Education Foundation

CROSSING THE BRIDGE: WHAT DO SCHOOLS IN POOR COMMUNITIES SAY ABOUT MIDDLE YEAR REFORM?

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Education Foundation Australia is an independent, nonprofit organisation that supports real-life learning and partnerships between schools and the community for the benefit of students in the compulsory years of schooling, especially those facing disadvantage.

Last year, with funding from The R E Ross Trust, the Foundation set out to discover how schools in our most disadvantaged communities are turning around learning outcomes for middle years students. In particular, the Crossing The Bridge study set out to investigate how these schools are using personalised or student-centred approaches to boost engagement and learning. It aimed to find out what has supported or hindered them and how their success could be implemented more widely.

Our decision to focus on personalised or student-centred learning comes out of our 18 years of work in supporting student-centred learning in government schools. It also comes out of our recognition that effective learning is increasingly being defined as learning that puts the learner at the centre.

This kind of learning approach goes under numerous names and is not, of course, exactly the same in all its manifestations. The Crossing The Bridge study defines student-centred learning as a learning framework that:

• Personalises teaching and learning to meet individual student needs
• Emphasises building meaning and understanding rather than completing tasks
• Is based on a challenging curriculum connected to students’ lives
• Enables the student to be an active participant in his or her learning
• Encourages cooperation between students
• Is guided by rather than centred around the teacher
• Connects learning to the wider community outside the school.

Our interest in student-centred learning also came out of the fairly common claim that it can provide part of the solution to disadvantage. Bob Connell proposed 25 years ago that the learning needs of poorer students would be better met if learning began with their own experience. Haberman’s prescription for good teaching for disadvantaged students is clearly a student-centred approach. Both the Blueprint and the United Kingdom’s personalised learning policy aim to overcome the effect of student disadvantage on educational achievement.

The study found that internationally, the comparatively few schools that combine high student poverty with high achievement have similar characteristics. One of these is a
student-centred approach to teaching and learning. The schools also have other features in common:

- A deliberate and conscious process of school improvement
- An integrated approach to change that includes teaching, curriculum, assessment, school organisation and school culture
- Effective and supportive school leadership
- Collaborative decision-making between leadership and staff
- A cooperative culture amongst teachers
- High expectations of students
- Respectful and caring relationships amongst students and between teachers and students
- High teacher quality
- Policies, structures and resources that support continued teacher development
- Relationships with parents and the community that support families and enrich learning.

The study looked at nine Victorian government and Catholic system schools in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne that have implemented student-centred learning in the middle years. These included four government secondary colleges, four Catholic primary schools and one government primary school: we were unsuccessful in engaging a Catholic secondary school.

The western metropolitan region of Melbourne was selected as the focus of the study because of the high degree of socio-economic disadvantage among its schools. All of the case study schools belong to Like School Group 6 to 9 or to similar categories within the Catholic system. All were recommended by their regional office on the grounds that they were well embarked on the implementation of student-centred learning in the middle years and had shown some sort of successful outcome as a result.

The impact of disadvantage shows up very clearly in these schools. Many of the students live in a single parent family. Many are new arrivals who have experienced serious disruption to their schooling and still show the effects of trauma. Many live in public housing. Many are transient students.

Many lack home access to IT. Many show low levels of social skills, which mean that the schools spend a lot of time managing student behaviour. Many have what their schools see as limited access to life experience within the context of Melbourne’s social and cultural offerings, even though none of the schools are more than 20 kilometres from the CBD.

As in other disadvantaged schools, low literacy is one of the biggest barriers to boosting student achievement. For this reason, many have linked their student-centred learning to new literacy programs drawing on the work of Carol Christensen or David Rose.

The study’s methodology was simple. I began with consultation and a review of the research literature in relation to disadvantage, disengagement and attempts by systems and schools to improve outcomes for the middle years.

