Engaging Students in Research Relationships for School Reform

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Students are often seen as the ultimate beneficiaries of school reforms and not its instigators. In the traditional view of education, they are often constructed as passive recipients of the benefits of schooling and education. Education from this perspective is understood as catering for the student development of attitudes, knowledge and skills for the students to become, at least, participants in their future society or, at best, future reformers of that society. In other words, if they are viewed as participants in the reform process they are seen as reformers-to-be. This chapter argues for a position where students become active participants in school reform – along with their teachers and perhaps other players. The argument in this chapter is based on the ample research findings that identify the students' disengagement from their education as a primary challenge that call for reform if education is to achieve its aim and be effective in the lives of young people. Further, we argue that students' participation in educational reform itself would contribute to the alleviation of their disengagement and hence itself is a means of needed educational reform. Here, however, we do not take the construct of (dis)engagement as unproblematic. In fact the literature contains several alternative understandings. We suggest that understanding disengagement as breaking of a relationship may lead into solutions of educational problems that strengthen these relationships. In

particular, working with students on educational reform is a demonstrably effective way of building relationships, alleviating disengagement and hence promoting productive educational reform.

The following section of the chapter discusses the constructs of (dis)engagement itself. This is followed by an example of a project in which students were active participants in action research projects designed to deal with aspects of school reforms. The last section of the paper discuses some of the emerging learning about working with students in collaborative research partnerships towards implementing reform in schools.

Perspectives on Student (Dis)Engagements

Student disengagement from education is frequently framed in a context of deficit and victim blaming, implying problems such as unsupportive families, undesirable communities and anti-academic peer groups as well as a lack of ability. An alternative view of disengagement places the blame on schools and education systems, identifying aspects of the hidden curriculum as responsible for incompatibility of student background and school prerequisites. While these explanations of disengagement may at times have a grounding in reality, we present in this chapter a conceptualisation that, rather than placing blame on any aspect of the system or the actors within that system, considers the problem as a breaking of relationships between young people and adults in school.

Disengagement as early school leaving

Undoubtedly, school retention is associated with student engagement; the more students are engaged in their education, the greater is their tendency to stay in school. With the absence of direct policies on student engagement in the different Australian education authorities, the constructs of retention – and the related school participation - in senior school and higher education are taken, at best, as measures of student engagement, or, at worst, as a substitute for it. Numerous federal and state governmental policies in the past few decades have targeted the issue of school retention. In Australia, benchmark Commonwealth, State and business funded reports delivered during the 1990's and early twenty first century estimated that the economic cost to Australia from students failing to complete 12 years of education was $2.9 billion for 2006 (Cavanagh & Reynolds, 2006).

However, of major concern behind levels of school participation are the patterns of participation by the different sectors of society. Not all groups of society experience a lack of participation in the same way. Fullarton, Walker, Ainley and Hillman (2003) examined the influences on patterns of participation in Year 12 subject areas (n ≈ 14,000 Australian students). The report on

the study concludes "Although many variables were found to be predictors of subject participation, several variables consistently stood out as important: gender, achievement level, parents' educational level, language background and students' aspirations" (p. 50). Other factors of exclusion from higher levels of schooling included socioeconomic background; rural and remote locations; and the influence of parental and family networks, peers, and teachers. Hence the concern about school retention, and engagement in general, is a two edged agenda – it is about excellence and accountability in educational provision and also about social justice (Vibert & Shields, 2003).

Needless to say, participation is important both for the individual and the society at large. Further, retention and participation are concrete measures that are relatively easy to quantify for research studies and policy statements. However, equating retention rates with engagement hides many issues in the lived experiences of students, their teachers, and their schools. In particular, retention rates do not signify anything about the quality of educational experiences that the students are engaged in nor about their level of satisfaction or ownership over the material learnt. The majority of research in this area has concentrated on individual student characteristics and emotions or on the family and context factors as indicators or predictors of disengagement. Such a stance often leads to pathologising the students or their background – hence blaming the victim - rather than identifying school and social factors giving rise to student disengagement (Fredericks, Blumenfeld & Paris, 2004; Lee & Burkam, 2001; McInerney, 2006; Smyth, 2006). Finally, this construction of disengagement does not point to obvious means of dealing with the problem.

