Student engagement in schools serving marginalised communities

This paper shares findings from a project that examined how schools serving marginalised communities facilitate students' substantive engagement. Through interviews with students, parents, teachers and school leaders, we determined that substantive engagement was supported by formal and informal strategies that enabled access to rich learning opportunities, the provision of welcoming school and classroom climates, and the enactment of pedagogies of care and school-wide programmes focused on substantive engagement. There were four key areas of substantive engagement: engaging curriculum and pedagogy, engaging school climate, engaging with learners, and engaging with communities. Strategies to support engagement included the removal of barriers to learning, such as assistance with breakfast or public transport, nurturing a positive school climate, providing support for ethnic groups and the delivery of alternative or flexible programmes. Drawing on the findings from five case studies, we propose four principles for substantive student engagement in complex contexts, which will be useful for school leaders and teachers who work in schools that serve marginalised communities.

Keywords: substantive engagement; nurture; pedagogies of care; learning outcomes; social justice

* ACCEPTED VERSION *

Introduction

Student disengagement is a serious and complex educational issue (Fredericks et al., 2016), with students from marginalised backgrounds persistently demonstrating lower levels of engagement (Tomaszewski et al., 2020), which can lead to serious implications for academic and social outcomes (Smyth et al., 2014). Disengagement is both caused by and contributes to students feeling marginalised, resentful and ineffective regarding their schooling, and is consequently associated with poor academic outcomes (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). Conversely, engagement in schooling has been positively correlated with improved academic

achievement, higher school completion rates and an increased sense of belonging (Harris, 2011).

Disengagement is a term that has been used to cover a range of experiences, policies and processes, which disenfranchise young people from their right to a meaningful education. This contrasts with schools that strive to make their classrooms places where students want to be, not because of the external rewards or threat of sanctions, but because they are places where students' imagination, thirst for knowledge, understandings of the world and questionings about what is and what could be, are ignited. However, students' lives and personal circumstances can get in the way of them accessing such classrooms, and simply increasing attendance data without making every day at school count educationally will be a hollow achievement (Mills et al., 2018).

The focus on attendance in departmental and school-based policies has reduced the issue of engaging students with their learning to simple accountability measures, such as records of attendance and school disciplinary action (e.g., suspensions and expulsions). We contend that while these metrics represent a very specific form of procedural engagement—in terms of students 'turning up' to school and complying with school rules—they cannot account for the rich learning opportunities that are made possible when strategies for substantive engagement are enacted through school-wide commitment to high-quality learning experiences and supportive school climates.

We agree that 'many economic, cultural and political factors that inhibit retention and engagement within schooling … are beyond the control of schools' (McGregor et al., 2017, p. 71). However, as sites of potential social and intellectual development, schools have the opportunity to offer marginalised and disenfranchised young people access to high-quality and meaningful education, which can make 'the difference'. While we do not suggest that schools can 'fix' broader inequitable social and economic structures, there is much that

schools can do within their physical and temporal boundaries to work together *with* young people to transform the 'social and material conditions of [their] lives through meaningful education' (Riddle & Cleaver, 2017, p. 508).

This paper provides insights into how schools serving marginalised communities have attempted to facilitate students' substantive engagement with meaningful learning. Through our conversations with students, their parents, teachers and school leaders, we considered the importance of positive school supports, school and classroom climates, pedagogies and programmes, and reforms that have enabled improved learning outcomes for students in marginalised communities.

This paper draws from data collected as part of an *Education Horizon* project, which was funded by the Queensland Department of Education. The project identified a range of public high schools that served communities facing a complex range of factors of social disadvantage across Queensland, Australia. The schools that were in the scope of our project had already used positive school-wide policies and strategies to improve attendance rates, academic and vocational outcomes and were reporting low disciplinary absences and improved learning outcomes for students. Our project sought to examine formal and informal strategies to determine the principles of their success.

Research design

The initial stage of the project reviewed existing Department of Education datasets to identify 21 public high schools in Queensland that had below-average values (i.e., < 1000) on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). ICSEA is a contentious proxy measure used in Australian education policymaking to indicate socioeconomic levels and other factors of relative educational disadvantage (Riddle, 2018). However, these schools also demonstrated low rates of disciplinary absences and above-average attendance and Year 12 completion rates, as well as publicly available (e.g., on official school websites and annual

reports) information regarding improved academic and vocational outcomes, school-wide approaches to curriculum and pedagogy and innovative co-curricular initiatives.

