INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM

Engagement in the middle years of schooling: The need for a mind jolt

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Contents

Introduction

Key stakeholders in education are increasingly concerned about young peoples' experiences at school. What happens in Australian classrooms occupies the attention of nervous politicians and bureaucrats who seek improvement in high stakes tests and are struggling to make headway. Of particular concern are the widening gaps in achievement between students who live in metropolitan, regional and rural communities and the stark differences in achievement between indigenous and non-indigenous young people (De Bortoli et al., 2024; Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2025). Research into inequities in Australian education systems suggest that disadvantaged students can be almost three years behind (Thomson, 2017). Parents too are experiencing unease. According to one longitudinal

Australian study, parents are increasingly concerned about their children's social and emotional wellbeing, the impact of social media, and whether they can access quality, affordable education for their children (Fu et al., 2019). These researchers contend that what is more prescient in the current data related to parents, is 'an overall unease about how their children will navigate what is perceived as an uncertain future' (p. 13).

Disturbingly, young people are also increasingly concerned about their experiences at school. The Resilience Survey, conducted by Kohler & Reece (2023) suggests that more than half of Australian secondary students are at risk of a poor learning mindset due to reported levels of anxiety and disengagement. Enjoyment of learning, they suggest, substantially drops after primary education, and levels of disengagement are higher for females and for gender diverse young people (p. 85). The Youth Survey Report in Victoria conducted by McHale et al. (2024) indicates that nearly half of female and male students (44%) believe school and study are their biggest personal challenge, up from 37% in 2022. Worryingly, in another recent survey conducted by the Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (2025), 43% of young Australians aged 18 – 24 say their education does not prepare them for the future.

Student engagement in schooling in Australia is clearly a key challenge. A recent review of evidence related to student engagement in years 7 – 9 in Victoria suggests at least one in three Victorian middle years students are disengaged at school (van der Kleij et al., 2025). In its recommendations, the review calls for further research using rich data sources that enable holistic investigation of student engagement and more in-depth understandings. This paper, drawing from qualitative data that focuses on the perspectives and lived experiences of Victorian middle years students aged between 11 – 16, aims to examine student engagement across cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural dimensions. While students have traditionally been objectified and excluded from the discourse on student engagement (Murphy, 2001) and discussions about the limitations of schooling (Fu et al., 2025), young people, who 'watch us all the time … and learn from all that watching and listening' (Sizer and Sizer, 1999 p. xvii), offer first-hand perspectives into the life of classrooms and the meanings they make there. Using an alternative method of capturing experience in classrooms, the paper examines drawings of learning created by secondary school students in three studies

over a period of almost 20 years. A coding scheme supporting interpretive analysis is used to examine the drawings. The paper begins with students' depictions of engaged learning. Also identified are themes related to the cultural and pedagogical characteristics of classrooms that can inhibit students' learning (their sense-making and agency and their feelings of belonging and selfworth) and create disengagement.

The drawings, as powerful windows into students' thinking and feelings, can act as an impetus to reflect on and change pedagogical practices (McGraw & Mason, 2022; Brandenburg & Gervasoni, 2016; Bessette, 2008; Haney et al., 2003). Powerfully, what students say about learning at school can support teachers and other stakeholders to employ the act of 'repositioning' (Apple, 2006), to see the impact of policies and practices from the standpoint of those who have least power and are directly affected. Imbued with imaginative insight and emotional depth, the drawings urge educators to contemplate assumptions inherent in dominant practices that can powerfully shape students' beliefs about learning, their behaviours at school, their feelings about being there, and their perception of the capacities required to succeed.

Engagement (and disengagement) in learning at school

Engagement at school is often examined according to three broad categories: behavioural, emotional and cognitive aspects (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioural engagement can involve a students' participation in tasks and their willingness to follow rules. Emotional engagement can involve a students' special interests and feelings about being at school as well as their reactions to teachers. Cognitive engagement can relate to a students' use of skills and strategies, their capacity to comprehend complex ideas, as well as the level of thoughtfulness and investment they devote to learning (Fredricks et al., 2004; Berry, 2020). While such categories are useful, the multifaceted and complex nature of engagement and the influence of context are also important considerations (Finn & Zimmer, 2012).

Engagement in schooling is associated with positive learning outcomes (Newmann, 1992; Fullarton, 2002; Finn & Zimmer, 2012) and is a particular focus for researchers interested in the middle years of schooling. According to Finn & Zimmer (2012) the behavioural, emotional and cognitive experience of middle years students is significant because of their unique stage of development. Aspects like feeling a sense of belonging, the development of positive relationships, having confidence and self-belief, the increasing use of self-regulatory skills, and the ability to explore more abstract ideas become more prevalent for these students as they learn and look toward the final years of compulsory schooling and beyond. This distinct phase is a crucial time in the identity development of individuals who learn in classrooms that are the most differentiated of all year levels (Pendergast & Main, 2024).