Other constructions of engagements

Other understandings of disengagement can be identified in the literature. One such construction is adopted by the series of Longitudinal Studies of Australian Youth conducted by the ACER (Fullarton et al., 2003). The author articulates a definition of engagement, based on the conceptualisation by Finn and Rock (1997) as "participation in the social, extracurricular, and athletic aspects of school life in addition to or in place of extensive participation in academic work" (p. 222). Fullarton et al. reasoned that such participation in extra curricular activities is related to the development of a sense of "belonging" that in turn promotes a sense of "self worth" and a decrease in dropping out, in particular with students at highest risk. Also, there is some evidence to support the relationship of such engagement with high marks, in particular for males.

As with the discussion on relating student engagement with retention, the level of student engagement does provide a relatively easy measure that is, arguably, a component of the overall level of engagement in school. However, there are three main limitations of such a

conceptualisation. First, many of extracurricular student activities in schools tend to be elitist – for example student participation in elected positions, such as student council representatives. In particular, the nature of disadvantage often means that students from low socio-economic backgrounds may not be in a position to take full advantage of some extracurricular offerings. Second, as the LSAY study demonstrates, schools that serve wealthier student populations, such as private schools, are more likely to provide a wider range of extracurricular activities for their students. Third, while extracurricular activities can contribute to the overall social and physical development of students, they are not central to the purposes and function of schooling, that is learning and knowledge generation.

From a critical/transformative pedagogy (McMahon, 2003) perspective, engagement is achieved "when students' interests and choices are taken seriously and the teacher working with the students establishes connections beyond the prescribed curriculum to other things including students lived experiences" (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992, p. 260). Students' engagement from this perspective is a measure of their empowerment to seek knowledge relevant to themselves and their context, problematise such knowledge and apply it to greater control over their lives and their environment (McInerney, 2006).

The critical/transformative view of education raises the question of what is valuable for students to be engaged in, but also it avoids the blaming the victim trap pointed to above. Cothran and Ennis (2000) report on the way teachers and students often see the problem of disengagement quite differently. Teachers often attribute lack of student engagement to students' negative attitudes, previous low achievement, family background or lack of parental support. Students, on the other hand, reported that they failed to see the studied material as relevant to themselves or that they did not feel involved or respected in the classroom practices. This raises the question asked by Butler-Kisber and Portelli (2003): "whose conception of engagement is most worthwhile?" (p. 208). As McInerney (2006) concludes, the dominant discourses on student disengagement are generally framed in terms of blame and deficits either of the individual students, their families and neighbourhoods and/or cultural groups or to teachers and schools. What is needed is an alternative understanding of disengagement that goes beyond pathologising the students and pathologising the schools. Such a construction of engagement is presented by Smyth (2006).

Disengagement as breakdown in relationships

Smyth proposes that, rather than understanding disengagement as a problem caused by the student or by the school, we need to understand engagement as a process that is played out in the

relationship between young people and schools. In discussing the learnings from a three year Australian Research Council Linkage Project on school disengagement, the author concludes that the "most profound finding … was that young people give up on school when they can't form sustainable relationships – with peers, adults and indeed the institution of schooling itself (Smyth 2006, p. 2). Lee and Burkam (2001), looking at school factors related to dropping out, found that students are less likely to drop out of high schools where relationships between teachers and students are consistently positive. The impact of positive teacher-student relations, however, is contingent upon the organisational and structural characteristics of high schools.

In understanding disengagement as a failure of relationships it is not useful to attribute blame for it to one of the partners but to regard it as a result of alternative and possibly conflicting perspectives, needs and frames of reference between students on one hand and their teachers, schools, and indeed society on the other. This understanding also points to managing the process of disengagement, as attempts to clarify misunderstandings and re-negotiate agendas and expectations rather than a means of seducing young people into participating in programs that adults have pre-determined to be appropriate for them. Similarly, it allows the construction of students not as passive victims of school alienation – but as active resistors (Smyth 2006). When students disengage from lessons or schools they withdraw their assent or disengage themselves. They do not reject learning in general but what is deliberately taught in school. Disengagement is seen as a political resistance (Erickson, 1987) rather than a pathological condition; thus showing respect to students' agency.

