Youth Disengagement from Education: Student and Teacher Perspectives

Dr Carol McKinstry, Nerida Hyett, Danielle Jones, Courtney Ireland, Leah Powell

La Trobe Rural Health School, La Trobe University

Meredith Fettling, Simon Wood

Bendigo Senior Secondary College

March 2017

Project Aims

To explore and develop a deeper understanding of the complex factors contributing to youth disengagement in a secondary education setting, identifying strategies to support and enable young people to either maintain engagement or re-engage within the educational environment.

Collaboration between LRHS and Bendigo Senior Secondary College.

Significance of the Project

- Student engagement is being highlighted as a significant issue – recent Grattan Institute Report: "Engaging students. Creating classrooms that improve learning".

- Lower secondary school retention rates in regional/rural areas – 10% difference in rural and metro for year 12

- Lower tertiary education participation of people living in regional/rural areas

- Link between educational attainment, socio-economic status and health and wellbeing – poorer social connectedness and vocational achievement, poverty, increased mental ill-health and substance abuse
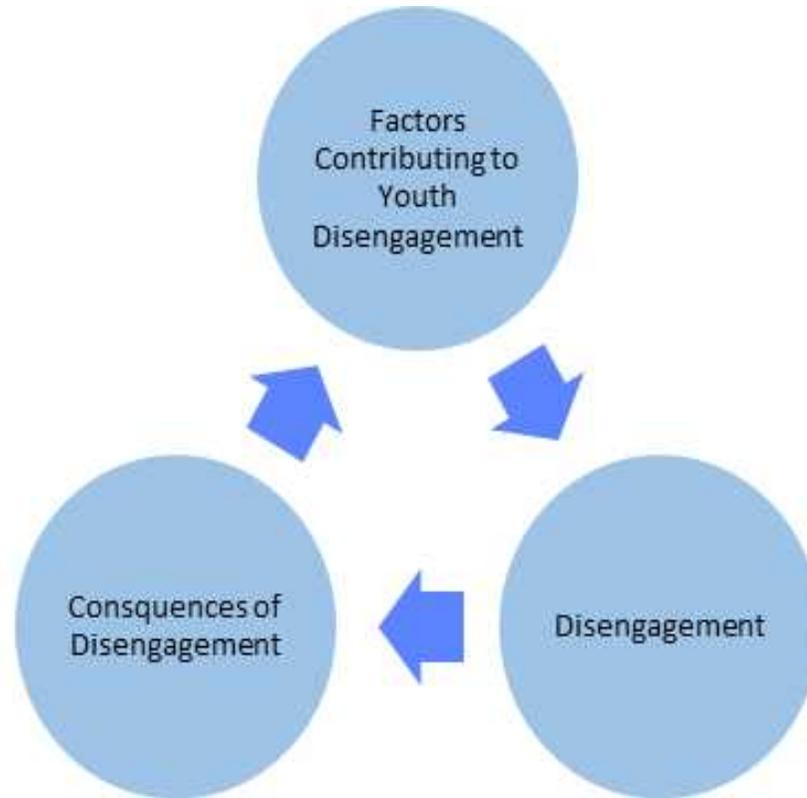
Project

- **Extensive literature review**

- **Ethics applications**

- **Data collection**
  - **Survey of BSSC staff**
  - **Interviews with 9 Year 11/12 students identified as 'at risk' of disengagin**