ICSEA values, disciplinary absence, attendance and completion rates data were cross-matched and clustered by remoteness status, school size and Indigenous student proportion to determine 21 key schools that served marginalised communities yet managed to 'buck the trend' of disadvantage. That is, the 21 participant schools shared characteristics of high attendance and completion rates, and below-average ICSEA scores. However, there was substantial variation in other demographic clustering factors, with regional and metropolitan schools, those with low (i.e., < 10%) and high (i.e., > 90%) proportions of Indigenous students, and small (i.e., < 200) and large (i.e., > 800) student populations.

The second stage of the project involved telephone interviews with the principals and other key personnel in these schools. These interviews, which lasted for approximately one hour, sought school leaders' perspectives on engaging students in marginalised and/or low socioeconomic communities, and a broad overview of the strategies used by the school to mitigate the effects of disadvantage. The final stage, the focus of this paper, involved face-to-face interviews conducted with school leaders, staff, students and parents from five case study schools, which were chosen to reflect the range of demographic and geographic spread of public state high schools (SHS) in Queensland (see Table 1). Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from our university ethics committees and permission to conduct research in government schools in Queensland was received from the Department of Education.

Table 1

Overview of the case study schools

School	ICSEA	Students	Indigenous	LBOTE	Location
Crocus SHS	930	90	9%	5	Remote

Lotus SHS	960	180	13%	5	Very remote
Mimosa SHS	830	350	36%	10	Inner regional
Shasta SHS	910	660	8%	70	Major city
Wisteria SHS	870	870	40%	25	Outer regional

Substantive engagement in meaningful learning

Interest in the construct of academic engagement and its widespread acceptance as a prerequisite for productive learning has proliferated since the mid-1990s (e.g., Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Zyngier, 2008). However, the broad range of strategies to enhance student engagement, together with current discourse around engagement reveal that it is a contested concept that is theorised in multiple ways (e.g., Appleton et al., 2008; Harris, 2008, 2011; Parker & Hodgson, 2020). Engagement has historically been considered in terms of three discrete dimensions: behavioural (i.e., easily observable and quantifiable aspects of schooling such as attendance and compliance with school rules); affective (i.e., observable psychological dispositions, attitudes and relationships); and cognitive (i.e., psychological investment in mastery learning and use of strategies; e.g., Allen et al., 2019; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; McMahon & Portelli, 2004; Reschly et al., 2020; Zyngier, 2008). In their review of the research literature, Fredericks et al. (2004) found that while some researchers focused on a single dimension, others contended that all three are equally significant. However, it has also been argued that cognitive engagement is the most important dimension of a hierarchical model (e.g., Harris, 2011). Arguing that 'any adequate treatment of student engagement must transcend … behavioural manifestations', Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) suggested a distinction between procedural and substantive engagement (p. 283). The authors' definition of procedural engagement aligned with the notion of behavioural engagement, as students comply with school rules and regulations such as attending school, completing work in a timely and satisfactory manner, and participating in classroom activities. This view of

engagement has been critiqued within the literature as it leads to a simplistic cause-effect characterisation of student engagement and implies a deficit view of students (McMahon & Portelli, 2004).

Conversely, Nystrand and Gamoran's (1991) conceptualisation of substantive engagement incorporated the affective and cognitive dimensions and transcends procedural engagement, as students demonstrate a sustained commitment to the content of schooling. While there is no clear behavioural manifestation of substantive engagement, the authors argue that students who are substantively engaged are more inclined to ask questions relating to the content rather than, for example, the word count of an assignment. We work with this understanding of engagement, in which there is a significant relationship between substantive engagement and academic achievement (e.g., Allen et al., 2019; McMahon & Portelli, 2004; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

Discourse around engagement also requires consideration of what students are engaging with, and what amounts to content that is academically worthwhile (McMahon & Portelli, 2004). There are several conceptualisations of meaningful learning within the literature. For example, in distinguishing between rote and meaningful learning, Mayer (2002) asserted that meaningful learning occurs 'when students build the knowledge and cognitive processes needed for successful problem solving' (p. 227). At the nexus of educational and cognitive psychology, Karpicke and Grimaldi (2012) defined meaningful learning as producing 'organised, coherent, and integrated mental models that allow people to make inferences and apply knowledge' (p. 408). Incorporating more student-centred views, Newmann et al. (1992) described authentic learning that is perceived by students as meaningful, valuable, significant and worthy of their efforts. This is furthered by McGregor et al. (2015), who described meaningful education as 'programmes that resonate with the needs and aspirations of young people who find themselves on the outside of mainstream

schooling pathways' (p. 611). Despite this complexity, the basic formula in schooling policies has been attendance + retention = engagement, which indicates a singular focus on procedural engagement. In this paper, we explore the distinction between procedural and substantive in the context of Queensland schools serving marginalised communities.

