

Educational leadership and the challenge of engaging young people in meaningful learning

ACCEPTED VERSION

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Abstract

This chapter presents some innovative educational leadership initiatives and programs designed to support and engage young people in secondary schooling in complex settings. Data from various case studies are shared to demonstrate school-level strategies that help keep students who are in danger of disengaging from education, not only in school but enthused about their learning. In this chapter, we emphasise strategies for school leaders and outline a series of principles for engaging with young people in mainstream school settings that have complex features, including: rural and remote locations; high proportion of students from Indigenous or English as an Additional Language or Dialect backgrounds; low-SES/high-poverty; and drought-affected regions and areas of low employment. We argue for the importance of community connectedness as a core pillar of engaging with young people in meaningful learning, as well as for a variety of deeply contextualised, local practices that best meet the learning needs of students within their local communities.

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Introduction

School leaders have long been concerned with the dual problems of *how to get students to school* and then *how to keep them there*. These issues of attendance and retention feature in annual school reports and other formal metrics of school performance. Improving student attendance and retention has been a major concern of governments worldwide (Birioukov, 2016; Kearney, 2003), as there is significant evidence to suggest that frequent absences from school are linked to poor academic achievement, school drop-out, at-risk behaviours, involvement in the youth justice system, and more limited life opportunities (Birioukov, 2016; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Rocque, Jennings, Piquero, Ozkan, & Farrington, 2016).

In Australia, there have been numerous policy strategies, such as the Queensland government's *Every Day Counts* initiative (DoE, 2018), which explicitly addresses one element of this problem—attendance. This issue has been well-researched (e.g., Birioukov, 2016; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014; Ladwig & Luke, 2013; Mills et al., 2018) and involves a range of evidence-based practices for increasing student attendance. The second part is generally regarded as a problem of retention, which has also drawn interest from researchers and policy makers (e.g., Allen et al., 2018; Lamb et al., 2004; te Riele, 2007). However, we argue that a shift in emphasis from this dual attendance–retention model to the issue of engagement will not only improve attendance and retention, but engage students in purposeful and meaningful learning (McGregor, Mills, Te Riele, & Hayes, 2015) that is deeply connected to their lives and communities (Riddle & Cleaver, 2017). The research

from which this chapter draws explored, among other things, the significance of school leadership in responding to schooling disengagement¹.

As interest in the construct of engagement has proliferated since the 1990s (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Zyngier, 2008), so too has the recognition that even though ‘we know it when we see it, and we know when it is missing’ (Newmann, 1986, p. 242), engagement is a messy construct which is complex and perceptually elusive (Fielding-Wells & Makar, 2008; Harris, 2008, 2011). Research suggests that this is because substantive engagement, defined by the internal processes which sustain an authentic commitment to academic work (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991), is often difficult to distinguish from procedural engagement, which refers to easily visible compliance and competently going through the activities of schooling (Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991).

Using publicly available data, our project identified several secondary schools serving low-SES communities throughout metropolitan and regional Queensland that were utilising positive strategies to improve attendance rates as well as academic and vocational outcomes for students in at-risk groups. Telephone surveys were conducted with the school principals or key personnel in 30 schools, then using five selected school case studies, the latter part of the project examined these positive strategies and the extent to which they were succeeding in tangible ways for students.

We argue that shifting the emphasis from a simple dual attendance–retention model to engagement as a primary focus, can have long-reaching and positive effects on attendance and retention, school curriculum and pedagogies, and academic and social outcomes for students in complex educational environments. Our findings suggest that the positive effects

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from emphasising engagement to enhance attendance and retention can potentially spill over from schools to their wider communities.

Many schools have developed systems of rewards to encourage improved attendance and engagement (Lupton, 2006; Mills et al., 2018). However, it has been argued that luring students with rewards, bribes and incentives runs the risk of demeaning schools as serious sites of learning (Arthurs, Patterson, & Bentley, 2014), and does little to instil trust in the school as a fundamental part of the community. Similarly, some of the principals in our study expressed caution in placing too much emphasis on rewards:

I don't think it is sustainable to always have those extrinsic things ... it's superficial ... You have to look at the culture around learning and ensuring kids are confident learners, so that they feel valued at school, and that will have that deep down, this is why we need to be at school (Wisteria SHS).

This view is reflected in other research which found that students need to be actively engaged in constructive and meaningful classroom work (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). The use of extrinsic motivations such as rewards, incentives and extra-curricular opportunities are all well and good, but they do not compete with the importance of relational and communal work in classrooms, where students feel like they belong, and that what they do and say matters.

