship between students and students and teachers emerged. The informality of the workshop spaces encouraged the eschewing of otherwise expected ways of interacting, with this affording generative possibilities for (re)establishing connections between the participating students—both with each other, and in their relationships to school.

Interestingly, this ‘looseness’ of interaction led to the development of deeply respectful interactions within which students engaged with each other and facilitators and teachers as equal co-participants of the space. One notable expression of this occurred during the first iteration of Bike Build (term 4, 2015) in which students made a point of greeting the authors each week, shaking hands, and in the case of several of the students, deploying a ‘special handshake’. Although this form of ritual has become widespread (and something of a populist cliché) in education in recent years, the significance of this gesture was nonetheless expressed in terms of the respect this showed and the place that the authors as researcher-facilitators held in the students’ view. The handshake itself was not important so much as the significance this gesture held in showing that the students recognised the authors as equal co-participants in the sessions.

Further to these physical demonstrations of the intra-dynamics of group participation, the informality of the workshop sessions also opened opportunity for dialogue. The authors found that, in amongst discussions around the repair and maintenance of the bicycles that dialogue often extended to other aspects of the students’ experiences of schooling and broader discussion of ‘life in general’. Although there are considerations of an ethical nature as to how far discussions of the personal lives of students should go (and commensurate policy set out by schools and education departments on how to mediate this), the chance to ask the students ‘how they were going’ and how their week had progressed provided a significant opportunity for demonstrating respect and care for the students and their place as co-participants in Bike Build. In short, the authors as researcher-facilitators developed a *rappport* with the

students that allowed for dialogue and connection. The rapport, trust, mutuality and respect of Bike Build were provoked by the ‘looseness’ of the curriculum and pedagogy of the sessions. As a space that allowed for interactions to emerge as the moment required, the workshops sessions—and subsequent activation of generative themes of inquiry—afforded a meaningful form of interaction to grow.

Bike Build demonstrated that informality has a place in schooling as a function for the nurturance of meaningful interpersonal relationships. In the informal spaces of Bike Build, dialogue occurred, and a sense of the understandings of Self (and one’s positioning within the school) developed. The students talked about their lives and aspirations. They expressed a sense of the frustrations they had with school. They also demonstrated the tacit knowledges they brought with them on how to repair bicycles and engage as collaborators. But it was during moments of informality and the ‘irreverence’ for formal modes of conduct and interaction that the significance of Bike Build was demonstrated. The unfamiliar surroundings of the Bike Build workshops eschewed the usual ways of ‘being’ practiced in other (more ‘formalised’) parts of the school, with this opening the possibility for renewed relationships and engagement with the enterprise of schooling. Bike Build in this case stood as a major ‘junction point’ in re-calibrating the student learning journey, and in the case of some of the students who went on to secure school-based traineeships and apprenticeships, demonstrated how the pathway mediated via informal engagement can have lasting (positive) effects.



## The Conceptual, Scholarly and Professional Literature Consulted

The respective literatures on *informal education*, *alternative learning* and *relational pedagogies* are extensive and outline an array of considerations on the nature and effect of learning spaces, approaches to teaching, and the role of the school as site of education. However, this review of the literature provides a summary overview of the literature commensurate with the focus of this project; *informality as a pedagogical dynamic*. While further resources are to be found beyond those discussed here, this survey includes works that indicate trends in the literature generally.

### Informality, Learning and Schooling

This project applied a specific understanding of ‘informality’ as a concept. The literature on ‘informality and education’ typically examines systems and practices of ‘informal education’, which, when taking its cues from the pioneering work of Malcolm Knowles (1950) in adult education, situates informal education broadly as ‘organised’ learning that occurs *beyond* schooling. McGivney (1999) for example, explores ‘informal education’ in terms of community organizing to activate social change. Learning in this expression is mediated as a socially ordered process conducted beyond the structures of an institutional location; in McGivney’s specific case, as a ‘grassroots’ undertaking designed to confront social change and mobilise the generation of collective, ‘community-based’ knowledge. As further examples, Dale and Bell’s (1999) and Cofer’s (2000) survey of informal education in workplace settings emphasises this collective aspect of informal education and highlights the ubiquitous nature of informal learning when geared toward a set of shared practices (such as those occurring in a workplace setting). Greenfield (2009) offers consideration of the effects that digital media and the informal education of “television, video games and the Internet” (69) exert as a further expression of informal learning, and in doing so draws parallels to the extensive literature on ‘public pedagogy’ (Giroux 2004; Sandlin, Burdick and Schultz 2010; Sandlin O’Malley and Burdick 2011); pedagogical formulations that “are not restricted to schools, blackboards and test taking” (Giroux 2004: 498).

La Belle’s (1982) analysis of the distinctions between the (often confused) terms ‘formal’, ‘nonformal’ and ‘informal’ education is particularly pertinent here. Noting that although these differing modes of education should be considered inter-relationally and that individuals engage in formal, nonformal and informal modes of learning simultaneously in the various aspects of their lives—a point Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley (2003) reinforce—informal education for La Belle (1982), is experienced according to “a typology of modes of education across the lifespan” (159), stressing the *relational* and *contextual* nature of human learning.

In broad terms, the literature identifies distinctions between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ learning contextually; according to the location within which the delivery of the ‘education’ in question takes place. So, broadly speaking, when set within *school*, learning becomes ‘formal’. When set within community, workplace or other such contexts, it is ‘informal’. Such a broad categorisation does somewhat cloud the idea of unintended learning that might occur within schools, whilst also denying that community or workplace learning might indeed draw from highly structured and organised curricula and approaches to pedagogy. However, it stands that this distinction between learning that is a) linked to formal institutional sites of education and, b) that learning which occurs elsewhere, beyond formal sites of education, provides a general sense of how ‘informal learning’ is positioned. It should be noted that criticism of such broad categorisations is present in the literature (see particularly Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley 2003), and that for this report the view that “it is more accurate to

conceive ‘formality’ and ‘informality’ as attributes present in all circumstances of learning” (Solomon, Boud and Rooney 2006: 11) holds as a useful way of considering the ways learning happens in practice.

For this study, Bike Build, as an expression of an alternative learning program, was not positioned as ‘informal education’ per se (although aspects of its conduct did most definitely fall within wider definitions of this approach, such as those forwarded by La Belle, 1982). While scrutiny as to what, exactly, this mode of education might be cast *as* provides an interesting point of conjecture, it was not with ‘informal education’ that the conduct of Bike Build was explicitly directed. Instead, it was with how *informality* presented as a marker of a relational pedagogy (Reeves and LeMay 2017; Aspelin 2014; Sidorkin 2000) set within the pedagogy deployed in the program and the way that informality worked through the educational engagement Bike Build mediated that formed the focus of the inquiry outlined here. This might appear a subtle distinction, but it is important to highlight that Bike Build was not framed around an expression of *informal education*, but instead sought to uncover how *informality* provided a dynamic for the pedagogy deployed within the workshop sessions.

As an integral feature of the pedagogical dynamic of Bike Build, informality stands here as an *irreverence toward established codes of conduct and modes of expected behaviour*. In these terms, Paul Willis in his seminal ethnography of working class schooling in the United Kingdom, *Learning to Labour* (1977) provides a useful starting point for thinking about informality, defining the concept as follows:

The nature of informality as a mode of *opposition* in this society is that it reserves itself as the exception to the rule. It is blind to all of the other exceptions which together could overthrow the rule. (166; emphasis added)

The key point within this definition is with the placement of informality as the ‘exception to the rule’. While Willis had in mind the explicit contravention of social ‘rules’—that is, the deliberate subversion of the rules of conduct mediating spaces like the classroom and school yard—this definition extends further to also include consideration of wider ‘social’ rules of decorum, interaction and expected practice. In Willis’ (1977) terms:

The most basic, obvious and explicit dimensions of counter-school culture is entrenched general and personalized opposition to ‘authority’ (11).

In continuing, Willis (1977) identifies:

This opposition is expressed mainly as a style. It is lived out in countless small ways which are special to the school institution, instantly recognized by the teachers, and an almost ritualistic part of the daily fabric of life for the kids (12).

Whereas Willis found this level of informality to be fundamentally *oppositional* in its nature, this project sought to extend the definition of informality by suggesting that informality might also be *generative*. While it is acknowledged here that informality may well have its foundation in the expression of resistant agency, where “the incursive demands of the formal are denied” (Willis 1977: 22), it is stressed in this report that informality also suggests an impulsiveness toward inquiry, and of actively subverting rules of conduct, interaction and engagement that limit discovery. Informality in this project hence came to refer to something positive and exciting; a learning that occurred beyond the constraints that formal edicts of schooling sometimes impose. Learning via informality was about *inquiry*.