While disengagement at school and the decline in student achievement during the middle years is an ongoing concern (Masters, 2016; Pendergast & Main, 2024), disengagement is not always obvious. Disengagement at school can be masqueraded by students' capacity to bluff and take short cuts (Sizer & Sizer, 1999). There are students who quietly disengage and under-achieve, who play a game of doing what's expected while devoting minimal effort. Recent research conducted in the US, suggests that only 26% of middle school students enjoy learning at school. Most students, these researchers contend, comply but are not invested (Anderson & Winthrop, 2025). Concerns about engagement at school are often associated with anxieties about academic achievement and retention; however, as Willms (2003) in an OECD report argues, school is central to the daily life of young people and disengagement is therefore a quality-of-life issue.

While it is understood that disengagement is caused by a complex array of interconnecting factors related to the student, family, school and community (De Witte et al., 2013), an increasingly demanding focus on improving test results and a narrowing of learning opportunities, are also recognised as key factors in students' disengagement at school. A UK report to parliament conducted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education titled 'Inquiry into the Loss of the Love of Learning' (2025), suggests that a narrowing of curriculum and teaching to the test were frequently mentioned by respondents as reasons for lower

levels of engagement at school. There is less time, teachers agreed, for building curiosity and joy; less time for spontaneity, creativity and personal connection-making (p. 7). Teaching, it is suggested, is increasingly construed as technical work focused narrowly on certain types of measurement and 'what works' to fix students (Biesta, 2010). After many years of researching engagement in Australian schooling, particularly in the middle years, Smyth and McInerney (2007) argue that what is 'increasingly evident is that instrumentalist forms of teaching are not translating into happy, switched-on and productive students' (p. 99). Similarly, Claxton (2021) contends that the more we seek to constrain, control, and structure the school experience around a set of strategies supported by certain bodies of research and 'cut-and-dried knowledge' (p. xxi), the more we run the risk of depersonalising the experience of learning and restricting student and teacher agency.

Research shows that teacher engagement and morale are also under strain, and this can in turn impact on students. In Australia, Gore and Rickards (2021) found that 'reform solutions' have placed teachers under unprecedented stress and Longmuir et al. (2022) found that onerous administrative and accountability requirements, decreasing professional autonomy, as well as unmanageable workloads were key reasons for increasing levels of dissatisfaction. In Longmuir et al.,'s study, only 27.6% of teachers indicated that they would stay in the profession until retirement. Issues related to teacher sustainability, point to a 'contemporary crisis' (Brandenburg et al., 2024, p. 2383) that is evident both here and overseas. A staggering 90% of UK teachers considered leaving the profession in 2025 (McClean & Worth, 2025). Teacher attrition, particularly in disadvantaged communities, creates discontinuity in students' learning (Kelchtermans, 2017) and is likely to further affect students who are already vulnerable (Heffernan et al., 2022). Student and teacher engagement are closely entwined (Thornberg et al. 2020) and this complex relationship should be an area for further research in Australia.

Design and methodology

This paper examines student created drawings from three different research projects involving secondary school students in diverse schools and locations in Victoria, Australia. The projects span over a period of nineteen years. In two projects, young people were invited to capture learning in an impromptu drawing. In the third, most recent project, students were invited to capture reading in a drawing. Drawings, collected across the three projects, are used in this study to examine the nature of engagement in learning and to identify key themes related to disengagement at school. Visual data like drawings are increasingly used in educational research for studying the experiences of teachers and pre-service teachers (Bessette & Paris, 2020; Brandenburg & Gervasoni, 2016), but visual imagery created by adolescent students is less often a focus (Haney, et al., 2004).

Each project received approval from a university ethics committee, and permissions were gained from systems and school principals to use the data for research purposes and publication. Project A (Seeing into the Life of Things: 2002 – 2006) involved collecting drawings from approximately 500 students who attended two large, multi-campus schools:

one is a large three-campus independent school in Melbourne and the other a large three-campus state secondary school in regional Victoria. These students were invited to draw their experience of learning. While they were not invited to draw the experience of learning at school, the vast majority did so, perhaps assuming that because they were in a school context, that was what was expected.

Project B (Connexions to School: 2007) involved collecting drawings and interview data from approximately 15 students enrolled in a Victorian alternative regional education program for young people who had left mainstream schooling. These students had attended a range of state, Catholic and independent mainstream schools before making the decision to leave. They were invited to draw their experience of learning in the mainstream school. Project C (Teaching Reading: 2015 – 2021) involved students who were invited to draw their experience of reading. In this project student and teacher interviews were also conducted. Over 1000 students, from years 7 – 12, attending 43 different secondary schools across Victoria, participated in the project. The students attended state, Catholic and independent schools situated in a range of metropolitan, regional and rural areas. In this paper, the focus is on the drawings only and other publications also include the examination of interview data which further corroborates the themes highlighted here (McGraw & Mason, 2022; McGraw & Mason, 2020; McGraw and Mason, 2019; McGraw & Mason, 2017, McGraw, 2011).