Why engagement matters in a data-driven policy environment

The increasing dominance of accountability measures and the emergence of what Lingard (2011) calls *policy as numbers*, translating 'complex social processes and events into simple figures or categories of judgement' (Ball, 2003, p. 217), is reflected in increased demands for numbers-driven performance by schools and school leaders. While it is unsurprising that schools are compelled to improve their performance data, including attendance and retention rates, we argue that focusing on attendance and retention is insufficient for improving

learning outcomes. Rather, a shift in focus to students' substantive engagement in meaningful learning would not only improve attendance and retention rates, but also enhance academic achievement and social cohesion. At the same time, we are reluctant to suggest that it might be in the interests of students to have their engagement *measured*. The reduction of engagement to a *score* flies in the face of creating meaningful, holistic educational experiences.

In the study underpinning this chapter, school leaders' understandings of what constitutes engagement varied widely, and reflected varying constructions of engagement from procedural to substantive. For example, one principal articulated a belief that engagement is about 'making sure they're lined up and ready for the teacher ... with all their equipment ... ready to go into class', while another recognised that students 'can come and turn up every day, but it doesn't mean that they are motivated'. This view aligned more closely with the students' conceptualisations of engagement as 'getting involved'; 'wanting to be there'; and 'enjoying it and wanting to learn'.

The principals' definitions of engagement were typically suggestive of procedural rather than substantive engagement. This research also suggests that procedural conceptualisations of engagement have led to a simplistic view of the relationship between engagement and academic success, which focuses on the individual and effectively ignores factors such as gender, socio-cultural and ethnic factors, as well as economic status (Zyngier, 2011).

Discussions about engagement also require consideration of what students are engaging with, as to achieve improved academic outcomes, they need to be engaged in work that they perceive as meaningful, valuable, significant, and worthy of their efforts (Newmann et al., 1992). A principal at one of the schools also discussed this point:

There were some [simplistic] measures of: ‘if you are doing this funky stuff with kids then you will have kids engaged in school’. I'm not in that park at all ... fundamentally, I believe every kid wants to come to school and every kid wants to learn’ (Wisteria SHS).

There was significant evidence that school leaders of our case study schools were implementing strategies that attempted to encourage schooling attendance and participation, support students in emotional and material ways, and connect them to their local community. Thus, our first principle relates to this.

Leadership, data, relationships and support

Strong, positive and enthusiastic school leadership and a coherent and supportive schooling philosophy underpins strategies for student retention and engagement. Many of the schools we worked with had developed ‘data walls’, which are visual displays of student attendance and achievement data that the principals linked to Sharratt and Fullan’s (2012) book, *Putting FACES on the Data*. Within the current policy climate of an intense focus on numbers, Sharratt and Fullan advocate for ‘humanising the teaching of each student and having the tools to do so systematically for all’ (p. 6). However, it may be argued that there is a significant difference between creating data walls and putting faces on the data, with some schools focusing intensely on these data walls, which in some cases were displayed in every classroom. This also raises questions about students’ and parents’ access to such visual displays of performative data and these depictions of children’s learning.

The principals and teachers regularly interrogated the data - ‘What’s the data telling me? Is it particular year levels, perhaps, or classes? Is it particular days of the week?’ (Hyacinth SHS) In one school, a teacher explained, ‘The first part was to make sense of the data. So, it is a bit like, we have got data now. What do we do? We know our kids are low,

but what's the next step? How can we move our students forward?'(Shasta SHS) This use of the data was common, with attendance and achievement data frequently used as a starting point to develop programs to address disengagement, as defined by these data.

One school described how they had 'moved on from data walls ... we went down the road and they had a ... Level of Achievement system ... we just grabbed it with both hands ... had a team around it, that set it up and got it moving ... we were able to turn from behaviour to achievement ... because the kids got to see how they were going' (Wisteria SHS). The students we spoke to reported responding positively to this shift because 'you can see that there's positive improvement, I feel like it gives more motivation'.

Creating a positive environment through strong relationships

Many principals discussed the importance of developing strong relationships with students and their families, with several staff outlining the '3 R's: relationships, relationships, relationships'. In one school, the principal explained that the school had become a safe space within the community: 'Our kids are here every morning, from very early in the morning and here very late ... it is a safe place where the community comes in' (Wisteria SHS). It was within this safe space that finding solutions to problems was sometimes achieved. One principal explained that 'It is really part of getting to know the kids ... they know you are not trying to trip them up, but honestly trying to find out ... is it okay? ... there's a willingness ... for kids to open up ... a general feeling of being understood' (Shasta SHS). The importance of developing strong relationships was also articulated by many teachers: 'Showing the kids that you really care about who they are and about their learning; that you are on this journey with them and that you are going to support them along that way' (Crocus SHS).

