

Applied learning and community partnerships improve student engagement in Australia

Applied learning in a community context helps make school more engaging for young adolescents.

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The middle years of education is a time of significant physical, social, emotional, and cognitive change for students. It is also a period associated with student disengagement from schooling as evidenced by increases in absenteeism, behavioral problems, and dropout rates as well as a plateau or decline in achievement (Barratt, 1998; Smyth, McInerney, & Hattam, 2003; Tadich, Deed, Campbell, & Prain, 2007). Young adolescents have unique needs and benefit from a cohesive, structured education experience (see e.g., Chadbourne, 2001; National Middle School Association [NMSA], 2010). One way schools can protect students from the risk of disengaging and dropping out is to help them value learning by situating it within the contexts and communities where knowledge is applied (Eyers, Cormack, & Barratt, 1992). Bentley (2000), for example, asserted that schools need to be re-oriented as community assets that act as hubs for a wide range of activities and are networked with overlapping and complementary strands of community and economic life.

In this article, we argue that an approach emphasizing applied learning and community partnership offers potential to engage students during the middle years of schooling. After outlining a conceptual framework incorporating applied learning and community partnerships, we present a case study from Australia to illustrate the framework in action and to highlight implications for practice.

A framework for improving engagement in the middle years

Applied learning is a holistic approach to education that encourages the learner to make connections to what is characterized as “the real world,” as opposed to the traditional school-based classroom. While contemporary educational scholars (e.g., Bentley, 2000; Harrison, 2007) argue that the connection between thinking and doing can provide benefits for the learner, this idea has a long history. A notable proponent of this approach was John Dewey (1916), who claimed interaction, reflection, and experience—combined with an interest in community and democracy—created a powerful educative framework. Applied learning requires self-regulation and engagement as students learn through a process of inquiry, analysis, and decision making.

In short, we understand applied learning to be the immediate and purposeful connection between school-based and real-world learning experiences. The focus is on real-life application of student learning to solve a practical problem or project. Underpinning this approach is a humanistic concern with nurturing and working with each student in a holistic manner, taking into account his or her personal strengths, interests, goals, and previous experiences (Victorian Curriculum & Assessment Authority [VCAA], 2006).

Because of the emphasis on real-world experiences, applied learning often connects students with community partners—organizations and individuals outside their

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schools—so they can demonstrate the relevance of what they have learned. Within an applied learning framework, community partnerships emphasize the social nature of learning, extending the process beyond formal school settings and classrooms to the wider community (Bentley, 2000; Billett, 2001, 2003; Eraut, 2004; Stevenson, 1993).

Networking is a critical dimension to this practical approach to education. Networking may involve connections and partnerships within the local community, and it may involve the use of technology to make connections to communities beyond the classroom, thereby extending students' learning beyond immediate time and space (Bentley, 2000; Butin, 2003; Gardner, 1999; Gee, 2004). These real-world connections represent one powerful way to provide innovative and engaging learning experiences and to foster a genuine understanding of what is required for learners to be successful in a complex world shared by educators and members of the general community. When done well, learning by doing and by being involved in integrated curriculum projects outside the formal classroom setting offers a richly practical and relevant learning environment that often results in highly productive learning outcomes (Beane, 1993; Beaty-O'Ferrall, Green, & Hanna, 2010).

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Applied learning and community partnerships together make a promising framework for enhancing student engagement in the middle years. These concepts resonate with many of the tenets of *This We Believe: Keys to Educating Young Adolescents* (NMSA, 2010), particularly the ideas that “the school includes community and business partners” and that “students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning” and, more generally, that “educators use multiple learning and teaching approaches” (p. 14). Furthermore, this approach may

help students become more aware of local and global communities, develop interpersonal and social skills needed to interact and learn with others in various contexts, and develop individual strengths and interests as they come to understand their potential contributions to the wider society.

Illustrative case study: The Pilot Program

The context

To illustrate the principles of applied learning and community partnerships in action, we present a case study from the Australian context. In Australia, the middle years refers to Year 5 through Year 8, encompassing the final two years of primary school and the first two years of secondary school. There has been considerable research in Australia focused on the general engagement and particular teaching and learning issues associated with the middle years of education (see, e.g., Lamb, Walstab, Teese, Vickers, & Rumberger, 2004). In Australia, the principal way to address engagement and retention in the middle years has been to implement broad reforms to curriculum design and delivery across all aspects of school programs. This approach is consistent with the admonition by Lamb and associates (2004) that “Failure to establish meaning in the curriculum or to build satisfactory teaching relationships removes the possibility of successful learning” (p. ix).