Procedural engagement: Every day counts

Procedural engagement refers to easily observable and quantifiable aspects of schooling such as attendance, retention and disciplinary absences, which are often used as simple accountability measures. Schools are often judged on the levels of attendance as indicated by their inclusion on the publicly accessible Australian My School website (https://www.myschool.edu.au). While attendance at school is important for learning, it is insufficient for the promotion of learning. Concerted efforts to promote attendance were evident in the Queensland Department of Education's (2018) *Every Day Counts* initiative, which sought to improve student attendance at school through a shared commitment by students, parents, caregivers, schools and the community. This initiative promoted four key messages:

(1) All children should be enrolled at school and attend school every day.

(2) Schools should monitor, communicate and implement strategies to improve regular school attendance.

(3) Truanting can place a student in unsafe situations and impact on their employability and life choices.

(4) Attendance at school is the responsibility of everyone in the community.

Equity considerations have meant that improving student attendance at school has become a major concern for governments (Birioukov, 2016). Frequent school absences have been linked to poor academic achievement, school drop-out, at-risk behaviours, involvement in the

youth justice system and more limited life opportunities (Kearney & Graczyk, 2014).

Absenteeism has also been examined in relation to students' personal, cultural, economic and social circumstances (e.g., McGregor & Mills, 2012; Skattebol & Hayes, 2016), which may affect students' ability to attend school and potentially perpetuate cycles of nonattendance into subsequent generations.

There is also substantial evidence to suggest that student disengagement also reduces the sense of belonging at school, which can have substantial flow-on effects in terms of academic achievement and social outcomes. Pendergast et al. (2018) argued that students' sense of belonging is affected by relationships in school, school climate, pedagogical practices and school-based interventions and programmes.

The report—*Making Every Day Count: Effective Strategies to Improve Student Attendance in Queensland State Schools* (Mills et al., 2018)—explored positive strategies used by 50 schools throughout metropolitan, regional and rural Queensland, which had been identified by the Department of Education as having productively addressed chronic absenteeism in their schools. In general, while quality teaching and learning practices were considered to be important, the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and attendance was not explicit. Instead, there was an emphasis on rewards and data-driven approaches, rather than specific pedagogical strategies and curriculum reforms. Student retention has been viewed largely as the outcome of successful attendance policies (Lamb et al., 2015), rather than a necessary precursor for substantive engagement in meaningful learning.

Ensuring attendance at school is necessary but not sufficient in relation to the social and economic goods available to students from their schooling and to the wider benefit to the community that comes from a first-class schooling system. Having a curriculum that is meaningful to students and pedagogical practices that challenge and engage students should form the central business of schooling. We contend that education policy remains focused on

procedural engagement, which emphasises the behavioural elements of getting students to school and keeping them there, while concentrating on students' compliance with school rules and procedures (e.g., Mills et al., 2018; Queensland Department of Education, 2018). Further, we argue that this emphasis needs to shift to include the cognitive and affective dimensions of substantive engagement (e.g., Reschly et al., 2020), which are critical to any meaningful engagement with schooling.

Substantive engagement in a meaningful education

Substantive engagement is not the 'being there' of school attendance and retention, but the 'being present' required to connect students in substantive ways to their learning. Going through the motions of schooling and ensuring compliance with the rules, procedures and processes might appear like something approximating engagement, but we contend that it is a thin version of procedural engagement, rather than a thick version of substantive engagement.

Parker and Hodgson (2020) argued that the 'outcome space' of substantive engagement is composed of nine factors: safety, relationships and connection, expertise and skill, resource, time, managing outside or external pressures, environmental changes, understanding of self and understanding of student and individualised attention. These factors were evident in our study, with the added contextual complexities of the case study schools serving marginalised communities, which faced high levels of poverty and unemployment. Further, these communities experienced entrenched economic and social disadvantage, ongoing poor outcomes in substance abuse, mental health and addressing community violence, among other complicating factors such as regionality and remoteness. As such, there were fewer opportunities to access rich social services and community support infrastructure, employment and healthcare.

