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11. DEVELOPING STUDENT AGENCY IN A TEACHER ADVISOR PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

Enacting personalised learning involves developing students' self-reflection on their cognitive, metacognitive and affective attributes as learners (Meyer, Haywood, Sachdev, & Faraday, 2008). In the same way that a personal understanding of self-hood can inform decision-making and problem-solving in a social context, a robust appreciation of the self as learner can inform choices made about curriculum topics, learning processes, engagement and how to become more self-directed/independent in learning.

In many learning contexts, the learner becomes aware of the attributes of problem-solving and critical reflection from learning activities embedded in the curriculum content of various disciplines. Yet, such a subtle acquisition of learner autonomy poses a challenge for many students who need or prefer a more explicit approach to learning skills. In this chapter we argue that a problem-solving approach to learning for young adolescents from low socio-economic backgrounds cannot be separated from the skills required to understand and address complex social contexts and decision making in life. Personal agency is linked in a unique way to understanding the self as a social being and as an autonomous learner, yet this relationship seems undervalued in learning contexts where public credibility for schools lies in success in standardised learning outcomes alone. In this chapter we analyse a Teacher Advisor (TA) program at Ironbark College that connects a personal understanding of self with explicit skills for developing the ability to become an independent learner.

Building Learner Agency

Various theorists have emphasised the importance of agency in learning, particularly in self-directed learning (see for example: Engle, 2006; Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). While Gillespie's (2012) definition of agency as acting independently of an immediate situation may give us some insight into the transfer of skills involved in the cross-over from personal problem-solving to learner problem solving, it is Sugarman and Martin's (2011c) theories of relational agency that provide the framework to interpret the structure and outcomes of the TA program. From their theory on personal agency we gained an understanding of students' developmental, emergent and decisive understandings of self and learning within the student groups

V. Prain et al. (Eds.), Personalising Learning in Open-Plan Schools, 205–219.

and therefore insight as to how the TA curriculum encouraged these capacities. Anne Edwards (Edwards, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012) theories of relational agency in professional settings provided a framework for understanding the teacher partnerships that are a vital part of the TA program.

Context

Ironbark College had approximately 580 students in 2013. It is classified as a below average SES school with a proportion of 57% of its students in the lowest and only 3% in the highest SES quartile (ACARA, 2014). Before restructure the school experienced a pattern of poor academic performance, low learner resilience, disengagement and high absenteeism (Prain et al., 2014). The authoritative approach of teachers, with an emphasis on behavior management rather than learning, and low expectations of student academic performance, resulted in teacher frustration and a high staff turnover.

The mandate for improved learning and relationships were provisionally linked to a government grant to build new open-plan teaching spaces where a personalised learning approach aimed to address student engagement and performance (see Chapter 1). At Ironbark College, the leadership team recognised that students needed to learn self-awareness and problem-solving skills, and teachers needed to adopt a relational agency approach (see Edwards, 2005, 2007, 2011) to build the strong relationships with students that would underpin the students' journey towards autonomy. In the initial stages of the TA program, the school aimed to change the nature of the relationships between teachers and students to develop an ethos of responsive attitudes and actions so that a platform of personalised learning could be prioritised. Essentially, the school wanted the teachers to care more about the personal lives and unique qualities of each student so they could identify with a meaningful relationship within the school.

In Prain et al., (2014) we analysed the capacity building of teachers and students that changed the nature of the relationships within the school. In particular we discussed the evolution of the TA program at Ironbark College as a structure to build student independence through relational agency. In this chapter, we focus on the TA program as a vital part of Ironbark College's whole school approach to student wellbeing (see Chapter 4) and argue that the program's success depended upon (a) the quality of the relationships among teachers and students in the TA group and (b) the teaching and learning of an explicit curriculum that combined social and emotional learning with the teaching of the generic skills that underpinned academic achievement.