In Victoria, the location for this case study, the focus on the middle years was energized in the 1990s by the Department of Education's Middle Years Research and Development Project. More recently, pedagogical principles and strategies for engagement of students in the middle years have been incorporated into broader initiatives, such as Principles of Learning and Teaching (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [DEECD], 2012a) and other curriculum documents (see, e.g., DEECD, 2012b). The principles of effective pedagogical approaches for middle years, characterized here as applied learning and community partnerships, were extended into the senior years of secondary education in the previous decade, with the adoption and expansion of alternative pathways such as the Certificate of Applied Learning in Victoria (VCAA, 2012).

The Pilot Program study

A regional Australian secondary school in Victoria implemented a program for Year 8 students, here called the Pilot Program, that involved elements of applied learning and community partnerships. During the program's operation, the principal author conducted regular site visits and made descriptive observational notes. In addition, data were collected using student focus group interviews and participant questionnaires. As datum was collected, it was examined through the



A rooftop garden project engages urban students in applied learning.

theoretical framework of applied learning with a focus on community partnerships, student sense of connection (Hattam, 2006), and curriculum integration (Beane, 1993). The authors regularly held discussions to identify emerging themes within the theoretical framework, and these were noted. As with any case study, the findings we present are limited in their generalizability. Nevertheless, we identified several implications that may provide direction for future curriculum development.

Pilot Program design

A brief survey of the Year 7 students was conducted, with a focus on those students experiencing a range of learning difficulties and engagement issues. The goal was

to identify areas of interest that could become the basis of a themed homeroom. The themes of sport, recreation, and the environment were identified as key areas of interest and, as a result, students were selected for the Pilot Program based on their interest in physical education. A small group of eight students whom staff believed would benefit from a more applied approach to the curriculum were encouraged to apply for placement in the Pilot Program. An interested staff member volunteered to be the homeroom teacher for the class and developed a range of applied learning projects to engage students throughout the year.

An important consideration in the development of the Pilot Program was the principle of connecting students with the broader community. Time constraints and the legal guidelines for providing adequate supervision limited the pool of possible partners that could be approached for such a project. Considering the aforementioned constraints and the students' interest in physical education, it was determined that the Pilot Program would partner with the physical education classes at a nearby primary school where members of the secondary staff had strong mutual connections and positive relationships.

The Year 8 students planned a range of physical education activities with prep and Year 1 students at the primary school. They implemented skills-based lessons and games at the primary school once per week for approximately ten weeks. The activities were designed to be inclusive and supported a philosophy of active engagement for all students.

Planning for the Pilot Program constituted an important component of the Year 8 curriculum, with lessons at school structured around the development and transfer of appropriate knowledge and skills. Physical education classes were designed around the planning and delivery of skill sessions that encouraged engagement in high-mobility physical activity and the promotion of healthy individual development. The teacher noted that, because these activities were aimed at a primary school audience, the secondary students could master the skills with a small amount of planning and practice, and every student could be involved in the lesson delivery. This promoted a sense of achievement and gave students the self-confidence to pass on the skills to the primary school cohort. The level of engagement was impressive, with every student involved in the delivery of the skill sessions.

Each week, the Year 8 students travelled 10 minutes by bus to the primary school. An additional staff member joined the group for each session to cover the supervision requirements. The teacher wisely used the travel time between schools to focus the group on the activities to be implemented and to revisit the goals for each session.

After they taught the lessons in the primary school, the secondary students would reflect on their experiences and write about them during their English lessons. In fact, throughout the duration of the Pilot Program, students were able to integrate their knowledge and understandings from their physical education subject with the learning outcomes for English. Specifically, the teacher was able to assess students' oral communication as they presented their activities to the primary school students; the teacher also assessed written tasks such as ongoing reflective journals, reports in the school newsletter, and written plans for physical education activities. The teacher commented:

I had to be flexible. I worked with them on topics that they chose, but covering the same outcomes ... the students got a lot out of it at both ends; working with the kids and staff from the other school has exposed them to a lot more people than just their teachers here. It has given them a bit more confidence to talk to other people and relate to other people.