Visual methods have become more widely used in educational and social research as a way to represent understandings and self-knowledge that can be different to those expressed verbally and in writing (Guillemin, 2004). Drawings can be a descriptive tool, where key elements in context are captured visually, but the process of drawing can also foster reflection, analysis and introspection, as the drawer's subjective ideas are also captured (Ganesh, 2011; Theron et al., 2011; Bessette & Paris, 2020). Often in the process of image-making, people resort naturally to metaphor and narrative as they search for ways to capture abstract concepts that play a key role in defining everyday realities and how people relate to others. Metaphors, suggest Lakoff & Johnson (1980) shape our mental models and actions. Metaphors selected by people to describe events, feelings and ideas, are useful because they help us to 'grasp intellectually systems that operate in ways quite mysterious to us, like learning' (Dickmeyer, 1989, p. 152).

Each of the three projects were teacher practitioner inquiries involving practising researchers as critical friends. The first step in each inquiry was to tap into students' experiences and thoughts. Project A and Project B were focused on students' engagement in learning. The process of inviting students to draw learning was used to surface student voice and experience, and through collaborative analysis of the students' responses, teachers formulated focus areas to inform their inquiries and create change. Teachers involved in Project C were inquiring into the teaching of reading and, in this case, students were invited to draw reading and to engage in focus group interviews.

Equipped with personal experiences over time and 'all that watching and listening' (Sizer & Sizer, 1999, p. xvii), students, on the whole, took quickly to the task of drawing learning or reading. Students were informed that their teachers valued their perspectives and wanted to

gain insight into their everyday experiences. Students were given blank paper, and each had a pen, a pencil or coloured textas to draw with. In most contexts, the drawing activity was facilitated by the researchers and sometimes by a teacher who did not teach the students. Students were asked to call upon their personal experiences and ideas and assured that they need not worry about their technical drawing skills. The drawing could be simple or detailed. They could add words, but it was emphasised that they should start by drawing. The students did not discuss their ideas with others and usually completed the drawings in 5 - 10 minutes.

For this paper, a coding scheme developed by Haney, et al. (2004) was used to identify patterns in the student drawings. An initial 'emergent analysis' involved grouping drawings into two categories: those that depicted engaged thinking and learning, and those that depicted disengagement. A next level of coding, referred to as 'trait coding' sought to describe specific features in drawings. Traits, created as a checklist, included aspects like, 'students are sitting alone' and 'teachers are standing in front of whiteboards/screens'. A next level of coding involved taking a holistic interpretive approach where key themes were identified by asking: what messages are embedded in this drawing? Examples include: 'the classroom is like a jailhouse' and 'learning is a competition'. A final level of analysis, linked closely to the interpretive process, was to identify metaphors and symbols that were commonly used to create meaning.

Interestingly, the drawings and the themes that emerge in these projects, cannot be categorised using gender, ability, location, education system, or age. The same sorts of ideas emerged from students who were male and female, who lived in different locations, and who went to state, independent and Catholic schools. **What does engaged learning look like?**

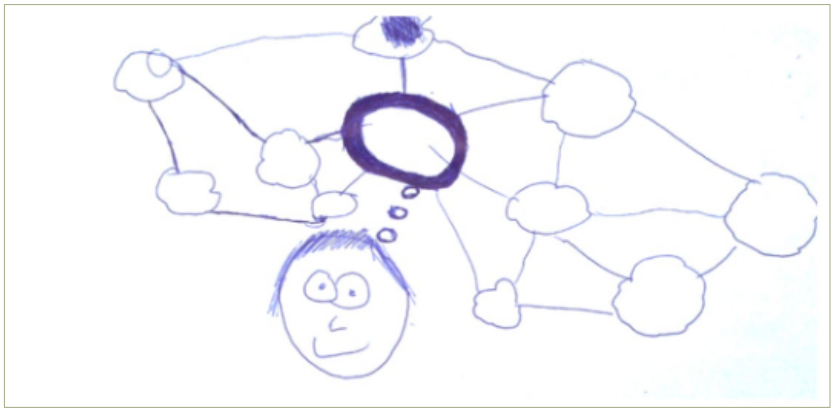
A small number of students across the three studies captured the experience of engaged thinking and learning. Interestingly, most of these drawings explore learning in a generic sense and do not include the context of the classroom. The following drawings capture key ideas about the nature of engaged learning identified by students.

Figure 1 - Project A

To learn properly you must at least have 40% of the brain working if it isn't you may need a mind jolt. You need to have most of your sensers (sic) working to learn properly.

Figure 1 emphasises the importance of active cognitive engagement. An active mind is depicted by cogs turning, electric volts being activated, and thinking is fuelled by questions, curiosity, and animated senses. The student's ideas seem akin to Dewey's (1933) notion of being 'alive' to experience and Greene's (1978) state of 'wide-awakeness'. If the brain and the senses are not active and open to experience, the student suggests that a 'mind jolt' is required and that the learner, perhaps through self-awareness, autonomy, and metacognition, takes agency to reboot the mind. The inclusion of figures activating cogs and igniting volts to stimulate questions, portrays learning as a generative, dynamic experience where thinking, the senses and selfregulation work together with impetus.