Implications for researching and managing disengagement

Constructing engagement as relationships that students nurture in schools and disengagement as a failure of these relationships has implications, both for investigating and managing disengagement. Constructing disengagement as a failure of relationships in education implies that care should be given that the very act of researching disengagement and managing it does not lead to furthering the alienation of students. Productive research methodologies should aim to strengthen the relationship between adults and students in attempts to understand problematic phenomena and to find effective solutions to them. Here we assert that such research methodologies necessarily involve young people themselves as researchers working with adults on real world problems affecting their lives; further, that research methodologies that aim to combine knowledge generation and knowledge application are more likely to lead to understanding and managing of the phenomenon of disengagement.

Cook-Sather (2002) argues that excluding students' perspectives from dialogue about schooling and change results in an incomplete picture of life in schools and limits opportunities for improvement. Smyth (2006) asserts that "if we want to really understand phenomena like 'dropping out' or 'disengaging' from school, and make dramatic inroads into them, then we need to access the meaning of these concepts and excavate them from the inside outwards" (p. 288), in other words, listening more attentively to student voices and experiences. Young people involved in researching a social practice or a problem are in a better position to know the "inside story". This is consistent with the principles of ethnographic research, particularly those adopted by some feminist researchers who argue that the view from inside a group should be obtained from the inside by using participant observation. As Denzin (1986) notes, "The researcher who has not yet penetrated the world of the individuals studied is in no firm position to begin developing predictions, explanations and theories about that world" (p. 39).

Students' involvement in meaningful research activities serves two purposes with reference to the two observations that Habermas (1987) makes on the interactions of the lifeworld and system world. On one hand, it allows the students who are constructed as recipients of the benefits from the education system world's knowledge and policy, to be active agencies of that world. To counteract the colonisation of the lifeworld by the systems level, Habermas turned to the developing grass-roots, democratic, social movements as redemptive agents and the carriers of a rational society (Seidman, 1998). Similarly, young people engaging in deep participation as researchers may find empowerment through having a direct impact on systems' processes. On the other hand, the students' participation in research assists in making that world more responsive to their own lifeworld. Research conducted in an increasingly commercialisation and commodification inclined culture at universities may not be relevant to the daily lives and concerns of school students. This involvement challenges the traditional educational system construction of students as clients of research and educational services and positions them as active agents in their own education.

The rest of the chapter discusses learning about relationships and engagement resulting from working with students on research projects over several years conducted by the first two authors. In particular it will concentrate on learnings from one such collaboration with the last two authors who were involved respectively as a teacher and as a student in one of these projects.

The LEO-SARUA Project

In 2006, the four authors were involved in an activity being a partnership between two complementary projects. Learning Engagement Online (LEO) is an initiative of the Sunshine Coast

Region of the education department (Education Queensland) in north metropolitan Brisbane. It is one of the services provided to the schools by the Behaviour Support Team. LEO aims to engage behaviourally challenging and at risk students in successful learning through the use of innovative technologies and relationship building. The project began in 2004 with one teacher working with primary school students in the Sunshine Coast South District. In 2007, the program was staffed by 8 teachers working with 150 students and 30 schools across the region. Students in the program often were considered by the school to be disengaged, required disciplinary interventions, lacked goals and plans for their future and exhibited low literacy aggravated by lack of school attendance. The high school component of the program provided the students with collaborative online lessons (up to 5 students from different schools online working together with their LEO teacher) as well as onsite visits (by the LEO teacher to the school) focusing on a project dealing with a real life authentic issue affecting the students' lives and community.

The complementary project, SARUA (Student Action Research for University Access), is a collaborative project between students, their teachers and Faculty of Education staff of a large Brisbane university. Commencing in a single school in Brisbane in 1991, the project has been employed in at least 20 other metropolitan schools and formed the basis of similar projects in at least two other states in Australia (Atweh, 2003). The SARUA project's aims are directly related to addressing the under-representation in higher education of students from identified groups (principally, various ethnic background, Indigenous and low socio-economic background students). Participatory action research was adopted as the preferred paradigm for constructing this project.