During the second semester of the initial year of the Pilot Program, the program was extended to include two new projects. The first was a second-hand clothing drive for charity. Students produced a number of pamphlets explaining to donors that they were collecting clothing for charity. Students left plastic bags with homeowners and organized the collection the following week. In small groups, students knocked on doors and spoke with residents about their project. After the clothes were collected, students delivered them to a local charity and were given a tour of the facility. Students were also given a presentation about the role of the welfare agency and the needs of disadvantaged people in the local community.

A second project involved Pilot Program students in the organization, promotion, and publication of most sporting events at their school. Students assisted with the marshalling of events and the recording of data at athletics, swimming, and interschool competitions. They were responsible for writing reports and results for the school magazine and weekly school newsletters, which

provided an authentic purpose for student writing. The teacher commented on the added motivation and willingness of students to engage in the drafting process.

One particularly challenging task was the organization of a triathlon that required students to book external venues and gain permission for the event from local authorities. The tasks were divided among small groups, and collaborative work was a key component in the overall success of the planning and eventual running of the event.

Implementation issues

It was a challenge for staff involved to coordinate the timetables, as the primary school operated on a five-day timetable and the secondary school timetable ran across ten days. Staff at both schools approached this issue with openness and a willingness to explore possibilities, and it was soon resolved. The secondary school participants typically would not have had the opportunity to engage with primary students within the constraints of the timetabled school framework. Fortunately, the inherent flexibility of the primary school programming accommodated the timetable constraints imposed by the secondary school. As one staff member commented, "Sometimes your best partners are right next door, all you have to do is ask."

Involvement in the primary school made the Year 8 participants feel special and gave them a strong sense of responsibility to the group and for the possible continuation of the program.

Pilot Program outcomes

The conceptual framework of using an applied learning model to build student connectedness and engagement through a community partnership can be described as a success. The project was established to accommodate the needs of an increasing number of students with learning difficulties who were identified as being disengaged or at risk of disengaging. The students who participated in the Pilot Program showed a high level of motivation and

were prepared to engage with the curriculum and the broader aims of the program. The students consistently reported that they had enjoyed the applied learning aspects of their program. One student said, “We don’t just like sitting down, writing out stuff. We learn more if we are active and doing things.” Another student added, “It’s better than just sitting there basically working from a book and then getting in trouble for mucking around. Better than just all bookwork, you get something out of it; enjoy your school a bit more.”



Service-learning in the community is an effective form of applied learning for middle grades students. photo provided by Paul D. Deering

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Students noted that being the first group to be involved in the program placed additional pressure on them to do the right thing so the program would be repeated the following year. Many students also noted that being in a class with students with similar interests made the experience more enjoyable.

The physical education curriculum that the Year 8 students developed was negotiated with the primary school participants, thus the Year 8 students perceived they were engaged in the learning along with the

younger students. The secondary students were respectful of their younger audience, and they understood the importance of learning the activities thoroughly so they could teach them to the younger students and pass on their knowledge and skills. As one student noted, “The kids relied on us, so we had to be organized and prepared and know what we were talking about.”

The secondary students prepared written reflections of their involvement in the Pilot Program during their English classes, and they used these classes as an opportunity to plan and improve performance for following sessions. Many noted in their reflections that relating the curriculum and assessment to the tasks was positive, valuable, and meaningful and that it resulted in a higher level of engagement and satisfaction. One student appreciated “getting out of school to help other people.” He wrote, “I have met a lot of new people and learned things in a different way. I loved all the things we did, like working with the primary school.”

Students acknowledged that their self-confidence and learning outcomes improved through involvement in the Pilot Program. As Butin (2003) noted, service-learning benefits the students involved, as they achieve new knowledge and real-world experience, build positive self-perceptions, and gain approval and recognition from their peers and schools.

