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Educational Engagement through the Middle Years of Schooling

Report for the In2Community Applied Learning Project

Dr Esther Chan
Dr Alison Baker
Professor Roger Slee
Jim Williamson

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 **VICTORIA
UNIVERSITY**
MELBOURNE AUSTRALIA



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LEARNING PROJECT

AUGUST 2015

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Address

Victoria University
City Queen Campus
300 Queen Street
VIC, 3000
Australia

Phone: +61 3 9919 5934

Email: Victoria.institute@vu.edu.au

About

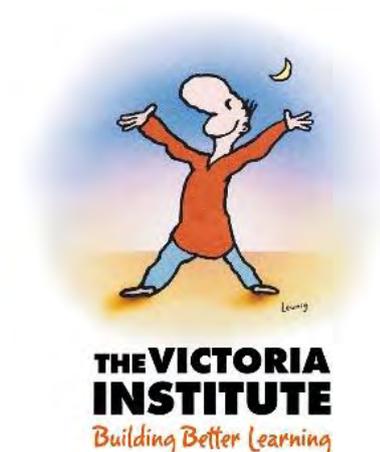
The Victoria Institute

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Well placed within Victoria University, The Victoria Institute has social justice as a key focus. Our researchers work collaboratively with a range of government departments, policy makers, philanthropic organisations and community groups. The Victoria Institute operates with the explicit intention of improving educational experiences and outcomes for all.

Our targeted research program aims to build better learning and greater participation and success for students from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds as well as those who are disengaged or excluded.

The Victoria Institute is connected with the College of Education and works in association with The Mitchell Institute and the Centre for International Research on Education Systems..



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Executive Summary

The In2Community Applied Learning Project was developed to better understand the main challenges and learning opportunities in Years 9 and 10 in Australian secondary schooling. The project was jointly funded by the Western Melbourne Regional Development Australia (WMRDA) Committee and Victoria University, and aims to:

- identify and trial new curriculum content, learning methods and evaluation that better engage students in Years 9 and 10
- increase the links between schools and the community
- meet national curriculum standards.

A key purpose of the project is to identify and develop, with staff and students, new forms of effective learning and engagement in the middle school years that minimise disengagement, mobilise disinterested students and link schools and students more closely with key community and regional agencies and issues.

This report provides an extended review of the research literature concerning student engagement, curriculum program innovation initiatives. It is also a formative evaluation of the progress of one school's approach to engaging students to improve their educational experiences and outcomes. This school and its community are in western metropolitan Melbourne.

This document also includes a case study documenting and evaluating two engagement initiatives at The Grange P–12 College, one of the three schools involved in the In2Community project. The initiatives are:

- the Year 9 Projects program, involving students in applied and project-based learning
- the Connections Program, an alternative learning space within the school for students who have disengaged or experienced significant disruption in their education.

Through interviews with students and staff, we identify several important themes in these initiatives, which indicate a substantial change in the dynamics of learning for students.

The Year 9 Projects initiative highlights the importance of having a range of engaging subjects available to students, which provide opportunities to develop creativity, real-world knowledge and interpersonal skills. In the Connections Program, it is through positive student–staff relationships, founded on trust and shared responsibility, that staff afford greater flexibility for students facing difficult living circumstances and difficulties in learning.

Finally, the report provides constructive recommendations to encourage further curriculum innovation, support for teachers' professional learning and the continuing improvement of students' learning experiences.

1. Introduction

Educational engagement can be defined as a state of being when a person is cognitively, behaviourally and emotionally involved in learning activities, and is maintaining a heightened sense of concentration, interest and enjoyment during those activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Shernoff, 2013). This construct is widely seen as the key to improving education outcomes for students (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012). With the middle years of schooling (Years 7–10) being identified as a period in which disengagement from education is particularly likely (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; MCEETYA, 2008), the In2Community Applied Learning Project was developed to better understand the main challenges and learning opportunities in Years 9 and 10 in Australian secondary schooling. The project was jointly funded by the Western Melbourn Regional Development Australia (WMRDA) Committee and Victoria University. The In2Community project is ongoing and aims to:

- identify and trial new curriculum content and learning and evaluation methods that better engage students in Years 9 and 10
- increase the links between schools and the community
- meet national curriculum standards.

A key purpose of the project is to identify and develop, with staff and students, new forms of effective learning and engagement in the middle school years that minimise disengagement, mobilise disinterested students and link schools and students more closely with key community and regional agencies and issues.

Two complementary reports have been developed since the project commenced in late 2013. The first report provides an overview of the project and some of the key issues for further consideration.

This case study forms the second part of the larger research and development project, and was conducted in 2014 by Professor Roger Slee, Dr Alison Baker and Dr Man Ching Esther Chan from the Victoria Institute at Victoria University. The case study explored the engagement strategies and curriculum innovations at one school, The Grange P–12 College, based in Melbourne’s Western Metropolitan Region. Fieldwork was carried out from June to August 2014. A researcher was on-site for three mornings, twice in June and once in July 2014, to observe class activities in the school. Interviews were conducted in August with three senior staff members, 10 teaching staff and 14 students from Years 9 to 11.

The principal research questions were:

- How do staff and students at the school view educational engagement and disengagement?
- What are the initiatives in the school to build and secure student engagement, and have they been effective?

To inform the In2Community project, policy documents and research literature relevant to the project were reviewed. The literature review outlines selected features of the Australian educational context and the educational context of Melbourne's Western Metropolitan Region. Theories of educational engagement and existing educational engagement initiatives in Australia and overseas were identified. The review offers examples of educational innovation and reform from elsewhere to assist the development of local initiatives. Particular focus is placed on the applied learning approach as an educational engagement initiative.

2. Literature review

Improving Year 12 (or equivalent) attainment as a national and state goal

In a competitive, globalised economy, improving the education of young people is considered vital to Australia's future prosperity (Commonwealth of Australia, 2013; MCEETYA, 2008). All states and territories have agreed to work towards ensuring that "all Australian school students acquire the knowledge and skills to participate effectively in society and employment in a globalised economy", as stated in the *National Education Agreement* (COAG, 2012, p. 5). Supporting this national goal, the governments set national targets to lift the Year 12 or equivalent or Certificate II attainment rate to 90% by 2015, and the Year 12 or equivalent or Certificate III attainment rate to 90% by 2020. Targets are also set to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy by 2018 for Indigenous students and at least halve their gap in Year 12 or equivalent attainment rates by 2020. However, a recent report by the COAG Reform Council (2013) suggests that Australia may not reach the education attainment targets. In 2012, the national Year 12 attainment rate was 85.9%. Of all the states and territories, only South Australia and the Northern Territory exceeded their 2012 improvement targets. The Reform Council forecasts that the 2015 target will not be reached if there is no accelerated progress in the Year 12 attainment rate in the next three years.

In Victoria, in accordance with the national goal to improve the education of all students, the vision statement *Growing Victoria Together* (State of Victoria, 2005) set the state target to lift the Year 12 or equivalent completion rate to 90% by 2010. Since the release of the statement, the State Government of Victoria has commissioned various reviews to examine ways to improve the education participation and attainment levels of disengaged school and adult learners, such as *Re-engaging Our Kids: A Framework for Education Provision to Children and Young People At Risk of Disengaging or Disengaged from School* (KPMG, 2009) and *Strategic Review of Effective Re-engagement Models for Disengaged Learners* (Davies, Lamb, & Doecke, 2011). The *Re-engaging Our Kids* report states that:

Victoria will provide a socially inclusive education system where all children and young people receive the support they need to enable their engagement in school, their wellbeing, learning opportunities and pathways to further education, training or employment. Students at risk of disengaging or already disengaged, will remain a particular focus for the Victorian government. (p. 49)

The framework encourages schools, school networks and regions to develop local solutions that are tailored to local needs in addressing student disengagement.

Other than these reviews, policy consultation and guideline documents have been published to direct the effort to improve educational engagement of students, such as *Pathways to Re-Engagement through Flexible Learning Options: A Policy Direction for Consultation* (DEECD, 2010) and *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools: Student Engagement Policy Guidelines: Promoting Student Engagement, Attendance and Positive Behaviours in Victorian Government Schools* (DEECD, 2012).

Despite these efforts, Victoria has yet to achieve its school completion target. The report by the Victorian Auditor-General (2012) on school completion rates points out that the 2010 target was not reached for students completing Year 12 or equivalent in that year. The report noted that the proportion of 19-year-olds in Victoria completing Year 12 or equivalent plateaued at around 80% in 2008, and no improvement has been made since. The Year 12 or equivalent completion rates for students in non-metropolitan schools and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are lower than the Victorian average. The completion rate for students from low and medium socioeconomic backgrounds has been decreasing since 2006, and the gap is widening in comparison to students with a high socioeconomic status. The gap in completion rates between metropolitan and non-metropolitan schools has widened during the same period when the completion rate for non-metropolitan students has deteriorated. These results throw into question the effectiveness of the current efforts for improving educational engagement in the state.

The Victorian Auditor-General (2012) observed that although the DEECD develops and endorses school-based programs to support students who are disengaged or at risk of disengaging from education, these programs have not made a significant impact on completion rates. The DEECD appears to be unclear about the effectiveness of these programs or whether there are sufficient resources available to schools to address the needs of vulnerable students. The report criticises the fact that the department does not provide advice and guidance to schools so that more informed choices about ways to support student engagement may be made. In light of these findings, the Victorian Auditor-General formulated three main recommendations to improve student completion rates:

1. Develop a framework to oversee the provision of support to students at risk of disengaging, or who are disengaged from education, to assist them to complete Year 12 or equivalent.
2. Analyse the impact of programs to determine which strategies have been effective, and why, to help schools use them more effectively.
3. Improve data collection for and analysis of how effective the department is in supporting schools to assist disengaged students and those at risk of disengaging to remain at school and complete Year 12 or equivalent. (p. 21)

Because of the pressing need to improve the education of students in Victoria and nationally, the In2Community Applied Learning Project follows the recommendation of the Re-engaging Our Kids report (KPMG, 2009) in terms of developing local solutions tailored to local needs. The project also specifically addresses the second recommendation of the Victorian Auditor-General (2012) in terms of examining education engagement initiatives in mainstream school settings in Melbourne's Western Region in Victoria.

A focus on educational engagement in the middle years of schooling

Educational engagement is widely seen as important for understanding the reasons behind school dropout, promoting school completion, and improving education outcomes for students (Christenson et al., 2012). It is generally believed that when students regularly lack concentration during school activities, lose interest, and/or find school learning boring and dull, they may eventually drop out from school (Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012; Shernoff, 2013). In Victoria, student engagement and wellbeing is one of the three student

outcomes specified in the School Accountability and Improvement Framework, along with student learning and student pathways and transitions (DEECD, 2011).

Although there are many different definitions of educational engagement (e.g. Fredricks et al., 2004; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Shernoff, 2013), these definitions essentially describe a state of being when a person is cognitively, behaviourally and emotionally involved in learning activities and maintaining a heightened sense of concentration, interest and enjoyment during those activities. Furthermore, educational engagement is a subjective experience of the learner, and such experience can occur inside or outside the classroom (Shernoff, 2013). Unlike the concept of motivation, which places greater attention on the agency of an individual in terms of the energy or drive pertaining to the person (Frydenberg, Ainley, & Russell, 2005), the concept of engagement places greater emphasis on the interactions and transactions between an individual and the environment. Research have shown that context is important for student engagement (Christenson et al., 2012; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010). Thus, educators work towards providing optimal conditions that maximise the educational engagement and the learning of individual students (Shernoff, 2013).

As noted in the introduction, the middle years of schooling (Years 7 to 10) have been identified as a transition period in which disengagement with education is particularly likely (Balfanz et al., 2007; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; MCEETYA, 2008). The need to address the educational needs of students in the middle years of schooling is emphasised in the report of the Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) Project (Centre for Applied Educational Research, 2002):

One of the more long-standing unresolved problems for educators has been to establish the conditions that result in all students in early adolescence wanting to pursue productive learning within the school setting and experiencing success. Research findings focused on the middle years (Years 5–9) of schooling reveal a strong pattern of under-achievement, and disengagement from school, particularly for boys.

The significant physical, social, emotional and intellectual changes associated with the adolescent years have been attributed to increases in absenteeism and behavioural problems, and a lack of academic progress observed during the middle school years (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine & Constant, 2004; Pridham & Deed, 2012). Although this assumption has been questioned by some (Chadbourne, 2001), there is general consensus that successful transition from the middle school period to the post-compulsory years is crucial to the development of a person into adulthood and into the world of work, training and community life (Luke et al., 2003). The focus of the In2Community Applied Learning Project on improving educational engagement in the middle years of schooling therefore aligns with existing literature and national and state policies to improve the educational outcomes of all students. Knowledge gained from the project can contribute to the body of empirical work examining educational engagement strategies for students in the middle years of education in Australia to inform current and future engagement initiatives. The next section further explores the connections between student learning, engagement and educational attainment.

Links between student learning, engagement and school attainment

There are different views of how student engagement relates to learning. Taylor and Parsons (2011) observed that “student engagement has become both a strategic process for learning and an accountability outcome unto itself” (p. 4). This is evident in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) which stresses the importance of student motivation and engagement in the middle years and suggests that student engagement can be converted into learning. Distinct from the government documents mentioned earlier (COAG Reform Council, 2009; e.g. DEECD, 2011) which view student engagement as an accountability outcome, the Melbourne Declaration appears to treat student engagement as a strategic process for learning. According to these policy documents, these dual functions of engagement create difficulty in stipulating what student engagement involves.

In recent research literature, findings from a range of studies suggest that school engagement may have a direct or indirect influence on later educational attainment (Christenson et al., 2012). A two-year longitudinal study (Wang & Holcombe, 2010) in the United States (US) examined middle school adolescents’ perceptions of school environment, engagement and academic achievement. Based on data from 1,046 adolescents collected through face-to-face interviews and a self-administered questionnaire, the study found that seventh graders’ perceptions of school characteristics relate to their school participation, identification with school, and use of self-regulation strategies in eighth grade, which in turn correlates with their eighth grade academic achievement. Another study (Abbott-Chapman et al., 2013) examined the longitudinal association between childhood school engagement and educational and occupational achievement in adulthood in Australia. The data for the study was drawn from the 1985 Australian Schools Health and Fitness Survey (ASHFS) which involved children aged 9 to 15 years (6,559 people), and followed them up in 2004–2006 when they were aged between 26 and 36 years (1,622 people). The study found that higher school engagement was independently associated with achieving higher-status occupations 20 years later, irrespective of socioeconomic background. These findings highlight the importance of providing students with “a rich learning environment inside and outside the classroom, that challenges and rewards effort” (p. 14).

Although student engagement is often valued in terms of its supporting role for academic learning, some researchers regard engagement to be an important aspect of schooling, irrespective of academic outcomes. Shernoff (2013) criticises the way that many research studies define engagement solely in terms of its relationship to achievement when engagement can be a key schooling outcome in its own right. His earlier work in the US (Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008) suggests that students who are most successful in school and from the most affluent communities can also perceive their classes to be “mind-numbingly boring” (Shernoff, 2013, p. 1). His view on the relationship between achievement and engagement is supported by the international study conducted by Willms (2003) and a later study in Canada by Willms and colleagues (Dunleavy, Willms, Milton, & Friesen, 2012). Based on the data from the 2000 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Willms found that the relationship between academic achievement and engagement was moderate (correlation between 0.48 and 0.51), and students who were high achievers can display low or high levels of engagement. Engagement was divided into two components in the study: sense of belonging (psychological aspect) and school participation/attendance (behavioural aspect). Willms believes that although improvements in student engagement may not translate directly into increases in levels of academic achievement, it should be considered a crucial matter in education, as student engagement is related to quality of life. The view of Shernoff and Willms and colleagues therefore accords

with the School Accountability and Improvement Framework in Victoria, which considers student engagement and wellbeing as an important student outcome alongside student learning, and student pathways and transitions (DEECD, 2011).

Explanations of student engagement and disengagement

Student engagement and disengagement involves complex processes related to a range of social, historical, cultural and personal factors. Engagement is a multifaceted construct involving behavioural (participation and involvement in academic or curricular activities), emotional (positive and negative reactions towards the school community including teachers and classmates) and cognitive (thoughtfulness and willingness to invest effort in learning activities) components (Fredricks et al., 2004). Rather than assuming that each of these components influences student learning equally, Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) suggest that the different components may imply different levels of investment and commitment to learning. They consider behavioural and emotional engagement to be preconditions for cognitive engagement and believe students need to be behaviourally and emotionally engaged before they can be cognitively engaged. In order to facilitate academic learning, students need to be physically present in class and experience a sense of emotional comfort and connectedness in the school. Based on their literature review, Gibbs and Poskitt identified eight interconnected factors that can influence student engagement: relationships with teachers and peers, relational learning, disposition to be a learner, motivation and interest, personal agency and cognitive autonomy, self-efficacy, goal orientation and academic self-regulated learning. They believe these factors operate dynamically with the individual student, and a student may be more or less influenced by particular factors at any moment in time.

Consistent with Gibbs and Poskitt's (2010) conceptualisation of engagement as a dynamic construct, Wylie and Hodgen (2012) examined longitudinal changes in student engagement in New Zealand. The researchers analysed data from the Competent Learners study, which tracked the learning experience of 300 to 500 children since they were nearly five years old until they were 20 years old. Parent reports collected when the children were six, eight and 10 years indicated that almost all the six-year-old children liked school, but the percentage gradually decreased over time. A similar pattern was found for students' self-reports about their enjoyment of education from 10 to 20 years of age. Ten statements were used as part of a questionnaire to measure student engagement in the study:

- I enjoy myself/I enjoy learning
- I could do better work if I tried
- I get bored
- I get tired of trying
- I feel restless
- I keep out of trouble

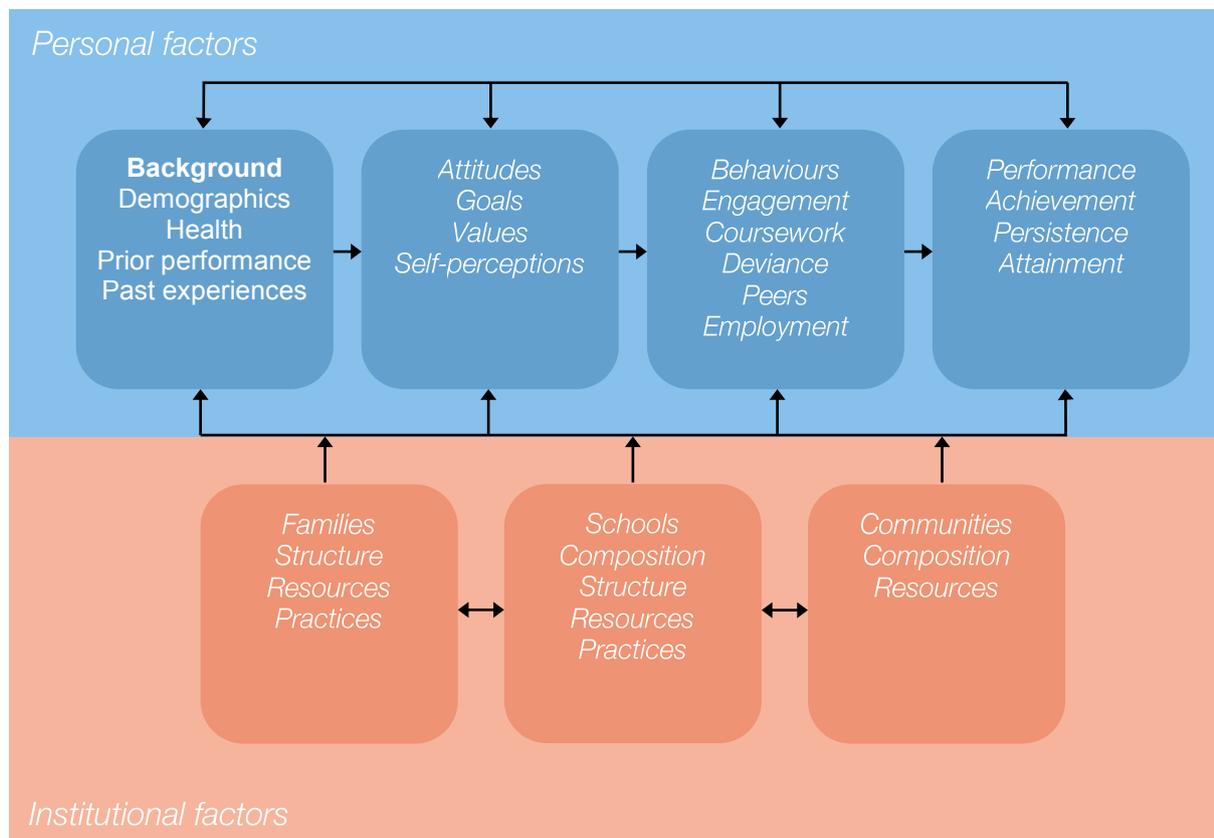
- I like my teacher(s)
- Teacher(s) listens to what I have to say/is interested in my ideas
- Teacher(s) treats me fairly in class
- I get all the help I need.

The study found a gradual decline in the levels of engagement reported by the students over time, particularly between ages 10 and 14. Wylie and Hodgen (2012) found that students who experienced school success at a reasonably high level at age 10 were more likely to report high levels of school engagement in later years. Students who reported low or moderate engagement levels at age 10 did not consistently report a particular level of engagement in subsequent years where the level could have increased or decreased. The researchers underscored the importance of studying the context and learning opportunities available to individuals in relation to longitudinal changes in student engagement, and highlighted the reciprocal relationship between students and the environment. They suggest that student learning can be shaped by the effort that a student put in, the responses of others as a result of the student's effort, and changes in learning opportunities and life events.

Rumberger and Rotermund (2012) reviewed empirical research that investigated the processes of school dropout, and concluded that no single factor can completely account for an individual student's decision to remain at school or not until graduation, although there are a number of salient factors that have been identified to influence the decision. The review underscored the close connection between school dropout and disengagement, citing that "dropping out itself might be better viewed as a process of disengagement from school" (p. 496). The researchers believe there is clear evidence to suggest that the decision to drop out is not solely influenced by a student's school experience, as the behaviours and activities of students outside school also influence the decision.

As part of their literature review, Rumberger and Rotermund (2012) examined several theories for explaining school dropout, and formulated a conceptual model to summarise key features of these theories (see Figure 1). The model distinguishes two types of factors: personal factors related to individual students, and institutional factors related to families, schools and communities. The researchers theorise that individual level factors are influenced by institutional contexts and by key features within each context, such as structure, composition, resources and practices. Though not specified in the figure, the researchers also suggest reciprocal and non-linear relationships between some of these components, such as attitudes and behaviours, where initial attitudes may influence behaviours, which in turn may affect subsequent attitudes. The framework implies the need to reach outside to enlist the support and involvement of the family, school and community when addressing educational disengagement.