I then created case studies of the nine schools. One school leader and up to three teachers
in each school participated in a series of initial semi-structured interviews. These were followed some months later by a second round of interviews with school leaders to discuss the study’s draft recommendations. A number of the schools also provided documents such as evaluation reports that have been used in the study.

Finally, a broad Reference Group was convened to advise on strategies to support the take-up of student-centred learning across more schools.

While none of the schools are specifically measuring the impact of their student-centred approaches, they all believe that student-centred learning is building student skills in a way that previous approaches have not. They cite marked improvement in student engagement, greater student confidence and self-esteem, more on-task learning behaviours in the classroom, better student group dynamics and a greater student ability to respond to a more challenging curriculum.

They also cite higher teacher expectations of students and stronger relationships between students and teachers. Feedback from students show that they feel that their schools are more student-oriented, that they are better known as individuals and that they have people who are responsible for them and who care about all aspects of their schooling. They also feel that they have much more self-directed work and greater opportunities to negotiate and choose what and how they learn.

The schools attribute these improvements to a more student-centred classroom, which brings with it more focused teacher-student relationships, more explicit messages about learning from teachers and greater consistency in approach from class to class and subject area to subject area.

So what does student-centred practice look like at these schools? Let’s take the example of two schools: Debney Park Secondary College and Gilmore College for Girls.

Debney Park Secondary College has a long history of catering for disadvantaged students, but when refugees from the Horn of Africa began entering the school four years ago, the level of educational challenge reached a new high. The low levels of literacy and numeracy and poor attitudes to school of these students were not going to be met by the teaching and learning approaches previously in place for Years 7 and 8.

The College set up a staged whole school reform process from the start. It piloted a new Year 7 and 8 model before extending it to Year 9 and later, the Year 10 to 12 program. The school has now been restructured into a Middle School and Senior School.

The middle years program is called Towards Equity and Excellence – Every Child Matters. It replaces traditional year levels with small classes to which students are allocated according to their personal learning needs and preferred learning styles. Each group is taught by a team of just four teachers.

This team approach enables close attention to student welfare and attendance as well as to learning. Individual learning plans are developed for each student within a restructured curriculum built around four integrated Learning Areas: Communication, Investigation, Recreation and Design Briefs. Rich tasks integrated across these Learning Areas promote
student interest and deep understanding.

The program also features two innovative community learning resources: SCRAYP and soundhouse@debney.

SCRAYP or the School Community Regional Arts for Youth Program provides creative learning experiences to boost student engagement and achievement. SCRAYP runs arts based programs in a number of western region schools, using community arts mentors trained to work with young people in developing performances related to themselves and their community. Its partnership with the school began in 2003 when the Innovation and Excellence cluster to which it belongs began a strategy to enhance middle years student engagement and learning through the arts.

SoundHouse is a not-for-profit project of the Music Alliance and the Department of Education now based on the school campus in a new purpose-built multimedia centre enabled by the Leading Schools Fund. Its engagement, leadership and hands-on learning principles fit well with the middle years approach. Extensive interviews with students indicate improvements in self confidence, engagement and spoken language skills since its introduction.

Gilmore College for Girls began its middle years reform seven years ago spurred by a number of needs: to turn around low Year 7 enrolments and a significant leakage of students at other year levels, to enable deeper learning and meet individual learning needs, to build better teacher-student relationships and to improve the school’s connection with its community.

The school had previously poured time and money into teacher professional development and curriculum development but this was not being reflected in real change in the classroom. The College realised that its existing structures were blocking its attempts to integrate curriculum, help students feel more connected to school and build stronger relationships between teachers and students.

In 2000, the school implemented 72 minute periods and a four period day across the school, led by the middle years. The longer periods provide opportunities for a range of teaching and learning activities. They give students more time to explore issues in depth and encourage a calmer, more focused school experience.

It also streamlined the curriculum, building in at least one major integrated curriculum project at each year level. These have led to a more holistic, big picture view of the curriculum and a culture where teachers see opportunities for shared assessment tasks. The College believes that it now has in place a relevant and responsive curriculum that encourages independent and deep learning.