In advancing the aims of the SARUA Project, university-based professional researchers work with schools to develop collaborative school-based projects between students, school staff, and the university; investigate barriers to higher education; and plan and perform action needed to bridge the gap between schools and universities (Atweh & Dornan, 1999). In this project, high school students volunteer to participate and are finally selected by their collaborating teachers according to their interest and ability to undertake the task. Each year, the project commences with a two-day student workshop at the University in which they examine some of the social concerns of students in their school, consider some of the social issues with respect to access to higher education, develop some research skills and learn something about university life. At the conclusion of this session, the participants identify specific issues for research and/or action in their school community and they develop plans to carry out their investigations. Having carried out their action research projects at

their own schools, the students then return to the university towards the end of the year to discuss ways of reporting their findings and to consider the next stage in the action research cycle.

The particular case study reported in this chapter is an example of the SARUA project in one school that ran in conjunction with the LEO project in the same school. In 2006, five middle school students from Redcliffe State High School, accompanied by their LEO teacher and a teacher aide, attended an orientation and planning day at the University conducted by two university staff. During this workshop, the student researchers considered social issues related to university access including barriers encountered by certain social groups towards university participation. At the conclusion of the session, the students elected to develop and administer a survey to ascertain the level of knowledge about university among students at their school and their post-school aspirations. Upon their return to school, the student researchers designed and conducted a survey for Years 10, 11 and 12 students. They obtained the permission of the school principal and staff to administer the survey in classrooms. The results of the survey were collated, tabulated and graphed. A report "Is University Seen as an Option by Redcliffe State High School Students?" (Woodward, Handsley, Lucas, Sanderson, & Price, 2006) was written to outline their findings and recommendations, and presented to school administrators.

As a means of providing information to fellow students, the student researchers embarked on the production of an info-documentary to be used as a resource to address these issues and provide information to high school students. The aim of this video was twofold; to provide a motivational source for students to think about university as well as provide information about university life. In May 2006, the student researchers commenced their work on the video and met for 140 minutes per week under supervision from their LEO teacher. All sessions began with a discussion regarding the intent of the session and the division of tasks among those present. The end of the session was used to discuss progress and plan activities for the following week.

During this project, the student researchers were able to accomplish the following tasks:

- Since none of the student researchers (nor the teacher) had the filming and technical knowledge required, they wrote a letter to the school Film and Television teacher requesting assistance to the group regarding film planning and technical issues.
- In developing the storyline, the student researchers identified desired components such as humour, the inclusion of university students who had overcome obstacles to succeed at

university, and the inclusion of different "faces" of university students, e.g., students with varying cultural and socio-economic backgrounds

- Planning filming days including organising transport to and from filming locations; setting up of locations, interviewing and filming of subjects;
- Transferring footage onto the computer; organising backup and storage of large amounts of film data; editing of film data; creating film texts, voiceovers and sound effects;
- Scripting of the presentation to launch their documentary, and delivery of presentations at a Student Voice Conference, Sunshine Coast Regional Principals' Conference, and Literacy for Boys Conference at a local university.

Further work on the project was conducted in 2007 by a following group of students.

Reforming Education through Relationships and Engagements

Engagement with other students

Students working together on research activities have a chance to develop collaborative skills. Collaboration on learning tasks is not new for many students in today's school systems. However, in research projects such as this, collaboration is more authentic than normal school work. Research activities are more complex and require the division of tasks and input from a variety of partners. Often, the conduct of one person's tasks depends on the others completing their jobs. In the LEO-SARUA project, students negotiated their tasks at the start of every meeting. Some tasks were done individually, while others were carried out by small groups. The student researchers had a chance to develop a sense of co-dependency with such collaboration resulting in a sense of confidence in the students. In the past, a number of students in the SARUA project have commented how collaboration with others culminated in difficult tasks becoming achievable.

