

## **Addressing disengagement from schooling through community action networks**

**Tom Stehlik**

**University of South Australia**

[tom.stehlik@unisa.edu.au](mailto:tom.stehlik@unisa.edu.au)

### **Abstract**

Educators and policy makers in Australia have been concerned for some time with ensuring that young people aged 15-19 successfully engage with society through either ‘learning or earning’. For most of this cohort this means completing secondary school, and for many going on to further education and employment. A significant number of young people however disengage from formal schooling and find it difficult to re-engage due to a number of reasons – socio-economic status; mental health issues, family breakdown, or lack of relevance and meaning of the school curriculum to their lives. This paper reviews research conducted in Australia into the reasons why young people disengage from schooling, and outline some strategies and programs that have been successful in addressing these issues. This includes recognizing that disengagement can begin in the early years of schooling and is even inter-generational; and that alternative learning programs are often better when based outside of schools involving the wider community, other agencies, and other professionals including social workers and youth workers working in collaboration with teachers.

### **Introduction and review of the literature**

Educators and policy-makers agree that educational disengagement is linked to a range of poor outcomes, both during the years of compulsory schooling and beyond. Although the term ‘engagement’ has been used in educational policy and literature for at least two decades, the precise meaning of the term remains contested (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Harris, 2006; McMahon & Zyngier, 2009).

While disengagement is the ‘official’ term for disconnection from school (Smyth & Fasoli, 2007), students who are disengaged may be variously described as ‘alienated’, ‘disaffected’, ‘detached’ or ‘at risk’ (Murray et al. 2004, p. 5).

Regardless of the terminology used, disengagement is not necessarily a rejection of learning, but often a rejection of the curriculum that is taught in schools (Atweh et al. 2007). As Erickson elaborates:

*Students in school, like other humans, learn constantly. When we say they are ‘not learning’ what we mean is that they are not learning what school authorities, teachers, and administrators intend for them to learn as the result of intentional instruction. (1987, pp. 343-344)*

From this perspective, engagement is not seen as an attribute inherent in the student but rather, ‘a state of being that is highly influenced by contextual factors - home, school, and peers - in relation to the capacity of each to provide consistent support for student learning’ (Furlong and Christenson, 2008, p. 366). Nevertheless, much of the policy discourse positions students and their families at the locus of the disengagement discussion (Zyngier 2004; Smyth 2005).

Disengagement from formal schooling is not an ‘all or nothing’ phenomenon, and is best regarded as a process, rather than an event (Butler et al. 2005). Students are not engaged or disengaged in every context or at every moment (Murray et al. 2004, p. 5).

In South Australia, school retention and engagement in learning were identified as significant issues by the state government, which in its 2004 Strategic Plan identified a number of key educational targets including to:

- Increase the leaving age to 17 years to ensure that young people are either in school, employed or in structured training.
- Increase the percentage of students completing Year 12 or its equivalent to 90% within 10 years.

These goals were prompted by a decline in retention rates in the state from 92.7% in 1992 to 68% in 2004, and a concern that an unacceptable number of young people were becoming at risk by leaving school early and not being fully engaged in education, training or work opportunities (Government of South Australia, 2006). While the first target has been achieved via legislation, the second target may be on track with school retention rates continuing to increase in South Australia with 2010 figures suggesting 81% of students completed Year 12, the final year of secondary schooling.

This second target however has required a significant shift in thinking about schooling and education across a range of government departments and agencies and educational service providers with a massive investment in programs and projects that challenge the current educational paradigm. As part of the state government's Social Inclusion Agenda, the South Australian School Retention Action Plan (SRAP) was launched in 2004 to invest \$28.4 million over four years into a range of strategies and initiatives to address young people becoming disconnected from education.

The largest of the School Retention Action Plan (SRAP) initiatives were the Innovative Community Action Networks (ICANs). With the South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) nominated as the lead agency, ICAN was funded with \$7.4 million over four years. The ICAN programs were premised on the development of strong and valued local school and community partnerships which were created in the four regions of the state that were identified as having particularly low school retention and comparatively high social risk factors. The local partners have the task of identifying local barriers to learning and are empowered to respond with local solutions in holistic ways. These partnerships, led by local ICAN Management Committees, involve collaboration between schools, government and non-government departments and agencies, business and industry, local community groups, families and young people; and are innovative in the fact that they require a 'joined-up' approach to education services which acknowledges that for some young people, schools are not the appropriate environment for learning.

