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Engaging student input on student engagement in learning

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Engaging student input on student engagement in learning

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Abstract

Student engagement, achievement, and participation are equity issues. Students' engagement in their learning is especially important in schools that cater to low-income communities where improved educational experiences can break the cycle of low achievement, school disaffection, and early school leaving. Moreover, for students who experience disadvantage in their lives, having input into their learning enables and supports a sense of connectedness, with learning and with school. This paper reports on a youth participatory action research project (YPAR) that took a rights-based approach to researching with students. The study was conducted in an Australian government secondary school situated in a context of disadvantage. The student-researchers, who faced socioeconomic disadvantage in their own lives, investigated students' experiences of engagement in learning in the first four years of secondary school. The findings demonstrated that students from a low socioeconomic community, including students who tended to be marginalized in conventional classroom contexts, had thoughtful and important contributions to make about their engagement in learning. The paper also reports on ways in which the participatory research design impacted upon the student-researchers and the school community. Importantly, the student-researchers valued the research opportunity and there was evidence of the impact of their investigations within and beyond the school.

Keywords: student engagement, equity, rights-based, YPAR, non-marginalizing education

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Equity and engagement

In Australia, an enduring political and educational challenge is that particular groups of students – Indigenous students, students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students living in rural and remote areas – tend not to have their needs met in conventional schooling. This is evidenced in their overrepresentation as the lowest school achievers and as early school leavers (COAG Reform Council, 2012). The difference between the educational outcomes of students from more advantaged communities compared to the outcomes of students from disadvantaged communities is referred to as the 'educational equity gap' (Sammons *et al.*, 2015: 8). This phenomenon occurs in many educational systems internationally (OECD, 2012), and in Australia the gap is re-exposed every time the national (NAPLAN) and international (PISA) assessment results are released. Educational inequity in Australia not only adds to the disadvantages many students already contend with in their lives, it also puts pressure on government targets for their improved levels of school participation and achievement (COAG, 2009). This has led to a government focus on students 'at risk' of low achievement and early school leaving, and their engagement (DEECD, 2009; Lamb and Rice, 2008).

Te Riele (2006) has critiqued the policy discourse around the 'at risk' label and its attention on deficiencies in students and their families. As a result, she has proposed that the deficit label be replaced with the concept of 'marginalized students', which more readily 'leads to the question: marginalized by who or what?' (Te Riele, 2006: 140). Further, Te Riele (2008: 1) has concluded that 'policy needs to change its focus from "fixing wayward youth" to providing "non-marginalising" education'. This claim proved particularly relevant after government reports revealed that despite targeted funding since 2008, strategies to remove barriers to higher educational outcomes for 'at risk' students had not been successful (COAG Reform Council, 2012; Victorian Auditor-General, 2012). There are promising indications, however, that non-marginalizing education is possible. Kannapel and Clements undertook an investigation into high-performing, high-poverty schools in the US and found that:

> Faculty in the study schools did not make an issue of the fact that many of their students were "in poverty." … Individual learning needs were targeted for attention, rather than categorizing students as part of an at risk group held to different performance expectations.
>
> (2005: 29)

This kind of non-marginalizing education resulted in improved equity, achievement, and student engagement.

The focus of this paper is on the latter, with the definition of student engagement taken from the *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement*:

> Student engagement refers to the students' active participation in academic and co-curricular or school-related activities, and commitment to educational goals and learning. Engaged students find learning meaningful, and are invested in their learning and future. It is a multidimensional construct that consists of behavioral (including academic), cognitive, and affective subtypes. Student engagement drives learning; requires energy and effort; is affected by multiple contextual influences; and can be achieved for all learners.

(Christenson *et al.*, 2012: 816–17)

The link with equity can be recognized in the final assertion that student engagement 'can be achieved for all learners'. The correlation between engagement and equity has been demonstrated in a Canadian study (Willms *et al.*, 2009) across 93 schools and including over 32,000 students from Grade 6 to Grade 12. It revealed that schools with higher levels of engagement had higher achievement irrespective of students' backgrounds. In addition, differences in levels of student engagement across schools were found to 'have less to do with students' family background than they do with school policies and practices' (Willms *et al.*, 2009: 31). This finding confirmed an earlier OECD study with 15-year-old students across 42 countries (Willms, 2003). A longitudinal study in Australia also established that students' school engagement had a long-term impact on educational and occupational outcomes into adulthood 'independent of socio-economic background' (Abbott-Chapman *et al.*, 2014: 114). In addition to greater educational and social equity, Hemphill and colleagues (2010) pointed to long-term benefits of school engagement as also leading to greater health equity. Taken together, these studies move beyond 'conservative or traditional' conceptions of student engagement and into 'critical–democratic' conceptions (McMahon and Portelli, 2004) that highlight how 'the rationale for student participation and engagement extends well beyond good educational practice and into social policy, social development, health, and well-being' (Willms *et al.*, 2009: 7). More democratic conceptualizations of student engagement have also seen student voice and participation increasingly recognized as a means of turning to the local level and towards those who have the most at stake in schools (McMahon and Portelli, 2004).

