

A Review

PUTTING YOUNG PEOPLE AT THE CENTRE OF THE DISCUSSION

WHAT SCHOOL KIDS WANT: A film by young people about how young people is available for \$A35 including GST, postage and handling. To order your copy, contact Ros Black on +61 3 9665 5903
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Reviewed by David Zyngier

Can you imagine studying something for twelve years and at the end you still haven't mastered it? Imagine ... students sitting through long school years, through thousands of hours [it is estimated that students spend some 16000 hours in school] of instruction in reading and writing, math and history. All the autumns, winters and springs of their youth are dominated by a schooling that refuses to sink in. At the end, they are on their way to college still needing more work in language, math and social studies; or else they are flung unceremoniously into the job-world that has little room for them. Whichever direction they go, their education has not permitted them to find out who they are and what's happening to them, and what they need to be free and whole. A disorientation towards reality accompanies the student's weak possession of literacy and conceptual skills. (Shor, 1980: 195)

The problems of schools are so compelling and the urge to get in there and deal with what is happening to our children so understandably powerful we sometimes lose the capacity or do not have the time to step back and ask the critical questions about the organisation of the society in which we live. (Apple, M. 1996 pp.109-110)

For teaching and learning to work, the curriculum has to be challenging for all kids and connect students to the world around them. David Reynolds, Middle Years Coordinator, Princes Hill Secondary College and winner of the Victorian Government Lindsay Thompson Fellowship 2002

Music, music theory in this school. If I'm doing the class work it's bloody boring, so, god it is bloody terrible. You sit through it and god, and just go to sleep, it's just pointless. Year 9 boy

But when I started to not come to school and started to not want to do much of anything, loosing interest in everything, no body really noticed, they kind of, took every body a year and that to

realise that, oh, hang on a second, she hasn't been to school for like a term. Year 11 girl

GIVING KIDS A GENUINE VOICE

What do kids really want from school? Do we really know? Despite current government agendas, which sees education through an instrumentalist lens, many educators would still ascribe to the view that schools exist to meet students' needs. Yet we rarely ask students themselves how they see their own needs. In a recent study (Zyngier, D. et al. 2003a) of students at risk, almost all students interviewed said they had no role in decisions relating to their education programs at their school.

In July 2002 a group of young filmmakers from Thornbury Darebin College¹ set out to make a film about what kids think about schools, their teachers and how they would improve it. What School Kids Want (*WSKW*) is a new Education Foundation² short but very powerful film that set out to change all this. In the lead-up to its 2002 Summit *No More Bored Kids: Radical Solutions for Public Schools*, the Foundation brought young media students together with professional film makers to interview Victorian primary and secondary students about how they really feel about the school experience. The result is an imaginative and provocative challenge to our assumptions about how schools should look, feel and be run.

If we decide to listen and learn then we'll learn. Grade 6 boy

Well a lot of the time I think of going to school as an obligation rather than a choice, so I wake up in the morning and think, shit I've got to go to school. Year 11 boy

During 2002 six year 11 students workshopped, interviewed and filmed students from both Primary and Secondary schools from Melbourne's western suburbs, taking over 8 hours of video. This has been skillfully and dramatically edited to a punchy 10 minutes - just right for teachers to watch at a staff meeting or professional development day! The young film-makers worked with media professionals on a demanding project which is itself an example of how eagerly young people respond to a real task in the real world which has purposeful outcomes. Here is a very practical, no-nonsense way to start discussions in the staff room or at a PD session.

Students are the central premise of schools

Educators (and parents) are committed to making schools a better place - therefore the efforts to improve pedagogy (teaching and learning) so that it is engaging and connected, are crucial.

Teachers know that from being in the classroom daily that the main thing students want when it comes to engaging education is to leave the classroom! Students crave the opportunity to take education beyond the school walls.

Reform to Australian education programs of the last thirty years have in most instances given primacy to the achievement of social outcomes for disadvantaged at-risk students over the achievement of their intellectual results. Schools have a unique and central purpose as institutions to promote the intellectual habits of mind in all students. Of all the social institutions, only schools have been assigned the task of developing and distributing intellectual capacities to the total population. Perhaps the central equity issue in schooling is the distribution of such capacities across all schools and student cohorts (Sheldon Rothman et al. 2003). Research in Queensland (Lingard, B. et al. 2001) indicates that it is not sufficient for schools in socially disadvantaged areas, or any schools for that matter, merely to provide

social support. Education must be socially supportive and intellectually demanding.