Therefore ICAN has demonstrated that the education of our young people is a responsibility to be shared across the whole community. The significant policy shift which was required to make this a reality in practice was the decision to make the school student enrolment funding more flexible, with resources available to enable young people to access case management and flexible community-based learning opportunities to meet their identified needs. This is known as a 'wrap-around' approach to case management, where services are wrapped around the particular needs of individual young people; the complete opposite of an educational paradigm that puts the curriculum first and assumes all young people will be able to engage with it in the same way.

## **Research project**

One of the four ICAN regions is located in the southern suburbs of Adelaide, an area with a range of socio-economic and social disadvantage factors that has seen particular cohorts of young people in the 15-19 year age group drop out of school, become at-risk and ‘slip through the cracks’ of the system. This includes:

- Indigenous young people and some young migrants
- young people under the Guardianship of the Minister
- young pregnant women, young mothers and young carers
- young people with a disability, whether physical, intellectual or emotional
- young people struggling with socio-economic disadvantage, homelessness and drugs and alcohol
- young people who had experienced the juvenile justice system
- young people with poor literacy and numeracy skills.

While the various ICAN programs and projects across the state were achieving success for these young people - measured quantitatively by a success rate of 70 per cent and the fact that young people were returning to school or further education and training, and a further 7 per cent were actively seeking employment – the projects also highlighted the fact that disengagement from schooling and learning often began much earlier in life, either in the transition from primary to high school around the age of 12 or 13; or even earlier during the primary school years. The Southern ICAN Management Committee therefore commissioned research to investigate the value of applying the ICAN approach to the younger 10-12 age group.

A team of researchers from the Centre for Research in Education (CREd) at the University of South Australia was engaged to undertake the project entitled: *Addressing disengagement in the early years: issues and opportunities*.

The project commenced on June 1, 2009 and was scheduled for completion on June 1, 2010. The stated aim of this research project was to:

*Explore and evaluate the pros and cons of the concept of extending the scope of Southern ICAN to include programs that target young people under 12 years of age as a way to improve youth engagement in the longer term.*

The methodology included a literature review of early years intervention and research as well as existing policies and programs; then two rounds of data collection involving interviews with staff from schools, community agencies and case management providers that were trialling various intervention programs with young people; as well as participation and observation in some program activities with young people. Obtaining appropriate ethical approval and consent from the university, the Department of Education and Children’s Services and the schools themselves took some time and delayed the start of the research project. However, the final approved research questions were:

*What are the experiences of students, teachers and ICAN stakeholders concerning disengagement in upper primary school?*

*What are the views of students, teachers and ICAN stakeholders on improving school engagement in upper primary school?*

*What are the risks involved in engagement-oriented intervention with young people under 12 years?*

*What are the barriers and opportunities that would work for and against expansion of the ICAN model into primary schools in the relevant Southern ICAN stakeholder organisations?*

The findings are presented in the following section against each of these research questions.

## **Findings**

A 2006 report by the SA Community Health Research Unit identified the 8–12 age group, or ‘middle childhood’ as a critical cohort in terms of health and wellbeing. Middle childhood figures as a phase in which children undergo significant cognitive, social and physical growth, and begin to find their place in the wider world. During these years, children gain skills, competencies and beliefs about themselves that have long-term consequences for their future. This investment in middle childhood may act to create a ‘springboard’ to a more advantaged adolescence and adulthood (Lawless & Thompson 2006).

This research therefore took a holistic life-course view of the needs of young people in the middle childhood age group, noting the importance of considering social and emotional indicators of wellbeing in addition to educational interventions and responses.

### **What are the experiences of students, teachers and ICAN stakeholders concerning disengagement in upper primary school?**

#### ***Different views of engagement***

The literature, as well as interviews with stakeholders, revealed a variety of understandings of the term disengagement, conflating it variously with students not attending school, being at-risk, and being socially immature and experiencing family dysfunction and/or socio-economic disadvantage.

#### ***Transition from primary to high school***

It is clear that the environment, structures, pedagogies and teaching methods in primary school are very different compared to high school. The generally inclusive and nurturing primary school environment gives way to a larger institution in which new relationships must be developed – not only with peers but with a number of different subject teachers – and this is often where young people begin to disengage. The research confirms that interventions beginning in primary schools provide a strong opportunity for improving transitions and addressing disengagement

#### ***The continuum of disengagement begins earlier than upper primary school***

A consistent response from educators and other stakeholders in relation to the ICAN Primary School Model was that early intervention could actually start much earlier than Year 6/7 – with the notion of ‘early’ ranging from around Year 4/5 to before birth (i.e. intergenerational disadvantage). The literature and respondents suggest that by Year 3, children have already formed sets of behaviours, values and coping strategies that become internalised and from then on determine how they see the world and themselves in it – their self worth for example.