Figure 1. A conceptual model of high school performance (adapted from Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012).



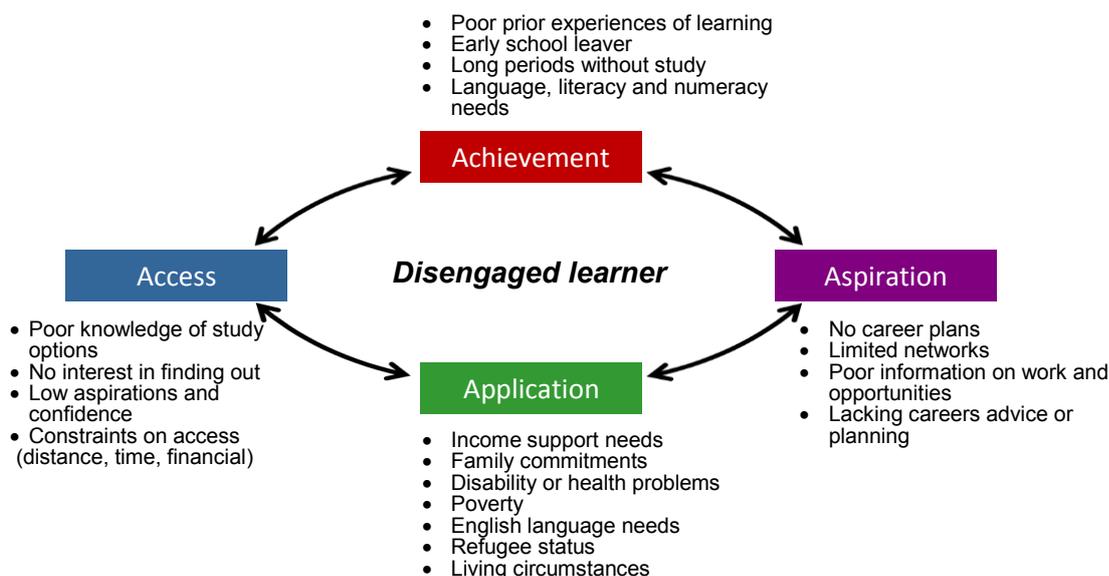
Reinforcing the importance of institutional factors in educational engagement, the KPMG (2009) report *Re-engaging Our Kids* identified groups of people to be at a greater risk of disengagement and low achievement and require additional support in terms of flexible learning options. These groups include:

those living in Out of Home Care; young offenders; Koorie children and young people; homeless children and young people; immigrant and refugee youth; young mothers; children and young people with disabilities; those experiencing mental health issues; and those children and young people who are already disengaged (and potentially have long histories of being out of school). (p. 16)

The report identified a range of challenges related to school disengagement, including a lack of a systems approach to address the needs of children and young people at risk of disengagement, limited availability and inequitable access to programs catering for children and young people at risk of disengagement, the professional needs of staff who work for these programs, as well as difficulty with establishing the effectiveness of existing programs. The report suggests that children and young people at risk of disengaging or disengaged from school should be offered the same opportunity as all other children and young people “to participate in meaningful and relevant learning opportunities” (p. 5). A four-tiered education provision system is proposed which offers differentiated education programs across school networks and regions (Tier 1), targeted initiatives bridging the community and the school that complement schooling (Tier 2), and flexible learning options within school settings (Tier 3) and within community settings (Tier 4). Strong partnership arrangements between government, school networks and communities are therefore needed to implement this framework.

In line with the KPMG report, Davies, Lamb and Doecke (2011) identified four separate but interrelated factors that contribute to disengagement: access, achievement, aspiration and application (see Figure 2). The researchers observed that there are disproportionately large numbers of low-skill and disengaged learners that are from key disadvantaged groups in Australia: the indigenous population, people with disabilities, early school leavers, the culturally and linguistically diverse students including refugees, older Australians who are low-skilled and without any qualifications, and those from socioeconomically disadvantaged families. The researchers theorise that, due to their disadvantaged backgrounds and experiences, disengaged learners often have limited access to study and training when they have poor knowledge of study options, limited interest and confidence in undertaking formal education, and constraints on transportation, finance and time. These learners also tend to have low achievement due to poor prior learning experience; prolonged period of interrupted study; and greater need for support in language, literacy and numeracy needs. They may face a range of barriers such as the need for income support, family commitments, disability or health issues, refugee status and childcare needs, which undermine their application or commitment to study. They may also have limited networks to connect them to work and community life which contribute to a low aspiration to work or study. Through identifying these different personal and social factors characterising disengaged learners, this framework provides a way to identify the leverage points for influencing student engagement.

Figure 2. Factors contributing to disengagement (adapted from Davies et al., 2011, p. 15).



Examining schooling from a sociohistorical perspective, Shernoff (2013) believes there is a mismatch between the traditional form of education and our current way of living that promotes disengagement in schools. Traditional public schools, characterised by their large class sizes, graded levels and uniform courses, are intended to “batch process” students, requiring them to progress at a prescribed pace and conform to a code of behaviour that includes punctuality, precision, regularity, attention and silence. These schools are modelled after the “hierarchical centralisation of industrial bureaucracies” to “manage masses of students and to deliver education as a product” (p. 7), and are therefore not designed with the goal to support student motivation and learning. However, with the popular use of social media and different forms of technology, teachers are constantly competing for the attention of their students. Students are also rapidly transforming into self-initiated learners and multitaskers when the internet can provide them with information instantaneously. This mismatch between the traditional form of education and the modern way of living

appears to contribute to the dissatisfaction of students with school learning. In particular, research conducted by Shernoff and others found that modern youths are concerned that their experience of classrooms lacks meaningful challenges, competence building, relevance to life and supportive relationships. Their research indicates that the traditional form of education fails to fulfil the educational needs of youths.

Shernoff (2013) suggests that educators need to create learning experiences that promote meaningful engagement “where the enjoyment of leisure activities is combined with the focus exacted in productive and skill-building activities — culminating in a state of engagement that feels like both work and play” (p. 68). Students also need to recognise the purpose of education as they participate in learning activities. Referring to the education philosophy of Einstein (1954) and Dewey (1937/1946), Shernoff asserts that the ultimate aim of education should balance individual growth and collective welfare of the community or society so that “the aim [of education] must be the training of independently acting and thinking individuals, who, however, see in the service of the community their highest life problem” (Einstein, 1954, p. 60). According to Shernoff, understanding the purpose of education and the relevance of learning activities may help students to establish trust in their teachers and other school professionals in guiding and facilitating their learning.

Accordingly, research literature has highlighted different aspects of educational engagement (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010), learning opportunities that are available to students (Wylie & Hodgen, 2012), and a range of associated institutional and personal factors (KPMG, 2009; Rumberger & Rotermund, 2012). Learners are affected by a range of factors related to access, achievement, application and aspiration (Davies et al., 2011), as well as changes to our modern way of living (Shernoff, 2013).

While recognising the complexity of education processes, these studies provide directions in terms of ways to improve educational engagement. The literature generally highlights the need for education to be purposeful, meaningful and applicable to the lives of young people in order to engage them in their learning. Gibbs and Pickett (2010), for example, suggest that engagement is influenced by the “perceived value or relevance of the learning” (p. 10). The Re-engaging Our Kids (KPMG, 2009) report asserts that all children should have the opportunity “to participate in meaningful and relevant learning opportunities” (p. 5), while Shernoff advocates for meaningful engagement in learning experiences. With its emphasis on practical application of knowledge, applied learning is seen as a key approach to engage students.

Applied learning as a strategy to engage adolescent learners

Applied learning refers to pedagogical principles and practices that are associated with “the activity of putting intellectual principles into practice” or “learning by doing” (Schwartzman & Henry, 2009, p. 4). It is often contrasted with traditional classroom learning which tends to focus on abstract theoretical knowledge without explicating the practical application of the knowledge outside the classroom (Schwartzman & Henry, 2009). The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA, 2011) identified four principles underpinning the applied learning approach:

- a connection between learning experience and the “real world” outside the classroom
- partnerships between students and their teachers with outside-school organisations and individuals to demonstrate the relevance of the students’ learning experience
- a holistic approach to support a student that takes into account the student’s personal strengths, interests, goals and prior experiences

- the promotion of the independence and self-responsibility in student learning which may involve the participation of students in determining the goals and outcomes of their learning experience.

Though not listed as one of the principles, another important element of applied learning is its focus on integrating theoretical knowledge with practical knowledge. Being involved in out-of-class activities such as volunteering may have intrinsic humanistic value but may not allow students to understand the facts, principles and theories that are associated with the experience. It is therefore important for applied learning to “[blend] theory with practice [to enable] a learner to transcend mere training and move toward initiating the self-discipline that characterises lifelong learning” (Schwartzman & Henry, 2009, p. 5).

In terms of steps to carry out applied learning, the VCAA (2011) listed the following key concepts.

1. Start from where learners are.
2. Negotiate the curriculum. Engage in a dialogue with learners about their curriculum.
3. Share knowledge. Recognise the knowledge learners bring to the learning environment.
4. Connect with communities and real life experiences.
5. Build resilience, confidence and self-worth — consider the whole person.
6. Integrate learning — the whole task and the whole person. In life we use a range of skills and knowledge. Learning should reflect the integration that occurs in real life tasks.
7. Promote diversity of learning styles and methods. Everyone learns differently. Accept that different learning styles require different learning/teaching methods. But value experiential, practical and “hands-on” ways of learning.
8. Assess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best ‘fits’ the learning content and context.
(p. 1)

The principles of applied learning can be integrated into different forms of teaching methods, such as project-based learning and community-based learning. Project-based learning “taps into students’ interests [by allowing] them to create projects that result in meaningful learning experiences” (Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg, & Bezon, 2007, p. 151). The approach enhances learning through allowing students to conduct in-depth investigations of a topic that they find interesting and meaningful (Grant, 2011). When the project is carried out in teams, the approach also encourages students to collaborate and cooperate with others. Peer review or self-reflection components could also be incorporated in the learning experience.

Although there are different usages of the term (Mooney & Edwards, 2001), “community-based learning” (or “service learning”) can be seen as a form of experiential learning that “[encourages] student learning and development through active participation in thoughtfully organised service that is conducted in, and meets the needs of, a community” (US Environmental Protection Agency, 2011). Service learning experiences are highly flexible in terms of duration (from a short-term module to a multiyear course), service delivery method (direct or indirect), responsibility level (low or high levels) and location (on-campus, in the local neighbourhood, in a nearby municipality, in another state or country, or online) (Felten & Clayton, 2011). Other than connecting student learning with local contexts and real-life experiences, the approach

encourages community engagement and promotes civic responsibility (Felten & Clayton, 2011; US Environmental Protection Agency, 2011).

In terms of how to develop and investigate applied learning initiatives as part of the In2Community Applied Learning project, there is a need to take into consideration different system and local level issues when emulating existing engagement initiatives. As is often emphasised in the research literature, educational engagement is “an interactive, ecological process that exists in the interaction or fit between an individual and an ecological system, with activities and relationships with others” (Shernoff, 2013, p. 53).

The capacity of the government, education system, school, family and peers to provide consistent expectations and supports for learning can influence the effectiveness of an educational engagement initiative. Any programs that aim to study or provide interventions for student engagement therefore also need to take into consideration the underlying contextual influences.

Lamb and Markussen (2010) point out that addressing the problem of school dropout is a complex and challenging task that ultimately tests the flexibility of educational and training systems to deal with student diversity. A particular issue with dealing with diverse learning needs of students relates to how engagement is viewed in government policies, which is discussed in the next section.

Definitions of student engagement in Australian and Victorian government policies

A review of government policies in Australia and Victoria found that the word engagement has been defined in divergent ways. For example, the COAG Reform Council Baseline Performance Report (2009) used school enrolment and attendance and Year 10 completion as performance indicators to evaluate the extent to which students are engaged in schooling. The report Strategic Review of Effective Re-Engagement Models for Disengaged Learners (Davies et al., 2011) defined a disengaged person as someone who has not attained Year 12 or equivalent qualification and who is either unemployed, not in the work force, or in a low-skill job. In Lamb and Rice’s (2008) report to the Victorian government Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion, student engagement was seen as separate from school completion and retention, although these terms were not clearly defined in the report.

In Victoria, the School Accountability and Improvement Framework defines student engagement and wellbeing as “the extent to which students feel safe, secure and stimulated to learn at school” (DEECD, 2011, p. 5). Student engagement is further defined in the School Engagement Policy Guidelines (DEECD, 2012) as involving three interrelated components: behavioural, emotional and cognitive. Behavioural engagement refers to a student’s attendance and participation in school-related activities, which can be academic, social, or extracurricular in nature. Emotional engagement refers to a student’s sense of belonging or connectedness to the school, and cognitive engagement refers to the investment that a student makes in his or her learning, and the student’s intrinsic motivation and self-regulation. For ways to measure these different components of engagement, the School Accountability and Improvement Framework suggests using a range of student, teacher and parent opinion surveys, combined with school-level data such as school attendance, suspension and expulsion data, and participation in support programs (DEECD, 2011).

A particular issue with different usages of the term “engagement” pertains to difficulty with comparing the results of different educational initiatives. A recent background paper prepared by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (2013) noted that the ambiguity of the term leads to difficulty with measuring engagement and identifying the solutions to improve student engagement. This ambiguity contributes to difficulty in discerning the effectiveness of engagement initiatives (KPMG, 2009; Victorian Auditor General, 2012).

In addition, Shernoff (2013) observed that many definitions and measures of educational engagement involve how adults, specifically teachers, expect good students to behave, such as being attentive in class. These adult judgements tend to overlook students who are genuinely engaged but do not fit the traditional mould of what a “good student” looks like.

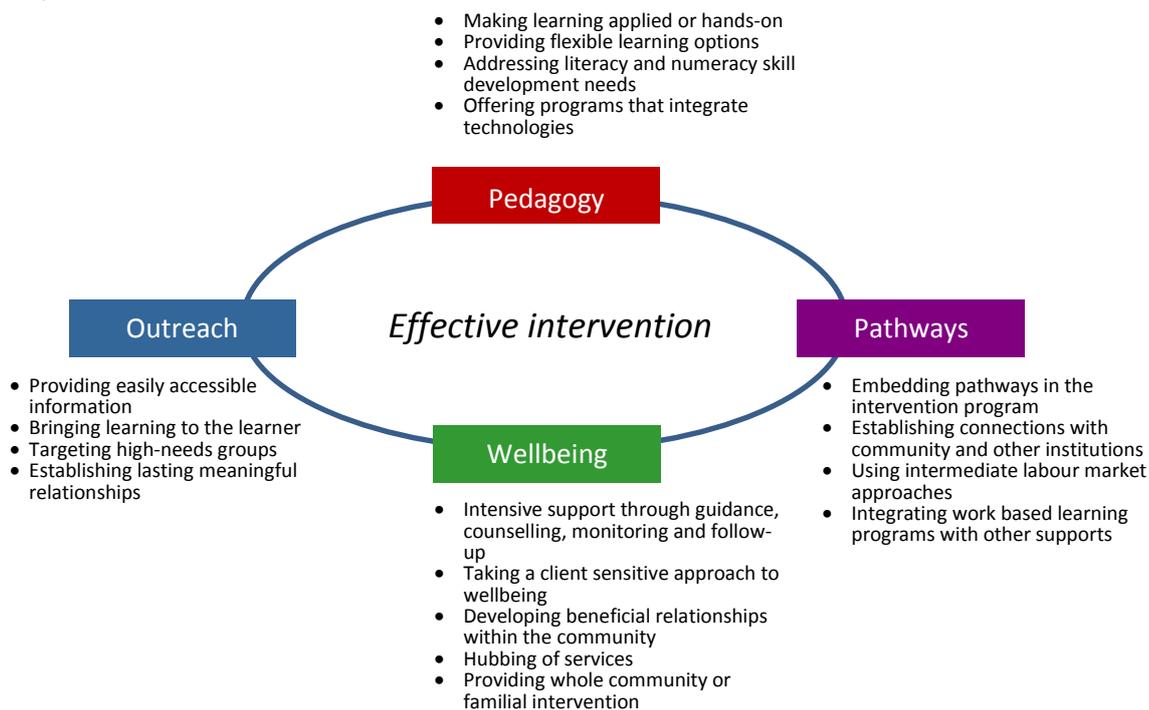
A potential issue for the In2Community Applied Learning Project is how students view engagement and what they consider as meaningful and purposeful learning, as this may have implications for whether they perceive a particular educational engagement initiative as effective or not.

The next section presents findings from Victorian reports which reviewed effective strategies to improve educational engagement (Brotherhood of St Laurence, n.d.; Davies et al., 2011) and school completions (Lamb & Rice, 2008). Some existing educational engagement initiatives in Australia and overseas at the government, local council, community and school levels are described.

Review of educational engagement intervention strategies

Drawing from a review of national and international literature on effective re-engagement programs and interventions, Davies et al. (2011) developed a conceptual model of effective interventions of disengagement (Figure 3) which corresponds to their framework (shown above in Figure 2) regarding factors that contribute to disengagement. Their report focused on people (15–64-year-olds) who have not attained Year 12 or equivalent qualification and who are unemployed, not in the work force, or in a low-skill job. Nonetheless, their framework may be useful for the In2Community Applied Learning Project to consider in terms of ways to engage Years 9 and 10 students.

Figure 3. A conceptual model of effective re-engagement interventions (adapted from Davies et al., 2011, pp. 15, 21).



The conceptual model has four elements: outreach, wellbeing, pathways and pedagogy. Outreach refers to “connecting with disengaged [learners] who may be socially and economically marginalised, in order to identify their needs and inform them of available options” (p. iv); wellbeing focuses on “identifying and addressing the welfare needs of disengaged people” (p. v); pedagogy focuses on understanding the learning needs of disengaged individuals, acknowledging their learning interests, and building on their prior knowledge and skills; and pathways relates to the provision of study, work and career development opportunities that are appealing and worthwhile for learners beyond the particular program. Davies et al. (2011) also list a range of strategies under each of these elements (see Figure 3) and recommend the consideration of these four elements and their respective strategies when evaluating interventions and programs that aim to re-engage learners.

At the local school level, Lamb and Rice (2008) identified 31 successful interventions for improving the outcomes for students at risk of early school-leaving. The interventions were identified from a review of Australian and international research literature and a survey of Victorian government schools that have received supplementary Student Resource Package funding to assist with disadvantaged students. The interventions were grouped into three areas: supportive school culture (school commitment), school-wide strategies (school-level initiatives), and student-focused strategies (initiatives addressing needs of specific groups of students or individuals) and are listed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Successful interventions for improving engagement and reducing early school leaving (identified by Lamb and Rice, 2008, pp. 12-13).

Area	Strategy
Supportive school culture (commitment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to continuous improvement • Commitment to success for all • Flexibility and responsiveness to individual need • High expectations • Encouraging student responsibility and autonomy • Shared vision
School-wide strategies (school-level approaches)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broad curriculum provision in the senior years • Offering quality Vocational Education and Training (VET) options • Providing programs that are challenging and stimulating • Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy skill growth • Programs to counter low achievement • Pathways planning and quality careers guidance and counselling • Strategic use of teachers and teaching resources • Smaller class sizes • Mini-school or school-within-a-school organisation • Team-based approaches to teaching, learning and pastoral care • Priority professional development • Community service • Cross-sectoral initiatives • Attendance policies and programs • Initiatives to improve connections with parents • Conflict resolution, mediation or problem-solving programs
Student-focused strategies (addressing individual student needs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student case management • Mentoring • Welfare support • Targeted assistance for skill development among low achievers • Tutoring and peer tutoring • Supplementary or out-of-school-time programs • Pathways planning for at risk students • Targeted financial support • Project-based learning for disengaged students

Adding to the review of Lamb and Rice (2008), the Brotherhood of St Laurence (n.d., p. 5) identified nine features of successful school-level engagement initiatives implementation. These include:

- embedding of the initiative across the school culture
- teacher participation and “buy-in”
- parent involvement and “buy-in”
- provision of stimulating experiences for students, giving them the chance to lead and allowing them to achieve practical outcomes
- confrontation of outside-school issues, taking into consideration differences across age groups
- engagement in sustained responses involving face-to-face contacts with families in their homes
- setting up of data collection, analysis and monitoring for evidence-based responses

- cross-agency collaboration and accountability
- attunement to the potential for negative peer influence.

Collectively, these reviews provide directions in terms of how educational engagement can be addressed at the system and school levels.

Snapshot of educational engagement strategies or programs

Government level initiatives

In terms of how educational engagement can be addressed at the government level, one approach is to introduce more flexible learning options and qualifications. Examples of this approach include the Pre-community Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning program introduced in Victoria, the New Basics Project in Queensland (a research project) and the Youthreach program in Ireland.

Pre-community Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) program

The VCAL program was introduced in 2002 by the state government to provide students with a secondary education qualification that is an alternative to the Victorian Certificate of Examination (VCE) (Pritchard & Anderson, 2009). The focus of the certificate is on equipping Years 11 and 12 students with “practical work-related experience, as well as literacy and numeracy skills and the opportunity to build personal skills that are important for life and work” (VCAA, 2013, p. 2). There are four compulsory strands in the VCAL program:

- literacy and numeracy skills
- work related skills
- industry specific skills
- personal development skills.

For the literacy and numeracy skills strand, there are specific VCAL units that can be undertaken, although students can also choose to enrol in VCE subjects or selected further education studies. At the higher levels of the VCAL program (Intermediate and Senior), students are required to complete nationally recognised Vocational Education and Training (VET) components for the industry specific skills strand. The work related skills strand may involve undertaking a structured work placement, a part-time apprenticeship or traineeship, or part-time work. The personal development skills strand involves participation in projects and activities in the community or school that will help to develop teamwork, self-confidence and other skills. Students develop their own VCAL program with a teacher or careers counsellor based on their particular learning needs and interests by selecting units and modules within each of the strands (VCAA, 2013). VCAL programs can be delivered outside the school campus and may involve partnerships with registered and authorised external providers. Community VCAL (CVCAL) programs are fully delivered by an external provider contracted by the school (DEECD, 2009).

Some external education providers also offer “pre-VCAL” programs to Year 9 and 10 students as a way to re-engage senior secondary school-aged students who were alienated from mainstream schooling. These programs could lead to enrolment in a VCAL program on completion (Volkoff & Gibson, 2009). One of the more well documented pre-VCAL programs is the 2009 program delivered by the Brotherhood of St Laurence High Street Centre, Frankston (Myconos, 2010). The eight-week program was offered to 16 students from the Mornington Peninsular area who had become disengaged from mainstream schooling and were considering the CVCAL option for the next year. A program coordinator provided advice to the students with their choices of pre-VCAL components to ensure smooth transitions to other education or work pathways. The students also received support and guidance from the coordinator throughout the course of the program including their work placements.