Experienced teachers acknowledge that a range of thinking and learning styles needs to be incorporated to enable students not only to engage, but also to achieve improved outcomes. This improvement is especially needed for students from disadvantaged and low socio economic backgrounds - those students who various government and independent reports have termed most *at risk* of non completing 12 years of education or its equivalent. (Australia. Parliament. House of Representatives. Standing Committee on Education and Training. et al. 2002)

If they taught it in a way that people would actually want to learn it in the first place, you wouldn't have to keep going over it, to keep it in people's heads. Year 11 girl

This video highlights the anecdotal reports from practicing teachers that learning needs to be interactive and also needs to be relevant for it to be effective (Zyngier, D. et al. 2003a). Teachers intuitively understand that learning needs to be interactive and fun if students are to be productively and authentically engaged in their learning (Newmann, F. M. 1996; Schlechty, P. C. 2002). Recent research (Zyngier, D. et al. 2003a) suggests that teachers unintentionally doubly disadvantage the already disadvantaged students by serving them up more of the “basics” and the inevitable “busy work” instead of actively engaging their intelligence.

Give Us Space and Give Us the Stars

Research³ shows that the success of schools - kids' learning, effective teaching, teacher morale and community confidence - can be linked to the school's physical environment (Horne, M. et al. 2002). In Australia, school design is the most neglected aspect of education reform. Even the youngest students want to see radical changes to the physical school and have definite notions of what a learning space should be.

*I hate working in tight small spaces. If I had lots of space, I could let my imagination take over
Year 6 Boy*

*We could build a tower and we could go up and up the stairs and we could go to the top floor
and at nighttime there would be a big telescope
Year 6 Boy*

We Want a School That Knows Us

Negative attitudes towards school are often associated with low academic performance and disengagement from schooling. Research shows that students who develop strong relationships with teachers and other students are more likely to do well in their studies (Sheldon Rothman et al. 2003). *What School Kids Want* suggests that students need a school where they feel safe, listened to, respected and known.

*[I want to] learn to learn about things, learn to take things in and form opinions. Year 11 girl
**And we should be able to learn by our selves, we also should be able to learn with them,
they should be able to bounce ideas off us. Year 11 boy***

Young people want to be included in the decisions about what is taught in schools. Most

particularly, they want to learn with and not just from their teachers.

Because if your going in to a class room where the teacher as everybody was saying, says open up the books, you know, read page 34, your just going to read it and do the work what are you going to get out of it....If its more like bouncy more like practical, because if it's fun then your are going to listen your going to want to learn, if it's boring you're just going to go to school and come home and say, school is shit. Year 11 girl

What School Kids Want reflects similar findings in the UK (Birkett, D. 2001) and Australia where the message was clear: school is boring (Zyngier, D. et al. 2003a) but it doesn't have to be that way. If only lessons were made more relevant, learning could be fun. Subjects should be explored through experience, by doing rather than being shown⁴.

We Want to Learn Stuff That's Relevant

Instead of teachers teaching students, I want it to be people teaching people Year 11 Boy
Teachers who teach us but talk to us as well. Year 11 girl

Recent OECD findings identify an alarming number of young people who say they are bored by school. Even in Australia, which has one of the highest rates of youth literacy and numeracy, up to 37 per cent of students feel that school is a place where they do not want to go. (OECD 2002)

Do young people need to like everything that is good for them? The evidence is that those who like school learn better than those who don't (Zyngier, D. et al. 2003a). This is very relevant for Australia, which ranks behind most other OECD countries in the number of young people who complete their secondary schooling.

The young Victorians interviewed for *WSKW* have clear ideas about how to change this. They strongly believe that learning should be authentic and engaging, closely related to their lives, their values and the world outside the school.

Excursions, experiments and real life experiences, not just copy this into your books. I think we should learn our passions, stuff we really want to learn.
Grade 6 boy

This video makes it clear that what kids want most to learn about:

- comes from the kids' own concerns about what is unfair, and inspire enthusiasm among all those involved
- creates real and lasting change, by tackling the main causes of the problem
- gets them involved in the community to tackle issues of social justice, responsibility, tolerance and cultural diversity
- creates awareness and understanding of the needs of others through personal contact
- allows everyone to take greater responsibility for their own lives
- work with others, inspiring them to take action

- consider the effects on the environment, society and economy (both positive and negative);
- help kids to express their views, become critical thinkers and learn how to put problem solving skills into action in order to challenge the world around them (Zyngier, D. 2003a, 2003b)

WSKW is just another reminder that classroom teachers must shift attention from the emphasis on so-called basic skills to incorporate intellectually challenging material that is relevant and connected to the children's lives, recognising that children learn in different ways and have different needs all done in a supportive class room environment. This conclusion is supported by a recent meta-review of at-risk literature (Zyngier, D. et al. 2003b).