In several projects that have been undertaken on student engagement and schooling, leadership and school climate have been identified as significant factors (e.g., Chen & Weikart, 2008; Van Eck et al., 2017). We found that leadership was important in terms of ensuring that the school was characterised by positive relationships between staff and students, students and students and staff and staff. In this research, such leadership was grounded in an understanding of building a positive and supportive climate, knowing the students (both their data and as people) and drawing on resources that recognised the needs of low socioeconomic populations without resorting to deficit stereotypes.

We found that procedural engagement was discussed more frequently than substantive engagement, with several schools conveying they were in the early stages of exploring engagement strategies after having lifted their attendance rates. Key factors that supported students' engagement through the removal of barriers to learning included assistance with breakfast or public transport, nurturing a positive school climate, support for ethnic groups and the provision of alternative or flexible programmes. Students facing difficult circumstances were typically 'case managed'. For example, a teacher at Mimosa SHS explained that the school employed community engagement officers to help address absenteeism 'because getting them here is half the battle'.

We contend that there is a need to shift from extrinsic reinforcers towards more intrinsic strategies to improve attendance by enhancing student engagement through quality teaching and learning practices within a positive school environment. Current strategies are based on the idea that every day at school must be made to count (e.g., Queensland Department of Education, 2018). However, there has to be an educational reason as to why it is critical for students to attend every day (Mills et al., 2016). Issues of pedagogy and curriculum have to be central to addressing issues of school attendance through the provision

of a meaningful education (e.g., Mills & McGregor, 2014). One principal summed up the difference between procedural and substantive engagement, explaining that students might:

> Turn up every day, but it doesn't mean that they are motivated, and it doesn't mean that they want to succeed. Ultimately, it's their school, so we need to make it a place that they want to be' (Principal, Crocus SHS).

There were four key areas of substantive engagement that arose during our conversations with school leaders, staff, students and parents at the case study schools: engaging curriculum and pedagogy, engaging school climate, engaging with learners and engaging with communities. We turn to each of these now to illustrate some key findings related to substantive engagement in schools serving marginalised communities.

Engaging curriculum and pedagogy

Teachers, students and parents shared several examples of engaging teaching and learning across the case study schools. For example, Shasta SHS ran a co-curricular Science–Technology–Engineering–Maths (STEM) club, which focused on robotics and programming and energised students to learn more about STEM-related topics. The STEM teacher had introduced a forensics unit in Year 10 science, during which students engaged in hands-on problem solving and critical thinking to gather forensic evidence from a mock crime scene to collaboratively evaluate and synthesise the evidence.

There were many instances in which it was clear that substantive engagement was enabled by rich curriculum and engaging teaching practices. For example, a Year 7 student at Crocus SHS explained that 'if teachers have good energy, it makes the kids feel good'. Similarly, a parent suggested that they felt that there was evidence of successful engagement when their child would 'talk about what's happening in class and what they have learned, with a smile on their face' (Parent, Crocus SHS).

In addition to curriculum, there were a range of co-curricular, flexible learning and alternative education programmes made available to students across the case study schools. These included school-based traineeships and work placements, as well as encouraging students to undertake tertiary and vocational training opportunities, working in hospitality, health and tourism, and volunteering within their local communities.

Dadvand and Cuervo (2020) argued for the 'importance of care as a relational practice based on principles of mutuality and recognition of difference …[which] expands what schools can do for students from academic goals to well-being and inclusion' (p. 149). There were multiple instances of teachers caring for students, which went beyond narrow conceptions of student outcomes to engaging with the lives of young people in multiple ways:

> I think the first step is knowing the students in front of you and having that rapport with them. If you don't have rapport with them, you are not going to engage them (Teacher, Crocus SHS).

> The three things you need are passion, a heart and you need to understand that it's just hard (Education Services Head of Department [HOD], Mimosa SHS).

Students recognised when their teachers went above and beyond the curriculum to engage with their lives in deeper, more meaningful ways:

> I love the teachers here. They are like my family because they help me with things at home as well, like, things that I can't talk to my aunty because she doesn't understand English. So, yeah, it's a bit hard at times to explain for her. So, I went to school and I got help from my teachers, and they help me, pretty much with whatever (Junior Student, Shasta SHS).