### ***Schools are taking a holistic / wellbeing approach to learning***

Maslow's hierarchy of needs was mentioned often by educators in relation to the bigger picture of young people needing to be safe, fed, clothed and healthy as necessary pre-requisites to engaging in learning (Maslow, 1998). As such, some schools and sites offer 'breakfast clubs' or other forms of practical support for supplying the basic needs. Other basic needs such as clothing are addressed by schools which have a defined uniform policy. This is seen as very important for schools in low socio-economic areas where being able to afford clothing of the required standard is an issue for many families. Successful mentoring programs and services aimed at the wellbeing of school children include the 'Rock and Water' program, discussed further later in this paper.

### ***Developing Social Connectedness***

A recurring theme in the research was the perception stated by many educators that young people at risk are often not necessarily manifesting learning or behavioural difficulties, but are experiencing difficulty in engaging in normal social activities and interactions. This was variously referred to as developing positive relationships, social literacies, social connectedness, social skills, life skills and a sense of belonging. Assisting in developing these social skills was seen as an essential role of ICAN and other alternative programs as a pre-requisite to engaging in learning, much as basic needs need to be met before higher needs can be addressed.

### **What are the views of students, teachers and ICAN stakeholders on improving school engagement in upper primary school?**

#### ***Contextual factors are important***

Across the Southern region, it is self-evident that there will be regional and contextual variations, in particular in the demographics of each school population. Innovative programs such as the Creek Club are centred on the physical characteristics of the site; for example there is a creek flowing through the grounds of Hackham South Primary School which provides the focus for that particular program. Other schools have developed programs and projects appropriate to their site, for example communal gardens or drumming workshops. Some of these models cannot be simply transported to other schools and communities - the context of each school as well as each individual needs to be taken into account. One positive finding from the research is that this issue is more likely to be addressed in a primary school than a high school context. Models, programs and projects need to be allowed to develop organically, rather than top-down, based on what works for that school and community, true to the innovative approach of ICAN.

#### ***Improving social skills***

The 'Rock and Water' program has been identified as a successful program for developing social skills and helping young children learn how to engage with peers in the schoolyard and during play. Programs that link children with the aged community for example also have indirect benefits for developing social skills for their students. These activities involve learning about practical literacy and numeracy, but also about life skills. A similar model can be applied to the 10-12 years age group. To participate successfully in community life, being able to read and write is absolutely essential, but so is the ability to relate and engage with others.

#### ***Maintaining positive relationships and respect***

Youth Workers were seen by young people in some of the high school programs as 'more helpful, more down to earth', and compared to their experiences with teachers, 'treat them with respect'. *Respect* was a term that recurred repeatedly when talking to these young people, and coupled with an approach to learning that was more relaxed, hands-on, one-to-one, flexible,

friendly and understanding of their needs seemed to be the key to the success of the program; with the result that most of them ‘want to come to school now’.

### **What are the risks involved in engagement-oriented intervention with young people under 12 years?**

#### ***Working from different views of what engagement means***

As outlined in the response to Question 1, educators expressed varying views on what engagement means, creating a risk in arriving at a shared understanding of engagement. A further finding in relation to the relative and multidimensional view of engagement is that it is also gendered. It was noted that while girls might appear to educators to be compliant, they can in fact be experiencing issues related to self image or self esteem and are not so easily identified as being at risk of disengaging in comparison to boys, whose behaviour is generally more obvious.

#### ***Short term programs that do not follow through***

The study has reinforced the findings of previous research into student disengagement that programs need to develop long term goals rather than short term objectives. In particular, young people at risk may benefit from a program or intervention only to find that they have no support when it has finished or the funding stops, or when they move on to another school. In addition, school holiday breaks are critical times to continue some form of support; particularly in the long summer break between primary and high school.

#### ***Not maintaining the flexible and integrated approach of ICAN***

ICAN has been successful because it offers flexibility in funding and programming, and because of the Integrated Services Model that is inclusive of other agencies, communities and especially parents. There is a risk in ICAN becoming entrenched in the mainstream, losing its flexibility and not maintaining the innovation that it was initially set up for. Adopting creative and innovative approaches to programs appropriate to the context of primary schools and their communities is crucial.

### **What are the barriers and opportunities that would work for and against expansion of the ICAN model into primary schools in the relevant Southern ICAN stakeholder organisations?**

#### ***Flexible funding***

Funding is both a barrier and an opportunity. Our consultations clearly showed that partners regarded flexibility of student funding (in terms of the funding following the student) as being a key strength of ICAN; and the inflexibility of funding timelines due to administrative constraints as being a major barrier.