- **Data analysis**
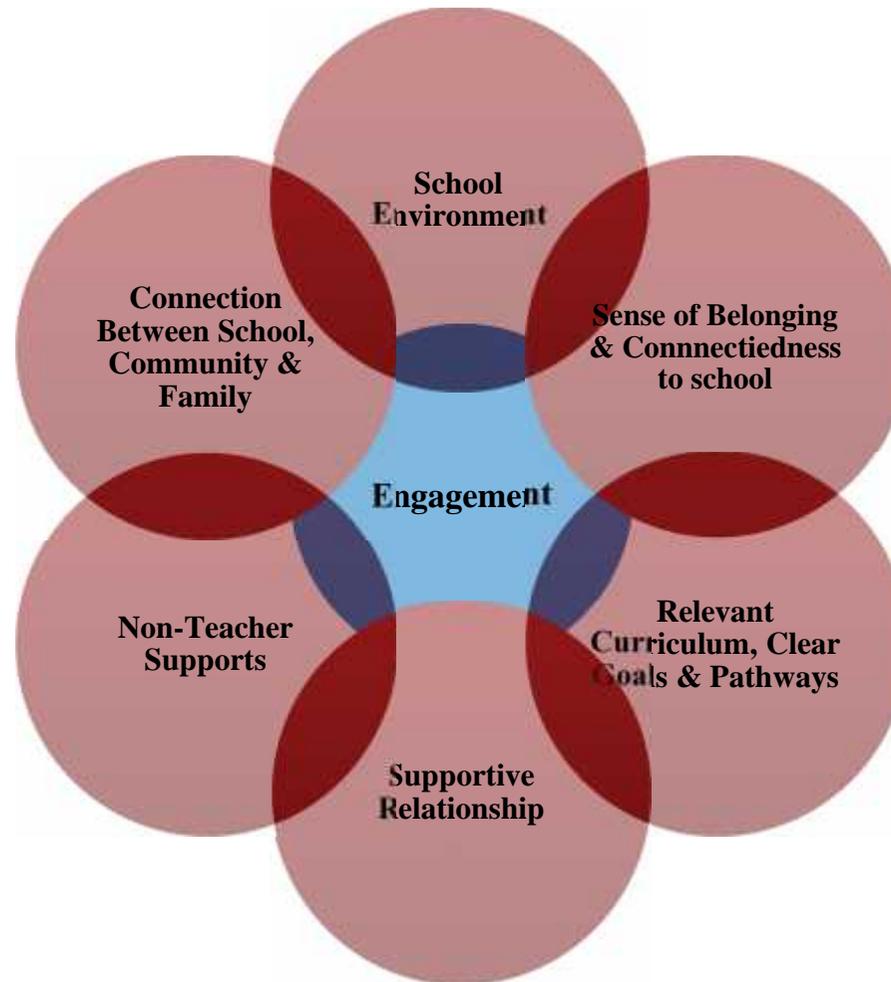
- **Dissemination of findings**

Literature Review

- **Engagement is a complex process – cognitive, behavioural and emotional**

- **Not just solely personal characteristics but influenced by social and environmental constructs (parents/guardians, families, teachers, peers and policy/practices)**

- **Cycle of disengagement**

- **Factors influencing engagement**

Cycle of disengagement

Factors influencing engagement

School Environment

Sense of Belonging & Connnectiedness to school

Connection Between School, Community & Family

Engagement

Relevant Curriculum, Clear Goals & Pathways

Non-Teacher Supports

Supportive Relationship

Teacher Survey

Sent to all teaching and education support staff – 142 teachers, 50 ES staff

90 responses:

- 65 teachers teaching VCE (74%)

- 15 teachers teaching VET (17%)

- 28 teachers teaching VCAL (32%)

- 7 teachers teaching EAL (8%)

- 4 teachers in the Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander Program (5%)

- 15 staff in the other category (17%) – ES, Netschool, librarians, Netschool,

Length of teaching experience – mean 9.56 years, maximum 33 years.

How do you identify students who are disengaged or at risk of disengagement (80 responses) Most common responses:

- **Attendance / absences**

- **Late for class**

- **Distracted by or on their phone all the time.**

- **Little work done in class**

- **Work submitted late or incomplete**

- **Behaviour in library**

- **Not willing to engage with peers/others in class**

- **Lack of motivation and withdrawn**

- **Body language, facial expression**

- **Not having specific pathway goals**

- **Changes in mood**

- **Reduced academic performance**

- **Lack of parent support or interest in student's education**

Comments (quotes)

"They sit in the back corner. They wear a hoodie or hat. They play computer games rather than work. They arrive late to class. They prefer not to be asked a question."

"Students who identify as Indigenous are initially identified as at risk. Attendance is an important sign of disengagement".

"Students who do not attend classes. Students who have excuses for being late or not attending. Students and parents who do not answer or return phone calls and parents who do not attend appointments".

"Either loud and disruptive (though this includes excellent students that are bored as well) or more likely quiet, non participating, constantly reaching for their phone to distract them from the work or doodling, etc.".