Often groups are formed on the basis of previous friendships between students. However, the school based projects provided for new and deep friendships to evolve between the students. Similarly, in many of the SARUA project teams, students worked in groups consisting of a variety of ethnic backgrounds. At times, everyday life of some schools is marked with separation between the different disengaged groups if not outright conflict. As a result of working in one such multi-ethnic group, one young female student commented: "When I came here I just hang around the, you know, my people, the Vietnamese people, and I didn't really socialise with other people and I thought those people must be bad and all this. But now that I done the survey [I realised that] there's heaps of people that [are] real nice". In another school with a significant Indigenous population, the

students working on the project identified two of the major objectives of their project: raising the visibility of Indigenous students within the school, and taking more ownership of their school work. This team embarked on the furnishing of a special Indigenous room in the school that students of all backgrounds can use as a rest and recreational room as well as a study room. The students' liaison teacher reported that the project resulted in increased awareness in the school community of Indigenous issues and a "mind-shift" among staff that included discussions of how Indigenous culture could be recognised within the school curriculum. The student participants themselves had, according to their teacher, set a benchmark for other Indigenous students, giving them the "confidence to recognise their culture but also to talk about their culture with their peers".

Working in collaborative teams also provides students with opportunities to develop skills in negotiating disagreements or conflicts. During the negotiations about student projects in the initial planning workshop at the university, students undertake an activity to identify their own interests and ideas about possible worthwhile projects. Through active-listening to each other's arguments for or against such projects, they form specific groups, based in mutual interest and/or friendship grounds. As most projects proceed, different factors can give rise to conflict. In some groups, students complain about the lack of efforts that some students are exerting. In many cases where the adult supervisor holds back intervening, students take leadership in resolving the tension by encouraging others to take their task seriously or by providing assistance for them to finish their task. However, at times adult intervention was needed, thus providing a learning opportunity for the students.

Engagement with adults

Through their engagement in the project, university staff, teachers and student researchers developed comradeship and solidarity. In the SARUA project, university staff requested that students address them by their first names. We believed this would assist in reducing the natural barriers with students. Also this occurred with some teachers. Often students regulated the use of the first names for their teachers while they were working on the project at the university only, reverting to formally addressing teachers in other encounters. Working with students as co-researchers allows for a levelling of the fields between the participants, and can be based on mutual respect and dedication to the task. Not all students developed such a relationship with their teachers, but never once have we experienced a misuse of that informality.

These new relationships with students were appreciated by many school coordinating teachers. A few teachers indicated that this was the most enjoyable part of their teaching work, providing opportunities to interact with students in a novel situation where positive relationships could develop and beneficial changes could be made. For these SARUA coordinators, the project offered a means of interacting with students that allowed the normal demarcations of teacher-student power relationships to be redrawn.

Working with students as co-researchers unavoidably leads to tensions, and at times conflicts between the young people and the adults. Atweh and Bland (2004) have discussed some of these conflicts and how were they were managed. This is not to say, however, that all tensions have been successfully resolved. Within the different spaces in which SARUA operates, participants have to continually negotiate various tensions that arise as the dynamics of the project change. These tensions are produced, partly, through the relationships between the various actors in the project and differences in age, experience, status, and levels of responsibility within the participant institutions. To pretend that, even in a fully democratic approach to collaboration, all participants have equal power would be "an insult to the intelligence of the young people" (Alder & Sandor, 1990, p. 40). Inescapably, university researchers and school staff have knowledge, responsibilities and commitments specific to their positions as well as an obligation to avoid setting up the young people to fail (Howard et al., 2002).

Engagement with school and society

Having used the term 'disengaged students' above, we can now problematise it. Bland (2008) discusses the detrimental effects of "labelling" on student disengagement. The danger occurs when transitory adjectives become constitutive, where a student becomes seen by others through the distorting lens of that label and, through teachers' (in)action, the label becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Graham, 2007; McInerney & McInerney, 2006). Thus teachers, and the education system at large, can unwittingly contribute to what we may call the vicious cycle of disengagement. Students themselves may also contribute to their own stigmatisation: as students progress to secondary school age, they start to believe that their abilities are fixed. They may use avoidance techniques to "avoid being labelled 'dumb'" (McInerney & McInerney, 2006, p. 239).

