From discrete intervention to engage marginalised students to whole-school initiative to engage all students

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Abstract

An enduring educational dilemma is that young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds do not have their needs met in conventional schooling. As a result, many have left school by Year 11. To counter this trend, some schools in disadvantaged areas introduce targeted in-school interventions before Year 11 to meet the needs of their students. Many of these interventions, which are highly successful in engaging students and supporting them to achieve, have insights to offer schools, but they remain on the margins as programmes for particular young people. However, a government secondary school in Victoria, Australia has been an exception. It was inspired to apply aspects of a successful intervention, Hands On Learning, to a whole-school initiative to enhance the engagement of all of its students. I used a case study approach to investigate the initiative's first year of implementation. Findings revealed that the majority of students did report engagement. However, economically disadvantaged students faced barriers to full participation that negatively impacted their learning experiences. The inequitable distribution of educational benefits demonstrated that whole-school adaptation of an intervention is not straightforward and unless the needs of disadvantaged students are targeted in the whole-school initiative, they are likely to experience educational disadvantage.

Keywords: marginalised students; disadvantage; equity; engagement; intervention; whole-school

Introduction

The social inequity of young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds being overrepresented as the lowest school achievers and as early school leavers is a political and educational challenge that is proving difficult to overcome (COAG Reform Council 2013; Gonski et al. 2011). Although many programmes that operate outside of mainstream education are highly successful in meeting the needs of disadvantaged students (Te Riele 2014; Wyn et al. 2014), successful aspects of these would need to be incorporated into mainstream schools before more equitable educational benefits would become system-wide.

This paper focuses on a government secondary school that applied successful aspects of such a programme into a school-wide initiative. The study investigated whether this initiative resulted in an equitable distribution of educational benefits to students. To commence, I review the Australian political and educational context, with a focus on the state of Victoria. From there, I detail the research methodology and specific research context. I then outline the findings before moving into the discussion and conclusion.

Political context

Australia's national education goals have focused on improving outcomes for all young Australians, with Goal 1 that schooling promotes equity and excellence, and Goal 2 that schooling enables students to become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens (MCEETYA 2008). These are basic human rights in a socially just education system. In line with this, Australia's 'National Education Agreement' has the equity imperative that 'schooling promotes the social inclusion and reduces the educational disadvantage of children' (COAG 2009).

Even with these government imperatives, large gaps in educational equity remain intractable (COAG Reform Council 2013; Gonski et al. 2011). In Victoria, for example, despite targeted interventions from 2008 to 2011, the gap between the proportions of students from low socio-economic backgrounds meeting minimum standards in reading compared to those from high socio-economic backgrounds, had not improved. In addition, the gap between the proportions of students from low socio-economic areas attaining a Year 12 or equivalent compared with students from high socio-economic areas had also remained largely unchanged (COAG Reform Council 2012). Inequities such as these indicate that in general, schools are not attuned to the needs of economically disadvantaged students, which diminishes their ability to reach their potential (Lamb et al. 2015). As a result, in Victoria, many have left school by Year 11 (Victorian Auditor-General 2012).

Complex social, economic and political forces are implicated in the impact of socio-economic background on the experience of education. For example, although the political rhetoric of improving educational outcomes for all young Australians has been around equity and social inclusion, one of the barriers to full participation of students from low-income households is cost of education (Bond and Horn 2009). The result is that students' socio-economic status has a direct impact on their learning opportunities and their participation in educational experiences (Baumann, Millard, and Hamdorf 2014; Furlong 2005). Yet, it is

often not economic adversity as such that jeopardises students' opportunities and participation, rather it is their experiences of exclusion (Skattebol et al. 2012) within the 'class cultures and processes of schooling' (Furlong 2005, 380). This injustice is compounded when instances of exclusion 'blame the victim' or are rationalised as part of the natural order that justifies inequitable access to opportunities, experiences and resources (Fallis and Opotow 2003). This is why many of the economic and educational inequalities that decrease the life chances of those already affected by adverse life circumstances continue (Sammons, Toth, and Sylva 2015).

Equity and Engagement

Despite the political rhetoric, equity is questionable when government policies compel young people to remain in schools that do not meet their current or future needs (Te Riele 2012). Galliott and Graham (2015) found that young people who were not well served by schooling 'struggle to see a future for themselves when they are forced to undertake subjects that do not interest them' (195-196). In contrast, engagement and motivation are enhanced when students perceive a purpose to their learning, especially a purpose linked to their future (Wylie and Hodgen 2012). To stress the influential role of schools in promoting opportunity despite students' backgrounds, the Victorian Auditor-General (2012, 1) stated:

> Students' educational outcomes, including their completion rates, are influenced by many factors including their social and economic background, their family situation, their engagement with education, and personal qualities such as resilience and self-confidence. While some of these factors sit outside the sphere of influence of schools, many are directly influenced by the school environment. The negative impacts of others can be offset by the use of appropriate strategies in schools.