Figure 2 - Project C

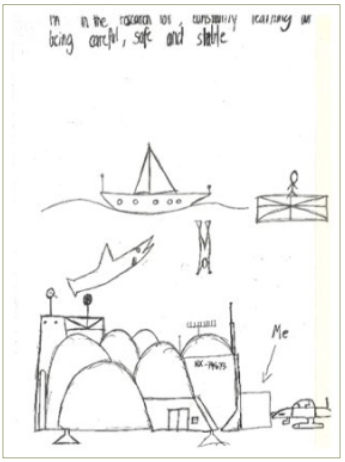


Some students understood the role of active connection-making in learning and this notion was sometimes represented as pieces of a puzzle coming together or of branches between fragments, as represented in Figure 2. Here the process of linking new learning (perhaps represented by the bold circle above the head) to existing knowledge and experience enables personal meaning-making. There is a sense of engagement and even joy in this process as signified by the student's smiling face.

The following drawings (Figures 3 and 4), capture ideas and feelings related to the environment required for high levels of engagement.

Figure 3 - Project C.

Figure 4: Project A



I'm safe in the research lab, constantly learning and being careful, safe and stable.

The student who created Figure 3 sits amongst her resources protected from a turbulent external world by a tent-like book cover. There is a sense of safety here that in turn enables attentiveness and illumination. The student who created Figure 4 uses the metaphor of an underwater laboratory, safe and protected from lurking sharks, to depict a notion of learning as careful inquiry, problem solving and research. Akin to Csikszentmihalyi's (1992) concept of flow, the drawings connect learning with intense concentration, deep exploration, pleasure, agency and safety. The idea of learning as flow is further emphasized in another drawing not included here, of a figure walking in awe in a forest. 'I feel I'm swallowed up by what I am doing,' the student wrote.

Another key theme that emerges from the drawings that depict meaningful engagement in learning is that learning occurs in experiences connected to the real world where active and physical exploration and personal discovery are inherent. There is a strong sense of awe, beauty and curiosity present in Figure 5 which is typical of these images. 'Live,' incites the student:

observe, participate, experience joy, and rely on both direct experience as well as what might be shared in texts.

Figure 5 - Project A

Learning is going out into the world to discover its wonders "live".

These notions of active experience, deep thought, inquiry and connection-making are in contrast to the vast majority of drawings where students depict learning at school as a passive, isolating, boring, precarious, confusing and sometimes intimidating and humiliating experience.

There appears to be a misalignment between the sort of engaged learning schools aim to foster and what they promulgate in practice. This misalignment was the most prominent theme to emerge from Fu et al.,'s(2025) recent study which examined the perspectives of secondary school students aged 17-18 across Australia. The same messages about disengaging approaches to teaching and learning, outmoded notions of 'quality' in education, the experience of pressure and stress, and the lack of authentic adherence to students' voices are also overwhelmingly present in the data collected in these projects. The next part of the paper will examine key interconnected themes related to the cultural and pedagogical characteristics of classrooms that can inhibit students' learning and create disengagement.

Learner as empty vessel

A key theme in the drawings was the depiction of learners as passive vessels being filled with information selected by teachers. This notion is illustrated in Figures 6 and 7. The learners are contentedly submissive, and knowledge is regarded as externally located fragments rather than something personalised and constructed by the learner through activity in social contexts. While we understand engagement in learning as a dynamic experience involving cognitive, emotional and behavioural components (Fredricks et al., 2004) and 'rich, inner motivational resources' (Berry, 2022, p. 3), the students' depictions of learning at school suggest compliance and passivity; a disembodied sense of being done to and acquiescing mutely like sponges.

Figure 6: Project A

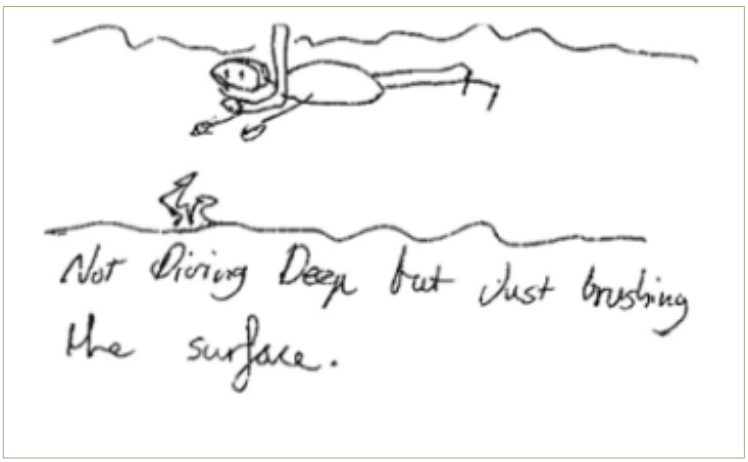
Figure 7: Project A

Knowledge is vacuumed into your brain!