Bike Build mediated this form of informality – a practice where expected norms for interacting could be challenged and subverted through speaking ‘openly’. This was central to the ethic of Bike Build, and students were encouraged to actively set the agenda based on the paths the inquiry they took and to be critical (whilst maintaining an informed viewpoint) on how they experienced the sessions, and on how these might be made better (as in, more ‘open’). This was particularly crucial when it is considered that these workshops were expected to be convened in terms of the students’ own expectations.

In this regard, Bike Build took seriously the critical pedagogical ethic that “one cannot expect positive results from an educational...program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people” (Freire 1970; 95). Whereas Bike Build had some clear objectives set within its remit—the enactment of practices for interaction and learning that were geared toward re-engagement as principal amongst these—the way this was achieved via dialogue with the students offered a basis upon which informality functioned. Bike Build hence had as its objective the clarification and enactment of “certain dispositions toward learning—not just the ability to perform certain tasks but the desire to learn and the ability to manage one’s learning” (Watkins and Noble, 2008: 6), with this ethic finding realisation through the informal engagements enabled in the Bike Build workshops. This aspect of informality is detailed further below but, in short, it was through the provocation for informality that the unfamiliar workshop space and visiting facilitators provided that opened new opportunities for engagement and inter-relationality, which in turn re-set the ways that learning proceeded. Informality in the Bike Build workshop sessions provided the means by which new relationships to learning could emerge.

Open Learning Environments, Active Learning and Collaborative Learning

A further subset of the literature explores the locations and modes of practice within which student-centred learning occurs. While these approaches are relevant to and in many ways overlap the concerns of the ‘relational pedagogy’ articulated in this report, the literature on open learning environments, active learning and collaborative learning is tangentially drawn upon to identify how (specifically) space and environment influence learning as ‘open’ learning settings. In broad terms, open learning stresses the:

...mediating role of the individual in uniquely defining meaning, establishing learning needs, determining learning goals and engaging in learning activities. (Hannafin, Land and Oliver 1999; 120)

This parallels the Freirean approach to dialogic learning emphasised in the Bike Build workshop sessions, and carries overtones in terms of how the sorts of interactions typical of an open learning environment position the learner as active in defining the inquiry.

Consideration of the role of the learner within the learning dynamic is central to the concerns identified in the literature of active learning. For example, Niemi (2012) highlights that:

Active learning strategies emphasise constructivistic qualities in knowledge processing. These are independent inquiry, and structuring and restructuring of knowledge. In active learning, the processing of knowledge also requires a problem-solving orientation, a critical approach and an evaluation of knowledge. The ultimate goal of knowledge processing is that the learner can elaborate on applications of knowledge and s/he may also produce new knowledge using cognitive processes (764).

Again however, the concerns of dialogic, inquiry-based learning central to the Bike Build workshop sessions parallel the ethic of the active learner expressed in this and commensurate literature (Simons, 1997; Slavin, 1997; Niemi, 1997), and for the purposes of this research, notions of the active learner expressed in this body of the literature were largely commensurate with the material drawn from Frierean and inquiry-based pedagogies deployed here.

Beyond these concerns for the open learning environment and active learner, literature exploring the nature of ‘collaborative learning’ also had relevance to this project, particularly in terms of the ways that collaboration featured as a major aspect of the Bike Build workshop sessions. Interestingly however, significant examples of this literature draw as their point of focus the pragmatic dynamics of convening a collaborative learning group, with attention given to group size (Dillenbourg 1999; McKinney and Graham-Buxton 1993), modes of interaction (Yamane 1996; Trimbur 1989) and (somewhat intriguingly) the role of ICTs in mediating collaboration (Sung and Hwang 2013; Järvelä et al, 2015; O'Donnell, Hmelo-Silver, and Erkens, 2013; O'Malley 2012).

For the purposes of this report the Bike Build workshop sessions were considered as ‘collaborative’ spaces, whereby group work, shared development of understanding and deliberative interaction provided hallmark features of the interactions. Combined with the positioning of the participating students as ‘active’ learners responsible for directing the curriculum of Bike Build and the ‘open’ space of the workshop sessions, the literature on open learning prefigures the effect of space itself (and the affordances such spaces offer) to the learning dynamic. While of interest to this research, the role played by the space of the workshops was predominantly considered in terms of the ‘disorientation’ it provided to the interpersonal engagements fostered in Bike Build.

#### Alternative Learning Programs in Australia

Although it is stressed that the focus of this report is on informality, and not the conduct of alternative learning programs *per se*, research from the field of alternative learning was referred to in order to position Bike Build as an example of an alternative learning pathway. As Te Riele (2014) highlights, alternative learning programs in Australia adhere broadly to three categories: “programs operating within mainstream schools, programs operating within TAFE [technical and further education] or ACE [advanced college of education], and separate (stand alone) programs” (12). As a component of a wider alternative learning program convened by, and within, the case school, Bike Build worked according to the ‘in school’ format that Te Reile (2014) identifies, whereby such programs “may take the form of electives, extracurricular activities or as replacement of regular classes for part of the school week. These programs may not directly lead to the attainment of educational credentials, but work to enable young people to learn and remain engaged in their school” (15).

McGregor and Mills (2012; 2013) and Wilson, Stemp and McGinty’s (2011) explorations of alternative pathways for young people disengaged from school provide further important Australian studies. Wilson, Stemp and McGinty (2011) for instance highlight that although there is “growing realization that flexible and socially inclusive education services are a necessary component of engaging those young people who face the most challenges” with schooling, “the academic integrity of alternative programs has been questionable” (34). McGregor and Mills’ (2012) study of “the kinds of teaching and learning that young people engage in” (843) and the place fulfilled by the alternative learning site within this spectrum, provides an insight into not only the role played by alternative learning sites, but also the

significance these hold as alternatives to mainstream schooling. This research accordingly builds on earlier work by Thompson and Russell (2009), Te Reile (2007) and Smyth and Hattam (2002).

It is important to note in light of this literature that the case school for this project, Wilsonton State High convened its alternative learning program under the direction of a full-time Youth Support Officer to coordinate and oversee the delivery of alternative programs and advise the school executive team on individual student progress. This demonstration of commitment, and the concomitant affordances of resourcing for this position, highlight how the alternative learning program was both considered and positioned within the School.

The Context of Disengagement from Learning in Australia

For young people who leave school early, the prospects for employment, social inclusion and lifestyle fulfilment are stark. *The Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth* (2000) highlighted that:

Compared with Year 12 graduates, non-completers are more likely to experience extended periods of unemployment; and those who succeed in finding work are more likely to obtain jobs in a narrow field of occupations. Non-completers are also more likely to be reliant on government assistance. (1)

More recently, the Mitchell Institute's *Counting the Costs of Lost Opportunity in Australian Education* (2017) explained that:

For individuals, missing out on the benefits of education generates costs not only because it affects occupational prospects, wages and job satisfaction, but also because it influences decisions people make and behaviours affecting health, marriage, parenting, and roles as citizens. These costs accumulate as those who miss out progress through adulthood until the end of their working lives. There are costs to the taxpayer which include things such as reduced tax revenue as well as increased public expenditure on crime, health, welfare, housing and income support, and associated services. There are also costs both to the individual and the community (social costs), such as loss of personal earnings, the social consequences of crime and excess burden of higher taxes required for additional social services. (Lamb and Huo, 2017: 2)

Although retention and completion rates in Australian schools are “at their highest level ever recorded in Australia, with almost 83% of 20-24 year olds having completed Year 12 or an equivalent certificate” (Australian Institute of Family Studies 2013, n.p.) for those who do not complete school, the economic, social and health implications of not completing are especially prevalent. The economic implications of early leaving are particularly staggering:

Based on modelling of lifetime costs associated with early school leaving, the average lifetime fiscal cost to Australian governments or the taxpayer is \$334,600 for each early leaver (at the 2014 net present value). Across the 37,700 19 year olds in 2014 in Australia who were likely to remain lifetime early leavers, this fiscal cost amounts to \$12.6 billion... (Lamb and Huo, 2017: 3)

Beyond these measures the social and well-being impacts of early school leaving are equally concerning. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (2013) report that propensity of “social exclusion; long-term welfare dependence; reduced life satisfaction; mental health problems; and, increased vulnerability to involvement in criminal activities” (n.p.) are heightened with early school

leaving. Early school leaving carries commensurate problems associated with self-esteem and positive self-identity, within which schooling or alternatively, *lack* of schooling effects “almost every facet of life...in health, family life and community participation and cohesion” (Deloitte Access Economics 2012: 1).