#### ***Wellbeing***

In terms of wellbeing, the research team noted that duty of care obligations for secondary students are not the same as the duty of care obligations for primary students. This needs to be taken into account when designing interventions and allocating intervention staff. An intervention that works well at secondary school level with a youth worker being the main point of contact for students may not be appropriate for primary school students. Nevertheless, there is a role for youth workers working closely in tandem with teachers at primary school level. Case management of primary school students therefore needs to operate on a different model than for secondary students, with programs being kept within the school for duty of care, and within the children’s peer groups for well being.

### ***Roles and responsibilities***

The respective roles and responsibilities of Youth Worker, Christian Pastoral Care Worker, School Counsellor and Social Worker are not always clearly articulated and seem to overlap. Perceptions of these roles varied across schools and agencies and the qualifications required for these roles also vary considerably. There seemed to be some tension between these roles and the level of status associated with them, which can create a barrier to collaboration in a 'joined-up' way.

### **Discussion and conclusions**

*If we can work with these families around social issues that prevent their kids from (a) being at school and (b) being successful when they are here at school, and we do that on site either individually or as a group around social skills and resilience, and working with families as well, and continuing that during the holidays. If we can build resilience and social capital with these kids so that the issues they have in the classroom and the school yard and wherever can decrease to the point where they can engage in learning.*

This quote from a Primary School Principal succinctly summarises the findings of the research project as it incorporates the references to a shared understanding of engagement, roles and responsibilities, partnerships, wellbeing, continuity and transitions, context and developing social connectedness. Furthermore, given the importance of context and individualised responses in addressing disengagement in the early years, there is obviously no single model that can be recommended for primary schools. However a number of conclusions and considerations are listed in this section which can be adopted or adapted as appropriate:

1. Attendance is a basic issue. Assistance is needed in just getting some children to school. As an initial response it is important to recognise that non-attendance is not usually due to the individual child's reluctance to attend school, but to issues beyond their control such as lack of transport, family dysfunction, irregular home life and parental neglect.
2. Community mentoring. While it is hard to get the right people who want to handle the tough kids, young people also need to feel safe, wanted and known, but often teachers are seen as representing authority even if they try hard to be caring. Children might want to maintain some distance for that reason. Therefore other significant adults are important, e.g. community volunteers, youth workers, case managers, social workers, school services officers and university student mentors.
3. Early identification of potential at-risk children and families through proactive engagement with the local community. School clusters could share a full-time dedicated social worker who becomes the link for disadvantaged families – someone who over time can develop a sense of trust and a positive relationship with these families.
4. Focus on a whole-of-school approach. This may involve cultural change and professional development for educators around a holistic, child-centred approach; based on keeping all children within the school community and their peer groups, as distinct from the secondary model where alternative programs are offered off-campus.
5. The middle schooling movement supports students in the transition from primary to secondary schooling. Schools that adopt a middle school structure and philosophy to their teaching address the social and academic needs of the 8-12 years age group. This approach works well for children deemed at risk through the common features of using an integrated curriculum, having a strong focus on relational learning, team teaching, constructivist teaching and learning practices, and the promotion of a holistic school community.

6. Cluster arrangements for schools working together appear to provide the best model for sharing resources, supporting students through transition, and fostering a whole-of-community approach to education and wellbeing of the young people and families in the community.

Finally, the project has reinforced a global trend which is apparent in the educational environment at the end of the first decade of the 21st century - the recognition in many developed countries of the importance of promoting positive social and emotional wellbeing in children and young people. The links between the wellbeing of a child and their behaviour, health and learning outcomes are well established, but it is now apparent that schools and teachers have a key role to play in promoting social and emotional learning in addition to focussing on academic outcomes (Gordon et al, 2011: Tobler, 2011). Furthermore, this requires effective partnerships that include families and the wider community working in collaborative relationships with teachers and schools to provide safe, caring learning environments for children; as exemplified by the ICAN model.