According to most students involved in these projects, the dominant model of learning is a transmission style that is more technically oriented and teacher centred and controlled. There is a distinct lack of consciousness, curiosity, agency, embodiment and metacognition in most

drawings. While researchers for some time have located reflective thinking as a means of personal connection-making, as being central to engaged learning (Dewey, 1933; Perkins, 1995; Ritchhart, 2002; Claxton, 2008), students do not seem aware of this. Many are like passengers (Anderson and Winthrope, 2025) devoting minimal effort and cruising through the experience of learning at school as opposed to diving deep, as depicted in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Project A



Not diving deep but just brushing the surface.

Learning as an isolating experience

Drawings like Figures 9 and 10 depict another key theme in the data: learners sit passively in isolation from one another. There is a distinct absence of collaboration, dialogue, interaction and argument.

Figure 9 - Project A

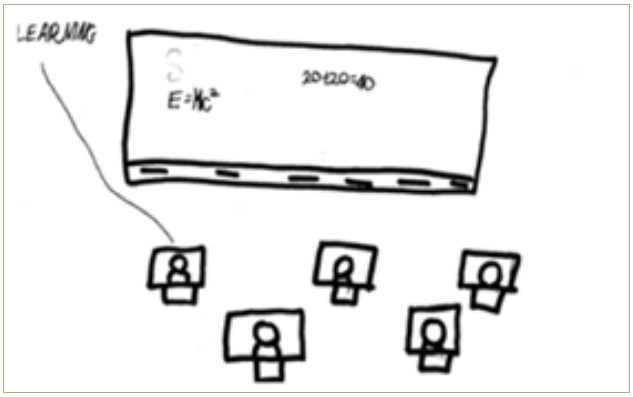


Figure 10 - Project A

Many student drawings, from across the projects, depict students sitting separately and obediently in front of whiteboards and screens. While learning theorists point to the importance of social processes activated in socio-cultural contexts (eg Vygotsky,1978; Vygotsky, 1986), of dialogue and the negotiation of meaning (eg Bakhtin, 1981), and the activation of sensations like emotions, associations and identity signals (Gee & Zhang, 2022), these students have quite different conceptions of what is required to learn. There is a distinct lack of individualism in most of the drawings, and it is interesting that mathematical equations

and formulas often appear on the screens. This may point to higher levels of disengagement in Mathematics, or it could suggest that the content of classes more generally is often dry, confusing or alienating.

The notions that belonging, collaboration and a sense of community are important for engaged learning are largely absent in the student drawings.

Learning and constraint

There have been concerns for some time about the level of learning and thinking expected of students in the middle years, with studies finding that too many classroom assignments are asking students to recall information and apply basic skills rather than expect higher order thinking (Santelises & Dabrowski, 2015; Smith, 2008; Tadich et al, 2007). A fixed, rigid view of what is to be learned and how it is to be understood and expressed calls largely upon lower order ways of thinking like remembering information, defining terms, and listing factors. 'Getting it', as proposed by the student in Figure 11, is a key priority. A dominant thread in the students' drawings pertains to feelings of control and constraint. The teacher who wears a mask covering their eyes, has the key to knowledge - and the door. The teacher, who holds an old-fashioned ruler or pointer that is focused on a learner's brain, may even seek to control what happens in thought. 'Only I have the key', states the teacher. There is a sense of being trapped and held prisoner illustrated by the bars on the window and the word 'jail'.

Figure 11: Project A

Teacher: Only I have the key.
Student: Oh, I get it.

The metaphor of the classroom as jailhouse is also depicted in Figure 12.Outside of the classroom and with groups of friends, the student feels safe and happy. Trapped in the classroom she can feel humiliation and embarrassment, as teachers question her in front of her peers.Similar to other drawings, there is an idea that there is a select, correct body of content and a preferred process for learning that disempowers and alienates students.

Figure 12: Project A

I only feel safe when my friends are there. I don't like the way teachers use intimidation to teach their subjects and I don't like it when they. embarrass me in front of the other students.

The clock and the bell are other key symbols in drawings, illustrating the counting down of time spent in classrooms and the desire to escape.

Figure 13: Project A

Most people take time to learn when the bell goes. Fact – Teachers are paid to teach but we have to pay to lern (sic).

In Figure 13, as the bell rings, arms and legs scramble for the door. Students sprint from the room and books are flung into the air. A teacher stands rigidly behind a desk which is often portrayed in student drawings as a barrier either between students and teachers, or between students and peers. The view that students 'take time to learn when the bell goes' suggests that more meaningful learning occurs elsewhere.