It stands that if a goal of formal (mainstream) education in Australia is the successful promotion of “the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development and wellbeing of young Australians” (MCEETYA, 2008), then the provision of opportunities for *all* young people to successfully engage in schooling stands as imperative.

School provides a central site for social interaction, and (along with the family) early enculturation into social mores and behaviours. Schooling also functions as a location within which young people learn to engage others and develop interpersonal skills, with the development of young people’s social capital buttressed by the experience schooling provides in the formation of productive social ‘bonds’ (Putnam 2000). School, while not the only social structure or institution central to the formative development of young people’s life-world (Flint, 2011: 4; Hirsch 2007) does nonetheless play an important role in shaping the social and economic opportunities individuals have available to them. Providing effective opportunities for young people to find the space to engage in productive social interactions as part of their schooling is hence an important undertaking. Providing alternatives to ‘formal’ modes of instruction and learning such as those delivered within Bike Build is hence crucial in affording a ‘circuit breaker’ in mediating the disengagement of students who struggle in the regular classroom.

## Methodology

### Research Goals

This project was framed by the following question:

“What role does informality play in defining the experience of the alternative learning program?”

### Method

This project deployed a qualitative, *idiographic* ethnography to examine student engagement within the Bike Build workshop sessions. Using participant observation, interview and conversational research derived from interactions encountered as part of the Bike Build workshop sessions, the dataset compiled for this report provides phenomenographic insight into the experience of Bike Build. In particular, viewpoints on the nature and experience of the informality of the sessions was sought from the interview, observational and participatory-reflective dataset captured for this project.

The bulk of the interview data was captured opportunistically, as encounters with students and other participants occurred through the workshop sessions (n=18). Permission to conduct the research and undertake interviews was issued by the students and participants (and their parents/guardians) via a Participant Consent Form, issued at the outset of the project and formulated as part of the USQ Ethics Clearance process. Further permission to conduct and record interview dialogue was also sought as each discussion commenced. ‘Naturalistic’ recording of dialogue was captured as part of these interview discussions, with these interview discussions providing a central component of the project’s evidentiary base.

Further to this ‘opportunistic’ data-set were scheduled interviews with key staff of the school and partners of the program (n=8). These interviews, although scheduled in advance and convened (typically) outside of the Bike Build workshop space, followed a semi-structured format, with specific questions derived from general themes associated with the inquiry. These included questions on the place of the School’s alternative learning program, the reasons why students were streamed into the program, the pressures of the ‘regular classroom’ and role of schooling. These viewpoints provided a sense of context and insight into the bureaucratic dimensions of convening Bike Build, whilst also providing invaluable insight into the informality of the alternative learning workshop space from the perspective of teachers and other collaborators involved in Bike Build.

Emphasis was given to building a ‘picture’ of the participants’ experience of Bike Build, with an interest in understanding specifically how informality functions as a component of the alternative learning space. An approach to the convening and facilitation of the workshop sessions identified as “deep hanging out” (Soyini-Madison 2005)—an approach indicative of this form of ethnography—was deployed accordingly. This approach was particularly valuable in enabling the authors to fulfil the ‘dual’ role of researcher-facilitator of the workshop sessions.

Selected audio-recordings of the interview material was transcribed by the professional transcription service, *Pacific Transcriptions*. These transcripts were verified upon completion by the lead CI to ensure accuracy, with extracts from these transcriptions used within this report as evidentiary sources. Pseudonyms have been applied and identifying features within data extracts either removed or de-identified to maintain anonymity.

Observational data derived from the field notes compiled by the authors as researcher-facilitators was also incorporated into the dataset. These fieldnotes identified notable instances and moments from the workshop sessions, adjunct considerations from the researchers as prompts for further inquiry, and other contextual notes. These notes were also discussed by the authors following workshop sessions to ensure that views expressed in the fieldnotes were commensurate with the events they illustrated. Extracts from these fieldnotes are not drawn on explicitly within this report, but did provide contextual consideration for the dataset presented here.

Ethics clearance for the conduct of this research was issued by the University of Southern Queensland Human Ethics Research Committee, under clearance number H16REA253, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2016.



## Assumptions Underpinning this Research

The findings detailed in the following section of this report were compiled in view of the following assumptions:

- **Assumption 1:** This project took the position that young people are cognisant when it comes to the decisions they make about their learning. This report positions young people as able to conceptualise the social surroundings they exist within and subsequently to exert behaviours derived from conscious decision-making deployed in context. This report argues that what is often manifest in young peoples' behaviours (particularly those considered as 'poor') are responses borne from frustration and the realisation of limited capacity to enact self-determined agency. Accordingly, young people often perceive the worlds they inhabit as filled with 'constraint' and limitation (Hickey and Pauli-Myler 2017; Hickey and Phillips 2012), and accordingly disengage or resort to an array of anti-social behaviour patterns as a response to these contexts.
- **Assumption 2:** This project took the position that self-regulated learning and student-centred negotiation of the curriculum and learning results in an emancipatory experience of learning. As Peel (2017) asserts, "providing opportunities for students to engage actively to self-regulate their learning, shifts the aim of classroom behaviour management beyond the function of maintaining order in the classroom to a focus on learning, being responsible and having fun" (2). This perspective drove the approach taken in Bike Build. Emphasis was given to the provision of 'space' that allowed the students to determine the level of their input and involvement, but equally, to identify where their personal strengths were.
- **Assumption 3:** This project took the position that learning is central to a young person's identity-formation, but that what is considered learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> C is largely restricted to iterations of formally constituted pedagogical address. In this report, 'learning' constitutes wider modes of interaction; such as those encountered in the Bike Build workshop sessions.
- **Assumption 4:** This broad pedagogical dynamic leads to the final assumption drawn upon in this report; that schools have as their responsibility the engagement of young people in productive modes of learning. Schools play a vital role in the provision of opportunity for young people and as spaces for the enactment of critical active citizenry. Accordingly, schools must provide opportunities for learning that resonate with the desires and prerogatives young people identify as important.

These assumptions drove the interpretation of the data presented in the *Findings*. Central to these assumptions, and the conduct of this research, was a prevailing belief that young people come to learning as cognisant and active, but that formulations of learning (particularly those enacted within formal sites of learning) often constrain the experience of learning, abstract what counts as knowledge, and delimit young people's modes of engagement to limited forms of expression and address.

## Findings

This report uses the conceptual triumvirate *relationships-behaviour-pathway* to classify the findings derived from the analysis of the project's dataset. These themes have been derived from the data as conceptual prompts for considering the ways informality functioned as part of the Bike Build workshops.

- *Relationships* identifies the ways that inter-personal interactions proceeded according to the informality expressed in the Bike Build workshops.
- *Behaviour* identifies how modes of personal conduct came to develop within the Bike Build workshops.
- *Pathway* corresponds to the means by which students were able to chart a course out of the Bike Build program to re-engage in school, or commence vocational education and training and employment.

To provide a broad illustration as to why these themes feature as core to this report, the following extracts from an interview with Mr Shane Adshead, the Youth Support Officer supporting Bike Build at Wilsonton State High School provides an insight into an illustrative experience drawn from the Bike Build program. Shane refers to the experience of 'Bobby', one of the student participants from the Term 3 2016 iteration of Bike Build:

Facilitator (Hickey): He's in the- what was the name of the apprenticeship again... Traineeship rather?

Shane: It's not an apprenticeship...it's a school based placement with a spray painter.

Facilitator: ...Cool.

Shane: Part of the Certificate II in Work Based Placement Vocational Pathways [a program working alongside the Alternative Program at Wilsonton State High] was that the students had to find an industry and he's found a local spray painter.

Facilitator: Was it just pot-luck- that is, he just found this person- or he knew someone who knew someone; one of those sorts of arrangements?

Shane: No, he had to go and talk to the Vocational Coordinator and he then had to go and attend an interview and so, based on this interview, they put him on for a day a week. After three weeks of going there, they've been so impressed they're going to buy him his own uniform!