The Queensland New Basics Project

In 2000, the Queensland government began a four-year research trial of an educational reform project known as the New Basics Project. The project involved an integration of a new curriculum and pedagogy and assessment approaches to accommodate student diversity in Years 1 to 9 (MCEECTYA, 1999). The project also involved new approaches to school organisation and professional learning. The research project was in part motivated by a concern about the “Year 9 dip”, so-called because of the decreases in attachment and attainment levels across Queensland state schools in the middle years of schooling. Schools that were selected for inclusion in the New Basics Project cohort adopted five key practices:

- The four categories of the New Basics Project are explicit in the school curriculum plan (i.e. life pathways and social futures, multiliteracies and communications media, active citizenship, and environment and technologies).
- The school operates as a significant learning community.
- Students and parents know about and value the particular “rich tasks” that are being worked towards and know which performance will be reported at the next juncture.
- Teachers demonstrate “productive pedagogies” in action.
- The school community is committed to maximising the use of electronic forms of communication and to the efficient use of the New Basics website (New Basics Branch, 2001, p. 1).

The New Basics Project provided an alternative to the traditional mode of organising curriculum through the eight key learning areas (KLAs) across Queensland schools. The design for classroom teaching practices (productive pedagogies), curriculum organisers, professional learning and assessment reform (rich tasks) can be sourced in the technical papers for the research and in the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Study (Lingard, Ladwig, Mills, Bahr, Chant & Warry, 2001).

The New Basics Framework adopted a transdisciplinary approach which draws on practices and skills across disciplines when teaching. The framework is underpinned by the notion that “transdisciplinary teams of teachers working with students on tasks that are clearly connected to their life pathways will provide the space for students’ deep intellectual engagement” (New Basics Branch, 2000, p. 6). The project has now been completed and its official site which contains the resources has been discontinued.

Youthreach

Youthreach (www.youthreach.ie) is a national second-chance education and training program in Ireland funded by the Exchequer under the government's National Development Plan. The program targets school leavers aged between 15 and 20 years who are unemployed. Similarly to VCAL, the program offers participants the opportunity to identify and pursue vocational training in out-of-school settings in Centres for Education distributed throughout the country. There are 12 building blocks to the program: methodology, achievement, quality, structure, flexibility, progression, appropriate certification, partnerships and networks, interculturalism, innovation, supports, and information and communications technology. The following further explains these building blocks.

Methodology refers to a focus on the holistic development of the individual. Achievement relates to the promotion of self-worth through the provision of a broad range of certification. Quality concerns the assurance of the quality of the services provided by the training providers and the work of the participants. Structure refers to the three-phase program structure to provide safe, encouraging and stimulating learning environments for the participants. Flexibility relates to flexible management, staffing and delivery of the program. Progression involves the provision of multiple educational pathways and options. Appropriate certification is carried out through a flexible, standards-based national qualifications system. Partnerships and networks are established through an emphasis on local planning and interagency networking in the provision of childcare, guidance, counselling and psychological services. Interculturalism concerns respect and accommodation for the community and cultural needs of participants. Innovation refers to the program's links with the Community Initiative Employment/Youthstart which was generated from a European guidance model known as MAGIC (Mentoring, Advocacy, Guidance, Information and Counselling). Supports involve the provision of psychological, guidance, counselling, advocacy and other supports. Finally, skills in information and communications technology are considered a personal educational right and social and economic necessity for the participants where the education centres are expected to help the participants to develop as part of the program (Youthreach, n.d.).

Local council/community level initiatives

Several local councils in Australia such as the Moonee Valley City Council in Melbourne's Western Region and the Logan City Council in Queensland have strategic frameworks to encourage youth engagement. These engagement strategies are designed to foster partnership and collaborations between the local council, youths, and community-based organisations and a sense of belonging and connectedness within the community.

Moonee Valley Youth Engagement Strategy

The Youth Engagement Strategy 2009–2013 of the Moonee Valley City Council (Moonee Valley City Council, 2009) focuses on "inclusion, opportunity and choice" for people aged 12 to 25 years of age. The strategic framework was developed based on consultations with young people, local service providers and agencies and secondary schools. The framework has five objectives:

- civic engagement: to increase the number of young people participating in community decision-making
- community participation: to increase social connectedness and improve the sense of belonging and identity

- health and wellbeing: to increase access to support, health and community services, and provide environments that are inclusive of young people
- education and employment: to expand and diversify education and employment opportunities of people throughout the municipality
- network and service coordination: to eliminate service gaps and increase shared vision and goals across the municipality.

The council planned to take active roles in the community as part of the Youth Engagement Strategy, including to:

- deliver youth programs, services and initiatives across the municipality
- advocate for and with young people to federal and state government
- work in partnership with community-based organisations and the business sector on youth issues
- take a lead in the community to promote opportunities and choices for young people
- undertake research and policy development regarding the needs of local young people and service providers
- fund external organisations to implement initiatives of benefit to local young people (p. 15).

The strategy illustrates the way the local council can be involved in promoting the educational and employment engagement of youth within the community. The strategy also appears to provide the scope for facilitating community-based learning through partnerships between youths and community-based organisations.

Logan Youth Vision

Similarly to the local government areas in Melbourne's Western Region, Logan City in South East Queensland has experienced fast growth, and the population has quadrupled since the council amalgamations in 2008. The Logan City Council is the sixth largest in Australia, with a population of 277,000, and has residents from more than 180 cultural backgrounds. The Logan Youth Vision 2010–2013 was developed based on consultation with a range of stakeholders. There are four key areas articulated in the vision document:

- Spaces and places: existing and future planning of facilities, infrastructure and open space to maximise opportunities for community use for recreation, sport, health, tourism, education, entertainment, celebration and creativity.
- Partnering: council partnering with young people to give them voice in planning and decision making, and for the council to maintain and develop partnerships with state and federal governments, councillors, and elected members, local services and business, to advocate for young people to improve their outcomes and opportunities and resources in education, employment, transport and safety.

- Resourcing: fund and support new, ongoing and enhanced programs and services that provide diverse recreational opportunities that are creative, innovative and entrepreneurial, build skills and capacity, develop leadership and embrace new technologies for young people and the youth sector; this includes providing and expanding opportunities for work experience, traineeships and apprenticeships for young people.
- Communicating: promote Logan as a safe, active and connected community; market and promote the range of opportunities, facilities and services available to support young people; and engage young people and keep them informed using new technologies (Logan City Council, 2011, pp. 12-15).

The Moonee Valley and Logan City Councils therefore developed different strategies to meet the needs of young people through community engagement. Their strategy documents suggest potential for educational engagement initiatives to draw resources and supports from local councils in designing community-based learning experiences.

School level initiatives

There are several large-scale school-based educational engagement programs from the US that are currently being implemented in Australia. These include the Big Picture Learning programs and the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) system.

The Big Picture Learning programs

The Big Picture Learning organisation was established in 1995 in the US, with a focus on personalised, applied and community learning. There are three principles that underpin the educational programs developed by the organisation:

- Learning must be based on each student's interests and needs.
- Curriculum must be relevant to the student and allow them to do real work in the real world.
- Students' growth and abilities must be measured by the quality of their work and how it changes them (Big Picture Learning, 2008, pp. 3-4).

The programs emphasise the uniqueness of each student in terms of interests, needs and capabilities, and encourages the active participation of each student in his or her own learning. As part of the program, each student jointly designs a learning plan with the support of parents, professional mentors and advisors. Based on the individual learning plan, an internship is organised with a mentor who may be in the field of law, engineering or business, etc. The student and his or her fellow students in a program are encouraged to interact to reinforce each other's learning experiences. The programs have also been adopted in countries other than the US, including Australia, Canada and the Netherlands (Big Picture Learning, 2008).

The AVID system

Also developed in the US, the AVID system was founded in 1980 and is an instructional system that aims to increase the number of disadvantaged students entering higher education. The philosophy behind the system is "hold students accountable to the highest standards, provide academic and social support, and they will rise to the challenge" (AVID, n.d.). The system facilitates school-wide transformation in leadership, systems, instruction and culture (AVID, 2012) involving eight foundational components:

- a non-traditional classroom setting meeting the academic and emotional needs of individual students
- the teacher as advisor, counsellor and student advocate
- an emphasis on objective [assessment] data
- the student at the centre of decision making regarding educational goals
- a student contract outlining willingness to work and setting learning goals
- student support from teachers and skilled, trained tutors
- a curriculum emphasising academic reading and writing
- reliance on the Socratic process (AVID, n.d.).

The system provides a range of resources to support the professional development of school leaders and teachers, and is being implemented in 89 sites in Australia (AVID, n.d.).

After our above review of a sample of educational engagement strategies in Australia and overseas, in the next section we profile Melbourne's Western Region, in which the In2Community Applied Learning Project is based, to examine the demographics and the education status of the region. The regional profile provides the context in which to review the relevance and applicability of the engagement initiatives employed by the research site of this case study, The Grange P–12 College.

3. Background and context

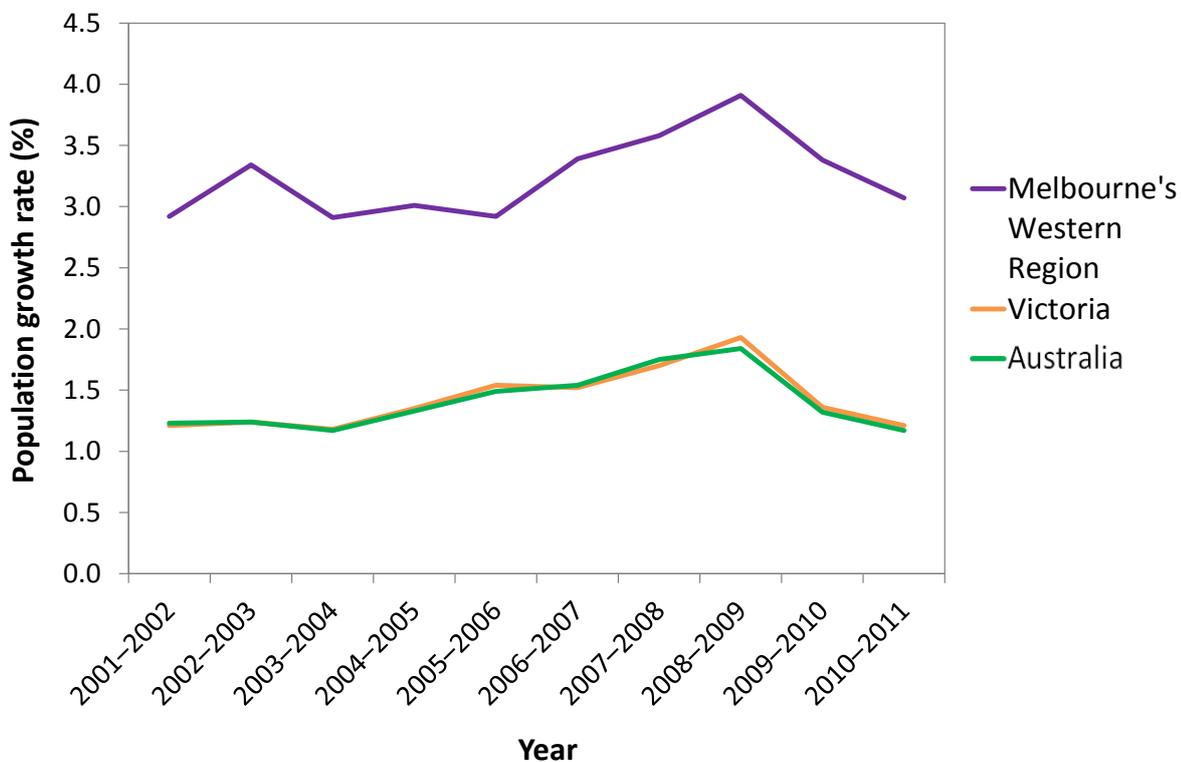
Melbourne’s Western Metropolitan Region at a Glance

Melbourne’s Western Metropolitan Region (hereafter referred to as Melbourne’s Western Region) is the fastest growing area in Australia (Salt, 2011). The region covers seven local government areas (see Figure 6 on the next page): Brimbank, Maribyrnong, Melbourne, Melton, Moonee Valley, Hobsons Bay and Wyndham.¹

Excluding Melbourne, the region has an area of 1,331 square kilometres, covering a range of urban and rural areas, in which some areas are rapidly transforming from rural into urban with the development of new estates (Regional Development Victoria, 2013).

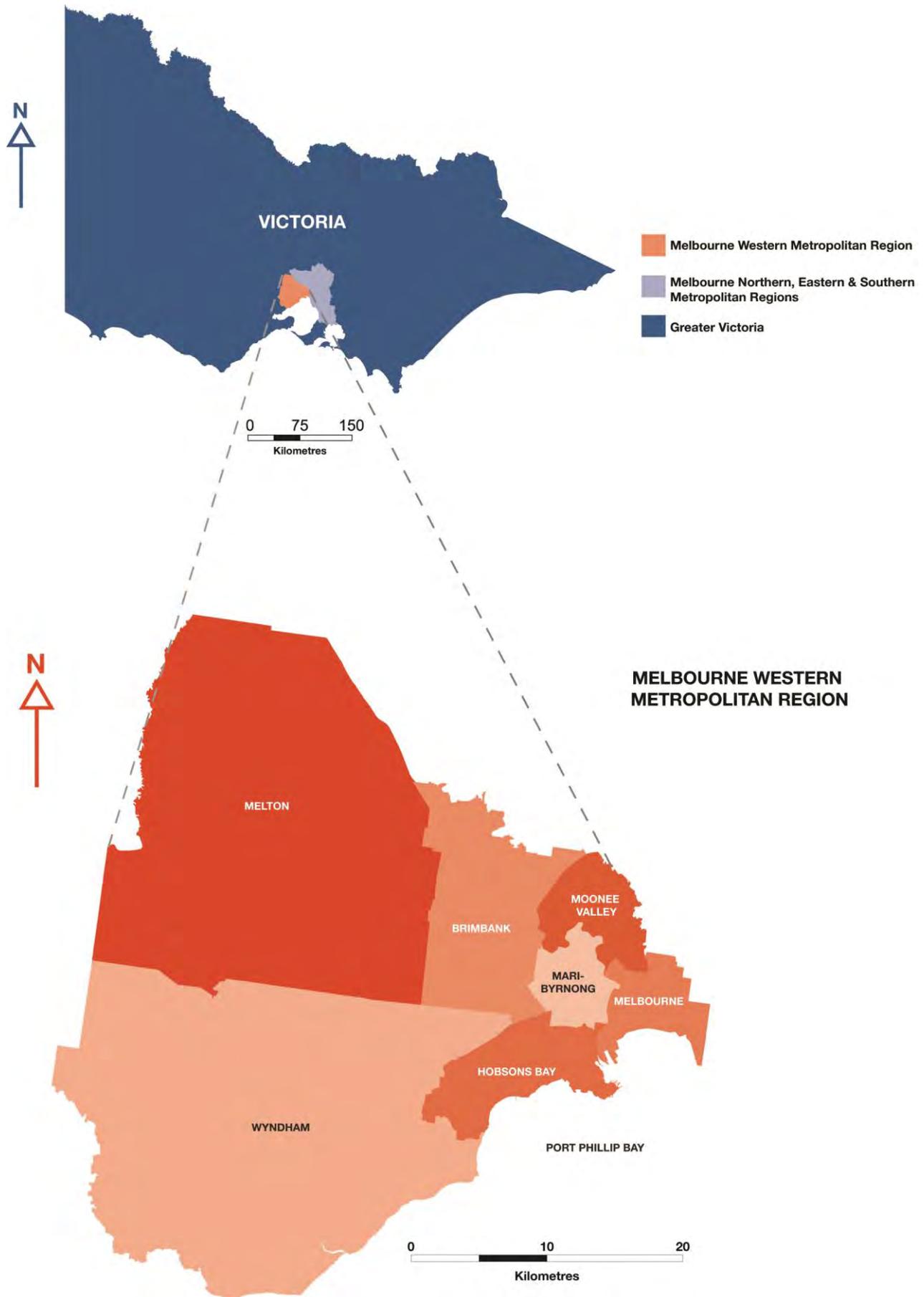
Figure 5 compares the rate of population growth at the regional, state and national levels between 2001 and 2011. It shows that the growth rate in Melbourne’s Western Region remained above state and national levels in the 10-year period.

Figure 5. Population growth rate between 2001 and 2011 (Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development, 2013).



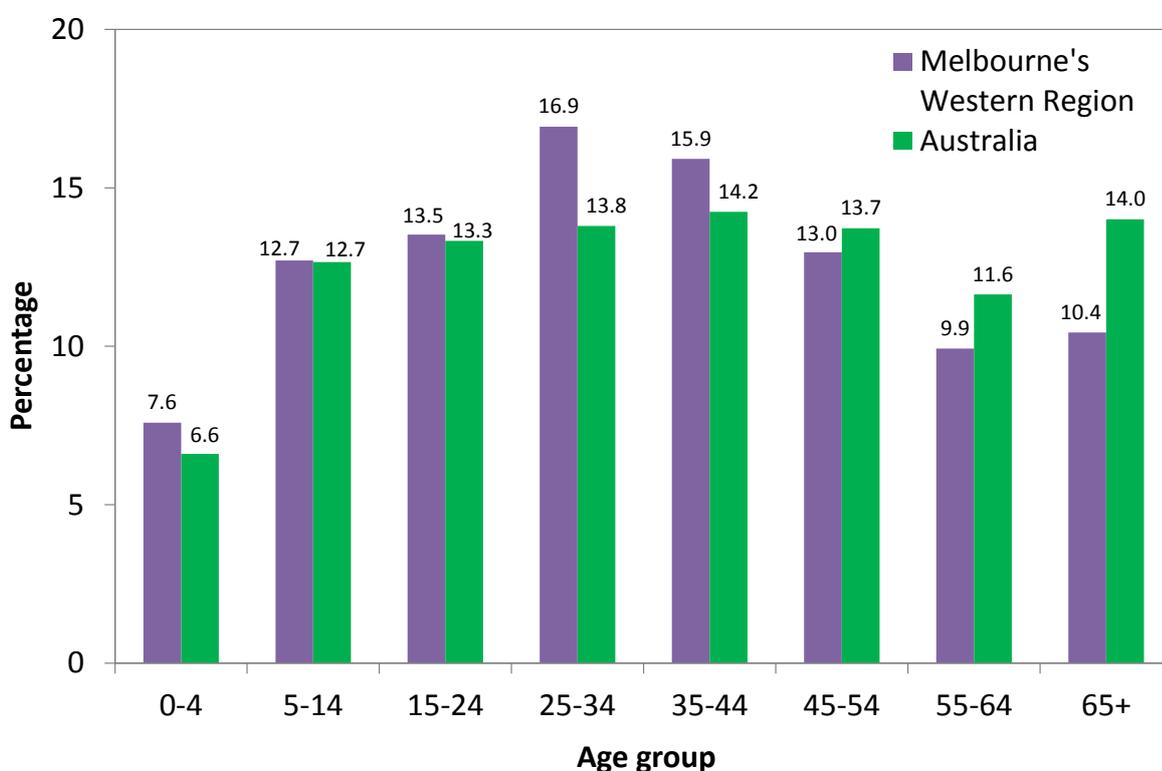
¹ There are discrepancies in terms of whether the City of Melbourne is considered part of Melbourne’s Western region (see Davies et al., 2011; Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development, 2013; Regional Development Victoria, 2013). The data for Melbourne are excluded from the regional statistics unless otherwise stated.

Figure 6. Map of Victoria (upper map) and the Melbourne Western Metropolitan Region (lower map).



During the 2010–2011 period, the average population growth rate of the region was 3.2%, compared to 1.4% in the state and across Australia (Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development, 2013). By 2016, the region is expected to be home to 14% of Victoria’s population, an increase from 11.6% in 2001 (Regional Development Victoria, 2013). Figure shows a breakdown of the population in the region (total population, 716,510) according to age, based on the 2011 census data (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b). The proportion of 15–19-year-olds in the region was 6.3% (44,986 people). Except for the 5–14-year age group (for whom the percentage is the same), there is a greater proportion of people in the younger age groups (0–44 years) residing in the region, compared to the Australian average.

Figure 7. Population by age in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013a).



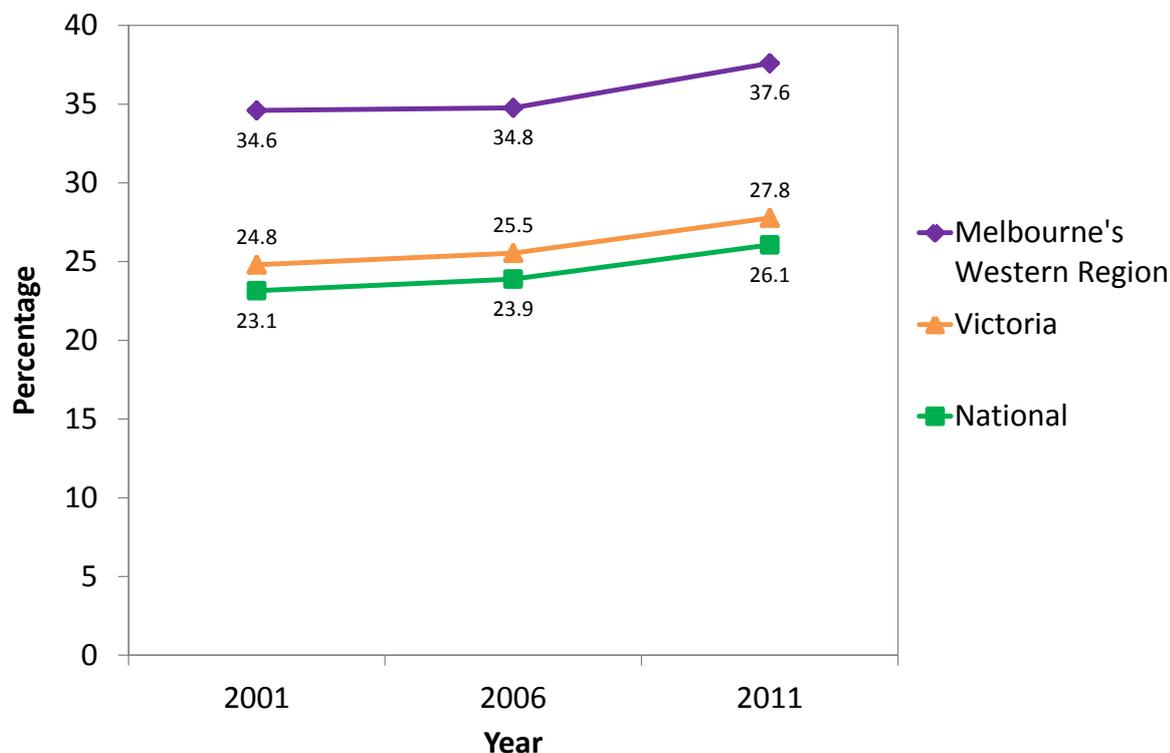
Melbourne’s Western Region has the most diverse population in Victoria, representing more than 130 nationalities (Regional Development Victoria, 2013); however, two-thirds of the population (62.4%; 417,673 people) were born in Australia. Based on the 2011 census, the top 10 overseas countries of birth in the region were Vietnam (30,713 residents), India (26,174), United Kingdom (20,144), Italy (14,412), Philippines (14,138), New Zealand (13,477), Malta (10,539), China² (9,647), Greece (6,844) and the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (6,559).