Student participation is itself an equity issue because the rights of all young people to participate in matters affecting their lives are legislated in the United

Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989). There is a vast literature, particularly related to school reform, that points to the need to promote citizenship by building democratic participation into the relationships, structures, teaching, learning, and assessments within schools (Fielding, 2007; Knight and Pearl, 2000; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000; Slee, 2011). Importantly, students' participation in decision-making fosters their sense of connection and engagement with their learning and school (Randall *et al.*, 2012). Such rights-based education was found to be associated with higher than expected exam results in disadvantaged areas of Scotland (Mannion *et al.*, 2015). However, it is often students who already have power, as evidenced in their use of social and cultural capital and their academic prowess, who participate in consultative roles in schools (Baker and Plows, 2015). Roger Slee, an active advocate of inclusive, democratic education, has argued that '[n]ew lines of interrogation need to be brought to the table, including a recognition that the experience of exclusion is a valuable planning tool' (2015: 43). Nevertheless, it is often difficult to gain participation from students who experience alienation within schools. Levinson (2012) referred to differential opportunities for civic participation as the 'civic empowerment gap', and he suggested that this gap was 'as large and as disturbing as the reading and math achievement gaps' (Levinson, 2012: 31).

In addition to more democratic practices in schools, research *with* students has increasingly been recognized as a form of external intervention that can confront 'barriers surrounding equity-oriented reform' (Kirshner and Pozzoboni, 2011: 1638). It does this by demonstrating to those within schools that marginalized students are interested in and have valuable insights to contribute to their education (Cammarota and Fine, 2008; Smyth, 2012). Research *with* marginalized communities is an equity imperative of youth participatory action research (YPAR) projects (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2011; Cammarota and Fine, 2008). However, when research is conducted in schools in contexts of disadvantage, adult researchers need to be aware of the unequal power relations within both the school and research contexts as well as unequal power relations 'that circulate around low income' (Skattebol *et al.*, 2012: 15). According to Cahill (2011: 78), democratic power relations are accomplished through dialogue in which 'the stakeholders are positioned as the agents who are best able to know and consider the specifics of their context, culture and values that shape their needs, constraints and opportunities'.

Disadvantage and equity are important issues that educators and policy makers need to address by facilitating non-marginalizing, rights-based education. The project that forms the basis of this paper sought to contribute to this discussion by

taking a rights-based approach to find out what could be learned *with* students from a low-income community about their experiences of engagement in learning. The student-researchers' findings were disseminated directly to the school community both to promote engagement and to address marginalization. Speaking to a wider audience, this paper will outline in detail the complex methods involved in this YPAR project. It will then go on to discuss both the doctoral researcher's and the student-researchers' findings in connection with student engagement in learning. In addition, the paper will discuss the students' participation in research in their school before pointing to future directions for both schools and research.

Methods

This paper focuses on one stage of a doctoral study using YPAR as the methodology. YPAR is a qualitative approach to research in which youth are positioned as research collaborators (Brydon-Miller *et al.*, 2011; Cammarota and Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2008). Morrell explains:

> If we are to truly understand how young people are affected by … social issues, and if we are to understand how to eradicate the social conditions that contribute to these issues, then we must listen to the young people who are most affected by them. Furthermore, we must equip young people with the investigative tools that allow them to collect, analyze, and distribute information about these issues from their unique perspectives as insiders.

(Morrell, 2008: 158)

Studies adopting participatory approaches vary in the extent to which participation is enacted by the young people (Holland *et al.*, 2010). In this study, the topic of student engagement in learning was predetermined, but the student-researchers' specific investigations on that topic were student-driven and adult-supported (Lundy *et al.*, 2011). For example, the student-researchers chose the area of the school in which to conduct their investigations and they were supported to design and trial their own research instruments, to collect their own data, to interpret that data, and to disseminate the findings and recommendations. In addition, the student-researchers were supported to explore and reflect upon their experiences as researchers. The aim of the study was to answer two research questions:

1. What do students report as their experiences of engagement in learning in Years 7–10?
2. In what ways does a YPAR design impact upon student-researchers and the school community?