One factor that is in the sphere of influence of schools is engagement (Lamb and Rice 2008). Thomson and Comber (2003) stressed that 'engaged learning occurs when the lives, knowledges, interests, bodies and energies of young people are at the center of the classroom and the school' (305). My research drew on such a strength-based conception of engaged learning that recognises, values and draws upon the potential within young people. This is in contrast to the deficit-based misrecognition associated with disengagement that undervalues what particular young people know and positions them as lacking (Wyn 2009).

Engagement has been conceptualised in a range of ways. Dominant social-psychological conceptions have recognised it as multidimensional, usually consisting of behavioural, cognitive and emotional subtypes (DEECD 2009; Lawson and Lawson 2013).

Over time, understanding has extended to include social-ecological and social-cultural theories (Bundick et al. 2014), as captured by Lawson and Lawson (2013, 433):

> [W]e consider student engagement … as the conceptual glue that connects student agency (including students' prior knowledge, experience and interest at school, home, and in the community) and its ecological influences (peers, family, and community) to the organizational structures and cultures of school.

In this paper, I draw on such a systems-oriented conception of student engagement.

Engagement is recognised as key to enhancing student learning and improving student outcomes (Reschly and Christenson 2012), which is why it is considered 'of primary importance to succeeding in school' (Lamb et al. 2015, 53). Wang and Holcombe (2010) have claimed that '[e]ngaged students are more successful in school by many measures' (633). This is particularly important for economically disadvantaged students because school enjoyment and engagement have been found to diminish socio-economic disparities (Abbott-Chapman et al. 2014). Importantly, Christenson, Reschly, and Wylie (2012) have emphasised that a key reason for the interest in engagement is that it is 'relevant for *all* students' (vii, emphasis in original). One Australian study that included both young people who faced barriers to engagement with education and a general sample found 'that all young people – regardless of their level of educational engagement – want similar things from the learning environments' (Randall, Morstyn, and Walsh 2012, 29). These 'things' included: being valued, respected and supported; positive relationships with teachers and peers; and work that was interesting and relevant. Wyn (2009) encapsulated the fundamentals of engaged learning as '[f]eeling that one belongs, can have a say and that the learning on offer is relevant to one's life' (55). Fundamentals such as these are clearly within the sphere of influence of schools, which is why they are prominent in school reform initiatives that focus on engagement (Hayes et al. 2006; Smyth et al. 2008; Lamb and Rice 2008). Research across countries and across schools concluded that levels of both student engagement and student outcomes 'have less to do with students' family background than they do with school policies and practices' (Willms, Friesen, and Milton 2009, 31).

Programmes that specifically cater to the needs of young people who have either rejected or been rejected within traditional schools have been the most receptive to educational reforms and inclusive approaches (Te Riele 2014; Wierenga and Taylor 2015). Most of these programmes have aimed to enhance engagement through authentic, meaningful learning, much of which involves student ownership and takes an interest-led, project-based

approach (Te Riele 2014; Baroutsis, McGregor, and Mills 2016; Hayes 2013; McGregor et al. 2015). Many, such as the Hands on Learning (HOL) programme described in detail below, involve young people in practical learning in the community. While these approaches are acknowledged as intrinsically motivating, schools overall have been slow to take them up (Lucas, Claxton, and Spencer 2013). In fact, Lucas, Claxton, and Spencer (2013) questioned 'whether, for many students, such approaches might be motivating and engaging if they were part of their overall school experience, rather than a special intervention' (104). As if in response to this question, a government secondary school in Victoria, Australia was inspired to apply aspects of a successful intervention, HOL, to a whole-school initiative to enhance the engagement of all of its students. This paper, from an investigation of the school's first year of implementation, seeks to add to understandings of the role of interventions and whole-school initiatives in relation to equity and engagement.