Figure compares the proportion of overseas-born residents in Melbourne’s Western Region, the state of Victoria, and nationally between 2001 and 2011. As can be seen in the figure, the region has a higher percentage of overseas born residents in the 10-year period of between 34.6% and 37.6%, compared to the state (24.8% and 27.8%) and Australia (23.1 and 26.1%) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b). During the same period, nearly 89,000 migrants settled in the region, and over half of them (52.5%) arrived through the

² Excludes special administrative regions (SARs) and Taiwan.

skilled migration program, 32.7% through family visas and 13.1% through humanitarian visas (Australian Department of Immigration, 2013). Between 2001 and 2011, there was a 75% (1,574 residents) increase in the Indigenous population living in the region, from 2,074 in 2001 to 3,648 in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b).

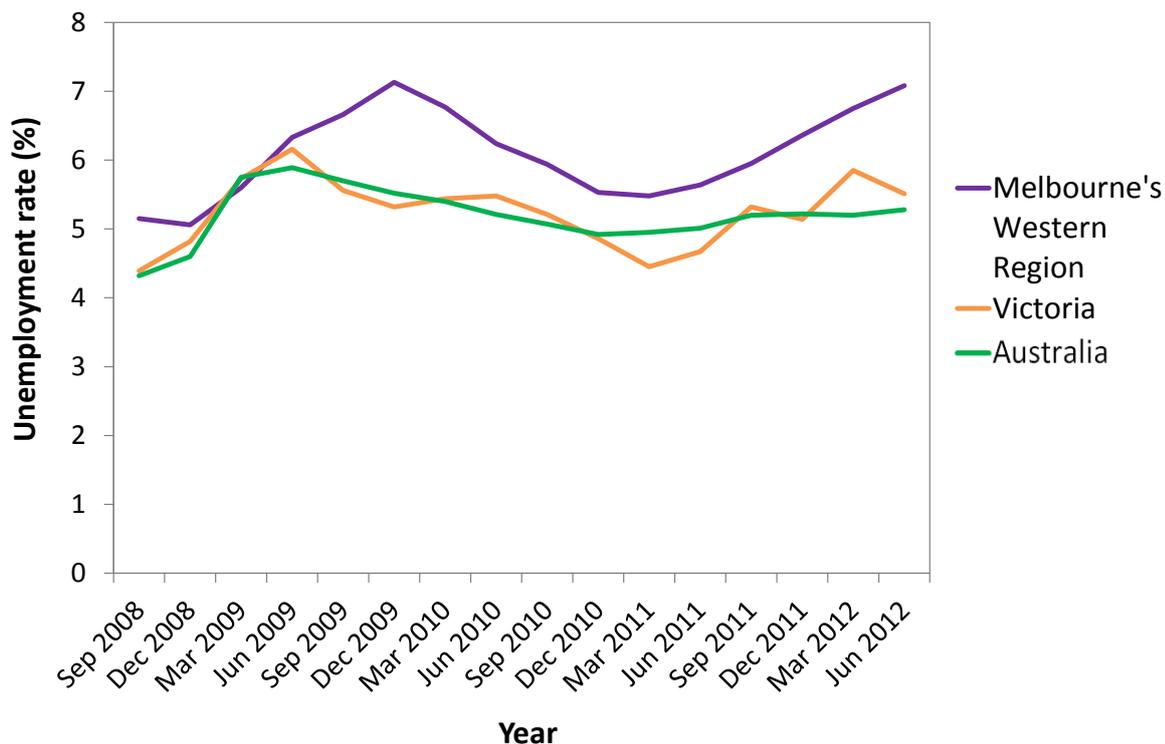
Figure 8. Proportion³ of overseas-born residents between 2001 and 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b).



In terms of economic status, there were 51,401 businesses in the region as at June 2011, with 89 of these being large firms with over 200 employees (Regional Development Victoria, 2013). The largest employment sector in the region is manufacturing (10.8%), followed by retail trade (10.2%), health care and social assistance (9.6%), and professional, scientific and technical services (8.4%) (Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development, 2013). Between September 2008 and June 2012, the unemployment rate in Melbourne's Western Region remained higher than that of the state and Australia except for March 2009 (Figure 9).

³ Proportion calculated based on people who reported their country of birth, excluding overseas visitors or those who did not state the information.

Figure 9. Unemployment rates between September 2008 and June 2012 (Department of Infrastructure and Regional Development, 2013).

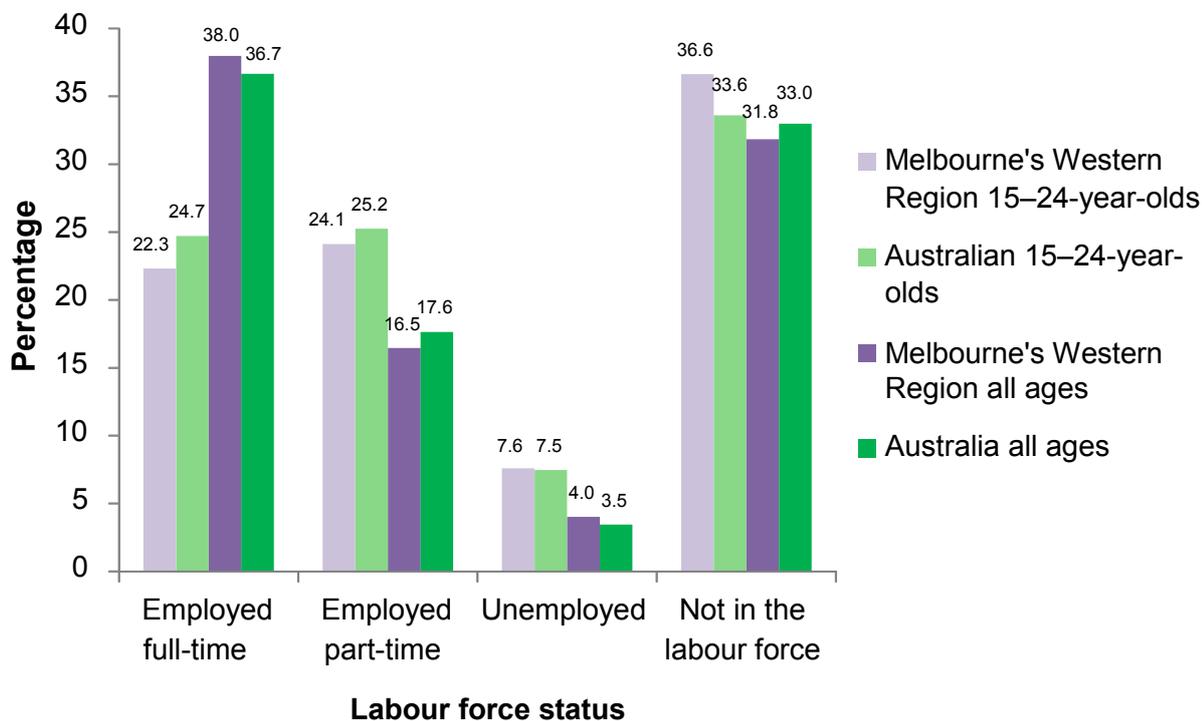


For the 15–24-years age group, the full-time and part-time employment rates in the region (22.3% and 24.1% respectively) are lower than that of Australia (24.7% and 25.2% respectively) and the unemployment rate (7.6%) is slightly higher than that of Australia (7.5%) (see Figure 10).

There is a greater proportion of 15–24-year-olds in the region who are not in the labour force (36.6%) than to Australia (33.6%). Compared to the national average, there is a higher than average number of residents receiving financial support from the government such as the Newstart allowance⁴ (2.9% regionally and 2.5% nationally), the single parenting payment (1.7% regionally and 1.5% nationally) and the youth allowance (2.0% regionally and 1.5% nationally) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013c). In 2010, over 27,000 residents in Melbourne’s Western region were receiving disability support payments. Over 13,300 households were on single parent benefits and over 23,000 residents were on unemployment benefits with an estimated 53% of these residents being unemployed long-term. There were 15,300 recipients on the youth allowance, with 12,400 of these recipients from families with low enough income levels that they were eligible for the student youth allowance (Western Melbourne Regional Development Australia Committee, 2012).

⁴ The Newstart allowance is a payment for people who are seeking employment and allows them to participate in activities that are designed to increase their chances of gaining employment (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013c).

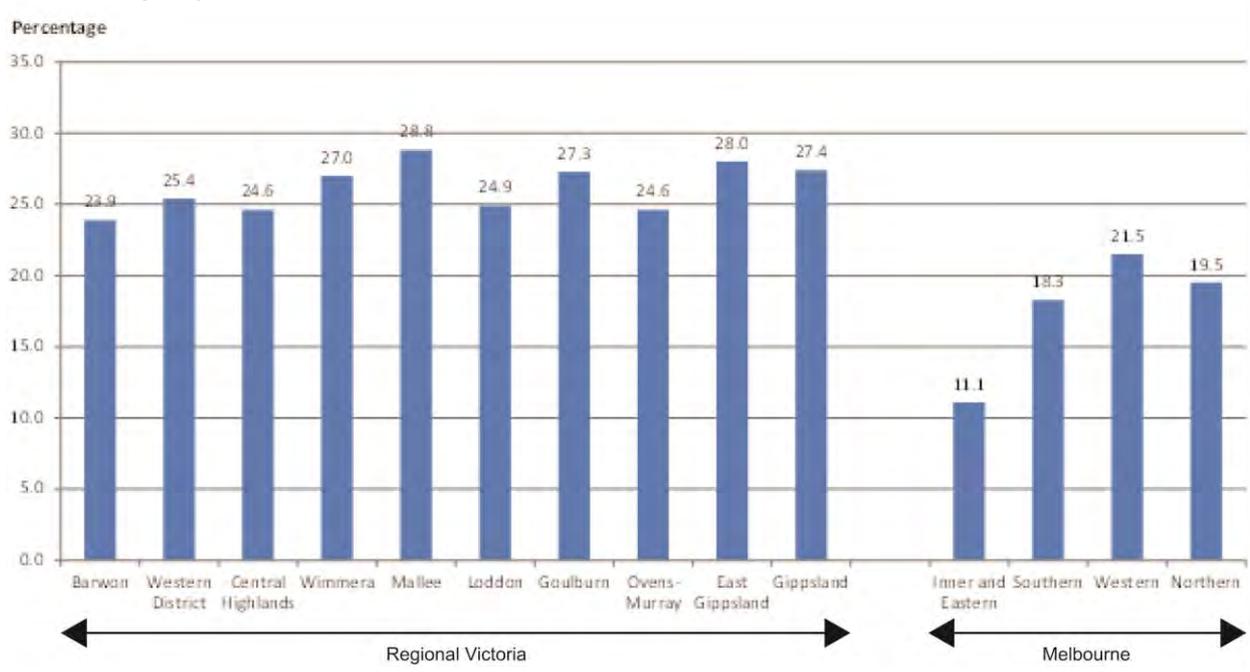
Figure 10. Labour force status of 15–24-year-olds and all ages in 2011 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b).



Education profile of Melbourne’s Western Region

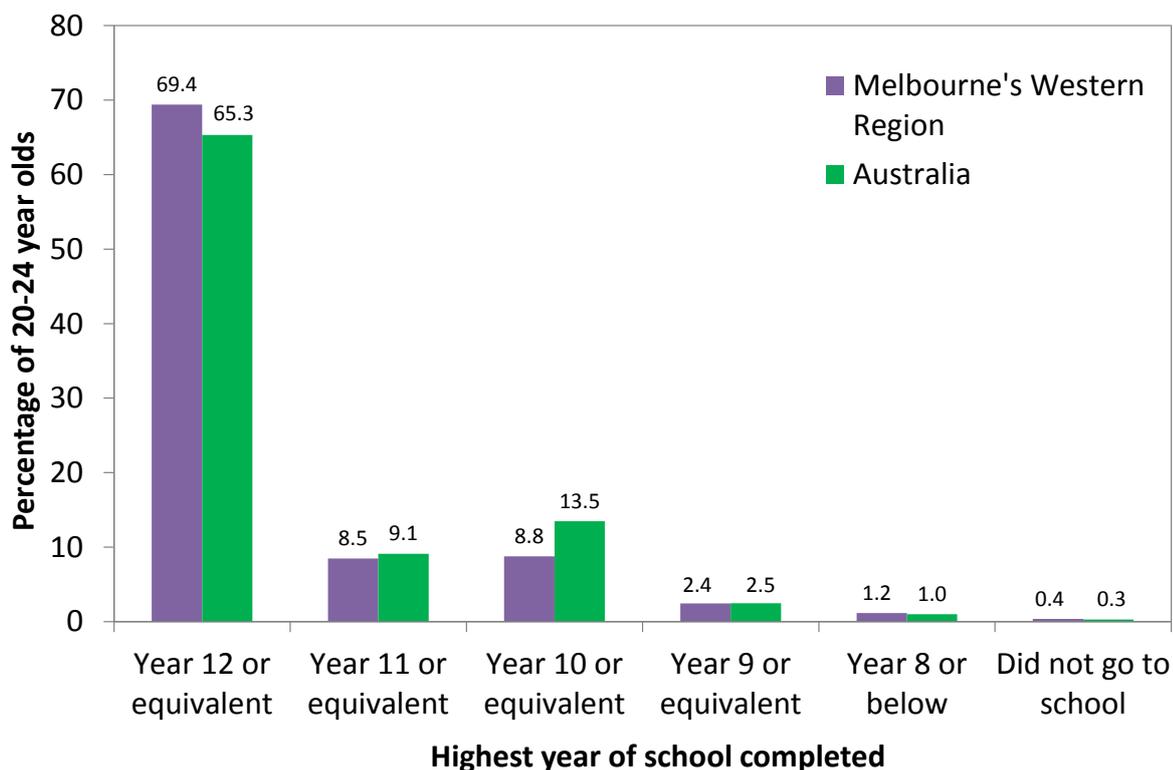
In 2013, there were 138 government and 82 non-government schools in Melbourne’s Western Region, with a total enrolment of 124,539.7 full-time equivalent students, which is 14.1% of the total enrolment of Victoria (DEECD, 2013b). Using data from the 2006 census, Davies, Lamb and Doecke (2011) compared the proportion of 15–64-year-old low-skill and disengaged learners relative to the adult population in different regions of Melbourne (see Figure). In their report, a disengaged learner is defined as “15–64-year-olds who have not attained at least an AQF [Australian Qualifications Framework] Level 3 Certificate and who are unemployed, not in the labour force or in low-skill jobs” (p. 5). Figure shows that there were generally higher proportions of low-skill and disengaged learners in regional Victoria compared to the four regions in Melbourne. Out of the Melbourne regions, Western Melbourne had the highest proportion of disengagement at 21.5%, followed by Northern Melbourne (19.5%), Southern Melbourne (18.3%) and Inner and Eastern Melbourne (11.1%).

Figure 11. Percentage of low-skill and disengaged learners as a percentage of the adult population (from Davies et al., 2011, p. 10).



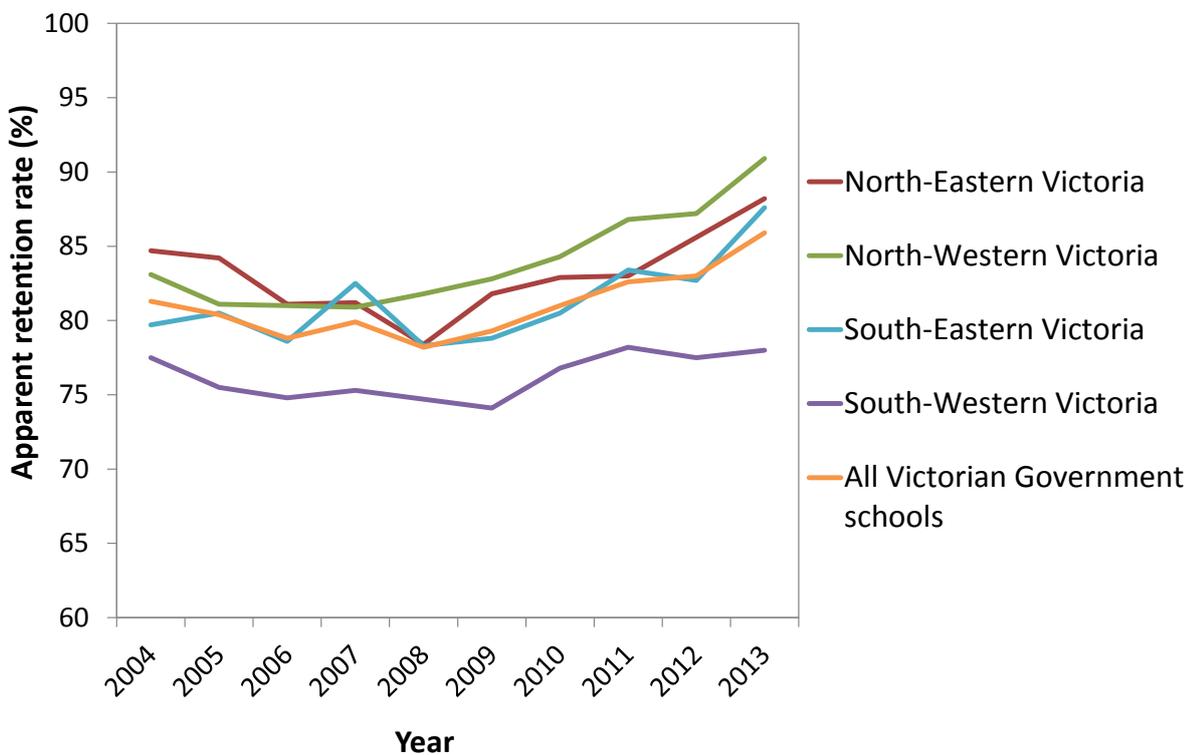
The completion rate of Year 12 or equivalent among 20–24-year-olds in Melbourne’s Western Region is higher than the national average (69.4%, compared to 65.3% nationally; see Figure 12). However, the completion rates of Years 11 and 10 or equivalent are lower than the national average (8.5% regionally and 9.1% nationally for Year 11 or equivalent, and 8.8% regionally and 13.5% nationally for Year 10 or equivalent).

Figure 12. Highest year level of school completed among 20–24-year-olds (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013b).



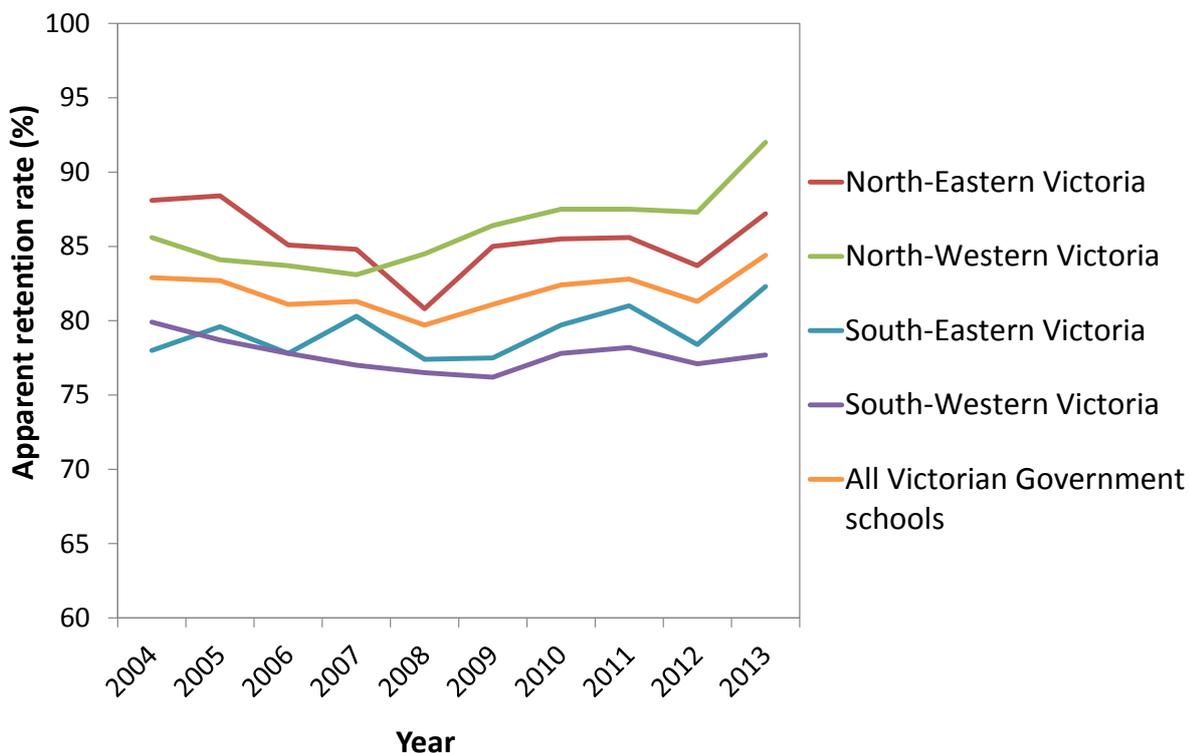
The Victorian DEECD (2013b) releases annual statistics on apparent retention rates of students in the state. The statistics refer to the proportion of Year 12 government school students who were enrolled in Year 7 five years ago and Year 10 two years ago, respectively.⁵ Statistics are available according to the new DEECD regional structure with four regions, where Melbourne’s Western Region has merged with Barwon South Western and Grampians Regions to form the new South-Western Victoria Region. As shown in Figure , within the 2004 to 2013 period, the apparent retention rate for Years 7–12 in South-Western Victoria was consistently lower than the state average. Although the region’s apparent retention rate of 79.9% for Years 10 to 12 was higher than in South-Eastern Victoria (78.0%) in 2004, the rate fell lower than all of the regions in most years and was consistently lower than the state average (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Apparent retention rates for Years 7–12 in government schools, by region, between 2004 and 2013 (Victorian DEECD, 2013b).



⁵ The statistics do not take into account factors such as students repeating year levels, interstate and overseas migration, transfer of students between education sectors or schools, or students who have left school previously, returning to continue their school education (Victorian DEECD, 2013b).

Figure 14. Apparent retention rates for Years 10–12 in government schools, by region, between 2004 and 2013 (Victorian DEECD, 2013b).