The research was conducted in a government secondary school in a socioeconomically disadvantaged outer suburb of Melbourne (Australia's second largest city). The suburb has been classified as 'most disadvantaged', and a neighbouring suburb adjoining the school has been designated as having persistent, entrenched, locational disadvantage (Vinson *et al.*, 2015). Some of the dominant factors of disadvantage highlighted in the report include unemployment, criminal convictions, disability, low education, child maltreatment, family violence, and psychiatric admissions. The school was chosen because it had demonstrated a commitment to student engagement by incorporating initiatives to meet the needs of its student population. It also had a history of student participation beyond just a select group of students on the student representative council. The research was focused on lower secondary education (Years 7–10), because this is where students' achievement and motivation levels have been shown to suffer the greatest decline (DEECD, 2012: 4) and where the risk of disengagement is greatest (MCEETYA, 2008: 12).

YPAR requires a commitment of time by the researcher both to engage with young people (Groundwater-Smith *et al.*, 2015) and to support them to develop the skills to participate, which is especially important for students who lack confidence and experience (MacLeod *et al.*, 2014). This study ran over one school semester – 19 school weeks from July to December 2013 – in which the author (a doctoral researcher) spent up to three days per week in the school. During this period I facilitated workshops and team meetings for the student-researchers. My fieldwork involved two data collection exercises, gathering:

- documents and artefacts, including school and staff newsletters and artefacts created by the student-researchers
- observations of the YPAR process (especially in the workshops and team meetings) and the school more generally, recorded in field notes.

As is common in qualitative research, data analysis was an integral aspect throughout the study (Stake, 2008) and the project utilized two approaches to data analysis. The first involved using the 'story' of each student-researcher's investigation experiences as shared in his or her own words during team meetings, and analysing them 'to understand the meaning of the experiences as revealed in the story' (Merriam, 2009: 23). The second approach was to use thematic analysis, which involved reading all data sources (documents, artefacts, and field notes) and giving them descriptive classifications. Through a continuous process of reflection and interpretation, classifications were allocated, revised, or amalgamated, until patterns emerged and key themes were discerned (Van Manen, 1990).

This research adhered to the ethical requirements of the university ethics committee with an emphasis on the ethical challenges of confidentiality, informed consent, and power when students research within their own community (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015; Te Riele and Brooks, 2013). One way in which confidentiality was negotiated while also facilitating student voice in the process was that student-researchers chose their own pseudonyms. In addition, some of the expectations for the participatory project were covered in workshops to help the novice researchers understand key principles and practices of research (Carrington *et al.*, 2010). Workshop One was designed as an important introduction to research in general and to develop a shared understanding of the research focus on student engagement. Workshop Two included training in research ethics and methods. In one activity the student-researchers revised the university information and consent forms into everyday language for use with their own participants.

The student-researchers' projects

Recruitment involved visits to every class group in Years 7–10 to introduce myself and the student engagement project and to call for volunteers who felt they did not often get to have a say in the school. Five students volunteered to take part: they represented a diversity of ages, year levels, and educational pathways (see Table 1). One thing all had in common, however, was that they all faced socioeconomic disadvantage. Some of the impacts of disadvantage on the student-researchers included arriving at school hungry or arriving tired from homes that lacked adequate heating or cooling, limited access to resources such as computers and internet, family responsibilities or part-time work that competed with schoolwork expectations, and inability to afford extracurricular activities such as excursions and camps.

