



Background to Doxa Engaging Students Wiki and Engaging Teachers to Engage Students Research

Doxa Youth Foundation undertook two major projects in the first half of 2009:

- 1) To undertake research exploring the experiences of new teachers in working with students at risk of disengagement in mainstream schools and the extent to which their pre-service training provided them with the skills and knowledge to engage students.
- 2) To build a wiki as a resource to help keep students at risk of leaving school early engaged in education

Background to Engaging Teachers to Engage Students Research

This research was carried out by Researcher Ian Seal, who was commissioned to investigate the extent to which newly graduated teachers are prepared by their pre-service training for working with, supporting and engaging those students at risk of disengagement from mainstream schooling.

Engagement in education is consistently shown to be a strong predictor not only of academic outcomes from schooling, but also of a range of long term outcomes, such as overall health and wellbeing, employment status and income level. Those young people who disengage from school and learning at an early age are at increased risk of various health and social concerns, which in turn leads to a number social and economic costs. Behavioural issues in the classroom, arguably an outcome of student disengagement, have been shown to be the most significant cause of concern for new secondary school teachers and are strongly implicated in the decision that many new teachers make to leave teaching for another career (AEU, 2009). Under the new *Effective Schools are Engaging Schools Student Engagement Policy Guidelines* (DEECD, 2009) all Victorian government schools are required to develop a Student Engagement Policy and this requirement will be included on the School Compliance Checklist from 2010. Government schools and school networks are accountable for 'student engagement and wellbeing' as one of three key student outcomes under the School and Network Accountability and Improvement Framework (DEECD, 2009).

This report explores the understandings of 12 teachers in their first or second year of teaching regarding engagement and its causes, and the skills and strategies that they feel they need in order to work effectively with students who are disengaged or at risk of disengagement. It draws from the literature on student engagement as comparison to the teachers' comments, to clarify why a focus on engagement is vital, and to identify the skills, expertise and characteristics required of teachers to engage, support and work with those students at-risk of disengagement.

Overall, this report develops an argument that it is essential that teachers have a comprehensive understanding of engagement, its causes and appropriate ways to tackle it; that currently many new teachers feel that they don't have that knowledge and those skills, and that pre-service education and training courses are a primary, but not the only, site at which these things must be learned and developed.

Doxa has significant experience in the provision of programs targeted at young people marginalised from mainstream education, and funds two schools that provide alternative education programs. Doxa recognises that such alternative education settings are but one of a number of strategies required to ensure that all students enjoy the greatest opportunity to remain engaged in and connected to education, and wish to identify strategies that strengthen the capacity of mainstream schools to work with those students at risk of disengagement. From this research, Doxa hopes to encourage and support tertiary teacher training institutions to provide greater curriculum emphasis on student engagement and meeting the needs of disengaged students, and on connecting pre-service teachers to alternative education settings.

Background to the Engaging Students Wiki

The wiki was funded by Doxa Youth Foundation and the auDA Foundation. We are grateful to the auDA Foundation for their support.

The reality is that if a young person is unable to find employment they are unlikely to fully participate in the life of the community, and will become completely disengaged. Those young people who do not complete school or go onto further training are at a greater risk of unemployment; earning less on average than those who have completed school or equivalent training; and experiencing a range of poorer social outcomes, such as poorer health. A stark example of this was highlighted in the recent research on *How Young People are Faring 2008* which reported school leavers with low literacy and numeracy skills in Year 9 were almost three times more likely to be unemployed or not in the labour force compared with high achievers.

There are some young people who for a variety of reasons do not cope in a mainstream school setting and yet it can be very hard for teachers, parents and community workers to find an alternative setting or program that may assist in keeping these students engaged in education for as long as possible.

The wiki includes a national database of information on alternative programs available for students at risk; research into student engagement including best practice and incidence of disengagement; and links to relevant community support organisations.

Doxa Youth Foundation established a reference group made up of representatives from state government in education and in human services, catholic education, youth organisations, teachers and researchers. We have approached education departments, alternative education providers and other relevant organisations nationally and have received an overwhelmingly positive response to support and contribute to the wiki content.

The Engaging Students Wiki has the potential to change lives; to assist teachers and education professionals to understand and support at risk students; to promote best practice for teaching and learning; to provide opportunities for professional dialogue between passionate educators; to provide parents with support and ideas in helping their children find a path forward; for young people to find they are not alone and that there are alternatives; for youth and community workers to share, promote and discuss programs which support at risk young people.