

Learning Frontiers

Professional practices to increase
student engagement in learning

Imagine a world where kids actually want to learn...

The problem with schools

Across the developed world, a consensus is emerging. Schools may have delivered in the past, but they're certainly not working for today – they were established in a different age and for a different set of purposes.

Schools are not giving students the best chance to compete and be successful in today's global economy, or helping them live their adult lives as responsible and productive global citizens. We are not educating for a digital age or a global society.

Our education system is also inequitable. The evidence shows we're not giving all our young people an equal chance of achieving at school and when they leave. We have failed to improve educational outcomes for many Indigenous Australians, and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are under-represented among high achievers and overrepresented among low achievers.

Our teachers are our greatest asset. What they know, do and care about affects opportunities and outcomes for all young Australians. Teachers work tirelessly to make a significant impact on their students, but many feel disillusioned and inhibited by the way schools and teaching are currently organised.

The consensus is that schools need to change in order to offer an education that is worth having.

Creating successful learners

We know that education must equip all young people with the knowledge, understanding, skills and values they need to achieve and be successful. But it should also instil the desire, skills and capacities to learn continuously, so every young person can take advantage of opportunities and face today's (and tomorrow's) challenges with confidence.

Our nation needs young Australians who are successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

If successful learners are lifelong learners who are involved in and take responsibility for their learning, then our task is to create an education system that ensures all young Australians are deeply **engaged** in learning – at school, and throughout their lives.

“It seems like school is all about exams – it's all we hear about and all anyone cares about, but exams are just about having a good short-term memory.

There's more important stuff we need to know – like when you go to a get a job or go to university you need to be street smart, to be able to talk to people and actually engage in conversation...but school doesn't teach you those skills”

*Year 10 student,
Government school, VIC*

“We need to ask a few key questions; 'who owns the learning?' 'Whose education is this and for what purpose?'

I wonder if kids really had freedom of choice, would they opt in to school? If so, why?

We have to be brave and enter critical conversations with young people about their schooling.”

*Middle Years teacher,
Independent school, NSW*

Creating engaged learners

Countries around the world, including the US, the UK, Canada and Singapore, are focusing on engagement. To become a world-class school system, Australia needs to do the same.

Being ‘engaged in learning’ matters. Research shows that engagement is linked to positive learning and life outcomes, and can predict children’s occupations as adults.

It also shows that motivation and engagement have a higher effect on student achievement than numerous other in-school factors.

The problem of disengagement

We know what disengagement in school looks like – poor classroom behaviour, absenteeism and low graduation rates are visible and undeniable. Or do we? Think of the number of students you know who behave well and get good grades, but who leave school ‘turned off’ learning – maybe for life. These students are visibly achieving, but are invisibly disengaged. They are engaged in school but not in learning. Many lack a sense of direction, struggle to cope with further study or employment, and fail to achieve their potential in the longer term.

The reasons behind disengagement are varied and complex, and too often, disadvantage and disengagement go hand in hand. But the evidence indicates that when disadvantaged students are engaged, they perform better than their more advantaged peers. And, while social, familial and personal factors are significant, variability between schools shows there is much teachers and schools can do to stimulate engagement.

Engaging disadvantaged students in learning is key to achieving equity and excellence in our schools.

But most schooling has fallen out of step with the outside world, and out of favour with students. Students are disengaged from learning at school because school is disengaged from their real world – a world that is fast-paced and rich in challenge and collaboration, and that embraces social media and technologies.

“ In Queensland, one in four Year 10 students selected an image of a prison to describe their school; with 62 per cent of boys ‘not coping’ in English doing likewise.”

Dusseldorp Skills Forum (2006)

“ Australian student performance is closely linked to social background. But across the OECD, highly engaged students from poor backgrounds tend to outperform disengaged students from wealthy backgrounds.”

OECD PISA 2009, Reading for Change: Performance and Engagement Across Countries

We need to ask ourselves:

Are we giving all young people the chance to grapple with the complex challenges they will face as 21st century citizens, employees, entrepreneurs...?

How are we helping our young people see that learning has value beyond their life at school, that it takes place all the time, everywhere, and is of lasting relevance?

Isn't deeply engaging all students in learning one of the most important things we, as educators, can do?

When students are deeply engaged in learning, they:

- ▶ Care not just about the outcome, but also the development, of their learning
- ▶ Take responsibility for their learning
- ▶ Bring discretionary energy to their learning task(s)
- ▶ See the value in, and show a desire to, learn beyond the school walls and the school day

Achieving widespread, deep engagement in our schools

There is a body of research on motivation, engagement and learner mindsets to draw on and learn from, plus the experience of innovative environments where students and teachers are deeply engaged in and passionate about learning.

There is no easy solution, but with the right tools and support, schools can work together as creative communities that can respond to the challenge of engagement and design their way to better practice.

Now is the time to act.

Learning Frontiers is being set up to help schools co-design and implement professional practices that will support increased student engagement in learning. The program will support schools to work together and with partners across Australia to design learning, teaching and assessment that foster the deep engagement of all Australian young people.

Because every young Australian deserves an education worth having.

“ I spoke to a young man in year 9 ... he just didn't attend, he just didn't bother going to school. But then he had an internship for 2 days a week working at a bike repair shop.

Now, in school we often put kids out on work experience in the hope it turns them back onto learning, but then on the other days at school, his whole curriculum, his whole learning plan, was built around his interests and his passions in bikes.

And I spoke to him at some length – I was a disbeliever – and I walked away and thought, well yes. He's doing the science of bikes, he's doing the maths of bikes, he writes stories about bikes, and he did social history about how bikes began. And that was the hook.”

Chris Bonnor, Big Picture Australia

“ Only 35% of Australian 15 year olds can be characterised as ‘deep’ readers – those who reported high levels of awareness about effective learning strategies and who regularly read a wide range of materials for enjoyment. In Finland this figure is 60%. ”

PISA 2009 Results: Learning to Learn

“ In 2007-8, the Canadian Education Association surveyed over 30,000 students. They found that while 69% of students are ‘socially’ engaged and ‘institutionally’ engaged in school, only 37% can be characterised as intellectually engaged – showing a serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning. Based on these findings, the CEA launched a multi-year project to raise intellectual engagement in schools. ”

What Did You Do in School Today

“ We keep doing things the way they have always been done and expect different outcomes. If the current climate suggests that we aren’t getting the results we want, obviously there is a need for a fundamental shift in the way we do things.

We know that learning takes place when it is tailored; tailored to the diverse needs of our students. Why then do we continue to educate in environments that lack any real flexibility, with bell times and physical environments designed to ensure structure and protect the standardisation of learning? ”

Year 11-12 teacher, Independent school, QLD

Learning Frontiers

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