'Schools not only reflect social inequality, they actively contribute to widening that inequality during the secondary years' (Brennan, M. 2001, p. 13). Students most at-risk of failure, from socially, culturally and economically disadvantaged conditions are the least likely to be exposed to the intellectually challenging and connected material. Those most at risk of failure are therefore condemned to mediocrity in a most Kafkaesque way.

Connectedness to social and community development aims to produce the solution to social problems through 'action learning' and 'action research' approaches to schooling and education.

What sort of Connected education?

Apple (1996, pp. 99-100) writes that 'few people who have witnessed the levels of boredom and alienation among our students in schools will quarrel with the assertion that curricula should be more closely linked to *real life*' The issue is who decides which vision of *real life*, whose values, is to be taught. The construction of real life on the basis of preparation for often non-existent paid work is the core problem.

Connectedness is however not enough. The recent renewed calls in Victoria for the re-introduction of technical schools confuses a *practical* curriculum with connectedness. Moreover the report into the new Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)⁵ warns that such a new program will be:

'... difficult to accommodate within the existing institutional culture of secondary schools [as it is] a significant departure from the dominant forms of teaching and learning since the 1950's [and] schools will need to undergo significant and substantial change. It is imperative that [there be a] shift in institutional culture [and that the] challenge to current institutional cultures be recognised and embraced.' (Henry, J. et al. 2002, p. 4)

Schools must never be the mere training grounds for industry needs. A practical curriculum is not necessarily an engaging curriculum. If schools overly focus on the problems of practical life (Driver Ed. HIV Ed. Business Ed. etc) the essential skills of critical reasoning are often ignored, further disempowering our students.

Connectedness must enable students to have more control of their lives, learn about individual and collective rights and be connected to a more participatory social vision than that of

providing human capital needs of industry and business.

The false construction of real life ignores or pushes to the margins the systemic unemployment, low wages, youth exploitation, part-timism, non-unionisation etc. Such student engagement and curriculum integration that prepare students for “real life” is a partial fiction, as it institutionalises as official knowledge perspectives that benefit those who are already the most powerful groups in society (Apple, M. 1996, p. 100).

We have an obligation to help young people seek out a range of ideas and to voice their own. We often shirk this responsibility teaching what Apple calls high status knowledge as if it was the truth, immutable and infallible while silencing the voices of those outside the mainstream. Here is an example suggested by Apple (1996):

Consider a geography class using the media to focus on a study of *natural disasters*. How we think about natural disasters and whose definition is crucial. We are accustomed to seeing (unfortunately) the damage to peoples’ lives from drought, hurricane and volcanic eruption as natural disasters. But is this seemingly neutral way of understanding these events really neutral or are particular values subtly insinuated in or omitted?

We recently saw the devastation caused by massive mud slides in South America - 100’s of people killed (we will never know how many - Why?) and thousands of houses washed away as torrential rains washed down a mountainside.

Every year such rains occur in, every year people die. This time an entire side of a mountain collapsed - the people living there died. No one in the valleys - the safe and fertile land - died! Poor families are forced to live on the dangerous hillsides, prone to mudslides or volcanic disturbance, because this is the only land left to them that they can afford. People crowd onto these mountainsides because of poverty and historical land ownership patterns that are grossly unequal. The problem is not the rain - a natural and needed yearly occurrence - but the unequal economic structure (probably a result of colonial occupation) that allows a small minority to control the lives of the majority!

This altered and more complete understanding of the problem then is rich in teaching possibilities that connects to the real world.

The fourfold challenges raised by WSKW

*Teachers talk about the same thing over and over again or for a very long time. Grade 6 girl
OK it says here bla bla bla makes bla bla bla makes bla bla bla ok the question is what does bla bla bla make bla bla bla bla bla bla bla bla bla bla bla bla. Year 11 boy*

The first challenge to teachers who wish to contribute to a connected education for their students is how they and their students get connected to the real world in an organic and authentic manner that not only values the students’ culture and needs but adds value to their learning experiences in terms of the mandated curriculum (Zyngier, D. et al. 2003a).

Secondly, schools will need to then accommodate the result of such a radical and transformative

change in the space and place that the school would/could occupy in the community.