In their fieldwork, student-researchers were supported by both the doctoral researcher and each other to design their own investigations. As shown in Table 1, student-researchers chose particular year levels to focus on, as well as specific instruments. They worked with peers (either other students in their year levels or other student-researchers) to develop and pilot their data collection instruments. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Table 1: Student-researchers' projects with methods and data sources

Pseudonym	Year level	Area of investigation	Methods	Sources
Melody	7	Year 9	• Student interviews x 22	• Interview transcripts
David	8	Year 8	• Student interviews x 12 • Online student surveys x 99	• Interview transcripts • Limited & open response questionnaire
Tim	9	Year 7	• Hard copy student surveys x 40	• Open response questionnaire
Heather	10	Year 10 academic pathway	• Student interviews x 5 • Hard copy student surveys x 22	• Interview transcripts • Limited & open response questionnaire
Kadee	10	Year 9–12 vocational pathway	• Student interviews x 3 • Hard copy student surveys x 45 • Hard copy teacher surveys x 5)	• Interview transcripts • Limited & open response questionnaire

Student-researchers met as a team, facilitated by the author, to share their investigation experiences (stories), collate their findings, and plan their dissemination activities. Their analysis of data included a two-stage process. First, the author supported individual student-researchers to interpret their own findings. This interpretation had a quantitative focus of 'look[ing] for the emergence of meaning from the repetition of phenomena' (Stake, 1995: 76). In this way both recurring themes and discrepant data emerged for further analysis and discussion (McMillan and Schumacher, 2010). This stage had a focus on reporting back to the year levels they investigated. The second stage involved the collation of group findings for critical analysis of what they meant in the larger context of student engagement in learning at the school. This stage had the focus of 'where to go from here', so that the school could continue to build on student engagement in learning across Years 7–10. Students prepared presentations that included reports of individual findings to year-level coordinators and feedback to the students at that year level. Consistent with participatory research methodology, student-researchers also showcased their findings (Wang, 2006) about student engagement in Years 7–10 at a school-level event with an audience that included families, interested staff, the school principal, and members of the school council.

The findings discussed in this paper are based on my analysis and are organized in two parts: an analysis of the student-researchers' findings about engagement, and

an exploration of the student-researchers' experiences of having input, including the impact of their research in the school and beyond.

Findings
Student voice about engagement in school

The first key issue under investigation was what students reported as their experiences of engagement in learning in Years 7–10. Since the student-researchers asked their peers about engagement, the 'voices' included here are also those of their participants. This data is identified with the student's year level, followed by 'I' for interview or 'S' for survey, followed by the question number. For example, (7 I 4) indicates the data was from a Year 7 student and was their response to interview question 4. When the student-researchers analysed their individual findings about student engagement in learning they found that, although there were dominant themes that they could relate to, the subject of student engagement was more complex than they had understood. Table 2 includes a brief summary prepared by each student-researcher presenting his or her findings.

Table 2: Summary of individual student-researchers' findings

Researcher	Student-researchers' key findings about student engagement in learning
Melody	Year 9 students like the Max [open plan] area but most students think it is too noisy for learning. Students said the Year 9 teachers cared and helped but some said they didn't get help or they needed more help with their learning. In particular, students didn't like being in the low-ability group because they felt they had more potential.
David	Year 8 students learn in different ways and what engages them in their learning is to be active. The majority of students think that ability groups and the matrix [literacy planning tool] could be improved and they have suggestions. Mainly Year 8s want more input and more choice in their learning.
Tim	Year 7 students are engaged in learning when they are active, have independent time, when they can choose what they learn, and when they can learn in different ways.
Heather	Year 10 students are engaged in learning when the work is interesting, when they are active, when choices aren't limited to what teachers have already decided, and when learning is related to the real world. Also important is communication between teachers and students.
Kadee	[Vocational] students and teachers want more hands-on learning and are prepared to help each other to do this.

Based on the doctoral researcher's analysis of the findings of this study, including documents, artefacts, and field notes, six inextricably linked themes were identified as contributing to student engagement. The first three refer to ways of learning:

- Practical and hands-on
- Interesting and fun
- Real-life context and importance to the future

The next three refer to environments of learning:

- Academic learning environment
- Social learning environment
- Physical learning environment

A summary of each theme is given below.

Practical and hands-on learning

This was a dominant theme across year levels and included the full range of applied learning subjects in the school: cooking, woodwork, sport, art, hands-on learning, applied mathematics, systems engineering, practical science experiments, drama, and music. The provision of diverse applied learning opportunities is considered a modifiable aspect of schools' learning environments that promotes students' active participation (Abbott-Chapman *et al.*, 2014). As one student explained: 'I like being active instead of angry teachers telling you this boring stuff you don't like' (9 I 3). In particular, applied forms of learning have been found to increase interest and engagement as well as interpersonal skills (Abbott-Chapman *et al.*, 2014; Istance and Dumont, 2010; Lamb and Rice, 2008).