> [The teacher] makes the topic—even if it is a hard thing to grasp the concept of, they still make it easy to learn and make the most boring thing sound fun and relate it to everyday life (Senior Student, Wisteria SHS).

> The teachers don't just blab on about stuff that you just generally don't want to hear about. They give you different ways of taking it in. So, sometimes, one of my teachers lets us grab our whiteboards out and do maths on our whiteboard instead of her just talking all the time (Junior Student, Wisteria SHS).

Some schools prioritised engagement through school-wide approaches to curriculum and pedagogy, with demonstrable results:

> We have changed over to a learning and engagement team … I have also been leading some targeted intervention strategies with our 7s and 8s … and my focus is changing into now working in the classrooms with teachers (Master Teacher, Mimosa SHS).

There were also significant challenges faced by schools serving rural and remote communities, with staff retention and continuity causing a range of issues with the delivery of innovative and targeted curriculum and pedagogical strategies. For example, the Curriculum HOD at Lotus SHS explained how school-based vocational training has been affected by staff turnover: 'You then get first-year teachers who have no [vocational education] training … and then we train them for three years and then they go … so, getting traction is really, really hard'.

Engaging school climate

Most of the case study schools had large populations of Indigenous students, culturally and linguistically diverse students or students who had come from rural or remote communities, which required focused engagement processes. Often, this involved the use of community engagement teams, who would make regular connections between the school and families to encourage attendance and participation at school. Most of the schools ran breakfast clubs on one or more days a week, which would provide students with sustenance and the opportunity to chat with a counsellor or community engagement liaison. Sometimes, the principal at Mimosa SHS would cook breakfast and take the opportunity to sit and speak with students.

The importance of a welcoming environment, in which students could talk to teachers and other members of the school community helped to ensure a climate of engagement:

> The teachers are really good; they can just have a chat with you or just sit down and talk; which means you are closer to the teachers; and then you understand they need to get their job done and you need to learn (Student, Lotus SHS).

One school serving a highly diverse multicultural community in an urban setting had established a series of cultural programmes and had a cultural coordinator, who facilitated engagement with community organisations, businesses and government departments for students and their families. The First Nations Coordinator at Shasta SHS described the importance of engaging with Indigenous students and making them a central part of the cultural life at the school:

> Once a week, I have a meeting with our Indigenous kids. They all come down … they bring some food down or we put in a little bit, you know, a couple of bucks … We set up who is going to do 'Welcomes' on parade [and discuss] what traineeships are coming up (First Nations Coordinator, Shasta SHS).

Staff recognised that engagement was a significant issue, which presented multiple challenges:

> I think the real challenge for us, as educators, is to find the kids that are slipping through the cracks, the ones that don't want to engage, the ones that are off sick or away from school (Music and Drama Teacher, Wisteria SHS).

There was a clear commitment across the case study schools to remove barriers to school attendance and engagement. Multiple varied and contextually relevant programmes and support services were in place to address social, economic and cultural barriers faced by students within the schools and communities. Some of the serious problems faced by students included mental health conditions, homelessness and poverty. Sometimes, just being able to

clear the path for learning (McGregor et al., 2017) for students to be physically able to attend school was a successful outcome for students.

Engaging with learners

There was significant evidence across the case study schools of a range of targeted strategies to get students to school and to then keep them engaged once they got there:

> This year, what I have done is work on developing relationships with students and their families—specifically kids that are at risk at any stage—and then developing programmes and rolling out programmes to support those students' needs, referring them onto possibly an external youth worker [or] to external psychologists. (Youth Support Coordinator, Mimosa SHS)

The principal at Shasta SHS explained the school-wide approach to ensuring that their students were given access and opportunity to engage in schooling:

> We have strategies in place for all year levels. So, they will each have a theme for the year, which the Year Coordinator works with on them. And we do case management to support every kid at each year level. We have got intervention strategies for those who are disengaged. We have external programmes [to support] our really curly-end kids … Our Student Services teams will go to homes and deliver food. Or the barrier might be they are disengaged because they can't get to school, so we support kids with [public transport] cards … Each kid has such unique circumstances, that it's about us knowing and understanding where they are at and what support they need (Principal, Shasta SHS).