There is a tendency in schools that disengaged students or those considered at risk are less likely to be offered innovative learning activities that require a high level of commitment and the development of high level shills and capacities. This could be because they are not seen as capable of succeeding or as sufficiently responsible to be trusted to undertake them. Challenging activities

are sometimes seen as a "reward" for students who have completed their classroom tasks and are thus denied to disengaged students. These practices, in turn, lead to boredom, if not resentment, by students and to further disengagement. On the other hand, students themselves are often reluctant to disclose experiences leading to their disengagement, or their own perceptions of being at risk, using "masking" behaviours (Carrington, 2007). Students' masking might involve invisibility in the classroom, being a clown or victim, displaying boredom, or demonstrating contempt for school and academic pursuits.

The LEO-SARUA project is an example of students being provided with an intellectually demanding opportunity that is both "real" to their context and valued by their school and society. Successful participation of students in the project illustrates their willingness to step up to the mark and act responsibly, developing significant learning, and leads to recognition by their school and society. This participation was instrumental in breaking the cycle of disengagement for these students as well as, they hope, for their peers.

As discussed above, the student researchers in this project participated in a special program in the school because of a combination of lack of achievement and behaviour considered not acceptable to the school. Some were at an immediate risk of expulsion from the school. Not only were all students able to successfully complete their schooling, but teachers at the school reported an improvement in their school results and relationships with them. At the conclusion of the project, at least two of the five student researchers went on to university.

Finally, students' involvement in "real" research projects contributes to the development of active citizenship in the students. Perhaps initially, some students volunteered to participate in SARUA projects based on a personal interest to be involved with something different from normal school work or to learn something about university. However, most students soon developed a genuine motivation and sense of responsibility for other students in their school who might benefit from the outcomes of their projects. Rather than being seen as "a problem", they adopted their role as contributors to solutions of problems with a great sense of pride and confidence. They were also aware that the outcomes of their activities brought public recognition to their schools and communities. Schools such as those we targeted for the SARUA project are not often recognised by the community as innovative or high achieving. Many students' projects, therefore, included positive publicity for their school and writing to departments of education and the media about their findings and accomplishments.

Concluding Comments

Understanding disengagement as a process that is played out in the relationship between young people and schools does not mean shifting the blame to teachers as the conveyers of school culture and the enforcers of school expectations. Rather, it means examining the interplay between disaffected students and all those aspects of mainstream schooling that make demands on them, of which the student-teacher relationship is just a part. It is, though, an aspect of this relationship that is, for students, most immediate and that can be most easily addressed, and is one that can affect the entire school culture.

In the example given, the normal demarcations of teacher-student power relationships were redrawn. Students and teachers involved in the LEO-SARUA experience developed new ways of working together and finding out about each other that led to a greater mutual respect and trust. One teacher, for instance, observed that not only did he get to know students well in the non-classroom situation, but added that it was a stimulating and enjoyable component of his teaching schedule. He was very complimentary towards the students and what he saw as their changed behaviour when they were away from the classroom, saying that "it's a totally different kettle of fish isn't it, when you get away from [the school], and they're basically, you know, confident, polite young adults generally". For another teacher, the project was the most enjoyable part of her teaching work, providing opportunities to interact with students in a novel situation where positive relationships could develop and beneficial changes could be made.

The student perspective on this change in the student-teacher relationship is exemplified by our fourth author who, as a student participant in the LEO-SARUA project, said that his involvement led to opportunities "to become more of a leader in classes – help other people in class, try to be a role model for other students" (Bland, 2008). He added that he had developed "great relationships with staff members - because my attitude has changed and I'm not so much of a problem student as some teachers might call you – they see me as someone they can have a friendship with. I'll show them respect, they show me respect – they help me when I need help because they know that I want to succeed". Having originally planned to leave school by the end of Year 10, he went on to become school captain and has since taken up university study. The work of the project students has significantly affected the school, raising expectations of all students and helping to develop a closer relationship with the University, with the aim of further increasing tertiary access.

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