Interesting and fun

This theme represented learning that was interactive, as opposed to 'just sitting down and doing the work' (9 I 4) – for example, playing games in science lessons to learn symbols rather than rote learning (9 I 4). Teachers were also noted as being engaging when they were fun, had a sense of humour, and related in ways that were not 'boring', such as having excitement in their voices. On the surface, the findings in this theme could appear to trivialize learning and teachers, yet research confirms the improvement in outcomes when students are engaged in learning that is enjoyable, interesting, and challenging, with teachers they can relate to (Abbott-Chapman *et al.*, 2014). Particularly pertinent to this theme is a contention by Abbott-Chapman *et al.* (2014: 116) that enjoyment, as an expression of engagement, 'appears to further influence subsequent education and career choices well into adulthood'.

Real-life context and importance to the future

Learning in this theme reflected the school's push from Year 7 to expose students to labour market opportunities and to keep their aspirations on track (Cummings *et*

al., 2012; Polvere and Lim, 2015). Learning experiences noted by students included excursions, camps, work experience placements, and community service projects. Learning related to the real world has been found to motivate all students and when it connects with possible futures it is an important educational driver (Galliott and Graham, 2015; Lamb and Rice, 2008). One student, for example, initially responded 'I hate every subject' (10 S 4) and yet later she listed experiences that engaged her, including working in a team, excursions/camps, and work placements (10 S 6). A risk for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, however, is that they are not recognized as having particular skills and talents, and consequently teachers can have low expectations for their future prospects. Teachers can then steer them towards relatively low-skilled vocational pathways that further disadvantage them both in education and the workforce (Smyth *et al.*, 2010). Bentley and Cazaly (2015: 68) recommended that a test to apply to all students is 'whether the system is engaging them and ensuring their progress along some valuable pathway'.

Academic learning environment

This environment is influenced by schools' and teachers' decisions about curriculum and pedagogy. Unsurprisingly, students viewed these decisions positively when they were perceived to promote learning, and negatively when they were not. Across year levels, students said they were engaged in learning when they had authentic choices that were not limited to teacher choices. Academic learning that was not meaningful was often described as 'boring', especially when associated with 'worksheets'. Ability grouping in the academic curriculum was also viewed negatively by students who were placed in the lowest groups and, at times, by other students. Despite evidence since the 1960s that ability grouping lacks educational and social value (Slee, 2011), the practice continues and one Year 8 student identified the way it reduced academic options for students relegated to low-ability groups: 'I think the groups are unnecessary. I've talked to some people [in the lowest group] and even though they feel they don't know a lot about literacy they feel babied in literacy and excluded from some of the stuff that's more interesting that other people are doing' (8 I 9). Students consistently articulated that getting help when it was needed was vital to their engagement, and negativity was expressed when students considered help was absent, especially in the context of perceived 'favouritism' for particular students. The overriding engagement message was for students to be at the centre of the learning and for teachers to play an important role in facilitating that learning (Istance and Dumont, 2010; Wang and Holcombe, 2010).

Social learning environment

This relational theme included peers and teachers. Overwhelmingly, friends were portrayed as an essential aspect of student engagement, although counter to this there were occasional findings citing friends as a distraction from learning. The importance of positive student–teacher relationships was also expressed, including a desire for teachers to interact with students about their lives outside the classroom, and the importance of teachers who cared. Other aspects were trust, respect, and personal safety, especially related to bullying. Research conducted by Smyth and Fasoli (2007: 291) captured the turnaround in student engagement within a school community that chose 'the development of respectful relations which afforded students the relational power that they require to persist with schooling, against the odds'.

Physical learning environment

The majority of students expressed the view that being engaged is easier when the environment is relaxed and not stressful. However, individual differences were evident. While some students preferred open learning spaces, others found they became distracted and therefore preferred conventional classrooms, and although some students found they needed quiet to concentrate on their learning, others liked to have music playing. Additional factors included atmospheric conditions such as temperature (both inside and outside), furniture, and facilities. This theme indicated that students did take into consideration how the physical learning environment related to their engagement (Carrington *et al.*, 2010).

Overall, student voice about engagement indicated that the students who participated in the various student-researcher investigations were committed to, and sought active participation in, their learning. In addition, they had constructive comments about their engagement in learning. The findings in this study were broadly consistent with previous studies and confirmed the claim by Randall *et al.* (2012: 3) 'that young people – regardless of their background – value similar things in a learning environment'. Nevertheless, the findings also revealed that students' experiences of what makes learning engaging can be diverse and complex and need to be taken into consideration if schools are to provide engaging, non-marginalizing education.