Educational context

Typically in Victoria, the academic curriculum dominates in the first four years of secondary school (Years 7-10), with little choice in timetable or subjects until senior secondary level (Years 11-12). It is not surprising therefore that student opinion surveys in Victoria identified the sharpest decline in both stimulating learning opportunities and motivation within junior secondary school (DEECD 2012). In addition, performance figures indicated a decline in levels of achievement throughout the secondary years of schooling (DEECD 2012). These disturbing trends led to a call 'for major changes in the organisation and approach at the secondary level' (DEECD 2012, 4), especially for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Victorian Auditor-General 2012). Some schools in disadvantaged areas have introduced initiatives before Year 11 in an attempt to meet the needs of their local students. Most of these take the form of in-school interventions that target particular students. One example is the HOL programme[1].

HOL is a targeted in-school intervention 'to prevent early school leaving by creating opportunities at school for vulnerable young people to be more engaged, discover their talents and experience success' (HOLA 2014b, 11). The HOL programme works with multi-age teams of up to 10 students who come out of classes one day per week to engage in practical learning projects with two artisan-teachers (HOLA 2014b; Te Riele 2014). Due to its success

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[1] http://handsonlearning.org.au/

both in keeping vulnerable young people engaged in school and in accessing philanthropic, community and school funding, HOL has scaled up into 53 schools (HOLA 2015).

Without denying or undervaluing the important difference that targeted interventions such as HOL make to their participants, as discrete interventions, they do not represent a comprehensive, system-wide educational solution. This is because they only reach a fraction of the students who could benefit (Deloitte AE 2012; HOLA 2015). In addition, their very existence can divert attention from, and deflect the urgency of, addressing the systemic and structural issues that underlie why the educational needs of particular students were not met in the first place. Using HOL as an example, students spend four days a week in traditional classrooms in which they 'don't thrive' (HOLA 2014b, 13) and they spend one day a week in HOL which they experience as an 'enabling space' (Wyn et al. 2014). However, the educational contexts which do not meet the needs of these students on the other four days of the week are usually not interrogated for their complicity in educational disadvantage, and their taken-for-granted pedagogy, curriculum, mechanisms and routines are not questioned for the roles they may play in students' marginalisation (Te Riele 2007). Consequently, educational contexts may continue to operate in ways that marginalise some young people so that educational interventions continue to be required (Smyth and Robinson 2015). I agree with the contention of Te Riele (2008) that 'policy needs to change its focus … to providing "non-marginalising" education' (1).

Although 'the impetus for HOL to commence was the need to give schools an alternative to exclusion' (Anderson and Curtin 2014, 54), the movement of students between programmes on the margins of institutions, and unchanging institutions, does not constitute inclusion (Slee 2011). From the perspectives of young people themselves, there is a tension between the educational benefit, and the educational stigma, of attending alternative education annexes (Skattebol and Hayes 2016). There is a potential solution, however, that could lead to a reduced need for discrete interventions. Schools could turn their gaze upon successful interventions for inspiration into whole-school change because these programmes are often highly successful in meeting the needs of educationally disadvantaged students, and in turning their experiences of marginalisation around into engagement and achievement (Deloitte AE 2012; Te Riele 2014; Wyn et al. 2014; Mills and McGregor 2014). Te Riele (2008, 2014) has referred to successful programmes that operate outside of the mainstream as showcases of innovation, and she has speculated that if mainstream schools tailored aspects of successful learning from these programmes to mainstream classes and the school, this

could 'facilitate system-wide improvements to enhance the educational experiences and attainments for all young Australians' (Te Riele 2014, 84).

In line with this contention, the current paper focuses on a government secondary school that was inspired to apply aspects of the successful HOL intervention to a whole-school initiative to enhance the engagement of all of its students. To ascertain whether the initiative produced an equitable distribution of the benefits of schooling (Thomson 2002), the research sought to answer two research questions:

1. How does a school scale up from a targeted intervention aimed at the engagement of a distinct group of students, to a whole-school initiative aimed at the engagement of all students?
2. In its first year, did the initiative achieve its aim to engage all students?

Research methodology and context

In this paper, I draw on data that were collected as part of an 18-month doctoral research project that used a case-study approach involving youth participatory action research and ethnographic methods to investigate student engagement. It was during the first six months of fieldwork, while I was undertaking the youth participatory action research component, that the school announced its intention to implement a whole-school initiative to enhance the engagement of all of its students. Due to the opportunity this presented to undertake an 'examination of an instance in action' (Walker 1980, 33), I applied to the Victoria University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Victorian Department of Education to continue at the school to investigate its movement from intention, to implementation of a whole-school initiative. The focus of this paper is the year-long study that used ethnographic methods. Towards the end of my first six months at the school, the executive team requested that it be named in publications and this was also approved by the University Ethics Committee. Individuals, however, have not been identified.