Similarly, the principal of Crocus SHS described the specific strategies utilised to engage with students who were struggling:

> We have got a really good support services team, in a guidance officer, a chaplain … a youth health nurse and a transition pathways officer … they are just phenomenal in terms of thinking outside the box and looking at different things we can do for kids, to make sure that they are staying in school but they are also getting some outcomes before they leave (Principal, Crocus SHS).

The principal at Mimosa SHS described some of the substantial challenges facing the school and its community, including bullying, mental health and community violence:

> There are kids who are sick and there are kids who are struggling socially with the whole idea of fitting in … We are trying to reverse violence, school bullying and violence within the community … There is a bit of mental illness, where kids can't cope with some of the social machinations at school. I know I am talking clichés here, but some kids don't fit in and some kids are scared to come to school; and we are working in that space (Principal, Mimosa SHS).

Some young people in marginalised communities experience extreme levels of deprivation and hardship, which the Youth Support Coordinator at Mimosa SHS referred to as complex trauma. To consider these students as being disengaged in schooling is an unfair judgement, given that they are disenfranchised and require sophisticated wrap-around support services in their schooling:

> When you are working with disengaged kids that come from complex trauma backgrounds or from youth justice, you need to be in control without being controlling, because those kids always need to control their space and they do that to control their anxiety. So, if you can be gentle and kind and private, and pull them aside, so you are not humiliating them or making them feel even worse than they already feel about themselves. (Youth Support Coordinator, Mimosa SHS)

> We have a guidance officer, a chaplain and an engagement officer. They work with certain students that may be having personal issues, which stop them from coming to school. It provides them with someone they can trust, to talk to. Sometimes they can't talk to their parents about what's going on. (Parent, Crocus SHS)

Due to substantial concerns regarding some students' mental health and wellbeing, including anxiety and depression, there were a range of effective 'wrap-around' programmes that were implemented across the case study schools. The details varied across schools, although the main elements included close relationships with local government departments and

community organisations, such as youth services and community outreach centres, the police, health services and other community and social supports.

Engaging with communities

There was a strong emphasis on community integration across the schools, especially with older students undertaking work-based placements and flexible learning arrangements. We spoke with students who were working as bakers, hairdressers and tourism operators, attending agricultural college and other vocational training centres. One student had already acquired their forklift and bobcat licences, while two others had substantial experience as shearers, travelling as far as Victoria (i.e., over 1000 km) for work.

Lotus SHS had a 'mobile classroom' in the form of $1.6 million commercial catering truck, which utilised Federal Government funding under the Trade Training Scheme. The unit included a commercial kitchen, a marquee and seating for up to 300 people. This moveable professional kitchen provides hospitality training for students while simultaneously servicing social functions across the region. The truck was based at one of our case study schools but also works with four other high schools in the region, travelling hundreds of kilometres to do so. This project clearly engages students who were looking for certificates in event management and various aspects of hospitality and tourism, which was one of the identified 'growth' sectors of the region. Thus, a symbiotic relationship existed between the school and the community. A parent described the benefit of the programme:

> It has been able to provide a programme where students can see real relevance to actual employment and industry here. It's created really strong links with current businesses, in all of those towns. And it's also provided a social network as well (Parent, Lotus SHS).

Staff at the school also highlighted the importance of the school–community relationship:

> Our community always puts their hand up to take a trainee of some kind or an apprentice: mechanical, electrical, tourism, hospitality (Head of Student Services, Lotus SHS).

> We engage quite broadly with the community … I think that's probably the difference; that we are making sure that we are tapping into as broad of the community as we possibly can, whereas in other schools … for whatever reason, you don't tap into your community quite as broadly (Deputy Principal, Lotus SHS).

Elaborating on the importance of close community integration, the school principal described how there was no fixed method of forming partnerships:

> Sometimes it's us approaching industry. Oftentimes, it is industry or business approaching us, saying, 'We would like that'. The next one that we are going to tackle is healthcare because that's the big industry that's taking off (Principal, Lotus SHS).

This principal went on to describe the critical importance of leadership in fostering school–community relationships:

> It probably does come down to, in a large extent, to the principal; how willing they are to work with the community and foster and create those links. So, there's definitely been highs and lows (Principal, Lotus SHS).

The Youth Support Coordinator at Mimosa SHS described the importance of working closely with government and not-for-profit agencies, including the Health Department, Indigenous community organisations and the Police Citizens Youth Club: 'I attend the interagency meeting, which is pretty much all these workers, where we talk about how we can best support and offer wrap-around support for all the kids'.