The significance of this example corresponds to the ways that relationships, behaviour and pathways provided Bobby with the means of finding a productive way of re-engaging with learning and, as this extract highlights, an employment pathway. For example, the relationships that formed between Bobby and Shane (as part of the alternative program), and later between Bobby and his placement supervisors stand as a major point of contrast to the relationships Bobby had with several of his peers and teachers at school. For Bobby, school was not a site that was conducive to effective relationship building, with the frustrations that he had felt with the formal edicts of the classroom and structure of school stifling

the formation of effective interpersonal connections (especially with those individuals that he associated with ‘authority’). Equally, the behaviours that Bobby typically expressed at school were mediated in the workshop spaces of both Bike Build and his placement. He had identified a workplace within which he could excel and subsequently found his ‘place’; a work environment that was meaningful and provided a sense of purpose, with this subsequently altering the way he positioned himself as a participant in these spaces. Through feeling engaged and as part of a larger collective, Bobby’s behaviour altered. As one of the outcomes of this relational dynamic, the opportunity that extended from the alternative learning program and Bike Build to undertake the workplace placement provided Bobby with an effective pathway—a transition from school to employment that opened opportunities for Bobby to excel.

Bobby’s case in many ways represented an ideal outcome from the program, and demonstrated that with an alteration to the ways that young people are addressed, encouraged to learn and provided with options within their schooling, the possibilities for success develop proportionally. However, it did remain that school was still problematic for Bobby, as Shane highlights:

Facilitator:                   How is he going at school, is he a bit more focussed here?

Shane:                         No, no, nothing has changed at school!

The role that the alternative learning program played in this regard is significant. As a site in which Bobby was able to undertake activities that, not only did he resonate with, but that also provided an opportunity for entry to the vocational pathway, the possibilities for something *beyond* school were presented (in this instance, via a workplace placement). It is with the options that the alternative program opened that set Bobby on the pathway to the placement. When asked what the alternative might have been for Bobby, without the pathway opened by the alternative program, Shane was clear:

Facilitator:                   [Without the alternative program] what would have happened to him?

Shane:                         Excluded... [he] would have been excluded this year.

The relationships that Bobby was able to form and broker through the alternative program (and of which Bike Build was a key part), led to a shift in his behaviour; especially when considered in terms of his placement within the traineeship (a setting within which Shane suggested the strong male role models of older co-workers played a key part in shaping his responsibility and commitment to work). It was from this that the pathways opened for Bobby emerged. Without the ‘circuit breaker’ of the alternative program, the likelihood of Bobby being excluded from school for behaviour issues was very real.

This is the orientation the data illuminated. In Bobby’s case, the alternative learning program not only provided an opportunity to ‘find a place’ in school where he could excel and undertake activities that he resonated with, but that also led to a potential career pathway. The alternative would have been expulsion and an increased likelihood of economic and social isolation. That Bobby was able to engage in productive and positive relationships as part of his engagement in the alternative program (and later work placement) shifted his behaviour and commitment to learning. This then ultimately positioned pathways of opportunity beyond school and into employment.

Through the concepts *Relationships-Behaviour-Pathway*, a sense of the role that the Bike Build program played was uncovered. However, it was specifically with the informality that was present

within the program that the dynamics (and success) of Bike Build can be most readily deciphered. The analysis of the ways that *relationships*, *behaviour* and *pathways* were mediated according to the informality of the program are detailed in the following sections.

#### Theme 1: Relationships

The most prominent aspect of the data corresponding to the theme ‘relationships’ concerned the nature of the interactions encountered during the workshops. The students participating in Bike Build were, by virtue of the fact that they had been streamed into the program because of problematic engagement with school, initially sceptical of the workshops and basic intentions underpinning the program. Beyond this, they also came to the program with records of poor interpersonal engagement that were specifically related to the interpersonal relationships they maintained. For instance, students who had bullied (and had been bullied), students who were aggressive and violent, and students who were dismissive and disrespectful to their peers and teachers were (predominantly) those encountered in Bike Build. Consequently, ‘relationships’, or more correctly, *problems with relationships*, provided a central reason for why students were streamed into the Bike Build program, and concomitantly a central theme for this research.

Accordingly, a key outcome for Bike Build was to demonstrate effective strategies for building positive interactions between students and it was with this that Gee’s (2005) conceptualisation of the “affinity space” provided a useful means for considering the ways that interactions occurred during the workshop sessions. In response to the shortfalls Gee sees in conceptualisations of the “community of practice” model (Gee 2005; Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998), the ‘affinity space’ provides a means of moving beyond the totalising suggestion implied in the concept “community” to consider a far more fluid, yet identifiable, formulation of collective practice. As Gee (2005) notes:

...the key problem with notions like “community of practice”, and related ones like “communities of learners”, is that they make it look like we are attempting to label a group of people. Once this is done, we face vexatious issues over which people are in and which are out of the group, how far they are in or out and when they are in or out. (215)

By contrast, Gee (2005) deploys the idea of the “social semiotic space” in which the ‘affinity group’ finds definition. The social semiotic space does not mandate ‘membership’ per se, but does find definition in the ways that the context and social enactment of the group prefigure certain meanings about that group. In short, the social semiotic group finds meaning through “ongoing social interactions that determine the (changing) universe of possible (and emergently routine) ways in which people can think about, value, act and interact” (Gee 2005: 220). It is then with consideration of the spaces in which these practices take place—that is, the spaces in which these expressions of affinity are enacted—that meaningful demonstration of the group surfaces.

The data showed a number of instances of this formulation of ‘affinity’ within the group. One example that perhaps best illustrates the nature of relationships formed out of the affinity group that included ‘Cody’, a student to who came to Bike Build in Term 2, 2017 withdrawn, socially anxious and who was streamed into the program after retaliating against instances of bullying. Cody was interested in the activities of the workshop sessions and participating actively in the repair of his bicycle, but he did remain desperately shy and ‘distant’ for the first few weeks of the program.

It emerged however that Cody had skills in bicycle repair; and in particular, the rebuilding and setting of wheel bearings. It was noted by the authors that during the session that covered this aspect of the bicycle repair—a session that occurred in week 4 of the 10-week program—that Cody took particular interest in the task, and even began to advise his group on how the task should proceed; in short, he took the *lead* on the activity. This was a major turning point for a student who previously would barely speak. Following this, Cody was prompted by the authors (in an attempt to respond to the ‘generative theme’ that this experience suggested) to liaise with other groups to advise on and ‘sign off’ on the repair of the wheels for their bicycles. Cody consequently became known as an ‘expert’ in wheel bearings. This had a marked effect on Cody’s visible self-confidence. He began to interact far more actively, voiced opinions on the direction of the repair of the bicycle and was sought-out by other students for advice.

In extension to the experience of Cody, recognition of the relational nature of Bike Build and the importance that the identification of individual skills had in generating positive engagement and self-esteem was raised by one of the school’s student support officers, Sean Turner. On the point of the nurturance of effective relationships, Sean noted in an interview during the first iteration of Bike Build (Term 4, 2015) the following:

Sean:            So his [a student within the program] behavior record [during primary school] is pretty clean, great relationship with the teacher and all that. Makes a move into high school and he’s been suspended three or four times... the nature of high school, going from one class to the other, it’s not about relationships anymore...

                    That’s when I stood back and thought “that’s weird; what’s going on here? Are we letting him down as a person?” So to see that, it’s interesting. The school system is like a factory...one size fits all. So, for the kids who are a bit more creative or geared in different ways...school can be difficult.

Sean’s response to this dynamic was to build meaningful relationships with students. Dialogue provided the basis of these interrelationships, with an ethic of mutual trust and honesty providing cues for building rapport. As Sean noted later in the same interview, the effects of this approach were clear:

Sean:            The [students’] trust is there, which is great. We’re in a really good place right now in Wilsonton in the sense that we’re trying things. There’s other schools that wouldn’t try what we’re trying...

                    So for me, it’s like just imagine if we *weren’t* trying... I’m an open book with them [the students] and I think they appreciate that.

A similar sentiment was later relayed by Shane Adshead during the second iteration of Bike Build (Term 3, 2016):

Shane:            [Student A] was funny last week. They used their Thursday session [the scheduled liaison session with Shane as part of the alternative program] to do a big debrief with me about everything that’s gone wrong...

Andrew:         A bit of a chat about the week?

Shane: Yeah

Andrew: That's good that they're doing this with you.

Shane: They said "its just stupid, stuff I'll never use". I said, "what are you actually talking about?", he said, "this Shakespeare *wanker*. I don't care about him; I don't want to know about him. I'm not interested, you know? I'm not interested". I said, "well, fair enough". I said, "well you can watch movies about the Shakespeare *wanker!*".