Consistent with qualitative case studies, multiple data collection methods contributed to an in-depth and multi-perspective understanding of the case (Denzin and Lincoln 2011; McMillan and Schumacher 2010). Specific data collection methods utilised and their data sources are outlined below.

Document collection:
- School and staff newsletters.
- Meeting minutes.

- Staff professional development handouts.
- School brochures and publicity material.
- Newspaper articles.
- Notices to families.
- Artefacts from a whole-staff Feedback Session.

Formal and informal interviews:

- Field notes.
- Transcribed audio records of formal interviews.

Ethnographic observation:

- Observation field notes.

Findings were identified through the reflective processes of data triangulation (Mathison 1988; Patton 1999) and thematic analysis (Stake 2008).

Fieldwork Context

In 2013, McClelland College, a government 7-12 school, had approximately 870 students and 80 full-time equivalent teaching and non-teaching staff. The College is situated in an outer south-eastern suburb of Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria. In a recent report, the suburb was classified as 'Most Disadvantaged' and the suburb adjoining the school was named among the small number of postcodes in the state of Victoria with persistent, entrenched, locational disadvantage (Vinson and Rawsthorne 2015). The report highlighted dominant factors of disadvantage as: unemployment; criminal convictions; disability; low education; child maltreatment; family violence; and psychiatric admissions. Despite significant challenges in a low socio-economic environment, McClelland College 'made a commitment to respond to the learning needs of the students'[2] (Location Profile). This commitment was in line with the premise that:

> [S]chools and communities designated as 'disadvantaged' had within them the funds
> of knowledge and the capacity to both articulate the 'problems' confronting them as
> well as the wit to become a major part of the 'solution'.
>
> (Smyth et al. 2014, 77)

As part of its commitment to the needs of its students, the College introduced two interventions. The first, HOL, commenced in 2009. It used an applied learning approach to engage students whose needs were not being met in conventional classes. The second, Connect, was initiated in 2011 to cater to students who faced

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[2] McClelland College. 2013a. "Job Description."

complex challenges in their lives that impacted their ability to engage in full-time, conventional forms of secondary schooling with a wide variety of teachers and among large cohorts of students. The Connect programme took a trauma-informed approach (Brunzell, Waters, and Stokes 2015) that aimed to give students the space and learning opportunities to build on their strengths. Both programmes had low adult-to-student ratios (up to 1:6) and the school's investment in such costly interventions was evidence of its commitment to respond to the diverse learning needs of its students. The necessity for such different initiatives highlights that educationally disadvantaged students, as indeed all students, do not comprise a homogenous group.

Findings

I outline the findings in two parts before moving into the discussion. Part 1 addresses the first research question 'How does a school scale up from a targeted intervention aimed at the engagement of a distinct group of students, to a whole-school initiative aimed at the engagement of all students?' Document collection and ethnographic observations led to an in-depth understanding and detailed description of this process. Part 2 is in answer to the second research question 'In its first year, did the initiative achieve its aim to engage all students?' Data sources included artefacts created by staff in a whole-staff Feedback Session and also transcriptions of semi-structured interviews of a sample of students from across year levels and programmes in the initiative. When I became aware that there were students who did not attend, or had stopped attending the initiative, I sought to also report on this 'discrepant data' (McMillan and Schumacher 2010, 330) by interviewing a sample of these students.

Part 1 - From targeted intervention to whole-school initiative

The College, like many schools, had students whose educational needs were not being met and who were marginalised in conventional classes. In part response, a HOL programme was contracted into the College. The first project for all HOL programmes is to build a hut to provide both a physical space in the school for HOL, and a 'physical sanctuary at school' (HOLA 2014b, 10) for marginalised young people. Work progressed on the hut as locally donated materials became available. Meanwhile, the HOL teams involved themselves in other projects in the school and local community (Te Riele 2014) and staff at the College began to see positive impacts on the students as they worked to achieve meaningful outcomes (Pinner 2013).

In 2013, the College held a dual celebration. In the first part, the Minister for Education formally opened the McClelland College HOL hut. At the opening, the Principal described the benefits of the HOL methodology:

> The power of HOL is not only the community engagement it fosters, but the life-long skills students develop like creativity, teamwork, and problem solving. As well as experiencing what it's like to achieve something successfully - which gives students a great sense of pride.
>
> (HOLA 2014a, Fabulous Facilities Opened)

The second part of the celebration was the launch of a new initiative, 'the McClelland Academy Program, an exciting whole-school programme that has been heavily inspired by the huge success at Hands On Learning'[3]. At the launch, the Principal outlined the initiative's close ties to HOL, with both programmes emphasising: student engagement; community involvement; peer-to-peer learning; giving students a choice before Year 10; and students following their interests (Field notes 1: 52).