The College also introduced an extensive team teaching model across the middle years. Most teachers now work in team teaching structures for almost half of their allotment. The timetable has been restructured to allow two key teachers to teach a home group for at least two subjects each. This means that each group of students has two key teachers for at least 60 per cent of their week. Teachers spend more time with students, getting to know them better and becoming better able to assess and cater for their needs. Students
spend significant time in a more secure structure that encourages risk taking and independent learning.

Each home group team of two teachers works closely together on both curriculum and welfare issues for the students in their care including monitoring of attendance, lateness, classroom management, academic achievement and parent contact. This promotes a more holistic view of student need and greater support between teachers. A year level team brings together all home group teams to address issues facing that year level. Finally, the three year level teams work together on overall middle school issues to form common approaches to welfare or curriculum issues.

The main question of the study was: what supports or challenges schools that want to make their practice more student-centred?

It found three main factors that have supported the schools.

Firstly, they own their practice. The schools are all strongly involved in systemic reforms but only put up their hand for this involvement after setting their own priorities within the school and testing the reforms against these priorities. Given anecdotal evidence that some schools in high poverty areas are overwhelmed by the current reforms, this ability to select the most capacity-building opportunities seems important. Having said this, the government schools are quick to acknowledge that the resources provided through the Blueprint have been key capacity builders and that change would have taken much longer without them.

Secondly, they have found workable models. One of the biggest challenges for schools wanting to improve student outcomes is finding proven models. The government schools used the resources available through the Blueprint process to conduct extensive research including observation of other schools that had had success under similar conditions. All of the schools continue to learn from observation of other schools and work quite hard to share their knowledge as well.

All of the schools drew strongly on policy models. For Gilmore College for Girls, for example, the starting point for reform was the Middle Years Conference program run by the Department in 1999 and 2000. For the first time, the curriculum leadership team saw a simple and practical model that could meet student learning needs. At Debney Park Secondary College, the principal dedicated the school to a solid year of research before the implementation of the new program, drawing on models developed by MYRAD and, later, through the LLEN. What possibly sets them apart from some other schools in the system is the degree to which they have made these models their own.
Thirdly, they have made a commitment to teacher learning. All of the schools have developed teacher professional learning teams where teachers meet on a weekly timetabled basis to share ideas, planning and practice. In addition, they bring their whole staff together in regular professional learning forums. With support from the Leading Schools Fund or Catholic system initiatives, some have created specialist roles to support teacher learning and developed relationships with critical friends and mentors. Even with system support, these learning structures are a big commitment for schools with limited resources, but the schools see them as indispensable.

So what about the challenges? The schools face four major challenges in changing practice to improve student outcomes.

The first challenge is finding the money. Student-centred learning comes at a cost. Out-of-school learning experiences, smaller classes and time for teacher learning are expensive. Some of the schools have been inventive in gaining support from local government, industry and the philanthropic sector, but funds remain tight. The shortage of funded time for learning and exchanging ideas is a particular source of frustration for staff who want to see progress quickly. Teacher Professional Leave programs are valuable, but they mean that teacher learning happens outside its central context – the classroom. The principals would prefer an increase in their core staffing or untagged funding that they could use to fund teacher learning in the school.

The second challenge is engaging the community. Student-centred learning should include real life learning experiences meaningfully linked to community contexts, but family factors and limited capacity make this difficult for the schools to implement. Even though these are dynamic, outward-looking schools, they generally lack the capacity to build or maintain partnerships with outside organisations that could bring in needed resources and opportunities.

The third challenge is engaging parents. Good learning should also be supported by close links between parents and schools, especially in disadvantaged areas, but forming these links remains difficult for the schools. They have tried various strategies to involve parents, but with little success.