The point here is that the student felt comfortable to speak openly with Shane in this moment. The *informality* and *irreverence* of this exchange, expressed by the sincere use of a word that would have led to trouble elsewhere in school—*wanker*—was tolerated, and understood by Shane as being acceptable in this context. To have admonished the student at this point about the use of *that* word would have derailed the conversation. Instead, Shane acquiesced, and while noting that he does (and did throughout the Bike Build program) set very clear parameters for the use of appropriate and respectful language, he recognised that the point of the conversation was to affirm the affinity of that moment and enable the student to express his concerns. That this student's vernacular contained an otherwise problematic word was not so much of an issue here; the real issue was the frustration with the class at the centre of this discussion. Fixating on the minutiae of the *apparent* misdemeanour was not the priority for Shane. Identifying the larger currents of experience and the students' reception with school was the focus of this exchange, and consequently it was with this that positive relationships and mutual understanding grew.

As a further demonstration of this ethic Shane referred to, what he termed, "therapeutic crisis intervention"; a practice he deployed "to manage a student who's traumatised, who's escalated [in behavioural misconduct], who doesn't have the skillset" to resolve an issue within the realm of expected social decorum. In these moments, Shane drew on the recognition that students often react impulsively to stressful situations and that consequently how he as a member of staff came to respond had a significant bearing on the nature of the resolution. To hone in on the 'micro' misdemeanours of language or (mild) anti-social behaviours at this point would have been to *miss* the point. Instead, perspective and a sense of affinity for the moment was required.

This was taken as an expression of enactivism, as relayed by Kincheloe (2008) via the constructivist psychology of Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela. As Kincheloe (2008) notes:

...the world we know is not pregiven but enacted. Thus, the act of cognition in this context does not involve the Cartesian effort to commit to memory "mental reflections" of the real world. Cognition is more complex than this... Instead of attempting to reconstruct "true" mental reflections of the "real world", learners should focus on how our actions in relation to the world create it. (176)

For Shane, the relationship was key to finding space for discussion around the experiences encountered in school; and indeed, the formation of the world the students confronted in their day to day encounters with school. In this regard, enactivism was brought to the surface through discussions that were prompted by the relationships between Shane and the students. In this regard, Shane was conscious of the fact that the experience of school had multiple dimensions, and was for each student nuanced in innumerable ways. To draw on Kincheloe again, Shane realised that "teaching that does not take such

cognitive complexity into account is short changed” (Kincheloe 2008: 176) and consequently worked to ensure that space and time to exchange viewpoints and share experiences was central to the program.

This ethic toward the recognition of the ‘bigger picture’ within which minor misdemeanours occurred produced a sense of trust and openness in the sessions that was core to the success of the program. In general terms, it was with the trust that this openness and freedom of expression that friendships emerged, but it was equally with a sense of *care* that an ethic of engagement functioned in Bike Build. Core to the accounts of informal learning discussed by Noddings (2005), care stood as central to the engagements encountered in Bike Build. Care for each other as individuals, and equally care for the experiences each student had when engaging with the program, stood as central to the inter-relational nature of the sessions.

An example of this ethic of care is noted in the following exchange between one of the authors and a student participant during the second iterations of Bike Build (Term 3 2016):

*Context: Author Hickey was discussing directions to an adjoining workshop space to secure a hammer for a repair of one of the bicycles.*

Facilitator [Hickey]: So you walk right through the loading bay as if you’re going to out those other doors [pointing toward the exit of the workshop space].

Student: Yep.

Facilitator: In those shelves, you walk right through the [bottom] bay, turn left where the garage door is.

Student: Yep.

Facilitator: In those shelves [there should be a hammer].

Student: On those shelves.

Facilitator: Actually, hang on- I’ll come with you.

[Walking to the adjoining workshop space]

Student: See I used to work on bikes. Still do.

Facilitator: Did you, yeah.

Student: Yeah. Dad's best mate is a mechanic and he works with motorbikes and everything.

Facilitator: Yeah.

Student: So I just get old motorbikes...

Facilitator: He's a motorbike mechanic or a car mechanic?

Student: He's both actually.

- Facilitator: Oh right, okay, cool.
- Student: Yeah. Dad is the same as well and they just love doing stuff with their cars and motorbikes.
- Facilitator: Yeah, good.
- Student: So I go out there a lot and do stuff with them.
- Facilitator: Yep. Do you ride a motorbike too?
- Student: Yeah.

In this seemingly innocuous moment, a connection was formed through conversation; in this instance, around motorcycles. While perhaps not startling in and of itself, that this information was volunteered by *this* student in *this* moment was remarkable. Further, this exchange begged further speculation as to whether these sorts of conversations could happen as part of a regular classroom, compacted with concerns for ‘getting through’ the curriculum and mediated by modes of interaction that rarely allow for idle discussion (let alone walks to adjoining workshop spaces). In many ways, this exchange marked the workshop sessions of Bike Build as moments that afforded opportunities for *meaningful* discussion and interaction. Again, it was with an ethic of care that the interactions proceeded; we wanted the students to express their expertise, just as the students wanted us to know that they brought with them knowledge and experience.

Therese Sippel, Deputy Principal and Head of Junior High School, explained the significance of this appreciation of care in terms of the experiences many of the students attending the school had beyond the school. Although we are cautious in unintentionally characterising the student population in certain ways, for many of the students in Bike Build, experiences beyond school were often problematic, with sometimes fractured relationships with parents and family providing a predominant experience. As Therese explained:

- Therese: Yep. Look our community to some degree is quite dysfunctional in terms of the families and probably kids don't - not all and I'll say this very generally. But lots of kids don't have anyone in their homes to aspire to.
- Facilitator: Sure.
- Therese: Like, so, in most homes there's not two parents working. In a lot of homes there's a lot of welfare in the family. Part of it is they just get lost in a world of ‘no confidence’...

Bike Build became a site in which different forms of relationship could emerge—to others, to school and work and to Self. This was an important aspect of Bike Build for Therese, as a key purpose of the program was to establish a productive conceptualisation of school and relationships to learning that would provide options within school and beyond as the students worked toward post-school education, training and employment (an idea that re-emerges below in the discussion of ‘pathways’).



To close this section, a final word is provided by one of the student participants who relayed the experience of the workshop sessions as follows:

Facilitator [Hickey]: Yeah, thank you. It's been good?

Student: Yep. This is a good way to do school.

Facilitator: Yeah. So you learnt something though. You've...

Student: Teamwork. Teamwork... and participating, it was good working with each other.

Relationships and the formation of effective strategies for working collaboratively, developing 'affinity' and finding a space within a larger collective to demonstrate expertise and find 'voice' was central to the Bike Build workshops.

## Theme 2: Behaviour

Intimated earlier in this analysis has been the theme of 'irreverence'. This was central to the nature of the inter-relationships built between students and students and facilitators, and provided a point of reference for considering how behaviour was expressed within Bike Build. For example, the 'looseness' of the Bike Build sessions, discernible as they were as somewhat unruly moments of interaction, inquiry and discovery, encouraged a certain amount of 'irreverence' as a marker of inter-personal connection, trust and respect. The students came to Bike Build (in most cases) unable to effectively engage in the forms of interaction typical of most other spaces of the school and consequently found Bike Build to be a space where speaking openly, engaging in conversation around and beyond given topics of focus and the general 'rowdiness' of the workshop sessions to be both engaging and generative.

As a core objective of Bike Build, 'behaviour' (and behaviour *remediation*) came to feature in many of the discussions had with both the facilitating teachers and students engaged in the program. Given that part of the initial remit of Bike Build was to remediate the ways students went about interacting with others, Bike Build had as central to its purpose the understanding of why problematic behaviour emerged in the first place. It was made apparent by Shane Adshead that, what he termed 'escalation' in behaviour problems was often the result of the enforcement of a regimen of expected behaviours associated with the formality encountered in most spaces within the school. Such enforcement of behaviour for behaviour's sake came to stand as an expression of (what we frame here as) 'unthinking authoritarianism'. Just as with Shane's acquiescence toward minor indiscretions in language use noted above, understanding the wider context within which behaviours were enacted stood as key for not only understanding why the students were acting in the ways they were, but also for appreciating that something larger than a simple enforcement of a code of behaviour was at play in these instances. In Shane's terms, behaviour was intimately linked to space and relationships, whereby the regular classroom came to be known and reacted against as a site of regimented behaviour and established modes of conduct. For the students of Bike Build, 'escalation' as Shane saw it, was often the result of a confrontation; students unable to negotiate the formations of the classroom 'acted out' (in Shane's understanding, usually through frustration), which in turn invoked a set of sanctioned responses to subsequently mediate these 'problem' expressions of behaviour. Consequently, the dynamic of the

regular classroom was one where the students invariably had problems with expectations around forms of expression and communication and sanctioned modes of interaction.