The connection to the local primary school was perceived by all participants as a mutually beneficial arrangement. The primary school students felt special when the Year 8 students visited, and the smaller group sizes ensured that all students received individual attention and instruction. The secondary students perceived a strong connection to the teacher, evident in student comments and through the written feedback. One student wrote, “The best thing about 8S was being in a class with Mr. S.” The teacher commented that students tended to work better for him because they had formed a stronger relationship. He noted that one particular student who was dealing with a number of complex personal issues was “happy to come to school” during the Pilot Program.

These comments echoed a familiar theme in the written evaluations from both students and parents and highlighted the significance and value of having committed and flexible staff involved in middle years programs. “Mr. S” was an advocate for the pilot class in staff and curriculum meetings, and this advocacy was extended to individual students who were experiencing

difficulties engaging in other subjects. He mediated a range of solutions, options, and opportunities for students throughout the year. One staff member commented, “These kids need a champion,” and this was a strong reference to the role played by Mr. S.

Implications for other programs

Several implications can be drawn from this case study. It is significant that the school needed to create adjunct activities involving community partnerships as a way to engage students identified by teaching staff as disengaged or under-engaged. In this case, the Pilot Program also leveraged students’ interests by including students who wanted to focus on physical education.

Community partnership programs should have the same educational purpose as any mainstream curricular program—to engage students in purposeful learning.

Both the secondary and primary schools developed and refined programs in response to local conditions, with the support of school administrators, who allocated resources to support the partnerships. In this case, a key factor for the success of the program was the close proximity of the home school to the community partner primary school. This enabled secondary students to move efficiently and safely between the two locations. In addition, both partners in the case study perceived benefits to participating in this project. Although the initial basis for any partnership may be due to some perceived value to each partner, there is a need for continuous reflection and adaptation in response to emerging issues. Seemingly small issues, such as a timetable change at the school, can have a significant impact on the organization and delivery of partnership outcomes.

The most significant variable was the capacity of the school-based partnership leader to plan, monitor, evaluate, and refine the relationship between the “home” secondary school and the partners. It was critical to

have an enthusiastic teacher (i.e., Mr. S) willing to lead the development of curriculum that operated parallel to normal school operations. This was also a potential weakness of the program, as the good will and emotional investment of one or a few teachers who think and operate differently may lead to burn out for them. When schools engage in community partnerships, leadership should come from multiple stakeholders. Parties from all sites should explicitly define the outcomes they desire from the relationship and specify the strategies they each intend to enact to implement the designed program. These planning activities are an important part of normalizing the program—that is, making it a regular part of the school curriculum.

From the school perspective, significant investment by individual teaching staff is made whenever alternative programs, such as community partnerships, are established. Because of this level of commitment and effort, it is important for schools to balance the experimentation that occurs whenever these programs are initiated and be cautious of overloading staff. In addition, schools must ensure that students on the margins are not isolated in “education ghettos” from which they cannot return to the school mainstream. Community partnership programs should have the same educational purpose as any mainstream curricular program—to engage students in purposeful learning. The challenges are for educators to find solutions to local problems that young people can tackle and to develop creative partnerships among education providers, businesses, and other community organizations that have an interest in programs for young people.

While the Pilot Program was successful, some questions for future consideration remain: How can curriculum initiatives of this nature be expanded and adequately resourced to meet the needs of a larger number of learners? How can relationships between stakeholders be optimized to ensure all parties perceive benefits from the partnership?

Conclusion

Engagement in the middle years continues to be a long-standing problem in Western education systems (Eccles & Templeton, 2002; Rowe, Holmes-Smith, & Hill, 1993), yet students today may not always learn effectively according to the hierarchical and controlled progression that educators and school systems have employed in the past.

The traditional view of learning and schooling is being overtaken by a realization that meaningful learning may be both formal and informal, occur across variable contexts, and be accompanied by peaks and troughs of engagement. While educators generally accept that learners negotiate material and knowledge in a variety of ways, the application of applied learning principles and community partnerships—and the significant investment of planning and effort it entails—is likely to provide a challenge to current teaching and learning spaces, curriculum, and pedagogical approaches. Despite the challenges, this case study demonstrates the promising potential to engage adolescent learners through applied learning pedagogy coupled with community partnerships and adds to the current international discourse among educators and school communities about the design and delivery of purposeful teaching and learning strategies that capture the interest of and provide future direction for young adolescents.

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