The statistics presented in this report show that, as the fastest growing area in Australia, Melbourne’s Western Region faces significant social challenge, but is also an area of opportunity, given the investment in its expansion (Williamson, Rasmussen and O’Neill, 2013). The region has a relatively young population and is culturally diverse. The unemployment rate in the region has been higher than the state and national averages in the past six years which contributes to a high need for welfare support in the region. Despite having a higher Year 12 or equivalent completion rate among 20–24-year-olds, compared to the national average, the region also had the highest proportion of disengaged adult learners, compared to other metropolitan regions in Melbourne. The apparent retention rate of the South-Western Victoria region was also relatively low compared to other Victoria regions in the past 10 years.



4. Evaluation of education engagement initiatives: The Grange P–12 College

The research site for this case study, The Grange P–12 College, is a government school in the Australian state of Victoria. The college is located approximately 27 kilometres west of the Melbourne central business district, in Hoppers Crossing in the local government area of Wyndham. The college has two campuses: the Callistemon campus which caters for Prep to Year 6 students and the Deloraine campus which caters for students from Years 7 to 12. The college had a total enrolment of 1,777 students in 2013 and employs around 180 staff across both campuses, including the school administrators, 145 teaching staff and 35 educational support staff (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2014). According to data collected through the Department, the student population at The Grange (948) is considerably below the Victorian average (1000) on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). Approximately 40% of students have a language background other than English, and 3% of the student population are Indigenous. In 2013 there were relatively equal numbers of boys (879) and girls (898).

This study investigated the implementation of two engagement programs provided by the college that target Year 9 and 10 students: the Year 9 Projects and the Connections Program. The broad aims of these programs are to:

- build supportive relationships and a sense of school belonging
- provide students with skills and opportunities to communicate with a range of peers and adults
- assist students to identify and build on their skills and interests
- encourage students to learn through a challenging and engaging curriculum.

Initiative descriptions

In 2013, there were 164 Year 9 students and 167 Year 10 students attending The Grange. All students in Year 9 participate in the Year 9 Projects initiative, whereas the Connections Program is comprised of 28 students from Years 9 and 10 who have been identified as highly disengaged learners.

Year 9 Projects

The middle years of schooling (Years 9 and 10) have been identified as an extremely important period in a young person's education. These years have been problematic due to the number of students who disengage from education, particularly as the age of mandatory schooling sits within this timeframe. The Grange Secondary College aimed to take a preventative approach to disengagement by developing an initiative that incorporates pedagogical differentiation and real-world content that links to students' interests

outside the classroom. The Year 9 Projects initiative is a curriculum innovation that uses applied and project-based learning to facilitate student engagement and widen their exposure to content areas that are not traditionally covered (i.e. philosophy, digital media and photography, and leadership through sports). Students are able to take several classes over the course of the school year, alongside the standard required classes (i.e. literacy and numeracy), and once a week they attend their chosen projects class. Each semester, students opt in to a different class so that they experience several different subjects throughout the year.

Connections Program

The Grange started the Connections Program in the middle of 2013. The aim of the program is to provide an internal alternative education setting for Years 9 and 10 students who have a prolonged association with the school (e.g. since Year 7) and may benefit from learning in a smaller or more intimate learning environment. Students are referred into this program based on a number of factors which can include low attendance that has significantly disrupted learning, extremely low levels of literacy or numeracy such that they are unable to participate in Year 9 or 10 coursework, learning difficulties, behavioural issues and/or family circumstances that have led to disengagement from learning. While there were approximately 25 Year 9 and 10 students enrolled in the Connections Program, the average daily attendance was around 10 students. Two teachers are allocated to this program, which runs separately to Years 9 and 10 and uses a highly individualised approach to cater to each student's learning needs. The Connections Program is not a permanent destination for students; the goal of the program is to enable students to return to their respective year levels. Distinctive characteristics of this program are the smaller class sizes, which allows for stable relationships to be created between students and teachers, in addition to incorporating more applied learning tasks and activities into the daily schedule.

Research design and methods

To explore the two engagement programs at The Grange, a case-study design was used to gain an in-depth and multiperspective understanding of student (dis)engagement. This research approach is particularly appropriate in education research exploring a system of action, in this case the engagement initiatives implemented at the school. As noted by Feagin, Orum and Sjoberg (1991), case study designs use a variety of data collection methods to understand systems of action or issues. In this research we used:

- ethnographic observation to gain insight into the engagement initiatives and how they translate into the classroom context
- interviews and focus groups with students, teachers and senior staff
- physical artefacts (i.e. students' artwork and photographs).

For data collection, a researcher made three 2-hour visits to the school site in June to July 2014 to observe the Connections Program, a regular Year 9/10 class and two Year 9 Projects classes. The visits allowed the researcher to become familiar with the site, the teachers and the students, and the school curriculum. Field notes were taken during these visits to document and reflect on the researcher's observation. Teachers, students and senior staff were then interviewed in focus groups. The Connections Program and Year 9 Projects teachers and senior staff were interviewed separately as a group, and the students were

interviewed individually or in small groups of two to three people. The interviews lasted 30 minutes for each of the teacher groups, around 60 minutes for the interview with senior staff, and between eight and 30 minutes each for the student groups. During the interviews, staff and students were asked about their views on engagement in general and to describe the engagement program or programs that they were involved in. Respondents' views on the strengths of the programs were sought. This included the challenges that the programs face and suggestions for improvement. All the interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

Figure 15. Overview of the research activities for the case study.

Data collection method	Data type	Timeframe
Ethnographic observation (three 2-hour visits)	Field notes	June–July (Terms 2 and 3)
Interviews with staff and students	Interview transcripts Student 'projects' artefacts (images, video, artwork)	August (Term 3)

Participants

Two Year 9, five Year 10 and two Year 11 students who were attending or attended the Connections Program participated in the study, as well as four of the teachers responsible for delivering the program. Five current Year 9 students and six teachers were interviewed to speak about the Year 9 Projects initiative as part of this study. Three senior staff members who oversaw the running of the Connections Program and the Year 9 Projects were also interviewed. As for research ethics protocols, students and staff signed the consent forms to indicate agreement to participate in the study. The students also had a parent or guardian who signed the consent forms. Figure provides a summary of the participant groups.

Figure 16. Summary of participant groups.

Participant group	Number of participants	Data collection method
Senior school staff	3	Group interview
Year 9 Projects teachers	6	Group interview
Year 9 Projects students	5 from Year 9	Interview dyads
Connections Program teachers	4	Group interview
Connections Program students	2 from Year 9 5 from Year 10 2 from Year 11	Interview dyads

Data analysis

Analysis was informed and framed by the extensive literature review that was undertaken prior to the development of the case study. Through this process, the researchers developed research questions around the broad areas of student engagement and how students and staff experience engagement initiatives. Following Bruan and Clarke's (2006) work on thematic analysis, the researchers developed a question–response matrix for student and staff interviews. The other forms of data (photographs and ethnographic observations) provide a means to triangulate the reports of students and staff, while also establishing important context-specific information.

The first part of our data analysis focused on student and staff perceptions of engagement. This analysis yielded several themes including:

- engagement
- barriers to engagement
- strategies to engage students

The second part of our data analysis focused on student and staff perceptions' of the two engagement initiatives (Year 9 Projects and Connections Program) which has been organised into the following sections:

- description of the program
- benefits
- challenges
- room for improvement.

In the following section the following abbreviations are used to distinguish speakers:

- A – student answers
- T - teacher responses
- Q - researcher's questions

All names used in the findings are pseudonyms to protect the confidentiality of participants.

Key themes on student engagement

Staff and student understanding of engagement

Consistent with the literature (e.g. Fredricks et al., 2004; Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010; Shernoff, 2013), staff and students highlight different aspects of engagement including social, academic and emotional.

I think engagement is anything that gets kids to come to school, because engagement's different things for different students. Some students are really engaged by the academic work. All the students are engaged with their friends. That's probably the number one thing, and then for the students who struggle with the school stuff it's important I think to

provide them with a program that makes them come to school as well as be with their friends. So engagement is as you said many things, but to me it's the hook that gets kids to come to school. (Maggie, senior staff)

Jennifer adds that the definition of engagement should go beyond attending school and emphasise learning that is purposeful and leads to a successful adult life. She also highlights the sense of community provided by the school environment.

I really actually think it's not just about coming to school, because you can go anywhere and hang out with your friends. You actually have to come to school and get something out of it that's going to help you in your future... So it is about learning when you come to school, and us actually engaging with them so they can learn in order for them to move on from school into a successful adult life, because I think otherwise you just think it is about just coming to school, and that's not enough. That's not what schools are about. (Jennifer, senior staff)

So we are in many ways, and all schools say this. You're a big school community. You're like a family. You hear that dialogue in independent schools a lot, but I actually think we actually do fulfil that kind of role for many of the students here. They don't like us all the time. They argue with us in the way you would argue with a functioning parent, but that's our role. (Jennifer, senior staff)

This perception of the school as a community, which involves fostering a sense of belonging among the staff and students, has been identified in past research as important to young people's social and psychological wellbeing (Osterman, 2000).

Teachers describe some behavioural indicators of engagement:

Engagement for me is when students are actively participating. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

Actively involved in the lesson, eye contact, proper sitting, they're actually involved, not necessarily having to always participate or chat, but they will look interested. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

I think engagement is when they are talking and they talk a lot. I'm in an art classroom but when they're actually talking about what they're actually doing generally they're quite engaged that way. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

I think engagement is when the students are interested and also self-driven. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

One of the students who was interviewed made an interesting observation concerning teachers' view of engagement: Teachers often expect students to demonstrate engagement through their outspokenness. However, a shy student can be an engaged student.

If a person is introvert, we've got some very introvert people in our class, they might not talk as much as other people. For me, I'm basically the opposite, I talk a lot...

...but for them it might be really hard to participate in those programs. ...

They do really good class work, they do good homework and all that, it's just that...

They just can't voice things. ... They can give it on a piece of paper but they can't say it, so it's like, yeah, I don't know, maybe it's about being nervous or something or being scared of not saying the right thing. (Eve, Year 9 student)

Eve's observation is consistent with the argument by Shernoff (2013) that adult judgements of engagement may overlook students who are genuinely but do not necessarily fit into teachers' perceptions of student engagement (i.e., being vocal, working on task)

Students also mention a preference for doing work that they find enjoyable or that links to their interests or passions.

To me, like, I would, like, consistently do the work if I found it engaging for me to do, you know. If I felt it was boring I was just like, nah, I don't want to do this, you know. (Mandy, Year 11 student)

Understanding disengagement

To provide the context of the engagement programs in the school, the staff and students were asked to suggest some of the reasons for disengagement or lack of education engagement experienced by some of the students.

The senior staff raised a range of factors that contribute to student disengagement, many of which are described in the model proposed by Rumberger and Rotermund (2012). At the student personal level senior staff identified the following factors as relevant to their context; these include family background; fractional or poor attendance record; and skills to access the curriculum and fitting in with other students to participate academically and socially. According to Donald, fitting in and being able to participate in school activities are hugely important for students, which confirms previous research that identifies sense of belonging in schools as extremely crucial for maintaining student engagement (Ma, 2003).

Jennifer (school staff) also believes the age of 14 to 16 can be a critical period for students to determine their future pathways as they begin to gain independence from their family:

I mean I know it starts from birth or before birth, but as a young person I think tries to really see where they're going to go and tries to see whether their future will be different to their family's or a similar path, I think they can really hit another big challenge at this particular age, between 14 and 16. It's a bit like make or break. We know most kids will get through, but we don't necessarily see that if they leave our school, move to another school or go into training.

The senior staff and teachers also highlight barriers to engagement at the systems and school levels.

The other thing there I think is the systemic barrier, and the much more conservative agendas of school and our requirements to meet state-wide benchmarks or national benchmarks. (Donald)

Teachers pointed out several issues with class size in affecting how well they can engage with students, because it presents particular challenges such as classroom management and safety concerns.

I think class size, especially for practical subjects, can be an issue. Waiting for equipment, getting hands-on equipment and also getting around to the kids can be an issue. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

I'd have to agree because my class size is always at the max with art and we do quite large project sizes. It can get very difficult to manage. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

They could do their own projects and I could physically supervise the class whereas now I have 25. I, safety-wise, can't supervise that many students doing experiments. It's very difficult. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

Both the senior staff and students suggest the importance of teacher–student relationships and student–student relationships in engaging students.

Poor teaching and teachers that can't build relationships with kids. I think that's a barrier to engagement, because they can have quite a big influence on young people attending school. (Maggie, senior staff)

[Some students might not like coming to school] Because the teachers get in your face. (Anthony, Year 10 student)

The teachers are annoying. (Charles, Year 10 student)

And even if you don't do anything wrong they still blame you for it. (Joshua, Year 10 student)

One student also identified the importance of peer connections and relationships in engagement and disengagement, reiterating the centrality of having a strong sense of belonging at school:

[Some students do not like to come to school because they] Don't have friends. (Neville, Year 9)

In addition, students also identified the content as an important part of engagement and disengagement. For some students it meant challenging work that isn't boring and other students discussed content that had a particular relevance for their career trajectories.

For example, Anthony (Year 10 student) highlights the importance of being intellectually stimulated in learning.

"[Some people might not like coming to school because] It's boring. I'd rather do something else better."

A few of the students interviewed highlighted their preference for more “hands-on work” that links to a particular job or trade.

Q: What would you rather do, do you think, or what's more interesting?

A1: Work.

Q: What do you mean by work?

A2: Working like a mechanic job.

Q: *Is that...so things that earn you money or just things where you create things?*

A2: *Yeah. A proper job.*

Q: *Proper job. That's more interesting.*

A2: *Yeah. I'd rather do that than go to school.*

A1: *Hands-on work, not paper...*

A2: *Yeah.*

A1: *... desk and stuff.*

A2: *Not desk stuff. Just more hands-on.*

Another student expressed her interest in doing more hands-on projects because they were more fun and allowed for a range of students to socialise;

I reckon they should be more like hands-on projects, like make it more fun and stuff, make them want to come and join in and, you know, help them to socialise with others.
(Mandy, Year 11 Student)

Other students identified a range of hands-on projects they were interested in, but didn't have access to in the last Projects class. In addition, they noted that it would be important to make these accessible beyond year 9 so they could continue with their passions:

Tiffany: *Hands-on working, like hospitality and I want to do food.*

Ann: *I like woodworks... (for Year 10 students)*

Q1: *What other classes would you be interested in taking if they had them [in Year 9 Projects]? Like what other options do you think they should have?*

Kathleen: *Woodwork.*

Hamish: *Yeah.*

Kathleen: *And metalwork.*

Hamish: *That would be fun.*

Kathleen: *Anything like automotive. Yeah. (Year 9 students)*

Teachers echoed students in respect to active learning or that which involves a "hands-on" approach, something that is particularly relevant for engaging the most disengaged students who attend the Connections Program.

The biggest thing I've found in terms of work is it has to be hands-on I think.
(Connections Program teacher)

The responses of the school staff and students highlight the tensions in the traditional education system in relation to what is expected of formal schooling, and balancing that with learning activities that students find particularly engaging. On the one hand, the students express a preference for more hands-on and applied learning activities with tangible outcomes, but on the other hand the school needs to meet the "conservative

agendas” and requirements at the systems level (Donald, p. 4). The teachers also noted the structural or systemic constraints that are imposed on them in delivering an engaging curriculum. The responses from the students suggest the importance of relationships with teachers and other students and the learning content in influencing their engagement with learning and school in general. The senior staff particularly underscore the personal circumstances (i.e. migration and displacement and family breakdown) that some students face in affecting how well they engage with formal education.

Year 9 Projects

As suggested by its name, the Year 9 Projects program focuses on project-based learning. The program is an initiative of The Grange to engage students through applied learning. Students complete a different Year 9 Project for each term across the four terms. Each project is 10 weeks long and with six periods (50 minutes each period) of contact time each week. Students nominate their project preference during the school holidays before the beginning of Year 9 and students are allocated into each project according to student preference, class size and group dynamics. The first week of each project is an adjustment period to allow students to decide whether they want to continue with the project or change to a different one.

Within each project, students are involved in a series of activities that leads to a final project. The projects offered cover topics that are not part of the standard Year 9 curriculum, such as philosophy, food, sports coaching, arts, media/photography and science. Teachers participating in the Year 9 Projects class note that curriculum is developed differently from the standard curriculum:

It's unlike other subjects in which you might look at the curriculum and look at the content and then develop and go “okay this is what I have to teach the kids how am I going to get them engaged”? Whereas I think in projects you start the other way around “what is going to get them engaged”; now what can I teach them? (Year 9 Projects Teacher)

In addition, different pedagogical approaches are taken which reverse traditional roles of students by placing them in the role of teacher–facilitator. For example, in the Projects class focused on sports coaching, students are asked to design a class and deliver a session for other students, thus taking on the role of teacher–coach. In arts, the projects included the drawing of self-portraits and portraits of a celebrity using special techniques. Students also made papier-mâché creatures from folklore. In food, students learn to cook different dishes such as chocolate soufflés, omelettes and meat pies. In philosophy, students create a “moral” board game similar to snakes and ladders, illustrating the consequences of different actions. In science, students design bridges out of different materials to determine how much weight the bridges could take. These projects are not graded according to the Australian Victorian Essential Learning Standards (AusVELS), but based on general outcomes across the different projects (e.g. participation and demonstration of learning).

In terms of the reception of the initiative, students and teachers interviewed generally express appreciation and enjoyment of the program.

Yeah, I think [other schools] should [run programs like the Year 9 Projects] because with us there's a wide variety, there's something for everyone and you get out of your comfort zone because you don't always get the subject that you want, so you get thrown into a different experience. It would be good, in my opinion, for all schools to have that kind of thing. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

So not like us solely. Like, it's good for us but when you talk to people from other schools where they don't have the same opportunities that we have they're just like, "Oh I wish that happened." So, it would be good if instead of them having to ask us and us having to explain it's good to share experience rather than teach, basically, what you're doing. I don't know, it would be good if other students got the opportunities we get, basically. (Eve and Matthew, Year 9 students)

Yes, [other schools should run a program like the Year 9 Projects] because it's actually a really fun experience for the kids so. And it helps you a lot in class. (Kathleen, Year 9 student)

Kind of designing science experiments. Finding out how stuff works. Doing experiments and reporting on how stuff works. ... Yeah, very fun. (Hamish, Year 9 student)

...

T1: Correct me if I'm wrong; Year 9, a lot of schools do have programs for the students, they are more hands-on rather than having them sit for a long period of time because they are in the troublesome year. Other schools will take the kids off to camps and things like that whereas Projects seems like our solution to that behavioural problem as well. I think it works really well. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

T2: I like Projects, I really enjoy taking it. It's probably my favourite class.

T3: It's my favourite.

Based on the interviews with students and staff, there are a number of themes that have been identified as important elements of the Year 9 Projects initiative. These include meaningful learning, building of self-confidence and trust for both students and teachers, flexibility in the curriculum, early exposure to a range of subjects, and change in group dynamics among the students compared to their regular classes.

Meaningful learning

Eve and Matthew (Year 9 students) express enjoyment of the various projects and highlights some of the things that they learned through their involvement in them:

Well we've got various projects, we've got the IT machine which is philosophy, we've got cooking, which we're a part of now and you learn about nutritional value and stuff like that and then you do cooking pracs and stuff. And then we've got sport coaching. My favourite thing of the whole lot. Sport which you basically take a class, like a whole class as the teacher.

I don't know, because I'm such a sporty person it's good to know how to take a class and how to teach them to do a sport that I like and stuff like that. And, with philosophy it's good to have like more of a complex look at things, not just so broad and stuff like that. And then, with the cooking, I don't know, you're going to have to know how to cook for your future, so it's good just to know how to cook a few basic things.

Yeah. The same with me in sport, because we had sport the first time as well, and what I took from it was how a teacher would feel when teaching a class, so we learnt some of those kind of skills. (Eve and Matthew Year 9 students)

Kathleen and Hamish (Year 9 students) share similar sentiments with Eve and Matthew about their enjoyment of learning in the Year 9 Projects. They reflect on what they've learned from their projects and relate their learning to their daily lives:

A2: Well, we did designing bridges out of certain stuff to see how much weight it could take. Out of newspaper, was one of them. Just newspaper and sticky tape. And then there was other ones with like popsicles sticks and stuff and see how much weight a newspaper bridge could hold with different designs.

...

A1: From cooking I've learnt more about how to cook and gotten better in the kitchen. And from art I learnt more skills and that, and performing arts I got more stage confidence.

...

A2: Well, specifically in philosophy we learnt how to think differently so thinking outside the box, thinking of questions that you wouldn't usually think about. So it kind of improved my skills as well as slightly with my performance because we had to do presentations and stuff about philosophy of happiness and stuff. Which was really hard.

Samuel (Year 9 student) explains what he learned through the projects, such as specific skills in media technology:

[In the media project] It's allowed me to refine my editing skills and I found out some pretty good things about science as well. Nothing I can really explain right now because I'd have to remember it. (Q: That's learning through doing?) Yeah. It's education.

Seeing themselves differently: self-confidence, responsibility and trust building

During the interviews, students and teachers reflected on the kinds of benefits or gains that they got from participating in the Year 9 Projects. Students focused on the ways in which the activities in the class provided opportunities to engage in ways they do not in traditional classes. This participation had a number of psychosocial benefits that were identified by students and staff. For example, one benefit mentioned often by students participating in the Year 9 Projects was the confidence that they gained from their involvement in the program.

A1: Well, you know how you do presentations in like English and all that, you have to stand up in front of the class? When you do it in all your projects classes you do it more often so it gives you more confidence.

A2: Yeah, improves your self esteem.

...

A2: Yeah, you get to be with other students. You get to socialise.

(Kathleen and Hamish)

Year 9 student Samuel's confidence is evident in his eagerness to show the researchers his creations from the projects and the pride that he takes in them:

Yeah our teacher – we do fish because they look really good and mine does anyway. Other people yeah they're good. I don't want to say people's ones are bad because they are actually really good.

...

You use newspaper and you use – what is a sugar cane wood type thing. And for glue we just use pure water and flour.

...

In media we've done – we've watched a movie, did a report on it I think it was. We did a voice-over project which I can show you on this and I actually I want to. We are currently working on a web news weather report. Well actually just news in general actually. We're doing the weather bit today. (Year 9 student, Samuel)

The program provides students with the opportunity to engage in independent learning and guide themselves through an entire project of their choice.

A1: Well, in cooking it's, you get to make food and everything. In art it was, you get to do something that's fun that actually interests you. It's not, yeah.

A2: You get to decide what you want to do instead of getting given a task.

A1: Yeah, and you get...

Q1: Self-directions?

A2: Yeah.

A1: You don't have to like read through things like constantly just to know how to do it. You just do it and if you don't succeed at it then you just chuck it out and try again.

(Kathleen and Hamish, Year 9 students)

Students are intentionally given more responsibility as part of the program. As described by the teachers in sports coaching below, they tend to follow a progression of activities in which students take on increasing amounts of responsibility and learn through observation, doing and reflection.