As Shane highlighted however, these mediations of ‘acting out’ often exacerbated the situated by failing to adequately respond to the core problem. Shane relayed in interview his views on how such behaviour indiscretions could be handled by relaying experiences drawn from the alternative learning program:

Shane: Yeah, we've asked the students to come up with rules for the alternate groups and it was really empowering seeing them come up with the ideas about respect and different things...

I said it wasn't a normal classroom and that although they were still in school and had to abide by school rules, I was going to see if they'd be responsible and come up with some ideas. When they are talking over the top of each other or being disrespectful, it's really easy to take a back step and just say, you guys, you're breaking your own rules. When do we proceed? Do we stop until you follow the rules?

Facilitator [Hickey]: You'll just hang tight...

Shane: Yep.

Facilitator [Hickey]: ...they'll just do what they need to do until they stop and realise what's going on?

Shane: Yeah, there's no need for me to get upset because it's about them, they set their own rules and their own boundaries and if they're going to break them...

This approach to behaviour mediation was borne from a deliberate student-centred approach to managing workshop sessions and incorporated a tolerance toward minor indiscretion. As Shane highlighted in a later interview:

Shane: ...one of the biggest issues they have in class is swearing—and not because they're swearing on purpose, but because every second or third word they hear at home is a swear word! They've said, “sir, can we swear in class?” I've said, that can't be one of the rules, how can we change that? They came up with [an ethic of] “what is said in the room stays in the room” and so I said that [is fine] unless we're talking about something that's not safe. But I said, that's fine, what is said in the room can stay in the room.

The building of effective relationships that tolerated mild irreverence were key for all the staff interviewed for this project. For example, Will Curthoys, a teacher with extensive experience including as a school leader, noted the following exchange:

Will: I think the schools in Australia are pretty much the same or relatively the same. I think it's the way that the teacher sets up the classroom and the expectations. So, I think that if a teacher - it's all about your relationship you have with your kids I believe. So, some teachers have really positive relationships. Some kids don't like the teacher but they understand exactly what they need to do in the

room. Their expectations are clear, the work is clear and so they know what to do. They know what's going to happen if they overstep the line so they feel quite comfortable in that.

I think where the kids, like the ones we're talking about, struggle, is where they don't know where the boundary is. So, they keep pushing to find the boundary where teachers are inconsistent with their reply or the way that they deal with them and that they don't feel like the teacher cares for them at all. So, I don't think they necessarily have to like the teacher or think the teacher likes them but I think it's about...

Facilitator [Hickey]: There's some sort of connection with the relationship.

Will: I think if it's about the kids know that you *care* for them...care for them [in that] you want them to achieve, you want them to do well. You're worried that they're not working in your classroom but it's not because they're mucking around, it's because they're not working and you believe as a teacher they can do better. I think kids switch on to that.

Significant here is the mention of *care*, and how Will positioned care as a foundational feature of effective inter-relationships. But further to this, the association Will makes to the influence of space is also notable. For Will, the prescriptions of the place and context of learning, and more particularly (and as intimated by Shane also) the expected modes of behaviour that these spaces predict, works to mediate behaviour cues. The effect of the Bike Build workshop space was crucial in this regard. The unfamiliarity of the workshop space, combined with the unfamiliarity of the facilitators (the authors), led to new formulations of behaviour. While traces of old behaviours were present—for example, students in each of the three iterations of Bike Build during the first few weeks of the workshops did on occasion ‘play up’ in efforts to test the boundaries that Will identifies—it remained that, by and large, the new surroundings of the Bike Build workshop space provoked new forms of interaction. But further to this, when the expected responses—the sorts of responses that likely would have been issued in the regular classroom—did not come in response to problematic behaviours, a disorientation of the social dynamic that combined with the more literal disorientation of the workshop space resulted. It was in this moment that new formations of behaviour and relationship emerged.

A stark counter-point to how the workshop space worked as a productively disorienting environment was provided by the exchanges students had with one of the support teachers who accompanied the second iteration of Bike Build. This (intentionally unnamed) teacher, while committed to Bike Build, and cognisant of the fact that the students participating in Bike Build had trouble negotiating the structures of the regular classroom, was still confounded by the ‘unruliness’ of the workshop spaces. The authors noted on several occasions the nature of his interactions with students, and his admonishment of students for (what were considered by the authors to be) minor indiscretions in behaviour—the use of the occasional, mild ‘swear’ word, moderate distraction and so on. More problematically still, this teacher also ‘stood on ceremony’ (as we put it), requiring the students to refer to himself and us as ‘Sir’ and ‘Miss’ (even though we had made it clear to the students that we were more than happy with any mode of address the students preferred, including the use of first names—we were visitors in *their* space, after all). On one notable occasion this teacher drew attention to a student, and subsequently broke the focus this student had on that week’s activity, by making a point

of the fact that the student's socks were not pulled up. The effect, of course, was immediate resistance from the student. Annoyed not only with the affront regarding the socks, but also clearly frustrated that the focus on the bike had been broken, this student retaliated with recalcitrance—the students had of course heard all of this before from this teacher, with the sort of 'escalation' that Shane highlighted now occurring directly in front of us. The other students in the group also became distracted by the charge of the socks, lost focus on the activities at hand, and proceeded to skilfully, and without the teacher in questions being *too* notably aware, lambast his authority with some deeply irreverent commentary muttered under the breath of his capacity to teach, his masculinity and competence as a human being. This commentary was clearly problematic, but equally could have easily been avoided with a more sophisticated understanding of the context of the workshop spaces and the relative insignificance of the socks.

When it was considered that this distraction and problematic behaviour resulted from the admonishment of a student for his *socks*, we were left wondering whether all the hassle was worth it. This particular teacher struggled with the informality of the Bike Build sessions, and was notably uneasy with the looseness of the sessions and (what he perceived as) a lack of structure. In our terms, he had missed the point entirely—there was indeed a profound structure in place, and focussed activity. More importantly, it was activity that was prompted by the students themselves. To admonish students on, of all things, socks at that point of an otherwise engaged session ultimately led to chaos, distraction and (further) breakdown in the inter-relationship between the students and this teacher. Instead, this situation may have proceeded more positively by allowing this minor indiscretion to slide. If the socks *were* a major point of issue, the student might have (for example) been quietly engaged after the workshop session.

The facilitation of the Bike Build workshop sessions did require some deftness on behalf of the facilitators present (including Shane and the other partner organisation personnel involved from week to week), and it is noted again that the workshop sessions were not free-for-all moments of anarchy. Limits were still set—especially around safety, instances of inter-personal violence and anti-social behaviours displayed in the workshop spaces. But for relatively 'minor' indiscretions—things like the occasional 'swear' word, wandering in and out of the workshop space, mild distraction of other students, and indeed, *socks*—no real response was issued. In fact, the workshop tasks simply proceeded with attention directed to those students who were engaging in their tasks. By and large, any behaviour issues soon quelled as the limits were set, and as interest in the activities at hand took over from any meaningful attempts by individual students to disrupt the workshop.

This relied of course on an element of novelty that the bikes provided, along with that of our presence as 'outsiders'. The disorientation that the Bike Build sessions provoked from expected modes of conduct formed a central aspect of the program, with the bicycles and activities being in some ways significantly unlike activities (typically) undertaken in other aspects of the students' experience of school. But significant also was the assertion of student-centredness in these sessions and the formation of respectful and trusting interactions with students (and within the group as a whole). Although the first few weeks of each iteration of Bike Build saw the (somewhat expected) testing-of-boundaries, it didn't take long for the students to realise that we weren't bothered if they attempted to play up. This was *their* time and we were operating in terms of *their* own rules. As the students engaged they found space to try ideas and facilitators who were actively responsive. Within this dynamic of mutuality and strong inter-relationships, the demonstration of cooperative behaviours accordingly emerged.

As one student relayed, the experience of meaningful interactions with his teachers resulted in the development of a respectful mode of conduct. For this particular student, the pathway to Bike Build had been the result of very poor interactions with teachers. The following statement comes as all the more remarkable given that this student was on his *last chance*; he had been given the (stark) alternative to either leave school or participate in Bike Build:

Facilitator [Hickey]: So is that what happens in the classroom? You just get frustrated...