Addressing bullying was also considered critical to ensuring a safe and positive school climate:

The school started the Stymie app/program so students can report bullying. And it goes to our year level coordinators; our behaviour management team, et cetera ... there's been a few things raised. 'Oh, okay, this was something that we weren't aware of' ... there's been hoaxes ... But I think that's a good avenue for students, once they become familiar with it (Lotus SHS).

Following on from this, many principals described the importance of developing strong, mutually beneficial relationships with their local communities through work experience, apprenticeship or traineeship programs, 'which underpin the absolute success of everything we do ... it's because of community engagement that we have really high success with our students' (Lotus SHS). Just as the community provided a means of alternative programs for young people, the school fulfilled the often-changing needs of the community. For example, 'sometimes it's us approaching industry. Oftentimes, it is industry or business approaching us ... the next one ... that we are going to tackle is healthcare, because that's the big industry that's taking off' (Lotus SHS).

Multi-services 'wrap-around' support

Removing barriers to attending school was another approach facilitated by school leaders. They utilised their data to implement a 'wrap-around' approach to tailor interventions to meet the needs of students who were identified as disengaged or at risk of disengaging. These programs focused primarily on the conditions that work against engagement, thus *clearing the path for learning* (McGregor et al., 2017). Through this approach, attempts were made to accommodate or ease the difficulties young people face as the result of homelessness, poverty or young parenthood. In one school, the principal explained, 'If we didn't run that wing/department within the school, we wouldn't have our head above water, to even look at anything else' (Wisteria SHS). Similarly, another school leader noted:

We have breakfast club three days a week; we have homework club after school ...

We give out food hampers and parcels to families, if we know that they are struggling. We also [help with transport] if we know kids can't physically get to school and are financially burdened (Shasta SHS).

Participating principals acknowledged the 'power of work' that goes on in schools, but that schools cannot succeed on their own. They reported that the schools worked collaboratively with external agencies such as youth mental health services, Police Citizens Youth Clubs and family support agencies to remove barriers to attendance. In response to high rates of mental illness, anxiety, depression and possibly suicide among some students, the schools recognised the importance of a coordinated approach to student health and wellbeing. We saw this in operation in schools that coordinated the work of the Behavioural Team, the Student Support Team, the Youth Support Coordinators, a school-based police officer, Health nurse, chaplains, the Community Education Counsellors and some teachers to ensure that students facing difficult times were supported from multiple perspectives.

This approach sometimes led to modified programs or timetables, which in some cases entailed a special classroom on site with 'a dedicated teacher, a flexible program, just for these students'. Some students participated in school-based apprenticeships or traineeships with community businesses or were offered alternative academic pathways.

Recognition and valuing of diverse cultures

Some schools with high Indigenous populations made a significant effort to address issues by employing an Aboriginal liaison officer to conduct home visits, and by working with local communities, especially Indigenous Elders. One multicultural school in an urban area provided an effective approach to recognising and valuing diverse cultures. This school had appointed a 'Cultural Coordinator' that ran cultural programs for the students and worked

with them to facilitate their entry into traineeships and ensured that they were made to feel comfortable in school. Indigenous students also worked with this person and it was these students who determined protocols in respect of ‘Welcomes to Country’ and other special ceremonies:

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 each ... We set up who is going to do ‘welcomes’ on parade coming up; what traineeships are coming up; what things like that are available? (First Nations Coordinator, Shasta SHS).

Long term projects that connect the school and community

There are growing calls for rethinking the nature of schooling through ‘whole-of-community systems’ to enhance the active engagement of young people. Contained within many policy responses to student disengagement are two main foci: changing students (e.g., remediation, therapies) or changing schools (e.g., environment, curriculum and pedagogy) including systems of schooling (e.g., alternative structures and streams). Previous research (Mills & McGregor, 2014) has suggested that changing schools and schooling structures have a greater impact than focusing on changing individual students in isolation, although young people’s personal circumstances clearly matter. The most successful responses have occurred in schools that have worked to address the individual causes of disengagement holistically, within a framework of school change and by engaging with the local community. Further research (see Carroll, Bower, & Muspratt, 2017; Pendergast, Allen, McGregor & Ronksley-Pavia, 2018) has demonstrated that school belonging and social connectedness within community are key protective factors that promote social inclusion and positive wellbeing and prevent school drop-out. It is thus clear that student disengagement cannot be solved by

simply changing teachers or young people. It is the very organisation and system of schooling and its relationship with communities that needs changing.

In one example, a ‘mobile classroom’ in the form of \$1.6 million B-double truck was (and still is) an initiative of a remote Queensland high school that 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 movable professional kitchen provides hospitality training for students while simultaneously servicing social functions across the region. The truck is 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.