And I teach sports coaching so quite a few of the extroverted boys, mainly because I do four lessons of prac, they love that too. They're getting out and playing sport and I role-model it too. The first few weeks I teach the classes and introduce what activity we're going to be doing. We do a couple of warm-ups, stretching, drills and then a game and then basically they use the theory classes too. We analyse good and bad coaching, we talk about what it is so they go from being a participant to thinking a lot more about umpiring and coaching and stuff and positivity, language and stuff as a coach and a participant. If they're putting down people or saying "shut up" or swearing it's like "well no that's not respectful, that's not what a coach would say" so I can really emphasise that a lot more as well. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

These sentiments were echoed across the teaching staff and even extended into an additional initiative the school has been offering which provides students with the opportunity to work in the canteen. Although not part of the Year 9 Projects, the canteen program that is run by the school seems to complement the food project in terms of providing students with a greater sense of responsibility and trust by the school staff.

I think in food as well same thing, there's definitely a lot of kids that are behaviourally challenging in other classes but it's sort of like "this is a dangerous area, we're making food, it's expensive stuff, it's expensive equipment, it's not fake knives, you can actually hurt each other. There's no room, you want to muck around you're out". They are like "oh okay that's it, it's an actual danger it's not just a 'ha ha' funny thing" so I think they get that sense of "okay this is a real responsibility"... They're there and they're handling money and they're serving people and everyone waiting for them. It's like that responsibility sometimes they thrive off because they've never had it before. I would use that trust thing too in the classroom like you need to show that you can do this. The planning, the preparation and I have to be able to trust you outside with really expensive equipment. I think that idea of wanting to be able to be trusted is something that they, you know...(Year 9 Projects teacher)

The satisfaction in pursuing their own interests in the Year 9 Projects is not limited to the students, but also extends to the teachers:

I like that I just get to pick what I want to teach and what I want to focus on, it's a bit of fun. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

Especially if it's an interest area you know. If you can get into something that you've got a passion for it's so reflective in the way you teach and the way you engage your class and your plan and the resources. The work you want to put into it it's really shown and the kids can really sense it. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

This section has highlighted the importance of the school's engagement initiatives in terms of developing students' sense of confidence, responsibility and the trust that has been established in this process. The majority of teachers reported that when students were given more responsibility and were able to take on leadership roles in the class activities, they thrived.

Curriculum flexibility

According to the teachers, the program relies on their ability to be flexible in both their pedagogical approach and with the unit plan and material. For many of the teachers this flexibility, which came in relation to planning the class or how quickly it progressed, was a positive experience:

I guess it changes from day to day, from group to group, the dynamic. Essentially teaching the same thing, I've got my unit plan for the 10 weeks. I've picked that up but it's already changed a lot depending on just the kids you've got. I have a rough outline but it's pretty flexible which is good as well I can sort of just pick it up and change it. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

A number of teachers discussed the importance of being able to try new ways of engaging the students and adapt the class and their teaching style if needed:

T1: *I like the flexibility of it.*

T2: *I do.*

T3: I like that I just get to pick what I want to teach and what I want to focus on, it's a bit of fun. ...

T2: It's true, I don't mind having them for 10 weeks, at least it's easy and you can immediately change. "This didn't work in Term 1 let's try something new in Term 2. Okay that still didn't work, try something new". (Year 9 Projects teachers)

For students Kathleen and Hamish (Year 9), the projects class makes their learning experience more enjoyable and stress-free because there is no formal assessment:

Kathleen: Because you actually do different stuff and it's not like something that you'd normally do so it's more fun.

Hamish: It's got different things that you don't actually have to cover in normal art class.

Kathleen: Yeah. So if you don't do well in that class it doesn't really matter as much so you're not really under that much stress.

Hamish: So you get to kind of express yourself more. Instead of doing a certain thing to like a...

Q1: Like a test or an assessment?

Hamish: Yeah.

However, students' work is monitored by teachers and their progress is followed through the activities of the program. Teachers maintain individual student work plans through which students' participation and completion of major tasks is recorded. This type of assessment is contrary to other kinds of formal assessment (i.e. multiple choice tests) and mirrors a process of authentic assessment in which tasks have an applied focus and real-world relevance.

Exposure to a range of subjects

Samuel (Year 9 student) particularly values the diversity and the novelty of the subjects offered as part of the Year 9 Projects, as well the opportunity to interact with the teachers in a different way. For example, Samuel describes the need to give students a range of options outside the traditional core subjects:

Yeah. Give people more diversity in what they're doing, not just English, maths, every day, you know, English, maths, sports and whatever else they do.

Samuel also believes that such classes open up opportunities to build positive relationships with teachers and for students and teachers to see each other in a different light.

Just being able to do things that are different. Cover different subjects and because it's different throughout the terms it does mean that you have to — most of the teachers that I've been with for the project classes I really like them because they're people and they really get the things that I say...

Eve and Matthew (Year 9 students) believe the exposure to different subjects allow students to go outside their comfort zone to try out subjects that they would not otherwise pursue:

You do kind of projects for the whole lesson, and you get thrown into things that you don't want to do but you turn out liking them like I did with art.

And when you get put into something it's like — like you're not in your comfort zone basically. And then you kind of figure out that you do like what you're doing rather than, "Oh, I'm never going to do that."

From the teachers' perspective, the Year 9 Projects classes provide some "taster" courses to students in subject areas that are usually only offered in Year 10 or beyond. A few of the teachers actively advocated for their subjects to be included in the Year 9 Projects:

We have a food program in our school that only starts at Year 10 which a lot of other schools start earlier. Last year I put the pressure on [staff name] actually, I think a little bit to try to get a food project started. It's obviously an important initiative, healthy eating when you're a teenager anyways. Also it's a class that kids are easily engaged in because there's food and they like that and it's immediate reward at the end of every week. They get to cook and eat so I chose and I asked and I've asked again to continue with it next year because it's been a really positive thing. It's really encouraging us to try and get more people into food at VCE level and build up that program so this is sort of our entice, get interested at Year 9 and push them forward. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

Similar, our numbers were sort of going down in Year 11 and 12 media and I thought if I get in early I can look after things. A bit selfish but the kids usually like doing it, so similar to (teacher's name), that was my rationale for doing it. Year 10 media is doing quite well so if we can just keep pumping up the numbers it will be good. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

One of the teachers spoke about the philosophy Projects class as a way to build interest in a subject that requires critical and abstract thinking; however, given that it is not offered at the school in Year 10, it was not necessarily a taster but a segue into other study areas that explore theory:

In terms of philosophy I don't think there's anything in Year 10 either... So there's kind of a gap and then Year 11/Year 12, but maybe they're more likely to choose philosophy or something like that or whatever, psychology by doing that. I don't know? (Year 9 Projects teacher)

I think also to widen their breadth of subjects for Year 10 and VCE, to not be pigeonholed...

The teachers consider students' choice of subject for the next year to be one of the indicators of success for the Year 9 Projects classes:

Also I suppose the flip side is when you get good kids and they say "I'm going to do media next year, I'm going to do photography next year" you go "yes". That's a win. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

Mixing of student groups

A special feature of the Year 9 Projects is that students are put in groups that are different from their regular classes. This seems to create different group dynamics and a new learning environment which some students, but not all, find beneficial.

And it's good too — our class is like a family, we've been together since Year 7, so we're pretty bonded in that sense, but when it comes to projects we do like being separated and it's good for having that experience of being with other people and not being with the same people every day. But, we're not really used to it.

Yeah, it's like a new thing. (Eve and Matthew)

However, not all students agreed with this reflection on group dynamics within Projects classes, for example, Samuel highlighted that particular combinations of students could prove to be an issue and would require teachers to consider the mix of students in a given class:

I do imagine this could prove to be problematic for other students, say if they have a beef with somebody else, that can be problematic. So then the teachers have to get involved and mix it up, put the kid in the another class (Samuel, Year 9 student)

Teachers, in particular, had positive perceptions of integrating different student groups during the Projects classes, not only in terms of enhancing engagement but the potential for important social and relational learning:

I think the nature of all projects classes here is that they have different classes every term. Most of the main subjects, maths, literacy, they are all in the same class with the same kids for every subject. I think projects is one of the only times they're with a different group of kids. Sometimes that can be really good for engagement but sometimes those first few weeks having them get to know each other and gauge who's who in the class; whether or not they're willing to participate or show another side to them. Sometimes they can be kind of shy in the beginning and then as it goes on they kind of open up and make new friends. That can be group work. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

I think it's also about breaking the kids away from their normal groups, though I find their behaviour different. I teach a lot of Year 9s anyway in their regular classes. When they come into the Projects their behaviour, their attitudes, everything changes completely just because they're around different people. It's amazing how incredible the personalities are. ... In a positive way. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

It's them as a collective that don't function well as a class together but when you break them apart they're fine that's what I really like about Projects. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

Nevertheless, although some students find the opportunity to mix with other students a positive experience, a few stated that they preferred to stay with their existing social groups and felt disconnected from their peers due to the Year 9 Projects class they were given (i.e. if they got a second or third choice). The teachers discussed the importance of students having peers in the Projects class, but also note that other factors can influence student's engagement in the class (i.e., choice):

T1: They still tend to hang around with some of their friends but they might change out of a project not because they don't necessarily like the project or whatever it might be just "I don't have any of my friends".

They don't have the same people to bounce off. (Year 9 Projects teacher) There's always going to be some kids that just don't want to be there, don't want to do the subject.

T4: I've got maybe one or two every time that are really disengaged with the projects. They don't want to be there, they're stuck there because they couldn't get the project that they wanted. Therefore they're angry about that and they will refuse to do the work.

T3: They're probably like that in all of their classes, I don't think they're just "oh it's Projects" I think if anything they're probably more excited to come to projects than other classes at times.

T2: Strangely enough though, Rodney does a lot of work in my normal art class, surprisingly he came into Projects and he really didn't want to be there.

T3: That probably comes down to the dynamics of the class, who was in his class?

T2: It was. It was because one of his mates from 9B was in there. And then he becomes a big sooky "I'm not doing anything".

T3: Exactly but if he was stuck there, if he had to continue, I can foresee that he would not have worked in that class. (Year 9 Projects teacher)

In sum, the teachers and students both provide positive accounts of the Year 9 Projects initiative. The adoption of the applied learning and project-based learning approach in the program provides a distinct way to teach and learn compared to the regular classes. With a strong focus on engaging students in the design of the curriculum, students are able to relate to what they learned from their involvement in Projects.

The flexibility of the curriculum and the less formal assessment tasks gives students and teachers the opportunity to pursue their interests as part of the program. Students, in particular, take the lead in some of the project activities such as sports coaching and designing scientific experiments, which demonstrate the trust that the staff place in the students as emerging independent learners. This helps to build the students' self-confidence. The projects allow students to participate in a range of subjects that they would not otherwise be exposed to. Through the Year 9 Projects classes, students interacted with a much broader range of their peers, although having at least a few friends in the class was important for most students interviewed.

Potential enhancements

With the generally positive impression expressed about the program, the interviewed teachers and students also suggested a few areas in which the program can be improved. These suggestions generally relate to the management and organisation of the program rather than about how individual projects should be taught or run.

In the interview with senior staff, there is an emphasis on a more focused approach to facilitate learning (as opposed to only about engagement) so that there can be a smoother transition from Year 9 to higher year levels:

I mean I think we probably need to be a bit more rigorous...In terms of some of the Year 9 work, and perhaps [have] a little bit more closer observation of some of the classroom practices of teachers, but that's not necessarily project-based. I see our projects evolving next year into, well we'll call them electives because I want the terminology to match up with what goes on in 10, 11 and 12. Well 10 particularly, so that they see it as something that contributes to their academic future. Projects has a bit of a fun ring to it, and while I want them to be engaging I don't want them to be seen as time off. So there's a lot to be said for the way words are used in schools, and a lot of them are not strictly project based. So I want to change the word. So we'll call them electives but we'll maintain the really positive aspects of the project and the teacher strategies in there that work, but we'll change the name. (Senior staff)

The teachers' responses suggested the need for a single person to coordinate the overall program. Some documentation of the aims and structure of the program are needed for teachers who are new to delivering the Projects program to understand its nature. Although the teachers seem to value the freedom they have in designing the curriculum (see Curriculum flexibility above), some mentorship or professional development could be useful for teachers to discuss and reflect on their teaching in relation to the program.

T1: Well that's the thing as well, is that I don't think there's really one person that's in charge of the projects.

T2: ... there's not one person who's taken control and said, "alright this is how the program's going to be run, this is what we're going to do to promote it". There's no one taking control of it and that's why there's no forethought and everything like that... It has a lot of potential I think.

T1: I also had no idea what projects was when I came in, what I was supposed to be doing. I didn't even realise that you're supposed to be working towards a project.

T2: I didn't either. (Year 9 Projects teachers)

In terms of timetabling, the teachers find six sessions a week for the Year 9 Projects classes seems to be too much. They believe it can work better if that can be reduced to four to five sessions a week to maintain students' interest in the project. As evidenced in this excerpt from the teachers' discussion, a there are a range of reasons why they believed the current timetabling proved to be difficult for students:

T1: Something I noticed with a few of my students, because not many students chose mine in the first couple, a lot were just placed in there. The big issue they had was that they ended up doing science every single day for multiple periods. It's six periods a week of project, that's more than any other subject and it's a lot if you don't want to be there or if you're doubling up in a subject like science that you really don't like. It's a lot of science to be studying. (Year 9 Projects teachers)

T2: Personally I think it's too much.

T3: I think it depends on the class too. Mine works well because I'll only have two theory. If it was the other way around, if it was four theory, two prac, that would be problematic. Because my kids are already — I wasn't sure Term 3, I don't know next term, but they all seem to be pretty sporty. The ones that struggle in mine are the really shy ones and the ones that maybe don't have any friends in their class. They can't coach by themselves they have to go in a group of at least two or three. I don't

pick the groups I let them pick so if they don't get along well with anyone then that can be a little bit problematic...there's one student who has a bit of Asperger's and he changed it out basically because he didn't want to work with anyone and probably wouldn't be able to do it in terms of the coaching. (Year 9 Projects teachers)

T2: Reduce back to four sessions.

T3: Four sessions is probably enough.

T1: Yeah I reckon five, five would be okay.

...

Some teachers also suggested the potential benefit of explaining and promoting the program to students during Year 8 so that they can make more informed decisions when choosing the projects that they want to do in Year 9.

T1: I think there's scope for doing this in Year 8 next year. I think they're thinking of doing this at Year 8 next year, that's what I've heard.

T2: I think that would be good.

T3: An improvement might be to kind of pump it up or promote it or start thinking about when you're in Year 8; one of the Project classes come to a Year 8 class and explain what we're doing, explain what happens.

T1: Good idea.

T3: Just to encourage...

T2: Or even if they have something you could read. I've never put forward a "what is this subject about?"

T1: Demystify the Year 9's Project. (Year 9 Projects teachers)

The students appear to be generally satisfied with how the Projects classes are run. Rather than reducing the contact hours, Kathleen (Year 9 student) prefers the hours to be increased and for more project options to be offered.

Q1: That's sweet. It's like the trial and error version. What are some things that you don't like about it?

A2: There's nothing.

Q1: Really? Everything? Even the science one?

A2: Yeah.

Q2: You love the science one?

A2: There's nothing bad about it.

Q1: Like would you have more or less of the classes or would you..?

A1: I'd have more.

A2: Yeah. Definitely have more.

A1: *For sure.* (Kathleen and Hamish, Year 9 students)

A1: *Yeah, they could just make more classes.*

...

A1: *Woodwork.*

...

A1: *And metalwork.*

...

A1: *Anything like automotive* (Kathleen and Hamish, Year 9 students)

Samuel (Year 9 student) believes providing more project options for students might not be a significant improvement as there are only a limited number of projects that students can undertake in a year:

Yeah more options. Well then again that can prove difficult because there are – right now there are five subjects and there are four terms. So the more subjects you add the less they can do.

Eve (Year 9 student), on the other hand, would like the option to be able to pursue the same project for the whole year:

By looking at the person's — considering we're in Year 9 it's getting to like the stage where we're starting to figure out what we're interested in, what we want to do. So, rather than swap it around every single term, even though that's a really good thing, look more to what — like if a person is set on something, give them the opportunity to further that instead of going for something that's completely irrelevant to them. Like, I'm a sport person not an art person, basically, so I would rather continue on with sport and sport-related things rather than going to art and textiles and stuff like that.

Q2: *It sounds like you're saying for those who know clearly what they want then they can stick to it otherwise they can still sample...*

Yeah, because some people are completely adamant in what they want to do, like, "That's it. Done." But, then they get changed around to do things that they kind of just discard basically. So they kind of want the students to be interested and focused in what they're doing but sometimes they aren't because it's not what they want to do and not what they want to spend their time doing. (Eve and Matthew, Year 9 students)

In summary, the responses from the staff and students suggest a few changes that can be made to the Year 9 Projects to enhance the program. These include a greater focus on learning (senior staff), a program coordinator to oversee and document the program as well as opportunities or channels to discuss and reflect on the teaching of the individual projects through mentoring or professional development (teachers). Students suggested different formats for running the program, including expanding on the project options and allowing students to pursue a single year-long project.

The Connections Program

The Grange started the Connections Program in the middle of 2013. The aim of the Program is to provide an internal alternative education setting for Year 9 and 10 students who have a prolonged association with the school (e.g. since Year 7) and may benefit from learning in a smaller or more intimate learning environment. There are usually two teachers in a class, and the class size is intended to be smaller than the mainstream program, with around 16 students attending the classes on a day-to-day basis. The Connections Program focuses on the basics of literacy and numeracy to prepare students for VCAL in Years 11 and 12 (Jennifer, senior staff).

Students are referred into the Connections Program if they have experienced significant disruption in their education due to family or personal circumstances, they are disengaging from schooling or are having difficulty with content in the mainstream classroom. This is explained by a senior staff member:

In terms of entry to the Connections Program, the school staff nominate, during the last school term, Year 8 students whom they think the Program would be suitable for when they are in Year 9 the next year. These students usually have shown signs of falling behind significantly in terms of their academic achievement and attendance compared to other students due to various personal or family circumstances. Some of the Year 10 students in the Program could be performing at Year 3 or Year 4 level academically.
(Connections Program teacher)

The staff talk to the nominated students and their parents and explain to them the purpose, history, and the nature of the Program. The staff make it clear to them that there is “fluidity” in the Program where students can try out the Program and move back to the mainstream program if they believe the Program does not suit them or vice versa.
(Jennifer, senior staff)

Perceived benefits of the Connections Program

The staff and students interviewed generally credited the Program for facilitating students' re-connection with the school and their learning. Jennifer believes parents and students appreciate the school's offer of the Program because the Program is seen as a better option for them to continue their education beyond Year 8.

The strength is that it's adaptable. The strength is that it's tapping into the students that we know, and so it's suggested to them. It's suggested that they might be suitable for Connections in Term 4 of Year 8, and some of them find that's a relief, because I think that they know that they're not doing so well and they don't know how they're going to make it through Year 9 and 10. (Jennifer, senior staff)

...and in many ways too, the parents I think are a bit relieved as well as the young person, because again it provides a way of them continuing to be at school, even though I think traditionally they're probably failing. I hate to say it, but failing in terms of academics and attendance. So it's like, no we don't think you're failing. We think that you're not suited to a mainstream program, and we have something that will help you if you want to stay at school. You need to because you're too young to leave, and that will, if you engage, will take you to VCAL. (Jennifer, senior staff)

The Connections Program teachers also mention other success stories in which many of the students continued to pursue VCAL beyond Year 10 after being in the Program:

T1: We just recently moved one student out into mainstream because we thought she could make it and she's doing okay. She's not going to get a 90 ENTER score but she's picked a load and we thought that she could succeed in a mainstream schooling setting so we're happy.

T2: And that happened last year with [student name].

T3: And that happened with another one last year, yeah.

T2: And she's gone onto VCE.

T1: Most of them go straight into VCAL.

T2: 99% will go to VCAL.

*T1: Yeah, maybe one a year will get to go mainstream, the rest will go to VCAL.
(Connections Program teachers)*

Other than academic changes, some of the students have also made significant improvements socially and emotionally since joining the Program:

T1: I've only been with these guys five weeks now, but the kids in the Connections class from Year 7 and 8, like socially and emotionally two years ago they were shocking, but now, that's where they've made the progress, it's not so much the learning side of things...

T2: It's social skills.

T1: It's the social and emotional, it's calm... yeah, that's right and they're coming to school so I reckon for them, yeah that's where they're getting the benefits, just listening to people, waiting for them to...

T2: And opening up...

T1: Yeah, talking about their feelings which the boys never did.

T3: [Student name] would be a good example.

T2: [Student name], he didn't say a word for a year and a half.

T1: So yeah, socially and emotionally that's where they've improved and really made leaps and bounds from two years ago. (Connections Program teachers)

T2: They might not have made gains in their education but their social...like [student name] is like one or two points away from having an ID [intellectual disability] and really struggled in mainstream and used to lash out and now you can't shut him up sometimes. He's been good. (Connections Program teachers)

The teachers find that the attendance of some students improved dramatically when attending the Connections Program. They attributed this to the stability that the Program provides to their lives:

T1: But the funny thing is with the 12 or 13 regulars, they are here every single day.

T2: Yeah, that's true.

T1: You can set your clock by them.

T2: Which is strange. They will not miss a day.

T1: These are kids that probably have really bad home lives and the only normal thing they know, the only structured routine every day thing they know is school and us.

T2: And that's why we see them every day.

T1: They're never sick, they're never away, the flu always seem to pass.

The students' responses echo the teachers' comments in terms of changes in their attitudes towards school. Mandy (Year 11 student) compares how she was like before and after being in the Program:

Before I went to Connections I must admit that my attitude and, you know, the way I dealt with things was like really negative. I would talk back to the teachers. I felt like, you know, if I was right and they were wrong I wouldn't do what they said. ... I always got kicked out a lot. I was sent to the [in-school detention] mainly because of behavioural issues, like I don't — I'm capable for the work but it was mainly because of my behaviour that I was sent to Connections. (Mandy, Year 11 student)

Norman (Year 11 student) tells a similar story in terms of improvements in how he relates to the teachers and other people. He is also showing more confidence in his academic ability after being in the Program:

Yeah. Just, I don't know, I always, like, always rude to the others, so like my attitude to each, like the teachers and, I don't know... Shocking.

Yeah, I was really bad, like, yeah. If someone like spoke back to me I was like, I used to crack it really badly. And I — if someone was like trying calm me down, like I wouldn't listen to him at all. I was like — it was like, yeah. But, yeah, Connections has probably helped me a bit, like pulled my head in. They showed me, like, you know, how smart I was actually, when I actually put my head down and actually worked. So, yeah. (Norman, Year 11 student)

Current Connections Program students Neville and Tom (Year 9) think the Program has helped them to re-engage academically as their attendance improves.