Jimmy: Yeah...People just yell out stuff and I just get annoyed and then just walk out of class.

Facilitator [Hickey]: Yeah, right. Including the teacher?

Jimmy: Yeah, sometimes.

Facilitator [Hickey]: Yeah, that's not so good at all. You get along pretty well with Sean [Turner, alternative program convenor].

Jimmy: Yeah, Sean is good.

Facilitator [Hickey]: So what is it about Sean particularly that makes him a good teacher?

Jimmy: He's nice...Just stops and listens. Yeah, real calm.

For Shane, the changes in behaviour witnessed in Bike Build were a result of the 'open', dialogic nature of the sessions, as compared to the compacted and regimented experience of regular classroom. The capacity the workshop spaces held for the formulation of meaningful inter-connections marked the defining feature of Bike Build in this regard, with the time and space for irreverent interaction and irreverence key to its success. As Shane noted, the distinction between the modes of interaction possible in Bike Build stood in stark contrast to the regular classroom, with this drawn specifically in terms of the time and capacity the workshop space opened for interaction. With meaningful interactions between students and between students and facilitators, the formulation of senses of trust and respect grew, which in turn led to shifts in behaviour:

Shane: [The Alternative Program is important] because they can stay focused on a task, know they're not going to get in trouble and be supported by people and build relationships, [where] in a classroom setting that just doesn't happen.

The teacher doesn't have the time to build relationships and help them stay focused and the teacher might tell them, "you need to listen, you need to pay attention", and not actually give them the skills to do that or teach them how to pay attention.

A major feature of the Bike Build sessions corresponded to the time afforded to dialogue and discussion. As a fundamental aspect of a 'relational pedagogy' deployed in the sessions, and a hallmark of the nature of the approaches taken when interacting with students, this approach to prefacing dialogue had a marked bearing on the behaviour expressed by the students. The link between dialogue, engagement and behavior in this regard provided a key theme from the analysis of the data.

## Theme 3: Pathway

A recurring theme from the literature corresponded to the idea of the ‘pathway’. The alternative program itself was often described as a distinct ‘pathway’, distinguished as it was from a ‘standard’ (or more regular) progression through school. This formulation of the pathway had a *teleological* basis to it: the alternative program was geared toward ensuring that the students engaged in it (and for whom the ‘regular’ pathway of school had not been an easy one) would progress successfully through the program, and ideally, back into school, training or employment. In this sense, the pathway was the point at which the remediation of the alternative program had its effect; in other words, it was with the pathway provided by Bike Build that the remediation could proceed.

To offer a means of conceptually illustrating this aspect of the findings drawn from this research, the notion of ‘linework’, borrowed from the social theory of Tim Ingold (2015; 2007) is presented as a means for understanding how students progressed through school (and indeed, how they arrived at the alternate learning program to begin with). Offering a conceptual cue for explaining the complex sets of inter-relationships students work within, ‘linework’ provided the means for figuratively explaining how students encountered in Bike Build engaged with school and where likely disruptions to their own progression might occur. As an important concept for considering how the students experienced school, consideration of the ‘lines’ the students traversed—those pathways and journeys they came from and progressed along—offered the means for establishing a sense of what it meant to engage with school and negotiate the complexities of the curriculum and school as site.

Ingold’s (2007) conceptualisation of the line as a “path of movement” (15) provided the scope to consider how the journey through and beyond school functioned for the participating students. During an extended discussion with Sean Turner, Sean outlined how he saw the multiple ‘lines’ in the journey the students were taking. While he wasn’t aware of Tim Ingold’s conceptualisation of lines, he deployed an understanding that worked from a very similar logic. There were several aspects to this:

- At the most visible layer, the students were on a ‘line’ to school that was mandated by the State. Given that all young people in Queensland are required to attain a formal education, school provided a prominent location in which this education was delivered. Accordingly, a ‘line’ from home to school represented a first, figurative, pathway.
- From here, there were the actions and decisions that prescribed where the students ‘were’ in the school. These lines were multiple, and included such ‘lineways’ as the schedule of classes the students had enrolled in, to also including pathways of interaction and behavior the students followed. Intersections with other lines occurred here also; for example with ‘lines of authority’ that ran through the school (represented predominantly by teachers and staff).
- It was with the decisions that the students made, in Sean’s understanding, that determined where the line progressed to. Sean saw the central remit of his job being the encouragement of positive decision making and relayed during the interview, how he worked with students to mediate decisions made and where ‘lines’ of opportunity would extend. The intersections of contact between the students and Sean were the result of the students confronting a ‘line of authority’ (promoted usually by poor behavior and interactions with other teachers) that

necessitated Sean stepping in as Youth Support Officer to mediate the problem and re-establish a positive pathway.

- But significantly, influences external to the school also infiltrated the behaviour of the students; these “outside factors” as Sean referred to these in the interview, included lines inflected and influenced from home and the students’ social networks. For example, how the students were effected by problematic events from home stood in direct relationship to behaviours that came to be represented in school. In these instances, a line from home to school demonstrated effects on how the students then engaged (or not) with school.

The overlay of this symbolic conceptualisation of lines provided a useful means of understanding the pathways the students were on, and how their individual ‘journeys’ through school proceeded. There is further research to be done in this area, but consideration of the line, as the point of progression, and the junction point of multiple lines that Bike Build represented offers a rich conceptual basis from which to consider alternative learning programs.

To close this analysis, Figure 1 provides a visual cue as to how lines were considered. These ‘pathways’ hold a teleological nature, in that they prescribe a progression from one point to the next, but importantly, also demonstrate the multiple ‘lines’ that influence a students’ experience of school. This important realisation that multiple lines operate simultaneously provides a useful cue for considering a further idea of Ingold’s (2007); the mesh. The mesh is, for all intents and purposes, the overlay of multiple lines simultaneously, with this metaphor providing a useful further point of consideration for how the experience of the students could be understood as a ‘journey’ that followed ‘lines’ of experience and interaction.

For this report, the line as a metaphor of progression, of decisions made, and journeys enacted offered a useful means for explaining how the students encountered in Bike Build not only came to the program, but also progressed from it. For Ingold (2007):

...life is lived...along paths, not just in places, and paths are lines of a sort. It is along paths, too, that people grow into a knowledge of the world around them, and describe this world in the stories they tell. (2)

New possibilities for the students emerged through the Bike Build program: possibilities for expression, interaction and learning. Understanding the student journey as a line, complete with intersections and overlaps, provided a useful metaphor for considering how the student came to experience school and progress through it.

Figure 1 is derived from the fieldnote sketches produced by CI Hickey during an interview with Sean Turner, and outlines how the student journey can be conceptualised as a ‘line’. Importantly, and as Sean relayed in terms of the nature of interactions students experienced at school, often times the journey encountered a ‘junction point’ (indicated by the asterisk symbols). It was in these moments that, as Sean relayed, students came to make decisions on which ‘directions’ they would take. It was also in these moments that Sean noted an opportunity for engagement and dialogue with students about the directions taken and speculation around the consequences different directions would yield emerged. As a mechanism for conceptualising and representing the interactions, encounters and decisions the students were experiencing as part of their schooling, the journey as line provided Sean with a means of not only

understanding how the students were encountering their schooling, but equally, a provocation to talk through with the students where they saw themselves progressing. The line offered a tangible means of thinking through the experience of dis/engagement and where problems in schooling for students emerged from.