The constraining nature of classroom learning and a perceived lack of freedom and agency, is also present in Figure 14 which suggests that in school there is only one way of experiencing success and that compliance is expected. The warning 'do not cross the line' is written on

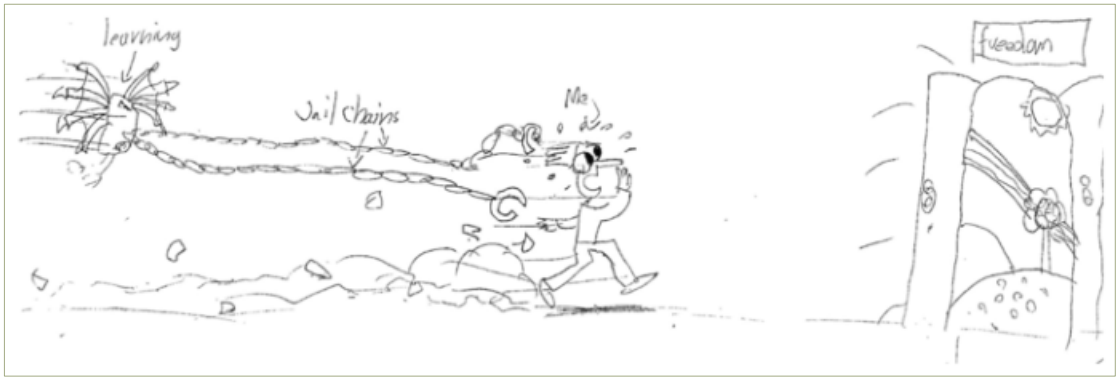
either side of the narrow path. One wonders about the place of creativity, innovation, critical thinking, adaptability and entrepreneurship which are widely regarded as core components of 21st Century thinking. There is a foreboding absence of these capabilities in students' representations of learning at school.

Figure14: Project C

Do not cross the line.

The image of learning as a chainsaw with handcuffs, as shown in Figure 15, dramatically highlights the poor reputation learning gains through school experiences that disengage. Learning is something to avoid, to run from, to fear. While this drawing worryingly highlights an opposing distinction between learning and freedom, the creativity, wit and critical scrutiny inherent in this drawing (and present in many others) speaks to the thinking potential of young people, and their capacity to use visual imagery in powerful, evocative ways.

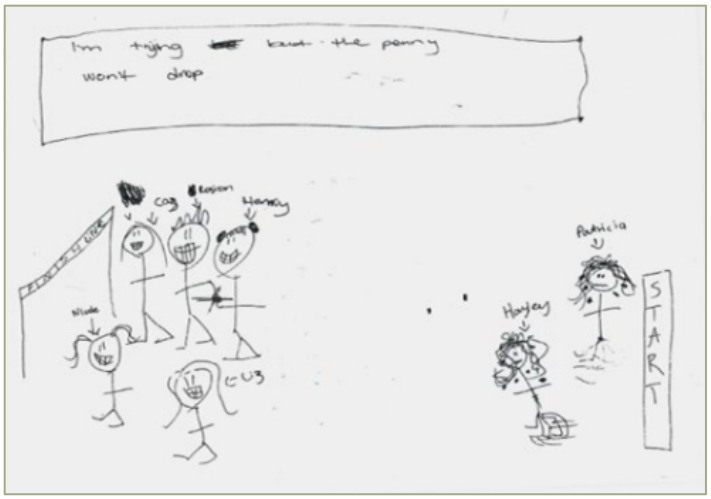
Figure 15: Project A



Learning as competitive and humiliating

According to many drawings, students feel as though they are sorted, sifted, categorised and labelled at school. This can lead to feelings of exclusion and incapacity. These internalised perceptions of self powerfully shape behaviours and engagement (Tamak and Demirkasimoglu, 2024).

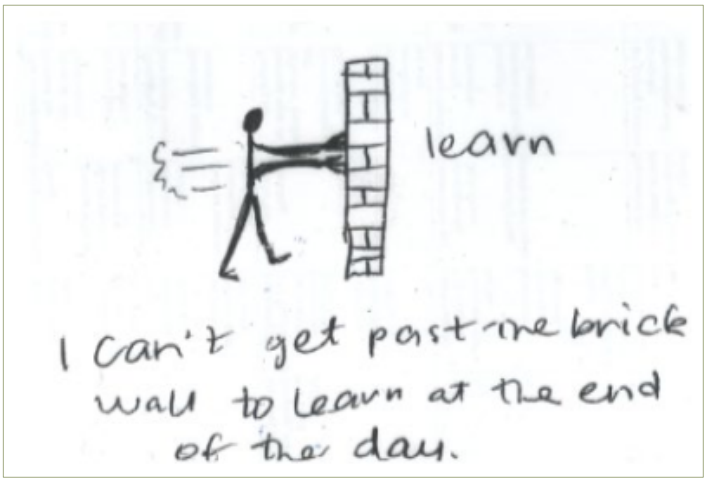
Figure 17: Project A



I'm trying but the penny won't drop.

A key theme emerging in the drawings across all projects, relates to students holding a negative self-image and feelings that they are not as capable as others.Sometimes these feelings and beliefs are represented using the metaphor of a race, as in Figure 17 where there is a clear sense of winners and losers. In this case the student believes they are trying their hardest to keep up and be successful (notice the spinning leg movements on Hayley and Patricia), but for them, 'the penny won't drop.' There is a sense in many drawings that students experience a block that they have no power or capacity to contend with.The notion of hitting a brick wall is represented in Figure 18.These feelings may be the consequence of not knowing how to learn or contend with challenges in certain contexts: how to call upon strategies, think metacognitively, or articulate the support required..