Discussion: Principles for substantive engagement

While schools understandably invest resources into increased procedural engagement— getting students to school and keeping them there—the measure of success for engagement

should not rely solely on metrics of school attendance and retention, although low absentee, suspension and expulsion levels along with high graduation rates are certainly worthy. We contend that it is through substantive engagement that students are able to make meaningful connections between their learning and their lives (Mills et al., 2016, 2021). There needs to be a balance between the behavioural, affective and cognitive modalities of engagement for it to work in any sustained manner (Reschly et al., 2020).

Shifting the emphasis of engagement from procedural to substantive is a long-term project, which requires close collaboration between schools and their communities, in which school leaders, teachers, students and their families work towards a shared vision of the engaged school. As such, our first principle for substantive engagement is that schools should develop deep and sustained connections to community, through which students are engaged in their schooling as a central part of community life, rather than a tack-on or compliance to state-mandated schooling (Mills et al., 2018, 2021). To do so requires that schools change to suit students, rather than the other way around (Riddle & Cleaver, 2017). This includes the physical and social structures of schools from the built and social environments through to curriculum and pedagogy, which cater to the diverse learning needs of students, honour their cultural histories and knowledges and make meaningful connections to their lives beyond the school gate.

Our second principle for substantive engagement is that schools need to work closely with their communities to understand the challenges and barriers facing young people regarding access to school and engagement in their learning (Allen et al., 2019). While there are common factors of disengagement that are prevalent in the literature, the nuances and specificities of each community's context need to be carefully accounted for in any audit or review of student engagement. Importantly, any such review needs to consider procedural

and substantive engagement issues, including behavioural, affective and cognitive factors (Reschly et al., 2020).

Our third principle for substantive engagement is that schools should develop school-wide plans student engagement data specific to their communities—with key input from students, their families and community groups—which generate targeted programmes and other interventions that address issues of disengagement and accommodate the unique contextual features of students and their communities. These can range from curriculum reform to new pedagogical approaches, generating flexible learning programmes, school-based traineeships and apprenticeships or embedding work-based learning into flexible approaches to schooling that enable young people to do their schooling remotely or via e-learning, while undertaking work placements in the community.

Our fourth principle for substantive engagement is that schools seeking to improve student engagement in marginalised communities need to clear the path for learning (McGregor et al., 2017). By clearing the path, we mean that the physical, economic, social and emotional barriers that prevent young people from being able to attend and engage in a meaningful education are removed as a precondition for substantive engagement. Many schools now provide wrap-around services that embed community groups and support services, including counselling, physical and mental healthcare practitioners and student welfare support, alongside breakfast clubs, accommodation support, travel concessions and flexible learning options. These are not exhaustive, and each school would determine the activities appropriate for the needs of its students. However, clearing the path for learning should be a guiding principle for any school community seeking to address student disengagement and disenfranchisement.

Conclusion

From our conversations with school leaders, teachers, students and their families in our study, we found that there was an overwhelming sense of commitment to school as a site of important academic, social and emotional labour for young people. However, there were multiple factors, often outside of the schoolgrounds, which needed to be addressed to 'clear the path' for learning. The focus of policymakers and school systems on attendance and retention is a relatively simple response to a complex problem and is necessary but insufficient to the task of producing quality academic and non-academic outcomes for students. What we found in our case study schools was a generally well-maintained balance between procedural engagement and strategies for substantive engagement.

The needs of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are complex and addressing these needs is often beyond the capacity of individual teachers or even schools, without sustained close relationships with government support services and community organisations. We contend that substantive engagement is inextricably connected to meaningful learning and has four key frames: engaging curriculum and pedagogy, engaging school climate, engaging with learners and engaging with communities. Aspects of one or more of these frames were evident in each school we visited, which we suggest accounts for their initial screening as 'high-performing' schools in terms of retention and academic outcomes, in spite of the range of disadvantages facing the communities serviced by those schools.

The case study schools indicate the importance of a shift from the current emphasis on procedural engagement, of which measures of attendance and retention are two key indicators, to substantive engagement, where young people are sustainably engaged in meaningful learning that connects to their lives and communities. While there are no simple metrics that measure substantive engagement, we contend that it is important that young

people are purposefully and sustainably engaged in meaningful education as part of the collective commitment to re-enfranchise marginalised learners.

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