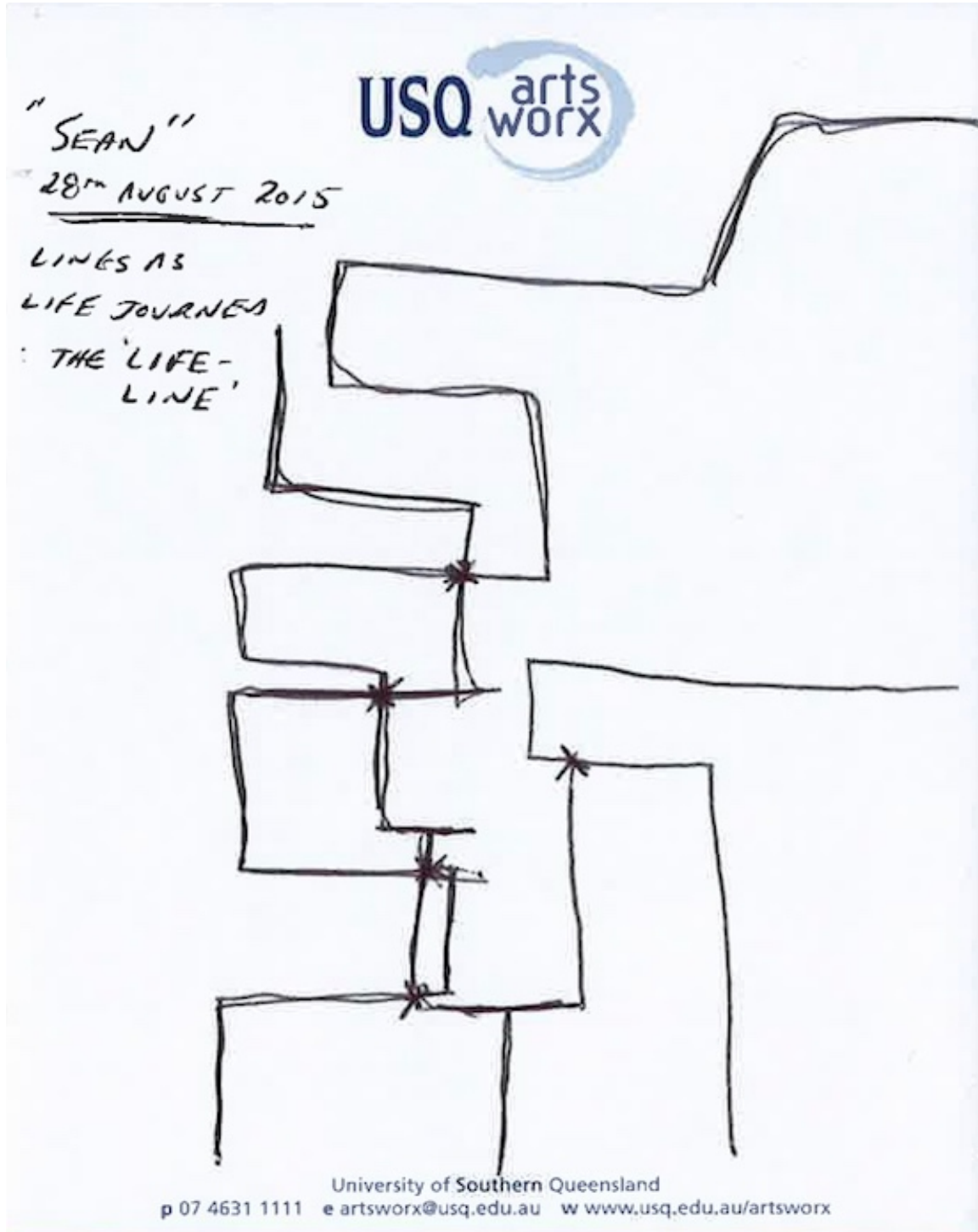


Figure 1: Linework and the Student Learning Journey



## Discussion

The striking feature of Bike Build was the informality that marked its conduct. As a pedagogical dynamic, informality stood as a mode of practice that deployed irreverence as its defining feature, and exerted a disorienting effect over the ways (expected) forms of engagement and interaction practiced within the school site came be realised. Informality produced an ‘affinity space’ (Gee 2005) of engagement in which new sets of relationships and practice could emerge. This was central to the success of Bike Build, with this formulation of ‘disoriented’ engagement with school and learning ultimately the result of the relational pedagogy that framed the workshop sessions. This disorientation had a positive effect on the students, and new relationships emerged with schooling and learning and between peers and teachers. Informality offered a generative experience in this regard, and provided the necessary basis for reformulating how learning could be experienced.

Beyond this, ‘linework’ provided the conceptual means for considering schooling as a ‘journey’, and consequently, i) how the experience of school was mediated by lines of experience that the students had encountered from home, from within school, from peers and so on, b) the place of the alternative learning program as a ‘junction’ point for remediating ‘lineways’ of disengagement and early school leaving, and c) the positive effects that intervention (mediated by Youth Support Offices Sean Turner and later Shane Adshead) had on re-orienting the ‘journey’ the students were on. The role of the alternative learning program in this regard stands as fundamental to the potential for remediating disengagement, but also draws close attention to the way that the alternative learning space functions as a site for confronting problematic lineways and re-orienting the journey.

In summary, this research found that, when the student experience of schooling was considered from the perspective of the student, a relational pedagogy built on an ethic of mutual respect, student inquiry and dialogic engagement provided a valuable means for understanding the experience of school, reorienting ways of learning and re-establishing positive relationships with school.

The Recommendations that follow draw from these findings and suggest that more can be done within sites of formal learning to consider how young people who are at risk of disengagement might be more effectively re-engaged in learning.

## Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn directly from the findings detailed above, and correspond to i) the place and purpose of the alternative learning program within the mainstream school setting, ii) the effects of a relational pedagogy, iii) the place of informality within the learning dynamic, and iv) the development of ‘linework’ as a conceptual tool for considering student progression.

**Recommendation 1:** The importance of Bike Build and the alternative learning program in affording an opportunity for students to re-engage in schooling was apparent in this research. Consequently, scope exists for the Department to undertake a comprehensive review of alternative learning programs currently embedded in Education Queensland schools, with a view to understanding the nature and range of formations these programs take and the effect they are having on learning and re-engagement of individual students.

This report recommends that, in building on existing research by te Reile (2014) and McGregor and Mills (2012; 2013) a *comprehensive State-wide review of alternative learning programs within Education Queensland secondary schools be undertaken*. The purpose of this review will be to not only gain a sense of what is being offered across the State, but to also provide a foundation upon which further study into the ‘relational pedagogies’ deployed in these programs might proceed.

**Recommendation 2:** The relational pedagogy central to the Bike Build workshops and as relayed throughout this report, was central to the success of Bike Build. Such an approach to students drew from a concern for the establishment of productive, mutually respectful and dialogic relationships between students and between students and teachers. Accordingly, scope exists for the Department to investigate the codification of a ‘relational pedagogy’ for application in Education Queensland schools.

This report recommends that the *codification of a ‘relational pedagogy’ that prefaces the building of effective interpersonal relationships be undertaken*.

**Recommendation 3:** Informality provided the impetus for the relational pedagogy enacted within the Bike Build workshop sessions. An opportunity exists to examine how informality provides the foundation of a ‘relational pedagogy’ and mode of engagement within the alternative learning space.

This report recommends that *further research on the dynamics of ‘informality’ as these apply to the enactment of a ‘relational pedagogy’ be undertaken*.

**Recommendation 4:** The student ‘journey’ provided a central metaphor for explaining and positioning student progression through school and through programs such as Bike Build. Understanding how students both progressed along lines of experience and encounter that extend from home, peer networks and other social contexts, as well as according to the interactions they experience within school, stood as an important means by which student behaviour and engagement within Bike Build was understood.

This report recommends that *further research exploring how the metaphor of the ‘student journey’ finds activation be undertaken*.

## Conclusion

There is a necessary idealism implied throughout this report. This report has outlined how consideration of the ways that relationships are formed and nurtured, the ways that behaviour is considered and the effects different pathways have on students comes to mediate the experience of learning. But more importantly, this report has also outlined how consideration of schooling and what ‘counts’ as learning effects the day-to-day experiences of school for students. In these terms, this report argues that the ways classroom spaces and interactions between teachers and students proceed has immediate bearing on what possibilities might emerge from schooling. As the invocation of the idea of informality throughout this report suggests, relational and dialogic interactions that result in meaningful relationships between individuals provides a powerful means of mediating learning and the experience of school.

The *Recommendations* outlined above consequently point toward this ethic. Significant to these *Recommendations* is the idea that the ethic (or indeed *ethos*) implied within these points is something that can be readily incorporated into mainstream school environments. The experiences of Shane and Sean, the Youth Support Officers encountered through the fieldwork for this research demonstrate how this might proceed, and if the experiences of Wilsonton State High are any indication, the effectiveness these approaches to relationships, behaviour and pathways can have.

In this regard, this report parallels suggestions from noted African-American pedagogue and scholar bell hooks that “to educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn” (1994: 13). Continuing hooks (1994) notes:

That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students...provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin. (13).

Within contexts of ‘packed curricula’, increasing governmental scrutiny, the attainment of ‘work readiness’ and ultimately, the corporatisation of schooling, the argument presented in this report suggests that space for the consideration of the formation of meaningful relationships powered by dialogic and informal interactions is central to the development of a practice of schooling that engages young people and provides opportunities for empowered and positive pathways. That it is possible, through the reconsideration of where and how learning proceeds, to reformulate the ways that learning is encountered, stands as a worthwhile and important undertaking.

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