Student voice about having a voice

The second key point of the project was to investigate in what ways a YPAR design impacted student-researchers and the school community. It is not just

students' engagement with learning that is important, but also their experience of participating in and having input into their school. This is analyzed both in terms of the process of 'doing' participatory research and of 'being listened to' in the context of the project. Their input is then analysed in terms of its impact in the school and beyond. The aim of this YPAR project was to gain students' integral participation because the project was meaningful to them and its outcomes had the potential to make a difference to student engagement in learning at the school. Nevertheless, participation across the stages of research is rarely static. Holland *et al.* (2010: 373) have argued that 'it is more important to pay close attention to *how* participation is enacted … than to focus in on *how much* participation was achieved'. In line with this contention, selected moments across the stages of data collection, analysis, reporting, and dissemination are unpacked to give insight into how participation was enacted in this project.

In planning their fieldwork, each student-researcher used his or her agency to choose both the area of the school to investigate and the method of investigation. Feedback indicated that this made the project more accessible, because students researched an area of the school in which they were interested, using methods that were congruent with their level of competency (Bradbury-Jones and Taylor, 2015). Tim, for example, decided on a data collection method we had trialled in a workshop, adapting it to gain more information and 'to make it more fun by making it into a game' (field notes 1: 18). He did this by providing a target, similar to a goal ring, for his respondents to throw their survey responses into. Lundy *et al.* (2011: 733) have cautioned that although research with young people 'can and indeed should be fun and engaging, the findings and outputs must be serious'. Tim's data collection method demonstrated his engagement and agency in planning his project. It also made the gathering of Year 7 voices more effective because the fun he instilled into the method resonated with his participants and motivated them to think of multiple examples of when they were engaged in learning. In addition, as each group left the room their evident enthusiasm for the activity also motivated other Year 7 students to participate. Importantly, Tim's method did indeed deliver meaningful findings.

Student-researchers also formulated the content of their enquiries, and this enabled them to tailor their investigations to issues associated with student engagement that were important and relevant to them. In David's interviews, for example, he investigated his passion for greater student voice at Year 8: 'Would you be interested in helping teachers to plan units of work?' (Question 7). The responses included nine affirmative, two negative, and one undecided. David was

surprised to find peers who did not share his own desire for such involvement. For example, one negative response was: 'I do the work, I don't make the work'. This described a phenomenon that David found most boring and frustrating – 'teachers handing out work and students passively doing it' (field notes 1: 24). Kellett (2011) notes that young researchers can be surprised by findings that show their peers don't share their views. David was able to use the process of the participatory research to reflect on his surprise, and reflect on how to use material that went against his views.

The authenticity of student voice itself can be analysed around accuracy of reporting. David, for example, was forthright about reporting findings that confronted the status quo, whereas Melody was hesitant to do this. In authentically listening to her participants, Melody had uncovered some of 'the impediments, barriers and constraints that turn young people off school in droves' (Smyth, 2012: 154). At a team meeting, Melody felt safe to voice her concern about including some of the findings that she referred to as 'bad stuff' (field notes 1: 33) in relation to noisy learning spaces, some students not getting help, and students expressing dissatisfaction with being placed in low-ability groups. It is not unusual for 'insider' researchers to feel apprehensive about the inclusion of findings that are critical of particular practices (Maguire, 2014) and this is intensified within the power relations of students reporting to teachers. Melody's concern reinforced the importance, within participatory projects, of ongoing support that includes dialogue about the research, its purposes, and its processes (MacLeod *et al.*, 2014). Following a team discussion about the purpose of the research – to build on and improve student engagement in learning – and the importance of 'insider' research – to give students a voice, not to censor their voices – Melody expressed her relief and said that she felt more confident to include, analyse, and report on those findings in the same way as with her other findings (field notes 1: 33).