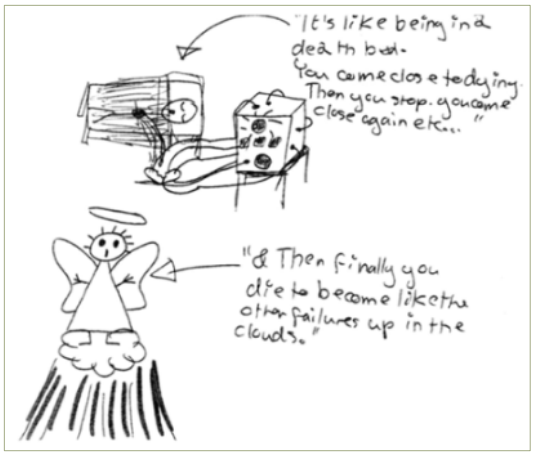
Figure 18: Project A



I can't get past the brick wall to learn at the end of the day.

The sense of failure and anxiety that many of these students associate with learning at school is distressing. The following drawings indicate serious implications related to self-identity, humiliation and stigmatisation associated with the emotional experience of disengagement at school. In Figure 19 failure at school is aligned with death and the life support system only prolongs a withdrawal that was always going to occur.

Figure 19: Project A



It's like being in a death bed.
You come close to dying. Then you stop.
You come close again etc …

& Then finally you die to become like the other failures up in the clouds.

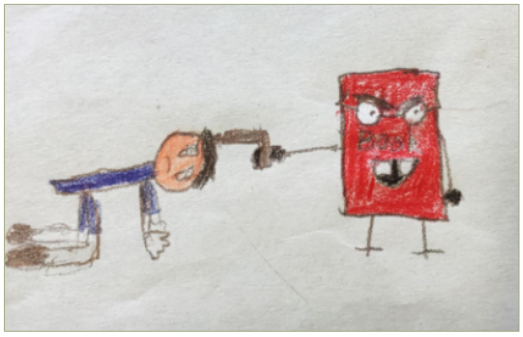
Figures 20 and 21, created by two young people who had left mainstream schooling for an alternative program illustrate the depth of fear and anxiety these young people associate with school. For these students, disengagement, at a profound level, is experienced physically as well as emotionally.

Figure 20: Project

Figure 21: Project B

Similarly, a number of the drawings that capture the experience of reading in classrooms, are violent and disturbing. Figure 22, which shows a book holding a gun to the head of an unhappy student, suggests that the book and whatever it represents, is powerful, unforgiving and cruel. The unhappy student, constrained and unable to act, is held to ransom.

Figure 22: Project C

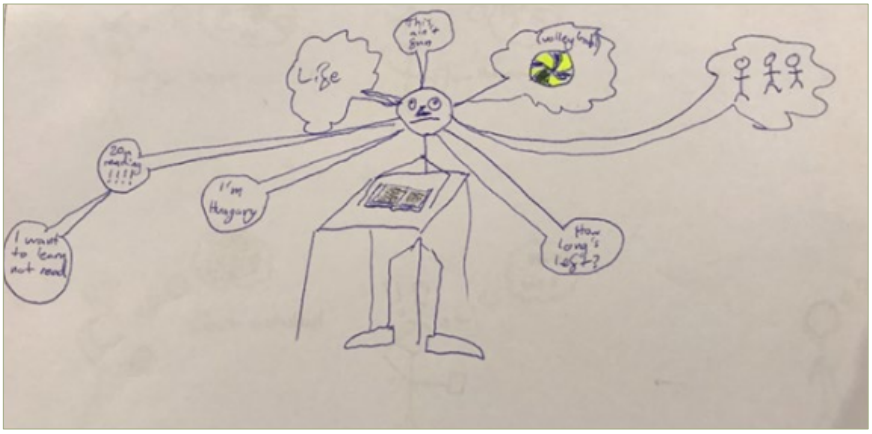


Boredom and mind wandering

Neuroscience is increasingly investigating the relationship between cognition, emotions and learning (Li, et al., 2020; Bourgeois, et al., 2022). This includes the ways motivation, attention, memory and problem solving are linked to emotions and consequently to students' learning achievements. A recent Australian study (Bourgeois, et al., 2022) found that boredom was the most commonly reported emotion amongst a sample of year 10 participants, with 'schoolwork' and 'teachers' listed as the top two causes for boredom. If emotional investment is essential to learning, then high level reports of boredom are significant.