Just as the HOL hut had been several years in its construction, this new initiative had been several years in its development. In 2010, initial discussions were based on enabling senior students to undertake dual senior certification through participation in Vocational Education and Training (VET) programmes that would not conflict with their regular Victorian Certificate of Education classes[4]. Due to the school's career focus from Year 7, the proposal of 'an alternative program' (see note 4, Slide 2) extended to include all year levels and to give all students 'an opportunity to develop skills and experience in a particular pathway'[5].

Four characteristics of the McClelland Academy Program (MAP), when considered together, made it unique. First, unlike conventional elective programmes where teachers deliver a prescribed curriculum, the MAP was to be student-centred with 'a negotiated curriculum and a hands on' orientation[6]. Second, unlike contemporary academy programmes that select elite performers, the MAP was to be inclusive of every student with a passion for an academy, 'regardless of their ability'[7]. Third, the MAP promoted deep learning with

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[3] McClelland College. 2013b. "Invitation to the Grand Opening of the McClelland College Hands On Learning Hut."
[4] Lanarus, T. 2013a. "McClelland Academy Program: Staff Presentation."
[5] McClelland College. 2013c. "MAP Parent Information."
[6] McClelland College. 2013d. "MAP Discussion Paper."
[7] McClelland College. 2014. "McClelland Academy Program Parent Policy."

students able to continue to develop deep understandings in their chosen passion year after year, potentially the entire six years of their secondary schooling (Field notes Staff PD 17 February 2014). Finally, the MAP was not to be theoretically or classroom based but was to provide students with opportunities to apply their passions in authentic ways through community- and school-based events (see note 5).

Considering the MAP was such an innovative initiative for the school, it was rolled out in a tight timeframe. It was first introduced to the whole McClelland College staff in April 2013 and staff were asked to submit proposals for MAP options in May (see note 4). Short amounts of staff development and planning time were then allocated leading to a four-week trial-run at the end of 2013[8]. The MAP was inclusive of student input through the Student Leadership Council gathering suggestions on possible programme options (see notes 4 and 5) and later, during the trial-run, through staff using student feedback to modify programmes (see note 6).

The 2014 MAP options (Academies) are outlined in Table 1 along with cost, enrolments and the number of classes that ran. The number of classes for each Academy was determined by the number of enrolments (see note 4), with the exception of the Baking Academy that had restricted enrolments due to the physical constraint of two cooking rooms.

Table 1: 2014 MAP.

2014 MAP academies	Cost per student	Enrolments	Number of classes
Baking	$100	47	2
Building	$100	26	1
Communications media	No cost	44	2
Computer programming	$50	50	2
Creative writing	$100	29	1
Global citizens	No cost	62	2
Japanese culture	$100	25	1
Maths and science	No cost	44	2
Design media	$100	50	2
Musical theatre production	$100	35	2
Sport	$100	202	8
Visual arts	$100	50	2

[8] Lanarus, T. 2013b. "MAP Planning for Headstart and 2014."

Study skills available to Years 11-12	No cost	122	5
VET courses available to Years10-12	$100 deposit	84	13

Table 1 indicates the diversity of MAP Academies. Like HOL, they were intended to be based on multi-age groups of like-minded students and adults pursuing their passions and contributing to the community. Also like HOL, the Academy programmes aimed for students to be 'more engaged, discover their talents and experience success' (HOLA 2014b, 11). During the first year of implementation, I explored the MAP's achievement towards its aim to engage all students.

Part 2 - Whole-school initiative to engage all students

The purpose here is not to compare individual Academy programmes but to analyse findings across the MAP. Although a feature of the initiative is that it is multi-aged, 2 of the 14 Academies, Study Skills and VET Courses, had restricted availability. Since this paper is interested in initiatives schools introduce before Year 11 in an attempt to meet the needs of their local students, the analysis will focus on data from the 49 interviews conducted with students from Years 7 to 10 across the 12 non-restricted Academies.

Table 2: MAP 2014 – data for Years 7–10 in non-restricted academies.