A2: *I've noticed that my Maths and my English work has improved.*

A1: *Yeah, my attendance has gone up a lot.*

A2: *Yeah, the attendance at school as well has gone up.*

(Neville and Tom, Year 9 students)

Tiffany and Ann (Year 10 students) also suggest academic and behavioural changes after being in the Connections Program:

A1: *My school work has (changed).*

A2: *Yeah. Doing a lot more work.*

A1: *Yeah, more work.*

Q: *What else? What have you learnt?*

A1: *Behaviour once in a while.*

(Tiffany and Ann, Year 10 students)

Staff and students suggest several strengths of the Connections Program. These include having two quality teachers in class, a focus on relationship building by the teachers, a greater flexibility of the teaching in the Program compared to the mainstream program, and a small class size with supportive peers. The financial support that the school provides to the students in the Connections Program was also raised during the interviews as a significant aspect of the Program.

Greater teacher attention

A central feature of the Connections Program is the availability of two teachers in the classroom. As Jennifer (senior staff) explains:

It started halfway through last year, continued into this year but it is expensive for the school, in that there are two teachers in the classroom. So that there really is that sense of another set of eyes watching behaviour, correcting behaviour and another body to form attachments to allowing one teacher to teach. Sort of one-on-one academic support. Another set of eyes observing mental health or emotional issues. So if someone looks not right they can take that person out of the room, and we know that good alternative setting programs do have more than one person in the room. (Jennifer, senior staff)

In particular, the teachers in the Program are purposefully selected for their high quality teaching.

... the strength is that some of those teachers are excellent teachers no matter who they teach. So it's not the place where we put the worst teachers, because the worst teachers can't teach these kids at all. At all. It's just ridiculous, and why should they have the worst teachers. They actually should have some of the best teachers, but you can't expect anyone to manage all the complexities of that kind of classroom on their own for a long period of time. (Jennifer, senior staff)

The purposeful selection of teachers for the Program is also recognised by the teachers themselves:

You'll notice all the teachers are relatively young, youngish, ... all pretty young and (have) a lot of patience. (Connections Program teacher)

...

You have to really pick and choose who you put in [the Program as teachers]. (Connections Program teacher)

The students also acknowledge the helpfulness of having two teachers in class for their learning:

A1: It's better to have two teachers.

A2: Two teachers they actually explain to you more in-depth with like the other teacher as well.

...

A2: And it's harder to get distracted because there's eyes on each side of the room.

(Neville and Tom, Year 9 students)

Relationship building

The biggest thing is I think for these kids is about building relationships. They will not work for someone who they don't trust at all. So they know all the students in here, they trust all the teachers in here. They still don't always do what we ask them to but they're more inclined to do it. Once you've built up the relationship there they're pretty good, they'll come and talk to us before anyone else. (Connections Program teachers)

With the strong emphasis on social relationships by the students in defining engagement as described earlier in this report, another feature of the Connections Program is the focus on relationship building with the students. There are several strategies that are used in the Program to help the teachers build relationships with their students. These include having a small number of designated teachers to teach the class so that students can connect better with the teachers (Connections Program teachers); the teachers having a consistent voice and tone with the students and try to reason with them even when they may be angry or confrontational and being more lenient regarding disciplinary issues, for example about the school uniform and language use:

T1: Like if a kid has his hat on I let it go, I don't know if you can as a [school] leader?

T2: No, as long as they're working and they're quiet... You don't mind it, whereas mainstream...can't allow it again. So we're a bit more lenient for sure, even language. (Connections Program teachers)

T1: With two teachers ... just having that one person they can connect with, one teacher, that they always had that common person in class.

T2: Almost like a primary school setting. (Connections Program teacher)

The students seem to respond well to these approaches by the teachers.

A1: Yeah, like I used to be in like heaps of fights.

A2: Yeah, trouble.

A1: And I was getting into trouble.

A2: And always answering back to teachers and stuff.

Q: And why aren't you doing that now?

A2: Because they're more like understanding.

A1: When they want to. (Tiffany and Ann, Year 10 students)

Mandy and Norman also appreciate the encouragement from teachers and the ways in which they balance giving students space but also pushing them to finish their work.

There was...

The encouragement of the teachers.

Yeah, the teachers. (Mandy and Norman, Year 11 students)

Students also discussed the support and understanding provided by teachers so that, despite difficult personal circumstances, students were still able to complete their work.

They're just like — when I had, like — I had a really bad, like, part of the year, the teachers would always like be there, like ask me if I was all right or — yeah, and they always pushed you to meet — like, to actually finish my work and stuff like that. So it was pretty good. (Student, Year 10).

Other students noted that teacher's understanding and respect was reflected in teacher's willingness to listen and help students in a range of ways:

A1: Just their attitude towards us. Like they didn't...

A2: ...they weren't — they didn't speak down to us at all. They were always like just sit down and...

A1: Try and understand the situation. (Student 1 or 2, Year 11 students)

A1: Probably more respect to me, to like others and the teachers.

A2: And like having a relationship with your teachers.

A1: That helps.

A2: So in the future, you know, they help you, you know, and it helps just realising, you know, the teacher is only there to help you, not like be your enemy because to me, like, I'm like the most stubborn person. I do not like listening to people. Like, if I feel they're wrong, it didn't — it makes you look at it a different way because I actually believe those teachers in there helped me a lot, encouraged me so much, even doing, you know, VCE. Like if I continue being in — like still stuck in Connections I'll probably be in like VCAL...

...

Yeah, respect, and like engaging myself to actually come to school and stuff like that

Yeah, because like my attendance level was like horrible and like this year it's like 92% so it's like a massive jump. (Mandy/Norman, Year 11 students)

Beyond the classroom level, as mentioned above, students who are selected to the Program tend to have an extended association with the school, having studied in the school since Year 7 or earlier. This selection criterion is not merely a way to manage the limited resources that the school has, but also a conscious decision to ensure the students selected into the Program already have a sense of being part of the school community.

The school's been very protective of putting students who enrol at Year 9 and 10 into the Program, because we don't want to be known as providing an alternative setting to other schools. It's for our students. We don't want other schools to say, oh if you go to the Grange because you're bombing out at our school at Year 9, they've got an alternative Program there that will take you in, because we've had less success with those students and they're highly disruptive. ... So it's really for our students who we feel have an

attachment to us, and who hopefully will continue to respond when they're placed in a smaller learning environment with less pressure. (Jennifer, senior staff)

A flexible curriculum

As an alternative education program, the Connections Program appears to adopt a curriculum that is more suited to the needs of the students where students are allowed more time and go over content and deal with the material in a more in-depth manner.

A1: And I think in Connections we've got the time, like if a kid's struggling he can stay at that progression point for three weeks, whereas if you're in a mainstream classroom you just can't cater for that. Like if he's that far behind you've basically got to push on for the sake of the other kids whereas when you're in this classroom he can be on the same thing for three weeks as long as he gets it and moves up to the next progression point. So that's important to have time on your side and the flexibility to be able to do that. (Connections Program teachers)

A2: Yeah. They have more time for us to finish off our work, instead of mainstream, like they'll give it to you and you have to finish by the next day.

(Tiffany or Ann, Year 10 students)

As observed from the school visit, the classes start in a specific way that allows the students time to settle down before the formal teaching begins. As the Connections Program teachers describe:

T1: His approach is always the same though; like he'll actually wait probably a good 10 minutes at the front marking the roll until they've all actually come in...

T2: Got everything out that they need to.

T1: ...and then in the meantime we're giving out pens and stuff and it's a good 10 minutes before the lesson actually starts and then even then he'll be writing on the board and you sort of keep them entertained with a bit of general discussion while he's getting all that up and then they get going. So I know it sounds really slow; any other class you'd go what's the teacher doing, why is he taking so long but...Teacher's identified the importance of having two staff members in the classroom when class begins: T1: But that also only works because you've got the second teacher in there.

T2: Yes, two teachers, yeah.

T1: [Teacher name] will have 10 or 15 minutes with a hypothetical question at the start that everyone can answer and create a discussion about that, get them all involved and then we hand out the sheets after that and that works all right. (Connections Program teachers)

The general discussion before the teaching begins is observed to serve multiple purposes. Other than as a “warm up” and to build relationship with the students, the conversations help the teachers to gauge the students' emotions or interest levels on the day and to get to know the students at a more personal level so that their interests can be incorporated into the teaching:

Mm. If you can get them onto something they're interested in, it might be something even on the news or something that's happened and even on Facebook or whatever, create a discussion around that. (Connections Program teachers)

The teachers also actively seek ways to engage the students through trying out different learning activities and making the activities more personalised and tapping into the interests and skills of students:

T1: They don't mind writing short stories.

T2: Yeah, I give them a few short story tasks. We did that horror story thing which got a few of the kids that hadn't been engaged in, all of a sudden they got into a horror thing and...

T1: A good one they did last year is they had to write their own biography. That was really, really good and they presented it to the [indistinct] team and a few of us.

T2: Yeah that worked really well.

...

T1: They were actually really good although some of the stuff that come up...

T2: Was pretty.....like with their families, it was pretty full on.

T1: Yeah.

T2: It was the first time I actually almost had a tear in my eye after listening to one kid.

(Connections Program teachers)

T1: Yeah. If we were to go buy 15 flat packs from Ikea... [Student name] is the perfect example, he was in Connections, severe ADHD... One day we had to build some bookcases to take home. Him, he sat the whole day there, just gave him the directions and off he went.

T2: He's a success, he's got a job at Bunnings now.

T1: Yeah, he's got a job at Bunnings. But yeah, he really loved it. They might not be able to read or write but if you give them some instructions with some pictures on it and off they go and they'll do it. (Connections Program teachers)

This example suggests that using a strengths-based approach to student engagement is particularly useful, which in this case involved the student using his visual literacy skills to complete the task and develop expertise.

Consistent with the suggestions from the Year 9 Projects earlier in this report, the teachers find students respond particularly well to learning activities that are applied with tangible outcomes.

For last semester we did a Level 2 first aid, they didn't get a certificate which I was a bit bummed about but basically they did a level 2 first aid and it was just a repeat, everything we did...like if we had a double we'd repeat what we did the last double in the first period, then we're in the second period of it and that went on and on and just smashing the repetitiveness. But it was hands-on and it was stuff they were going to use; they got to play victim, they got to do snake bites and things like that and they saw the benefit of it and some of the kids are really, really good at it. (Connections Program teachers)

Small class size with supportive peers

The small class size environment is often mentioned by the interviewed staff and students as a strength of the Program. They also appear to find the particular mix of students in the Program conducive to creating a supportive learning environment for the students who are not able to be engaged in a mainstream classroom setting academically or socially. As the teachers point out, the focus on relationship building in the Program helps the students to “find a place” in the classroom.

A lot of them have been down a real bad path and come back onboard through the Connections Program because they feel out of place in mainstream. So even the kids who are just operating at Grade 3, Grade 4 level, even if they're not bad kids, imagine being in a classroom and having no idea, you're going to play up so you don't look like an idiot. A lot of these kids have come in, found a place in the classroom, can get the help through certain teachers, build that relationship and then they've gone on, built their social skills up and gone onto VCAL... (Connections Program teachers)

The perception of fitting in and feeling like “an equal” with other students in the Program was important for Mandy/Norman (Year 11 student) where they experience a greater sense of peer support for their academic work.

Connections was probably like — they spoke about the work probably more in depth than like, I don't know, maybe like an everyday class. So like the other kids...

More helping.

Yeah.

And plus, like, you felt an equal to the class because everyone is the same, you know. Everyone, like, has bad attitude, that kind of school. Yeah, like that, do you know what I mean, and like bringing the class feeling the same as and equal to everyone helps you more, you know, in things like my work.

*It's like at the start of the year as I came here when I was like 12, 13, and by the end of the year it was like there were five of us that actually come to school like everyday.
(Mandy/Norman Year 11 students)*

Tom (Year 9 student) also suggests that he feels he can learn from other students in the Program:

Q: And do you think other schools should run a program like this?

Tom: Yeah.

Q: Why?

Tom: Because it helps you, keeps you in school, you enjoy coming.

Q: Neville, what do you think?

Neville: I don't know, just mixing two year levels and having two teachers.

Tom: And you can learn from each other.

Q: So you think it helps students to learn?

Tom: Yeah.

Neville: Yeah.

(Neville and Tom, Year 9 students)

Financial support for students

The school provides financial support to students in the Connections Program for things such as stationery, textbooks, uniforms and meals. Such support is particularly helpful for students whose family could be struggling financially and allows some stability in what they can expect when arriving at school.

T1: A lot of them just worked in [the school canteen] at recess because...

T2: Get free food.

T1: A lot of these kids they don't get food at home so they're coming and the first meal they eat is lunch after they've got fed at the canteen. (Connections Program teacher)

...

Q: Tell me how is being in the Connections different from your other school experiences?

A1: You used to get pizza.

A2: Yeah. You used to get pizza all the time. Soft drinks.

(Anthony, Joshua, Charles, Year 10 students).

Q: Do you think other schools should run a program like the Connections?

A2: Yeah.

A1: Yes.

A2: It would be helpful.

A1: Because some students are struggling.

Q: How are they struggling?

A1: Like there could be some that can't afford books and then the Connection class they give us books.

A2: Yeah, they provide the pens and the books and stuff.

Q: So in the regular class you don't get those?

A2: No. You have to buy the books.

A1: You have to buy them yourself.

A2: Or you buy it off the teacher.

A1: You have to buy your own stationery.

Q: So it's Connections that give you those books.

A2: Yeah.

A1: That helps us.

A2: And we have our own like locker thing for each subject that has our books in it.

Q: Cool. That must be good. And you don't have to carry books home at all?

A2: Nuh.

A1: Nuh. We just carry our lunch.

Q: You just rock up and then you can just attend a class. Excellent.

A2: Yeah.

(Tiffany and Ann, Year 10 students)

The provision of free uniforms is also one of the strategies that the school uses to allow the students in the Program to feel part of and not stand out in the school community.

We've offered uniform. We give free uniform. ... Yeah, I would like to feel that they feel proud to wear the school uniform, and we don't want to put them in something different.

(Jennifer, senior staff)

Challenges facing the Connections Program

Several challenges that the Program faces have emerged from the interviews with staff and students. Many of these challenges show up the complexity of engagement alternatives run within schools. This section illustrates the ways in which Program strengths can sometimes pose problems for schools when understood within the broader context of accountability and high-stakes testing. For example, while a major strength of the Program is to have two teachers in the classroom, it also poses a problem in relation to resources.

Resources

One of the main challenges the Program faces is the staffing level required to run the Program:

We want the students to achieve some learning success in the classroom, we have to put two staff in there, but as Donald said before it's a drain on resources. We don't get extra acknowledgement in the community for doing that. We don't get extra acknowledgement necessarily through the department for that, but I think that's where you're weighing up the cost, but that's a real strength... (Jennifer, senior staff)

...we do need to continue to keep that level of teaching–learning strength in the classroom. So it's not so much an improvement, but in order to improve the curriculum offerings or the pedagogy that's used, we need to continue to have two teachers in the room, and so they can work on curriculum and they can look at assessment tasks and they can do all that stuff as a larger team. (Jennifer, senior staff)

The number of students participating in the Program has increased since last year, and the teachers and students both commented on this as an issue. For example, teachers found that the group functioned best when it had one teacher for every six students:

T1: So basically they come into the Connections Program to reconnect with school... and they have all their subjects within the one classroom and we base it on a small group. It's supposed to be around 12 to 13 students...

T2: Maybe 12 to 15.

T1: With two teachers, so they had [a staff: student ratio of] about one to six and that worked really well in the small groups. This year it's blown out a little bit, we've had higher numbers which makes it a bit more difficult... (Connections Program teachers)

Students echoed teacher's opinions, noting that the smaller class size the previous year was their preference:

A1: And it used to be a smaller class. It was easier.

A2: There would have been like six or seven of us in there.

Q: You prefer last year?

A2: Yeah.

Q: And why?

A2: And the class was a lot smaller.

A1: No. The class was a lot smaller. It was easier to work in. No one was there.

Q: How many people are there now?

A3: There's like around 20.

A2: There's a proper class full now.

Q: So it's getting too big you think?

A2: Yeah.

(Anthony, Joshua and Charles, Year 10 students)

Balancing the school's role and responsibility for the students

Despite the lack of resources and public acknowledgement, part of the reason that the school has started the Connections Program is a sense of social justice. This has required the school to assume responsibility beyond a traditional education model and working with the "most difficult" students. The social justice stance is evident from the interview with the senior staff, and appears to be related to the belief that the school should provide a nurturing and positive learning environment to every student, particularly those who face adverse circumstances, so they can have a "successful adult life". (Jennifer, senior staff).

That's another issue from the school's position and another issue in relation to the school, and I know that where we've taught, we've always had a bit of a sense of social justice that when you've got challenging kids and difficult kids where you want them to re-engage. As I said before, they actually don't look like kids that the community sees going to school, and we take a bit of a risk and we're prepared to do that, and I think at times

it's very difficult for us with community perception, and that's a real issue for a lot of schools, why they don't want to build in re-engagement programs. (Donald, senior staff)

Jennifer further explains the issues that the school is prepared to deal with on behalf of or for the students, but also highlights the need for the school to set a boundary in terms of how much it can be involved in the students' personal life.

The kids in Connections, there's always someone with a massive problem. So there's always meetings. You know, whether it's DHS [Department of Human Services] involvement, family violence, running away from home, self-harm. They go through, you know, being bashed up outside of school for some not school-related issue, but some other issue. Drug use. So there's always high intensity problems rolling through the group, and my role would be really to provide guidance and help problem-solve so that they can keep being engaged at school, and that's where sort of the boundaries aren't traditional school boundaries but at the same time all the work's done here at school. We don't go out into their homes. We don't engage on that level. If the family wants to have meetings here, you know, we might say you should seek this kind of support and they may or may not take our advice. That's if the family's involved. ... it's up to the family how much help they want to accept and the young person as well. It's always tricky. (Jennifer, senior staff)

Another challenge has been for the school to balance their role and responsibility for the students, which has required a collective effort that has included extra support from staff responsible for wellbeing, and extending their partnerships in the community.

T1: We work with the wellbeing team pretty heavily with output too. There's two or three counsellors that we...

T2: Yeah, a lot of these kids do have issues.

T1: They're down with them regularly I know, yeah.

T2: And [name of staff] from Create, she was here for probably three or four months last year and they popped in this year as well at the start of the year and I think Cottage, Create and a few of the other agencies...

T1: Everyone's kind of linked in, yeah. (Connections Program teachers)

Externally and internally imposed stigma

Although none of the students interviewed appeared to be dissatisfied with being in the Connections Program, the school staff expressed concerns with how the students view themselves and how others view the students who are part of the Program.

The other thing that's proving a little bit of a problem, and we're not really sure how to tackle this, we've tried, is that the young people in Connections have become a bit of their own club. So they do stand out in the school yard. They don't wear the uniform. They wear parts of the uniform. ... We want them to wear the school uniform. We don't want them to look like lesser students if you know what I mean. So we see them as having an equal place in our school community. So therefore we would expect them to abide by the school rules, which is to come in uniform and to follow the rules of the school values. Respect learning and working together. They often choose not to wear the school uniform or only parts of the school uniform. So they look, in the eyes of others, of

other students, visitors to the school, parents in the community like a really rough group of kids. We don't want them to look like that, because in a way it's a kind of a tricky one. They I think wear it as a badge of honour, but it also looks like kids with low self-esteem who can't be bothered to feel proud of who they are or where they are. So this is the problem <laugh>. We think it's a problem. Like I said, we feel they have equal placing in our school community. We've offered uniform. We give free uniform. We've even tried to negotiate them just wearing the school sort of zipper spray jacket, so that at least all of them have some parts of the school uniform on. You'll see that that's sort of the case, but not really. We don't want them to feel like a disenfranchised group, or look like a disenfranchised group. So I don't know if they feel like it. I don't think they do, otherwise they wouldn't come to school. I think they feel quite okay about themselves, but it's that they don't have a perception of how they're coming across to others. So it's not even about out on the street, it's about how they look even in the school grounds. (Jennifer, senior staff)

A similar concern is expressed during the interview with the teachers:

T1: And there's a stigma attached to the classroom as well, the Connections room...

T2: Yeah, there's a very big stigma.

T1: ...which is tough for them. Like they deserve to be in there but it's still seen as 25 idiots running around basically. (Connections Program teachers)

Mandy and Norman (Year 11 students) show their awareness of the stigma and suggest that they were being made fun of when they were in the Program. However, they are no longer concerned about the stigma that came with being part of the Program:

Yeah. And how, like, being in lab makes you like — other people belittle you because you're in there, because, you know, you're Connections, you know.

Q2: So there's a stigma, like...

Yeah.

...

How other people see you, because like us being Connections, other people are like laughing at us, you know. It is a bit of a joke but, like, sometimes you're just like...

At the time it probably wasn't.

Yeah, at the time it wasn't a fight.

Q3: Does it bother you much?

No, not now.

Not any more, not really.

I'd probably laugh about it now, to be honest. I have jokes about it. (Mandy and Norman, Year 11 student)

Nonetheless, Jennifer (senior staff) described one case where a student who appeared to have benefitted from the Program initially became withdrawn after becoming more conscious of the stigma of being in the Program:

Anyway this girl was moved into Connections during the course of Year 9. So she again wasn't immediately put into Connections. She didn't like it because she knew she was smart. She believed she was cognitively capable of a lot harder academic work. There was actually a lot of truth in that, but she wasn't working in the classroom, and she was highly disruptive, highly disengaged in terms of wandering around the school, causing some drama and then leaving the school grounds, you know. ... So the decision was made, and I suppose that's where we talk as a group, let's try Connections. Let's see if she'll settle, and she did actually settle initially but then she didn't like it, because I think that's kind of the chicken or the egg. She settled in the environment. Her attendance improved, therefore her mental health improves. Therefore she's doing less weird things around the school yard, therefore more kids are finding her socially acceptable. Therefore she says, I don't want to be in Connections because this work's too easy and we kept saying, "But you've been better since you've been in Connections." "Yes, but I'm not dumb like them. I don't want to be in Connections," until she started then to rebel against that and stop coming to Connections. So we're back going full circle. So then we put her back into mainstream. Eventually we had to because that was her wishes and we felt that she was starting to deteriorate again and she went back into regular classes, and to be honest it's hard to measure what happened after that. She was better than what she was initially, but she left the school because she chose to go and live with her mother in another suburb. So again the family stuff has meant that her schooling now is disrupted again. (Jennifer, senior staff)

The Connections Program appears to help students re-engage with school and their education through providing a more intimate and supportive learning environment, with greater teacher attention. The focus on relationship building with the students by the teachers encourages the students to have greater self-confidence and motivation to continue with their education. Through tapping into the personal interests of the students and providing a flexible curriculum that can accommodate different paces of learning, teachers are better able to deliver teaching that is more personalised and in-depth. These different aspects of the Program appear to have created a positive learning environment in which the students view their teachers and peers as particularly supportive. Despite this generally positive outcome, challenges remain for the running of the Program. These include a heavy resource burden for the school to maintain the high teacher:student ratio, the need to balance the school's social responsibility for their students, and the stigma that may be associated with being part of the Program. Staff and students also suggested improvements for some aspects of the Program. Several areas for improvements in the Program were identified from the interviews. These included the need for a more engaging curriculum with more meaningful learning and clearer education pathways. The teachers and students also raised issues related to timetabling and the current learning space. Some of these areas are already being addressed by the senior staff, with changes to be implemented next year.