The fourth challenge is meeting wider student needs. All of the schools are working hard to meet student learning needs, but meeting their non-learning needs and addressing the issues that impact on student learning remains a huge challenge. None of the schools believe that they have the resources to do it. They stress the importance of more specialist teachers and welfare support.

The study concluded that multiple barriers to good student outcomes require multiple solutions. It makes five recommendations:

1. Highly effective leadership is the most fundamental precondition for effective teaching and good student outcomes in schools in disadvantaged communities. Schools in our most disadvantaged areas need the best leaders. Incentives and ongoing support must be provided to encourage the most effective leaders to apply for positions in these schools. New models of collaborative school leadership should also be considered for implementation in Victoria to build the capacity of
current leaders and ensure that the best leadership knowledge is available where it is most needed.

2 Genuine improvement in student outcomes requires good teacher practice, not short-term programs. A new funding formula should increase the core staffing of schools in disadvantaged communities to provide the flexibility and structures for in-school teacher learning on a long term and sustainable basis. Ongoing work is also needed to build a learning system that supports informed innovation, spreads knowledge, scales up good practice and benefits from the learnings of other sectors.

3 Schools and teachers in disadvantaged communities need models of proven practice and the tools to implement them in their own local context in a sustainable way. For student-centred learning to flourish in more schools in disadvantaged communities, it needs to be better understood as a rigorous practice. Work is needed to develop sharper definitions of what student-centred learning constitutes, collate the evidence of its positive impact on student outcomes and disseminate workable models and supportive tools to schools.

4 Schools in disadvantaged communities need support to address the wider needs of students and their families beyond the way schools are currently resourced. Without this, these schools risk becoming welfare instead of learning organisations. New funding partnerships between areas of government responsible for community strengthening as well as business, philanthropy and community organisations could meet the non-learning needs of students in disadvantaged areas and engage and support their families.

5 The community needs a broader set of measures of student achievement. Wider definitions and new certifications of educational success need to be developed and school systems need to better recognise the work of schools that add value to student achievement in the face of disadvantage. There is a role for independent organisations to generate more discussion of this issue across the school system and within the wider community.

The report also recommends three new models for the structure and operation of schools.

The first of these is student-centred schools. The implementation of student-centred learning in the classroom begs the question of what it would take to create student-centred schools. Students are the most neglected players in the work of school improvement and learning reform, yet with the right skills and sense of purpose, they can transform their schools and build capacity in their communities.

The second is schools as community centres. Schools are powerful platforms for developing knowledge for young people and their communities and for building the social capital of those communities, but they cannot do this work alone. There are numerous models for reconfiguring schools as community learning hubs that offer education and other services for the entire community. There are also models of new partnerships between government, business, community organisations and philanthropy to support these arrangements.
The third is shared responsibility for young people. The case study schools are trying to build collective responsibility for student outcomes within their own walls. How much more could be gained if they worked together at a local or district level under a new definition of publicly funded education to share scarce resources, meet the needs of all students and build value for their communities? Keating and McGaw point to numerous examples of collaborative arrangements between government and non-government schools including co-location, integrated senior secondary programs, joint facilities, the exchange of personnel and shared student support services. These examples need to be developed as formal practice across school sectors.

So what are our next steps? Building on the recommendations of Crossing The Bridge, the Foundation is launching a new three year research project, Outside the Square: New Models of Educational Excellence, which will look at next practice educational models implemented with success in Victoria, Australia and internationally. The project will explore four themes:

- Next practice curriculum and pedagogy that caters for the full diversity of students’ learning needs and styles, backgrounds and aspirations and gives young people a leadership role in the school and community
- Next practice measurement that redefines educational success
- Next practice school partnerships and
- Next practice school design.

The Department of Education will be a key partner in this project and we look forward to working with you.

Crossing The Bridge can be downloaded at www.educationfoundation.org.au

Print copies are also freely available on request. Contact Rosalyn Black on 03 9665 5903 or email ros.black@educationfoundation.org.au

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