COST	CHOICE	PASSION	EXPERIENCE
Yes = 35	Yes = 32	Yes = 32	+ = 31
			- = 1
		No = 0	+ = 0
			- = 0
	No = 3	Yes = 2	+ = 2
			- = 0
		No = 1	+ = 1
			- = 0
No = 14	Yes = 4	Yes = 2	+ = 2
			- = 0
		No = 2	+ = 2
			- = 0
	No = 10	Yes = 1	+ = 1
			- = 0
		No = 9	+ = 3
			- = 6

49	49	49	49

The first two columns in Table 2 indicate students' engagement in the MAP bureaucratic mechanisms (Cost and Choice):

COST   'Yes' students were in a Cost Academy, or

                    'No' students were in a No Cost Academy.

CHOICE   'Yes' students Did get an Academy of Choice, or

                    'No' students Did Not get an Academy of Choice.

The last two columns in Table 2 indicate students' engagement in the MAP academies (Passion and Experience):

PASSION   'Yes' students Did explore an area of Passion, or

                    'No' students Did Not explore an area of Passion.

EXPERIENCE '+' students described a positive MAP Experience, or

                    '-' students described a negative MAP Experience

The first column of Table 2 refers to a critical aspect of the MAP bureaucracy, Cost. The cost attached to some academies directly impacted access because the cost had to be paid before a student was enrolled. Data in column one indicate that 71% of students accessed an academy with a cost. Cost also impacted educational provision because academies with a cost were invested with more resources. For example, Cost Academies predominantly had staff allocated who had passion and expertise in the field, whereas No Cost Academies were likely to be allocated left over staff. In addition, No Cost Academies had less consistency with staff, which one student noted as a weakness: 'there are always different teachers between 3rd and 4th periods … When you have different teachers they don't really know what's going on' (Interview 40, Question 13b).

The marginal status of No Cost Academies became evident when one staff group described them as 'dumping grounds for non-payers including Connect students and students kicked out of other MAPs' (Artefact 1, 2014). This description was verified by a non-paying student: 'I got put in this [No Cost Academy] because I got kicked out of Art that I needed to pay for' (Interview 31, Question 1). A student in a No Cost Academy made a proposal to the school to improve the MAP, 'The time limit you get to pay the cost' (Interview 30, Question 14). The implications of cost were deliberated at the whole-staff Feedback Session in September of the first year (Artefact 1, 2014). One group noted cost as an 'accessibility' issue, while another saw the problem as simply that there were 'not enough free academies'.

Others argued that offering more No Cost options was not the answer because 'students in free academies were often not interested/disengaged'. One reason given for this was that students were 'removed from academies they were interested in because parents didn't pay, and were put into ones they weren't interested in'.

The second column of Table 2 refers to another key component of the MAP bureaucracy, Choice, because students, with their families, were to choose academies based on their passion (see note 5). Students in Years 7-10 whose families could pay the cost had 100% choice, all 12 academies. In contrast, students whose families could not pay the cost were limited to just four No Cost academies. All students in Cost Academies Did get Academies of Choice except for two who missed out on their first choice of the Baking Academy and one Year 7 student who is counted in No Choice because his mother chose (Interview 1, Question 1). In stark contrast, 71% of students in No Cost Academies did not get an Academy of Choice:

> Did you get the Academy of your choice? Explain: (Interview Question 1)
>
> - No, maybe the one I wanted was filled up. They put me in there (Interview 5)
> - No, I wanted to be in Cooking but I didn't really have time to put my note in (Interview 15)
> - No, they [the No Cost Academies] were all stupid (Interview 29)
> - No, I wanted to be in the Sports Academy but at the time we didn't have the money (Interview 30)
> - No, I got put in this because I got kicked out of Art that I needed to pay for (Interview 31)
> - Well I didn't pay so it was a free one I needed to do (Interview 32)
> - No, I wanted to go into Art but it was too late because of everything else that was happening all at once (Interview 34)
> - No I got moved into it (Interview 40)
> - No, I wanted to do the Sport MAP but in the end Mum chose Maths (Interview 50)

One student, who did get his choice, identified lack of choice as a threat of the MAP: 'People who don't get their chosen MAP; they're stuck in something they don't want to do' (Interview 11, Question 13b).

Due to the MAP initiative being inspired by the HOL intervention, I compared their bureaucratic mechanisms and clear differences emerged:

- The HOL programme is voluntary, which means that students were not put into HOL in the way some students were put into No Cost Academies;
- The HOL programme is accessed at no cost to students and families because HOL operates on a combination of philanthropic and school funding; and

- Staff at HOL support vulnerable students and their families to return the required paperwork so that students are not denied participation.