A more engaging curriculum

With the combining of Years 9 and 10 in the Connections Program, the interviewed teachers express difficulty with developing a curriculum that captures the interests of the students across the two year levels.

T1: I think one of the problems is, because you've got kids that are in there from Year 9 and Year 10 you can't repeat the same curriculum and there is no set curriculum.

T2: That needs to be looked at...

T1: Start of the year... it's been a lot harder this second half of the semester because all the new stuff that we're doing has kind of worn off so they're used to it now so it's time to do something different again. (Connections Program teachers)

Nonetheless, the teachers find that the students are particularly interested in learning that is more hands-on and applied.

T1: They go by a Year 10 timetable so they get two electives through the semester but that's where they play up because they don't know the teachers and the electives, because it depends if it's a VCE, they're not necessarily practical or they don't see the point in them. When we say hands-on we're talking like trade-specific.

T2: But definitely just getting them to build something, to do something, they'd love it.

T1: One thing I've seen, I was doing a tour of another school for a job and they get their problematic kids in all year levels, they get them out one day a week for a term and at the moment they're building a house on the campus. I don't know how it works, they obviously get some people within the community or TAFE or whatever to come in and the kids do something, they build something. One day a week maybe get someone in here, we've got the automotives, get them to... I'd say probably not automotive but maybe some sort of building where they build a garden or a chair or... I think a lot of these kids would like something say like a woodwork. If these kids had a woodwork or something like that, they would love it I reckon, especially the boys. They would do it.

T2: Well I think we've got three or four boys in the VET program automotive at the moment and they look forward to that every Friday. They come in with their overalls and they go off...they love it, that's what they enjoy but then when they're in class reading an article and answering questions they just don't see the point, whereas automotive, they're like "Oh I'm going to be a mechanic when I'm older" or "This is the path I want to follow". So we need to link it into more hands-on project-based activities. (Connections Program teachers)

Meaningful learning

Resonating with the idea of meaningful learning, which is a focus of the Year 9 Projects, the teachers in the Connections Program emphasise the need for learning to be "real-life" and thought of a range of ideas. For example, suggestions have been made to bring people who are expert in their trade into the school to teach students applied skills such as carpentry or send the students out to external applied-learning programs.

T1: And that's the other thing, it's got to be real-life. In maths last week, I had a 10-minute conversation with a kid about what a tender is, when you put in a tender in terms of if you're a skilled labourer or whatever, and he sat there and listened and

asked questions for 10 minutes, this with [student name]. So yeah, anything real-life that relates to what they think they might do afterwards.

T2: [Student name] was the same, he wouldn't touch any of the maths worksheets. As soon as you handed him a tape measure...

T3: Off he goes.

T2: Yeah, like he didn't realise why you needed maths to be a carpenter. So if you need anything that's what you're going to need. But as soon as he's seen that side of it, he was engaged.

T3: And bring some people in. Like if we can't ship them out...

T1: We should do that more.

T3: ...bring some people in because they're actually pretty good when someone comes in with a bit of nous and they're actually quite respectful to people that come in and they'll listen and they'll attempt... Say if a carpenter was to come in and say "all right, we're going to build a prefab bird box" or something like that...

T1: They'd love that. (Connections Program teachers)

--

The Trade Centre in Geelong, that's a good weekly visit that I think [indistinct] use that for their alternative education, they send the kids down every Thursday or every second week and they get a taster in like hospitality, carpentry, stuff like that. That would be fantastic. Like we've got the minibus, take six or seven kids up one week, the other seven the next and let them have a taste and maybe get some direction where they want to go because they've got no direction at all. (Connections Program teachers)

Tiffany and Ann (Year 10 students) also express interest in woodwork and note that the school used to include that as part of their curriculum but no longer does that because the students were not engaging with their learning appropriately.

Q: What else? What sort of work do you want to do in a school that's perfect for you?

A1: Hands-on work.

A2: Yeah.

A1: Hands-on working, like hospitality and I want to do food.

A2: I like woodwork, because Birdwood College and that do that, woodwork.

A1: They used to do it here, but they don't do it no more.

Q: Oh, why not?

A1: I don't know.

A2: Probably because of the students.

Q: What do you mean?

A2: *They muck around too much with the tools and stuff.*

(Tiffany and Ann, Year 10 students)

Tiffany and Ann also indicate that they find career-related activities more useful than purely academic work.

A1: *And then like when we was doing our careers thing for history, humanities, yeah that's when we were looking for jobs and doing our resumes.*

A2: *Yeah.*

Q: *So things that are more applied to you isn't it when you are doing resumes and things like that, rather than something that is kind of just in the books.*

A1: *Out of the subject, yeah.*

(Tiffany and Ann, Year 10 students)

Other than learning that is work-related, one teacher suggested providing the students in the Program the opportunity to teach or mentor younger students in the school to build social relationships. The approach also has the potential to reinforce the learning of the senior students as they act as a role model and the more competent peer in the learning process.

I definitely think they need something tangible. They need to experience success. A lot of these kids don't.

...

I'm talking things like your old school bike ed; going down and learning how to ride a bike and doing some bike ed. Anything really. I'd like to get them ideally, it would be harder, but get them to go the primary school and teach some of the kids there to do something and build that relationship but... (Connections Program teachers)

The teachers also find embedding the use of technologies in their teaching appeals to the students in their learning. Schools need to eliminate apparent disjunctures between the everyday technologies that students have access to and apply in their everyday lives outside of the classroom and the lag in learning technology in formal education. One of the teachers is currently trialling a computer program on iPads in class.

T1: *The kids do like iPads. I'm in the middle of trying to run a [inaudible] education unit using iPads.*

T2: *As long as there's no games on them they're fine.*

T1: *It's an American [unit]...it's called Drug Free World so it's an American-based thing, but we'll have a go. So I created a classroom, they do the work, it allows me to assess their work on mine and everything like that so wish me luck. But definitely more hands-on, your nuts and bolts, get them to hammer things, build something. Because I'm having a bit of an issue trying to figure out how it works and then obviously we can't always get the iPads but definitely I want to try, we are trying. (Connections Program teachers)*

Clearer learning pathways

Teachers underscore the need for learning with more tangible outcomes so that students can gain qualifications as part of their learning.

T1: Like at the moment they're putting the classroom away from mainstream and they can't see really any point in why they're there. They don't do work, well, so what and if they do they're not really getting rewarded for it, whereas if it was like a pre-VCAL, like a level 2, I think that might work a little bit better.

T2: Yeah, there's nothing tangible, they don't get anything, like this is what I did. I would've loved for them...all my kids could've passed the level 2 first aid if we had have got an assessor to come out and do it at the end of the semester. They could've gone home and taken their certificates to their parents and said "Look, I've actually...

T3: Yeah, something.

T2:...I've done something", whereas at the moment it's all just theory-based which I'd like to make sure it's a little bit more... (Connections Program teachers)

Recognising this need for clearer learning pathways, the school is going to orientate the Program curriculum to more work-related skills. Instead of participating in the Year 9 Projects, students will be taught other skills.

...next year they're going to be offered more work-related skills, so it mirrors like a pre-VCAL course which we think is good. So it's always looking at the curriculum. How can we best serve these kids? ... they don't cope well in projects. They only cope with their teachers. So instead of projects we'll offer them art and other electives, but run by their regular group of teachers and other skills that will help them out. So we're always looking to improve... (Jennifer, senior staff)

Despite the planned change, some teachers believe the students could be engaged in project-based learning in other ways to make the learning more meaningful:

Q: What do you think could be improved in the Program?

T1: Well that, project-based activities.

T2: But something that also ties in your maths and your English into your projects. Say for example we're looking at doing something with the amphitheatre out the back of the library; say the kids were to take that area and make it all nice and garden and all that sort of stuff and tie in their maths, "Okay this is the area we've got, how much of this are we going to need, how much soil are we going to need?" and you're tying your mathematics a little bit that way. So it's hands-on, all right if they're building something, okay this has got to be cut at 90 mil or whatever and they'll learn it and they'll...

T3: They'll see a point to it.

T1: They'll see a point to it and then at the end of it hopefully it's there, it's finished, we built this. (Connections Program teachers)

Timetabling

The teachers indicate that the school day could be too long for the students and suggest ways to organise the timetable to suit the students better, particularly for the final two periods when they may have difficulty concentrating.

T1: For some of the other subjects, maths and English and things, it would be very hard and I think a lot of the kids I find they need to be able to do something and I also think being here six periods a day for a week is a bit much for them to be honest.

T2: Yeah. Another example of that is today they've got a double maths after lunch and the last period, probably the last 40 minutes, is always an effort just to keep them in their seat. I know one lesson they pulled out some cards and they just played cards and one of them was actually teaching the others how to play and I thought you know what, that's being sociable, everyone's calm, learning, listening to others... (Connections Program teachers)

Rather than allowing a set timetable to dictate when the students should change over to a different period or subject, the teachers propose making the timetable more flexible or dynamic, so students can continue to work if they are deeply engrossed in the learning activity.

T1: Probably even the timetabling where the four periods, maybe they do, say, four periods of every subject, do a period of maths, period of English, period of PE, period of I'll say humanities, just one period every day, so boom, boom, boom, boom so it's constantly changing so they're not...because they...

T2: No I still think doubles.

T1: You reckon doubles?

T2: Because I think they swap over... I had them on Wednesday for a single and it swaps over, if they're on task and then say [teacher's name] will come in for English...

T3: It's a changeup.

T2: That's it, no matter what you do you just don't know what you're going to get.

T1: Yeah, and the other thing is if something's working, it doesn't matter if it's English or maths, let them do it. Like it should be like a primary school setting where you get your eight hours; so you go in and say you're working on a task and it's maths and two and a half hours in they're still doing it, do it, but as soon as you start seeing cracks, change or have Simon working on maths and then someone can be...whatever they choose to do have different projects.

T2: Run two different curriculums at once.

T3: Because as soon as they have a bit of ownership they love it. (Connections Program teachers)

Alternatively, in addition to making the timetable more adaptable, there is a suggestion for making the final two periods more project-based so that students participate in learning activities that are more hands-on.

And I thought that's better than doing numeracy and stuff, let's keep it up.

T1: *That's why 5/6 should be project-based as well something...*

T2: *Yeah so they do something.*

T1: *...whether they're creating garden beds or building, whatever they're doing...*

T2: *Something they can be proud of.*

T1: *But five and six every day, if that could be incorporated that would be fantastic.*

T2: *Yeah, I think that's a much a better idea. (Connections Program teachers)*

New classroom

Both the teachers and the students commented that the current classroom housing the Connections Program is insufficiently equipped. The Program will be relocated to a different classroom next year, and the following are suggestions for how the new classroom can be fitted out to facilitate learning and engagement.

T1: *[The current classroom] It's too small, it's drab, it's...*

T2: *No whiteboard.*

T1: *You can't watch a movie.*

T3: *There's a whiteboard but no interactive whiteboard but they need that because...*

T1: *They need the videos...*

T2: *Yeah, they love to watch a video. Like if you're going to do English you'd watch a movie and analyse the movie but that's...*

T3: *But yeah, the room is horrible. Even if you want to bring a projector in you can't because there's too much sunlight. The only good thing it's got is an evaporative air-conditioner, cooler, heater thing.*

T1: *That actually is really good.*

[laughing]

T3: *So in summer it's all right because you've got one of the only cool rooms. But the ideal room for them would be to be like a E3 where they've got like a mini-lecture theatre and a classroom and it's dark.*

T1: *It needs to be away I think as well.*

T2: *And it's all bricks so they can't break anything. (Connections Program teachers)*

Tiffany and Ann also prefer a classroom that is more similar to the ones that are in the rest of the school but with a fewer tables to suit the student number.

A2: *Change the classroom.*

A1: *Yeah, because we're always stuck in the one room. That's just boring.*

A2: *Yeah.*

Q: *What do you want the classroom to look like, if you can change it?*

A1: Like a normal class. Just like a normal class without heaps of tables all spread around and there's hardly anybody in the class, so yeah.

Q: Ann, can you think of what can be done?

A2: Yeah, our classroom looks ugly, yes.

Q: And what would your perfect classroom look like for you?

A2: Just like change classrooms like the other classes for subjects.

Q: You want it to look like other classrooms.

A1: Mm. But less tables because there's only like 10 to 15 of us in the class.

(Tiffany and Ann, Year 10 students)

On the subject of tables, one of the teachers suggests providing individual tables for students rather than long tables that are shared by multiple students.

T1: I'd like to see like in the American movies where everyone's got their own little table.

T2: That's basically what they've got now.

T1: Yeah but everyone has one so they're not even on a table with a pair but still have a big enough room that they could...so at least a metre so you can't just reach over and grab the next person. (Connections Program teachers)

Thus some areas for improvement were identified. To make learning more engaging for the students, more hands-on work with tangible outcomes could be introduced to the curriculum, such as offering students the option to do woodwork or automotive work, depending on their interests.

These learning options could involve inviting skilled people into the school or sending students to external programs or workshops. The applied learning approach could also integrate academic learning into project-based learning opportunities such as gardening or woodwork. Social learning could be promoted through organising the Year 9 and 10 students to teach the students in primary grades and build social relationships. Teachers would also like the students to be involved in learning projects that are part of certificate programs, such as first aid or pre-VCAL. The use of digital technologies, such as iPads, was being trialled. Some teachers proposed making the timetable more student-centred, in the sense that changes of activities or class subjects during the day could be facilitated by close monitoring of student interests by the teachers. With the prospect of relocating to a new classroom next year, teachers and students would like a more technologically equipped classroom with an interactive whiteboard and a video projector. One of the teachers also thought individual student tables could be useful for organising the classroom.

Discussions and tentative conclusions

Values, ethical commitments and social justice

This research reveals important elements of a school's culture central to engaging the "most disengaged" students. The school has been determined to create initiatives that achieve and promote student engagement through project-based learning. Through an explicit commitment to social justice, the teachers, administrative staff and wellbeing team have developed a whole-school approach to educational disengagement across Years 9 and 10, taking ownership for programs that often fall outside the remit of

mainstream public schools. The school has resisted the trend of referring students to outside programs and centres. The school exemplifies an ethos of inclusive education demonstrated in its commitment to the most vulnerable students. The school is part of, and a beneficiary of, its community.

As evidenced in the Connections Program, staff exercise a duty of care that extends beyond educative processes, and endeavours to provide students experiencing difficulty in the home and school contexts with a safe space to learn with positive adult mentors. Through its engagement initiatives, the school teachers and staff better understand their students, their strengths and the challenges they encounter in and out of school. It is through positive student–staff relationships, which are founded on trust and shared responsibility, that staff can allow flexibility for students facing difficult living circumstances and difficulties in learning. Such programs open up the opportunity for students to pursue their passions and engage in creative expression in a way that values their knowledge and skills. Finally, these programs also create conditions for all students to engage and learn in the school community, which is significant in a climate in which withdrawing, referring and setting up external learning programs is commonplace.

Student, teacher and staff perspectives about the Connections Program and Year 9 Projects highlight themes indicative of the success of these initiatives. Both programs had *high student, teacher and staff buy-in*. This was shown in the positive student reports about the initiatives, especially in relation to the engaging subject content of the classes. Teachers also articulated the importance of these initiatives as creating opportunities to try different pedagogical approaches, which they understood to be more engaging for students. This educational innovation connected to the world of the students, was creative and employed technology to enhance the student experience. Senior staff also highlighted the importance of Year 9 Projects and the Connections Program as part of their commitment to socially just and inclusive education. They call for stronger links to the students and teachers in Year 8.

Research themes

Relationships

Both the students and teachers we interviewed believed that these programs positively changed the student–teacher relationship. For example, in the Year 9 Projects program, teachers gained a better understanding of students' learning styles, were impressed with student leadership skills, and felt that they were able to develop a deeper level of trust with students. On the other hand, students believed that the Year 9 Projects classes allowed them to see their teachers in a different light and, through project activities, students were able to establish trust and respect due to their changing roles and responsibilities. Students saw their teachers as people, allowing them to relate differently and create conditions for relational engagement between adult and young person. It was also evident from observations and interviews that students had secured a different relationship with their learning material.

Teaching and learning outcomes

The Year 9 Projects program provides the opportunity for teachers to apply their creativity and develop a broader range of learning options for students that were interest-based and creative. While the programs offered more freedom and flexibility for teachers, this was not always an easy transition and was labour intensive. For example, the Year 9 Projects program, in particular, sometimes exposed the limitations of teachers. There were challenges not only to their training in relation to applied learning projects, but also, because there was a lack of structured curriculum, they were sometimes challenged to quickly collect and structure materials. It also meant that traditional means of assessing students were less relevant and “outcomes” less clear, which often provoked anxiety for teachers in the program.

One of the main benefits identified by students is engagement in the curriculum achieved through applied learning. Students found project-based learning in an area of their choice to be meaningful learning, because it widened their scope of knowledge and skills through sustained engagement. In addition, many students felt that the Year 9 Projects class did not have some pressures of traditional classes, because not everything was based on assessments, and they could instead express creativity and/or follow up alternative interests.

Our research suggests that the engagement initiatives in place at The Grange are excellent examples of school-based curriculum initiatives, particularly for disengaged and “hard-to-reach” students. Such programs ought to be exemplars for other schools aiming to retain students who have interrupted educational experiences, and which are working to build relationships to foster pride and belonging. The results from our research also suggest that The Year 9 Projects program is valuable for students preparing for VCE because it provides breathing room, in the context of schooling that is highly driven by assessments and outcomes. The program is a very useful precursor for VCAL and assists the school in developing alternative and non-traditional pathways into continuing learning and work.

The program demonstrates the importance of applied learning for students who are experiencing difficulty seeing the connection between traditional classes and productive destinations beyond schooling. This bold experiment in curriculum innovation suggests that engagement is simply not a question of students doing the connecting, but also how we, as educators, shape the teaching and learning environment and experiences, so that schools better engage with students at the margins of school life. The work at The Grange also underlines the importance of technology in the world of students and its potential for unlocking many of the barriers to learning.

Challenges

Our comments are formative, meaning they are providing a snapshot of two distinctive engagement initiatives at one school. We are not able to chart gains across time that might be attributable to these programs. Such an extended evaluation is an important element of school improvement.

A limitation of these kinds of programs is the short timelines. Additional work needs to be done to explore the ways this school and other schools engage in “bridging work” that facilitates transitions through the key junctures of schooling and beyond for students. This is especially important for students who may not have the level of material, emotional and learning support as students from more privileged circumstances. It is clear from our research that important bridging work needs to be done to ensure the sustainability of engagement initiatives in the school. This involves developing a strong sequential approach and a progression into the “next steps” for students in the program. For students who are in the Connections Program, this may also involve developing “handrails” or supports that can lead to additional opportunities for education, training and/or employment. It will also be important to build a strong program infrastructure that can meet content and achievement standards set out in the Australian Senior Secondary Curriculum, and to establish strong links between the engagement initiatives and the learning areas set out in these national guidelines. It was also clear that teachers needed more guidance, support and communication from their administration. It is abundantly clear from this small snapshot into the educational experiences of these vulnerable students at The Grange that the building of support structures as early as possible would be beneficial. We acknowledge that teachers and administration are at one in this regard and that they have gone a long way in building data that enables them to respond to the unique needs of each child.

Maintaining student gains is vital. Some respondents identified the potential for students in support programs to be stigmatised. This risk is amplified by compromises in the quality of the physical environment and educational resources such as technology. Respondents are aware of the learning spaces, relationships and experiences.

These programs are resource-intensive and can become difficult to maintain. These initiatives deserve to be supported with applied professional development for the teachers. Energy must be maintained through demonstrating that this is not simply remedial work that usefully occupies vulnerable students while they are at school. Linking this activity to the core areas of school life and building pathways beyond school and into the community is essential.

5. Recommendations

1. Continue to give high priority to supporting and expanding the Year 9 and 10 engagement programs (Year 9 Projects and Connections Program).

- Recognise the school's early success in engaging vulnerable students in the educational life of the school, and encourage teachers and students to continue building on the reported improved relationships, growth in trust and positive impacts on teaching and learning.

2. Continue to develop teacher capacity for curriculum innovation to further enhance student engagement.

- Encourage working with unstructured curriculum and being able to work with ambiguity and creativity (skills and knowledge base).
- Engage support staff to assist teachers with the projects, for example, have Victoria University pre-service teachers involved in the engagement programs as part of their placement (resources).
- Build reflective learning communities for teachers and staff to increase knowledge sharing and innovative learning strategies (capacity-building).
- Enhance teachers' capacity for development of authentic assessments which reflect the class activities and mirror practical, real-world tasks (authenticity).

3. Develop connections with local partners to enhance the community engagement element of the programs.

- Include community-based and business settings to facilitate place-based student learning.
- Identify more community-based learning opportunities.

4. Extend and deepen the use of technology across the curriculum and support teachers to build authentic engagement with technology in classroom learning.

- Implement strategies that utilise technology for building and accessing the curriculum.
- Continue to build student learning profiles to encourage personalised learning programs.

5. Establish additional research components to build an evidence base for engagement programs and local student needs.

- Examine case studies (exemplars and best practice models), particularly initiatives in public school settings, that bridge the school–community divide.

- Investigate longitudinal research approaches that use school-based data systems to track student progress and outcomes in these programs, while also incorporating student perspectives in program implementation.

6. Build on understanding of increasingly diverse cultural communities in the region and develop inclusive educational practices.

- Build on the school's commitment to including all students, eschewing off-site centres for disconnected students, preferring to build innovative learning programs that embrace students and the community and thereby broaden and enrich educational programs.

7. Encourage continuing exploration of ways to improve communications within and across programs, to support teachers in meeting the demands of curriculum innovation.

- Recognise that all large, complex education organisations struggle with achieving fluent and responsive formal and informal communications to support teachers and students, and that The Grange has developed robust protocols for these initiatives. Seek greater coordination and guidance in the planning and delivery of curriculum reforms.
- Develop clear expectations of the initiatives for staff and align project objectives with specific learning outcomes.
- Increase flexibility of the timetable for Year 9 Projects to allow students to be fully engaged in class time.

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