Teacher Survey

Staff self-rated skill in identifying students who are disengage or at risk of disengagement (85 responses)

- **Strongly agree – 38%**

- **Agree – 36%**

- **Somewhat agree – 25%**

- **Strongly disagree – 1%**

I have sufficient skills/training to support disengaged students – 85 responses

- **Strongly agree – 11 (13%)**

- **Agree – 28 (33%)**

- **Somewhat agree – 30 (35%)**

- **Neither agree or disagree – 4 (5%)**

- **Somewhat disagree – 11 (13%)**

- **Disagree – 1 (1%)**

Teacher Survey

I have sufficient time to spend with students who are disengaged or 'at risk' of disengagement - 85 responses

- **Strongly agree – 2 (2%)**

- **Agree – 12 (14%)**

- **Somewhat agree – 20 (23%)**

- **Neither agree or disagree – 2 (2%)**

- **Somewhat disagree – 17 (20%)**

- **Disagree – 20 (23%)**

- **Strongly disagree – 12 (14%)**

What strategies have you successfully used to engage students within your classroom/setting? (77 responses)

- **Most common responses**

- **Goal setting**

- **Relationship building – rapport and trust. Taking an interest in the student and their outside school interests. Getting to know them better**

- **Providing extra support**

- **Individualised personal support**

- **Making the students feel valued.**

- **Being positive, demonstrating enthusiasm and passion for the subject.**

- **Build on student's strengths**

- **Arranging peer support from other students**

- **Choice re topic for assessment**

- **Referral to internal or external support agencies**

- **Meet with parents (but not many included this in their response)**

Comments re successful strategies

"Showing enthusiasm and passion for my subject. Building positive relationships with students by getting to know their interests and making them feel that I care. Knowing each student's learning strengths and gaps and targeting my teaching to cater for the students needs. Use a range of teaching approaches and learning activity task types."

"Personalised programs, individual meetings, arranged for Wellbeing Support, conversations with parents."

"Being genuinely interested in them and their 'story'. Contacting appropriate support people. Making referrals to other internal and external agencies where necessary. Providing clear and reasonable boundaries. Setting high expectations. Remaining consistent. Creating links between current work and future pathways."

Interviews

9 students identified as 'at risk' and recruited by BSSC teachers

2 females and 7 males

- **Year 11 VACL and VET**

- **3 x Year 11 VCE**

- **Year 12 VCE – left mid year**

- **Year 12 VCE**

- **Year 11 VCAL**

- **Year 12 VCAL**

- **Year 13 VCE**

Semi-structured interviews – approximately 30 minutes

Themes

- Mental health – anxiety, depression, lack of confidence and self esteem

- Difficulties with English – language disorder and literacy issues

- Teacher relationships – positive and negative

- Home life – supportive mother but often unstable

- Lack of belonging and connectedness

- Aspiration

- Friends and peers – positive and negative

- Attendance issues – falling behind or feeling overwhelmed

- Additional supports – Wellbeing team, extra support from teachers and coordinators

- Transition

Implications for allied health

- Literacy issues

- Mental health issues

- Increasing capacity of teachers to assist with 'non-teaching' issues

- Early identification

- Inclusion of students in mainstream schools

- Linking supports such as headspace with schools
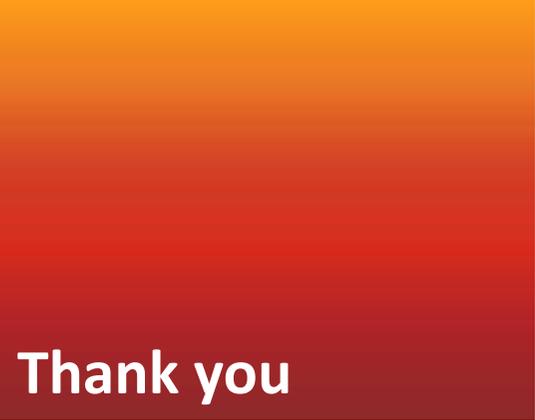
Thank you

Dr Carol McKinstry

c.mckinstry@latrobe.edu.au

Twitter @MckinstryC