Thirdly, the education system as a whole will need to integrate such dramatically different curricula that challenges the viability of a curriculum determined by the requirements of university admission. Teachers (and students) will have to confront a system which 'is a social construction informed by a particular view of what education is, itself embedded in the values of the dominant social groups' (Gale, T. 2000).

The final challenge is for society itself. Society will need to accommodate an engaged, empowered and perhaps enraged generation of learners demanding not just sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, but social justice and equity for not just the few but for all, a recognitive social justice concerned not just with the redistribution of goods and services. The social justice demanded by such students/adults may demand a rethinking of social arrangements that are currently accepted as just, giving status to action that is currently thought to be counterproductive and decentering concerns thought to be pivotal (Gale, T. 2000, p. 253).

Then students will no longer see themselves as victims, objectified and exploited, as innocent and docile victims of the system (Bourdieu, P. et al. 1990; Carlson, D. et al. 1998). Together with their teachers, students will have greater control over not just the content but the delivery of their curriculum.

We await the day when every teacher will be able to report that 'The students became engaged through the planning and organising [of a community connected curriculum] ... [which] encouraged teamwork and shared responsibility. The students worked effectively because they had been given a high level of ownership of the program' (Papadopoulos, S. 2002, p. 12). Then our students will no longer see themselves as victims, objectified and exploited as innocent and docile victims of the system. Together with their teachers students will have acquired control over not just the content but the delivery of their curriculum.

Questions raised by WSKW to classroom teachers

1. To what extent is the knowledge I teach integrated across subject boundaries?
2. To what extent do I make links with students' background knowledge explicit in my class?
3. To what extent do my classroom activities or tasks make it clear that what is learned is, or will be, of some use-value outside of the school in 'the real world' not just in the distant future?
4. To what extent are my classroom activities and tasks based on the resolution of a specific and realistic problem(s)?
5. Do I unintentionally doubly disadvantage the already disadvantaged students by serving them up more of the *basics* and *busy work* instead of actively engaging their intelligence?
6. Whose vision of *real life* counts in my classroom?

Conclusion

The purpose of *WSKW* is to not necessarily identify a single pedagogy to be universally applied, rather to stimulate discussion about an education within the context of social justice. We cannot do it on our own - but without a change in the way we teach, improved student outcomes for those we

recognise as needing the most assistance will never be achieved.

WSKW is a powerful example of how pedagogies that incorporates intellectually challenging material that is relevant and connected to the children's lives, recognising that children learn in different ways and have different needs and engages with that difference in a supportive class room environment is what we teachers have to deliver.

Together with their teachers, students will have acquired control over not just the content but the delivery of their curriculum.

The lessons for teachers of this video is that it is incumbent on us all to provide quality classroom teaching and assessment practices and curricula relevant to students' futures. The current educational emphasis on a credentialled society defines quality student outcomes in terms of academic results from limited, standardised testing of basic skills, a generalised ranking out of 100 that says very little about what has been learnt and how well it has been learned.

Students' work restructuring the school and its curriculum must be recognised as a fundamental principle of school-level innovation Unless the central relationship among students and between students and teachers is rearranged to include [active student participation] then most innovation will not be sustainable. ...What is clear is that ... school change can only be accomplished with significant student participation ... and an engagement with ... community on the basis of changing purposes of secondary schools. (Brennan, M. 2001, pp. 22-3)

Three final questions to all interested in education

1. Is it possible to change schools without a concomitant change in the social and economic conditions?
2. Is school reform more about raising the achievement level and scores on what the reformers have determined to be *high status knowledge* than improving the lives of the children?
3. The final question is *who is to really benefit* from any changes we make to education?

'Surely it is an obligation of education in a democracy to empower the young members of the public to participate and play articulate roles in the public space' (Apple, M. et al. 1999, p. 8).

What School Kids Want makes young people central players in the adventurous rethinking of schooling. It has important messages for policymakers, school principals, teachers, parents and all who are concerned about making schools work. It can be used to remind experienced and novice teachers alike about the centrality of students in our daily work lives, about the need to engage our students in meaningful, relevant, connected and intellectually challenging work.

In the end we are talking about the lives and the futures of our children!

¹ A 1000 student years 7-12 secondary school in Melbourne's industrial working class western suburbs.

² The Education Foundation is a not-for-profit independent organisation committed to promoting excellence in state education <http://www.educationfoundation.org.au>

³ See School Works <http://www.school-works.org/> for full details

⁴ see <http://www.bobpearlman.org/BestPractices/SchoolIdlikecompetition.htm> for full details about the Guardian's findings and <http://www.guardian.co.uk/guardianeducation/story/0,3605,501372,00.html> for the above article.

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