Engaging curriculum and pedagogy

We contend that in prioritising school attendance, there has been an emphasis on procedural engagement, leaving substantive engagement lagging. However, we did find intermittent examples of highly engaging teaching practices. For instance, one Year 10 science unit focused on forensic science through fingerprinting, chromatography and footprints. At the end of the term, the teacher set up a crime scene in a classroom. The students worked collaboratively to process the scene, putting numbered markers next to evidence and taking photographs, and so on. In an engaging twist, other teachers were identified as suspects and the students had to solve the crime scene. This example demonstrates elements of curriculum and pedagogy that are most likely to engage students: hands-on; student-centred; problem solving; creative thinking to generate solutions to real-life issues; critical thinking; gathering, evaluation and synthesis of primary evidence; collaboration; and fun!

This teacher had also set up a STEM class to which *all* students were invited, because in ‘... most schools that have STEM classes, they only invite the high-end students ... you find that the lower ability students ... just take off with this stuff’.

Another teacher explained that, ‘I always like to start debates/arguments because ... everyone's got an opinion. So, if I can burr up one group, the other group will burr up; and before you know it, we have got this great, big discussion of stuff going on’.

There was also some discussion of the way in which ‘the high-achieving kids have gone under the radar because ... you have obviously got to deal with the immediate stuff’ and that ‘we do a lot for our lower ability students but what are we doing for our higher end students?’

There was recognition that schools needed to be doing more about substantive engagement with schooling:

I think they get that balance between having high expectations with their curriculum but knowing that you have got to look after people. There's that balance ... you can't have the one without the other. Like, there's no use looking after kids' wellbeing, when you are not setting them up for a future.

Across the participant schools, there was frequent use of flexible learning and alternative programs to broaden students’ opportunities. For example, in one rural high school this involved one or more days out at an agricultural college or obtaining other qualifications (for example one student managed to acquire both bobcat and forklift tickets).

Conclusion

Drawing on the findings of our study and the breadth of research literature available, we propose the following set of simple, easy to implement and practical recommendations that can be adapted to suit the particular contextual needs of different schools and learning places:

1. School leadership teams should undertake a thorough review of the student population and their needs alongside an audit of the practices within their school that might contribute to issues of schooling disengagement *and* engagement. The review and audit could form part of the school's annual population survey or be conducted separately. There are commercially available school audit tools, although we are not able to recommend one or another. The important thing is to determine potential disengagement *sticking points* and also to identify possible programs and activities that are already within the school that are working well to keep students interested and committed to their learning.
2. The leadership team needs to develop a whole school plan with staff (and students) to address schooling disengagement while taking into account the unique community context, location, schooling demographics and student learning needs. This is something that cannot be rushed and requires ongoing conversations with the school community, possibly including other support and social services in the broader community. The plan should present clearly identifiable goals and timelines for implementation, as well as measurable outcomes that can be reported on and shared with the school community.
3. The leadership team needs to take responsibility for 'clearing the path for learning'. Different members of the leadership team should be assigned responsibility for facilitating teams of workers and teachers to address specific aspects of the schooling environment. This could include a wide range of activities and responsibilities, including the transitioning of students into high school; addressing student welfare (e.g., breakfast clubs, travel concessions, accessing mental and physical health practitioners); learning diagnostics; school culture and a sense of belonging—and other hurdles to learning and engagement

present in a local community. ‘Clearing the path for learning’ should be a core component of the whole school engagement plan described in the point above.

4. Schools need to be entrepreneurial and creative with their initiatives. Most importantly, they need to develop projects that will connect the school to community resources, create symbiotic relationships between the school and community that will facilitate learning and create webs of ongoing support systems for young people. These partnerships with the broader community cannot be underestimated, whether they be with local sporting and community associations or with potential employers.
5. Schools must offer a range of different meaningful pathways for students for whom university is not an immediate destination, but which do not take them down ‘dead-end’ roads. These pathways can include a wide range of opportunities, including school-based traineeships and apprenticeships, flexible learning programs, school–employer partnerships where students can study while they work, distance and e-learning, tuition and counselling services for students who require additional support, as well as a range of potential wrap-around support services.

We trust that this short chapter has made clear the importance of achieving and maintaining a balance between a tripartite focus on attendance, retention and engagement for student success. Place too much emphasis on attendance, particularly through the use of extrinsic rewards, and you risk losing some students because they do not find themselves suited to school—or more accurately, school does not suit them. At the same time, there is little point in having engaging pedagogies and curriculum if you cannot get students through the front gate each morning. But it is important to recognise that attendance and retention are preconditions, rather than outcomes, of successful learning in schools. We suggest that the

complexities of behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement be foregrounded by principals and explored with staff so as to create better understanding of the needs of students. It is incumbent upon school leaders to use data *purposefully* to create both individualised webs of support for young people and whole-of-school reform for supportive and healthy school communities.

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