The third column of Table 2 refers to Passion because a defining feature of the MAP was that students gain 'authentic hands-on experience in their chosen area of passion' (see note 7). Consequently, interview Question 3 asked students whether they had explored an area of passion. Data in column three indicate that for the majority of students (76%), the MAP did provide an opportunity to explore an area of passion and unsurprisingly, this included all students who were in a Cost Academy and did get their Choice. However, nearly all students who were in a No Cost Academy and did not get an Academy of Choice indicated that they Did Not explore a passion. One student identified this as a threat of the MAP: 'If students don't get into a MAP they like then they're not motivated and it is a waste of time' (Interview 4, Question 13d). This was confirmed by a student who stopped attending, 'I really wasn't interested; it wasn't my passion. I had no intention of doing that in the future so I thought there's no point if it's not what I want to do' (Interview 30, Question 11).

The final column in Table 2 refers to Experience because the MAP aimed to engage all students and one indicator of engagement was the quality of a student's MAP experience: 'Overall, how would you describe your experience of MAP this year?' (Question 11). Almost 100% of students in Cost Academies reported positive experiences that were largely described as fantastic, great, enjoyable and fun, and included high-level positivity such as: 'There's really no way of explaining it, it was that great' (Interview 13); 'It's exceeded my expectations' (Interview 18); and 'I absolutely loved it' (Interview 52). With the No Cost Academies, almost 60% of students reported positive experiences. This included four students who were not in an Academy of Choice and three who had not explored an area of Passion. These students described their experiences as 'good', 'fun', 'really fun' (Interviews 22, 40 and 50), and even more positively, 'I find it very exciting and knowledgeable' (Interview 15). However, the other six students who were in No Cost Academies, were not in an Academy of Choice, and did not explore an area of Passion, described negative experiences.

The six students, two male and four female, ranged from Years 7 to 9 and five were participants in the school's Connect programme. An additional indicator of engagement was attendance. Of the two students who continued to attend, one, by virtue of being in Year 7 (Interview 5), was possibly less likely to withdraw attendance even though she described her MAP experience as 'boring' and judged a weakness of MAP to be that it was 'boring'. Her

suggestion to keep improving the MAP (Question 14) was to 'Make it more fun, like with games, instead of doing the same thing technically over the weeks.' The second student who continued to attend was a Year 8 Connect student (Interview 32). Despite describing her experience as 'not fantastic', she did note that she worked as part of a team with one of her best friends. Another Year 8 Connect student explained the reason he stopped attending, 'I used to attend but then it got boring, it wasn't really what I was into so I just stopped going. I just went home or I went out with friends' (Interview 30). Yet another Year 8 Connect student (Interview 31) who described her experience of MAP as 'bad, boring' also stopped attending. A Year 9 Connect student explained why she stopped attending: 'I got changed and that really wasn't doing much for me because I didn't really enjoy my teacher and so instead of doing MAP I just go home' (Interview 34). The other Year 9 Connect student chose not to engage with the MAP at all: 'I just thought what's the point of doin' somethin' that I don't wanna do if you could just go home and chill and do whatever' (Interview 29).

Discussion

In the first year of implementation, the majority of students reported engagement in the MAP by describing positive experiences. However, analysis revealed that social stratification occurred through the MAP bureaucratic mechanisms and this whole-school initiative replicated the inequity in society in the amount of choices and quality of opportunities available to those who have more access to economic resources compared to those who have less. Just as Bond and Horn (2009) found, cost created a barrier to full participation of students from families that faced economic hardship. This resulted in the exclusion of some students from accessing an academy of their passion, even though a defining feature of the MAP was that students gained experience in their chosen area of passion (see note 7).

Six students were put at the most disadvantage in the MAP and five were Connect students, the most educationally vulnerable students in the school. The marginal status of these students was indicated by their explanations for not getting an Academy of Choice. Explanations, however, can be more complex than words represent (Skattebol and Hayes 2016). For example, one student (Interview 5) was unsure why she did not get her choice and the explanation 'They put me in there' suggested that either she had chosen a Cost Academy and did not pay or that she did not return the paperwork. Non-return of paperwork by students in No Cost Academies may have indicated that they had not shown their families the paperwork, perhaps to protect them from further financial demands. Skattebol and Hayes (2016) found that students 'exercised their agency to refuse things that required additional

fees … The consequence of this meant they not only had limited subject choice but also missed out on potentially enriching experiences' (12). Non-return of paperwork may also have indicated a lack of buy-in to apply for No Cost academies they were not interested in, as confirmed by one No Cost student, 'They were all stupid' (Interview 29). Skattebol et al. (2012) found that young people would 'rationalise their own exclusion from … activities by considering them not to be important' (9) and that would seem to be the case with this student, who actively chose not to engage with the MAP.