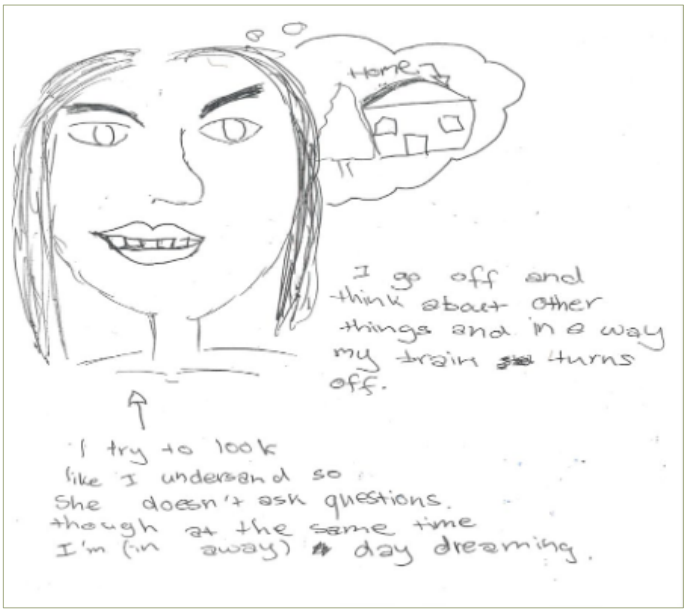
The experience of boredom and mind wandering was the most dominant theme in drawings across all projects. Notions of flying away, escaping to other places, thinking about things they would rather be doing, dreaming, singing and sleeping commonly feature in the drawings. Figures 23 and 24 show examples of the mental spaces students retreat to in classrooms while giving an impression they are engaged.

Figure 23: Project C



- I want to learn not read.
- I'm hungry.
- Life.
- This ain't fun.
- Volleyball
- How long is left?

Figure 24: Project C



I go off and think about other things and in a way my brain turns off.

I try to look like I understand so she doesn't ask questions though at the same time I'm (in away) day dreaming.

Inherent in many of these drawings is a sense of strategic, purposeful action and insight rather than mindless escape. Students' minds wander as a coping mechanism and sometimes as a method of entertainment. They go elsewhere while displaying the mask of engagement. The approaches used by students who give the impression of compliance were discussed frequently by students who participated in interviews in Project C. Pretending to read, using AI to fulfil requirements, carefully regurgitating the language of teachers and authoritative texts were approaches used by students to get things done and meet expectations without needing to engage fully in tasks. This sense of awareness and insight is also present in Figure 25 where the student playfully and intentionally categorises the things to be learned at school.

Figure 25: Project B

- *Boring things that seem unimportant*
- *Boring things that are important*
- *Boring things that seem unimportant but repeated continually*
- *Interesting things*
- *Funny things*
- *Stupid things*
- *Some crazes*
- *Stupid and unimportant things*

While the frequency of boredom and mind wandering are troubling when we consider the consequences for individuals who may then experience gaps in learning, fewer opportunities for success and wasted precious hours; the broader social and cultural consequences are also concerning. A democratic, socially just society capable of dealing with increasingly complex contemporary challenges relies on the active and purposeful engagement of all young people (Zyngier, 2008).

Student drawings as a catalyst for change

Student drawings of their lived experience in classrooms can provide insight into the cognitive, behavioural and emotional dimensions of being in classrooms. Student drawings have affective and moral dimensions (Swennen et al., 2004) that cannot easily be discounted. For this reason, they can effectively be used to engage teachers and school leaders in reflection and change (Haney, et al., 2004). In each of these projects, student drawings were used to evaluate pedagogical approaches and frame teachers' practitioner inquiries. The drawings as powerful artefacts prompted teachers to see through 'ethnographic eyes' (Frank, 1999); to look beyond assumptions and mandates, to examine the actual (and possibly enduring) impact of teaching practices and dominant beliefs on students' understandings about

learning and themselves as learners. Rather than regarding professional learning as a vehicle for instituting policy and reform by systems (Doecke & Parr, 2011), practitioner inquiry that encourages the analysis of a range of artefacts, aims to invigorate teachers, engage them in critical reflection, storytelling, interpretive processes, collegial dialogue, and to extend their imaginative minds and create change. The drawings, created with sincerity, point to a way that students can also be participants in educational reform by powerfully sharing what they see, know and feel. What might be possible if they were invited to engage in high-level conversations about the future of schooling and what should be changed?

Conclusion

The student drawings collected in three separate research projects conducted in Victorian secondary schools encourage educators to think deeply and critically about contemporary teaching and learning practices. Conceptions of learning that underpin practice need close interrogation. When learning at school is largely a transactional process, it becomes irrelevant to the needs of a complex, uncertain, increasingly ambiguous global world. There is also the danger that students come to believe that they have a right to learn – or they don't; that they can be successful in learning – or they can't. As this study suggests, conceptions of learning that are teacher-centred, focused on one size-fits-all, and which enforce competition, compliance and a limited range of basic routines, disengage young people and, disturbingly, tarnish the reputation of learning.

On a positive note, the body of drawings collected in these projects encourage educators to marvel at the creative, critical minds of young people. The drawings, sometimes simple in construction, contain deep layers of meaning, emotion and conceptual thought. These young people, from diverse schools and locations across the state of Victoria are ready and able to learn. They have the capacity for deep-thinking, critique, resistance, high-level engagement and they have intriguing ideas and deep insight. If we shift the deficit conception of young people as needing to be fixed, to a view that positions youth as culturally creative and open to innovation, who knows what might be possible. Jolting our minds is the first big step to take as we prepare to more seriously act upon the challenges associated with engagement in schooling.

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