Many of the educational programs presented as part of ICAN that have been shown to be successful in working towards changing the educational paradigm have reflected this trend; with examples of programs aimed at helping both children and adults to develop the fundamental skills to be able to effectively deal with social relationships at home and at school. The 'Rock and Water' program has already been mentioned as a successful program for developing social skills and helping young children learn how to engage with peers in the schoolyard and during play. The program is not based in the classroom but runs at recess and lunchtime. Year 3/4 children are selected for the program from those identified as not being successful in the yard and having issues like poor social skills and anger management. The program assists the children in managing these issues. While the participants are mainly boys, one girl with Asperger's disorder asked to be in the program and has been one of the most successful participants. As one Primary School Principal noted:

*One lad in particular whose success rate in the yard had been zero, who has just had a complete turnaround, and the effect it's had on his whole demeanour, and how he behaves and interacts with kids in the classroom as well, is huge; rather than using his fists, he's a much happier kid, he's calm and he's got all the language that goes with it.*

There are many other successful programs now operating in Australian schools targeting wellbeing and mental health for young children. 'KidsMatter' is a program that takes a whole school approach to the issue and is now being funded by the federal government to reach over 1700 primary schools by 2014, following an evaluation of its trial in 100 schools which saw a reduction in difficult behaviours such as emotional symptoms, conduct problems, peer problems and hyperactivity (Tobler, 2011). Individual primary schools are implementing other programs such as 'Play is the Way', which includes workshops for staff demonstrating a number of games and accompanying language. It is the language which is important in working with students so they begin to learn that there are different ways to resolve issues (Crafers Primary School, 2011).

In conclusion, the most important and critical finding from these examples is the fact that schools now have a far bigger responsibility in preparing our children for the society of the future than just providing academic learning. Schooling now includes ensuring the wellbeing of the entire community – children, parents and families. This creates a whole new paradigm for educational policy, school management, teacher education and working 'outside the square'. As another Primary School Principal noted:



*We all need to be mindful that we are developing school communities that in some instances are the only communities that a family or an individual belong to...so it's beholden on us to get it right.*

**Dr Tom Stehlik** has been teaching and researching at the University of South Australia since 1992. His interests in educational issues are broad and include Steiner Education, social inclusion, lifelong learning, organisational culture and communities of practice.

## References

- Appleton, J. Christenson, S. & Furlong, M. (2008). 'Student engagement with school: Critical conceptual and methodological issues of the construct', *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(5), 369-386.
- Atweh, B. Bland, D. Carrington, S. & Cavanagh, R. (2007). *School disengagement: Its constructions, investigation and management*, Perth.
- Butler, H. Bond, L. Drew, S. Krelle, A. & Seal, I. (2005). *Doing it differently: Improving young people's engagement with school*. Brotherhood of St Laurence: Melbourne.
- Crafers Primary School Newsletter, (2011), Viewed 11 May, 2011, <http://www.crafersps.sa.edu.au/PDF/18March2011.pdf>
- Erickson, F. (1987). 'Transformation and school success: The politics and culture of educational achievement', *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 18(4), 335-356.
- Featherstone, B. & Manby, M. (2006). 'Working with families: Messages for policy and practice from an evaluation of a school-based project', *Children & Society*, 20(1), 30-39.
- Furlong, M. & Christenson, S. (2008). 'Engaging students at school and with learning: A relevant construct for all students', *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(5), 365-368.
- Gordon, R. Ji, P. Mulhall, P. Shaw, B. and Weissberg, R. (2011). 'Social and emotional learning for Illinois students: Policy, practice and progress', *The Illinois Report 2011*, 68-83
- Government of South Australia. (2006). Press Release June 23, Viewed 12 July, 2009, <http://www.ministers.sa.gov.au/news.php?id=307>
- Harris, L. (2006). 'A phenomenographic investigation of teacher conceptions of student engagement in learning'. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 35(1), 57-79.
- Lawless, A. & Thompson, G. (2006). *Child2Teen: Mobilising the Onkaparinga community*, SA Community Health Research Unit.
- Maslow, A. (1998). *Toward a psychology of being*, Wiley and Sons: New York
- McMahon, B. & Zyngier, D. (2009). 'Student engagement: Contested concepts in two continents'. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 4(2), 164-181.
- Murray, S; Mitchell, J; Gale, T; Edwards, J & Zyngier, D. (2004). *Student disengagement from primary schooling: A review of research and practice, a report to the CASS Foundation*, Monash University: Melbourne.
- Smyth, J. (2005). 'An argument for new understandings and explanations of early school leaving that go beyond the conventional'. *London Review of Education*, 3(2), 117-130.
- Smyth, J. & Fasoli, L. (2007). 'Climbing over the rocks in the road to student engagement and learning in a challenging high school in Australia', *Educational Research*, 49(3), 273-295.
- Tobler, H. (2011). 'Coping part of the curriculum', *The Weekend Australian*, March 5-6, 13
- Zyngier, D. (2004). 'Doing education not doing time. Engaging pedagogies and pedagogues - what does student engagement look like in action?', Paper presented at *AARE Doing the Public Good: Positioning Education Research conference, 2004*.