Communicating the results of findings through dissemination is an essential stage of participatory research and, again, there can be differing degrees of participation (Baker and Plows, 2015; Groundwater-Smith *et al.*, 2015). In the current project, the student-researchers' voices were central to how dissemination was conducted and this resulted in multiple forms of dissemination to suit the differing audiences and the student-researchers' comfort levels. All were prepared to present their findings to the respective year-level coordinators, and all chose to do this using PowerPoint presentations. In reflections following the presentations, although some admitted to being nervous beforehand, each young person considered that they had been listened to, that their findings had been well received, and that the quality of

their work had been acknowledged. For example, in her praise of the high quality of work carried out by Melody (who was then in Year 7), the Year 9 coordinator said she wanted Melody on the leadership team when she reached Year 9 (field notes S: 8). Another important consideration was how to disseminate the findings to the student population. With only David and Kadee keen to do this at year-level assemblies, the team collectively agreed that the PowerPoint presentations for each project would be relayed on the television screens that presented information at each year level (field notes 1: 33). A further level of dissemination took the form of a public exhibition to include the students' families, interested staff, the principal, and the school council. Although all expressed a desire to have their research listened to and acknowledged at the level of school council, they were also nervous about speaking in front of school officials. Again, technology provided the conduit, through Melody's suggestion to produce a video that would have pictures of teaching and learning areas around the school and their voices in the background (field notes 1: 33). The impact of this solution was that the authentic voices of the student-researchers were disseminated without exposing any of the young researchers to undue pressure, and yet they were physically present to receive due acknowledgement. While the process of dissemination must be sensitive to the needs and wishes of young people, Baker and Plows contend that young people's involvement 'has an ethical imperative – this is research about them and their experiences' (Baker and Plows, 2015: 206).

As a result of their work's dissemination within the school, the student-researchers were listened to by students, parents, teachers, and school officials. In the longer term, there is evidence that three of the young people had an enhanced voice beyond the research. As a direct result of her study in the vocational pathway, Kadee began collaborating with students and teachers to introduce more hands-on learning into the vocational curriculum (field notes 1: 51). Similarly, as a direct result of their participation in the project, Melody and David joined a student–teacher working party related to the implementation of a new whole-school programme (field notes 2: 8). For these student-researchers, their 'voice' was heard and valued and they had an opportunity to participate in the school beyond the research project.

Beyond the school, the invitation to co-author an article about the project in an online journal on student participation was an opportunity for the student-researchers to share their reflections about their roles in the YPAR project, and also to disseminate their findings about student engagement in learning. Although it is difficult to gauge the actual impact of this student participation opportunity,

it had the potential for students and teachers throughout Australia and overseas to read about student engagement and student participation from the perspectives of these young researchers. Moreover, it may serve as an example to other schools of how YPAR methodology can provide an engaging learning experience for student-researchers – especially students who can feel disenfranchised in schools – while at the same time helping schools to gather important data directly from students about their engagement in learning. Another way in which the student-researchers had a voice beyond the school was via their video. With the students' permission, an Australian advocate of student participation who was attending a student voice conference took a copy of the video to use as input in a panel session about students as researchers. While we may never know if exposure in that academic forum had any effect beyond the session, the 'voice' of these students was nevertheless represented to an audience of academics who were interested in student research.

The students' participation in having input into the school demonstrated that they did have an authentic voice in terms of doing the research, and they demonstrated their agency across all processes of the project. In addition, three of the student-researchers had a voice in the school beyond the project. In their feedback at the end, all of the participants assessed that their involvement had been beneficial. Heather, for example, had gone from an initial lack of confidence about her ability, because she was behind in her school work, to a reflection following her presentation to the coordinators that 'taking part made me feel good about myself' (field notes 1: 26).

Conclusion

In contrast to deficit perceptions of students 'at risk' and a general lack of opportunity for such students to be civically engaged, this paper has demonstrated that when young people who tend not to have their needs met in schools are given the opportunity, they make constructive contributions to thinking about student engagement. In addition, the paper contributes to findings on student engagement by adding support to existing recommendations but drawing directly from student-led data collection. One student-researcher explained that she had decided to participate in the research 'so I could help make a difference and keep not only me in school, but everyone in school' (field notes S: 7). This was an important motivation, and from an equity perspective it points to the ongoing need for educators and policy makers to prioritize research and action into engagement with young people who tend to be put at a disadvantage in schools. I concur with Smyth and Fasoli: 'If the conditions necessary to successfully engage students in schools are ignored,

then it could be argued that we are complicit in perpetuating educational policy failure' (Smyth and Fasoli, 2007: 277). Unfortunately, inequities in educational achievement, engagement, and civic participation are associated with factors such as race, (dis)ability, and social, cultural, and linguistic background (COAG Reform Council, 2012). However, democratic student participation in the form of YPAR may facilitate a reversal in this trend by empowering students to find local answers to the perennial education and policy challenge of facilitating more engaging and equitable educational outcomes for all.

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