The predominant description of MAP experiences by the six students was 'boring'. This finding is in line with previous studies that revealed students from backgrounds of disadvantage lacked access to engaging and enriching activities both within and beyond the curriculum (Sammons, Toth, and Sylva 2015; Wylie and Hodgen 2012). The Year 7 student who recommended more fun and games rather than doing the same thing each week indicated that her No Cost Academy was prescriptive and boring rather than interactive and student-centred. Boring is understood as a shorthand term students use to describe alienating characteristics of school: 'for students, boring connotes something missing in their education, conveys a deep sense of disappointment, and casts class cutting as a coping mechanism for classes that fail to engage' (Fallis and Opotow 2003, 108). This description particularly resonates with the four students who 'cut' school at MAP times. For them, the No Cost Academies further reinforced their experiences of school learning as tedious and bearing little relevance to their interests, passions and future aspirations (Galliott and Graham 2015). Skattebol et al. (2012) recommended that resources were needed to enable young people experiencing economic adversity 'to pursue their aspirations' (5).

The Year 8 Connect student who did continue to attend (Interview 32) noted that she was in an Academy with a best friend. This finding confirmed other research that noted friends as an important incentive for students to continue to attend school because friends contribute to enjoyment, provide support and help build resilience (Randall, Morstyn, and Walsh 2012). In contrast, the four Connect students who went home on MAP afternoons became more disconnected from relationships and benefits at school. Bond and Horn (2009) have noted the psychological impact on students when families were unable to cover the costs of education expenses: 'many reported negative impacts on the children such as sadness and depression, anger, reduced social confidence and loss of friends' (24). There were indications of some of these in the words, tone of voice, body language and actions of some No Cost students related to their MAP experiences. In addition, Lamb et al. (2015) cautioned that '[i]f

education does not work well for young people, their access to society is impaired and their capacity to contribute is diminished' (2).

For the six students, rather than being immersed in academies based on multi-age groups of like-minded students and adults pursuing their passions and contributing to the community, due to family and life circumstances beyond their control, they were excluded from full participation. As a consequence, they missed out on the opportunity MAP provided for community engagement and the development of life skills such as creativity, teamwork and problem-solving. Their experiences of exclusion reinforced the contention by Baumann, Millard, and Hamdorf (2014, 1) that despite 'knowledge of the importance of civic engagement and participation for academic achievement, students' opportunities as a part of school learning are largely determined by socioeconomic status'.

In the first year of implementation, the school became aware of the initiative's barriers to full participation and the inequities these created. Consequently, in 2015, the school established a working party so that the initiative could progress towards its aim to engage all students (Staff Newsletter 13 February 2015). The working party included two student representatives who had previous experience of research in the school and personal experience of disadvantage in their lives.

A limitation of this investigation into the implementation of a whole-school initiative to engage all students is that it concluded at the end of the first year and does not have data on the progress of the initiative or the working party. However, while the study was in-depth in only one school with a relatively small number of students and staff, its findings are likely to have broad relevance as schools look beyond conventional pedagogy in their quest to engage all students, and as more schools look to successful interventions for ways to meet the needs of educationally disadvantaged students.

Conclusion

The research indicated that the process of a school scaling up from an intervention targeted at the engagement of a distinct group of students, to a whole-school initiative aimed at the engagement of all students was not straightforward. In its first year, the initiative did not produce an equitable distribution of benefits and it conformed to schooling's predisposition to produce exclusion and exclusivity (Thomson 2002). Specifically, the research reinforced how easily school processes can benefit more advantaged students and how, without vigilance, barriers to the full participation of economically disadvantaged students can be overlooked or

justified as part of the natural order. The inequities that resulted demonstrated that unless the needs of disadvantaged students are targeted in whole-school initiatives, as they are in interventions, they are likely to face barriers to full participation. Such educational disadvantage can result in estrangement from school, with the potential to lead students further along the pathway of low achievement and early school leaving. In contrast, a needs-based approach would be in line with the equity principle that students who face economic adversity must be targeted if their educational disadvantage is to be overcome and their educational outcomes improved (Gonski et al. 2011; Lamb et al. 2015):

> Educational disadvantage occurs when the benefits of education are not evenly distributed, where there are barriers to access and participation, and when expected outcomes from education differ for particular individuals or groups.
>
> (COAG Reform Council 2012, 38)

This investigation reinforced the ongoing need for vigilance in schools to remove mechanisms of educational disadvantage and to target educational needs in order to provide equitable educational experiences and outcomes that engage all students.

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