Methodology

Qualitative data were collected in this study through interviews, observations and document analysis over three years of the TA program from 2011 to 2014. A series of

interviews with principals (2), neighbourhood leaders (8), TA program co-ordinators (3), beginning and experienced teachers (6 and 17 respectively), and students (15) provided perspectives from all involved in the program. A students-as-researchers project (8 student leaders and four student led focus groups) was conducted in the final year of the study to examine the students' perspectives on their understanding of personal agency as it was developed through the conduct and operation of the TA groups. Data were analysed using a qualitative coding method of recurring themes that were cross-referenced for each year of the study and with each participant.

The study made three important findings:

1. that the program must be strategically positioned to develop a student–centric school culture of responsiveness through relational agency;
2. that an explicit TA program of skilling students in life skills and in learner autonomy must involve a curriculum, learning and advocacy framework;
3. that students who are empowered by their own development in agency regarding life and learning contexts need to be active in learning choices and pathways.

In summary, the study found that a Teacher Advisor program (TA) that is structured to make learning skills explicit must be embedded in strategic goals and structured with developmental activities for relational agency for both teachers and students. In the next section direct quotes from participants in the Ironbark College case study and some themes from the literature are explored to link a whole school approach to changed relationships that promote personal agency and learning.

STRATEGIC SUPPORT FOR A RESPONSIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

Phillippo (2010) argued that an effective TA program must align the school vision with structures of support for TA with the explicit aim that a whole school approach values social and emotional learning and student wellbeing. Part of that school alignment involves a strategic commitment to time and resources where the school encourages changed relationships and where teachers feel supported in their expanded roles. As one teacher claimed:

> It's building relationships and it's the strength of those relationships that needs to be the foundation for everything else we do here. I think there's more opportunity to do that now the way the TA is set up. We have more time now and it's valued more because of the resources that are put into it. We acknowledge as a school that this is so important which is why this new approach came about.

Ironbark College's vision statement, "Challenging educational experiences in a supportive environment" recognised the need to raise students' learning aspirations within a caring environment that connected with students' interests and community. The school had a well-established culture of support for its student cohort through community connections and it achieved this through a focus on respect for self, the

school and others while encouraging confidence, courage, persistence and teamwork (see Chapter 4 and Prain et al., 2014). This was also evident in the strong focus on developing an effective TA program to support students personally and academically.

To improve the connection between teachers and students and between peers, the school's strategic support for the TA program included:

- TA groups of 25 students with two TA teachers working in partnership;
- a dedicated 20 minute time for TA activities each day;
- the TA groups stayed together for the four years of junior secondary school;
- the TA teacher taught their students in as many classes as possible;
- a network of support provided referential expertise (counselors and wellbeing officers) for students who experienced more serious problems;
- a neighbourhood leader modeled collaborative conversations with families and students.

Teachers were deliberately paired to complement each other according to gender, skills, interests and experience. For example, innovative approaches from a beginning teacher complemented an experienced teacher's understanding of structure and process. Teachers shared expertise to build skills and broaden the ways in which problems could be resolved (Edwards, 2010). The strategic support offered within the community structure and the support network at the school facilitated a collaborative exchange of skills and perspectives that built confidence in how the teachers accommodated the expectations of their role as Teacher Advisor. At the same time, students valued consistency in the contact and communication they shared with their teachers:

> We have her for English as well so we have her four times a week. We really know her and she's relatively influential on us. (Grant, Year 8)

AN EXPLICIT TA CURRICULUM

Curriculum Content

The TA program at Ironbark College was structured to teach personal problem solving, learner resilience and student autonomy in an explicit way. The program planners based developmental progressions on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (from Years 7 (age 11–12) to Year 10 (age 15–16) with set learning activities, provocations, and discussions proposed for each topic area. The timely development of learning skills, goal setting, planning and reporting were also included. The teachers worked with the students to explore a topic that provided information relevant to students' lives together with learning activities designed to promote discussion questions and encourage reflection. Supporting resources included: media reports, dvds, advertisements, songs, visiting artists, guests, sports people, Youtube, and a range of influential trends, technologies or fashions. Teachers provided feedback to the TA coordinator as to how effective the provocation activities were in creating a

reflective consideration of the issues involved. Eventually, the students were also asked for feedback on the activities and more recently the school began working on student led provocations and TA group activities. Table 11.1 below shows the structured approach to the TA curriculum.

Table 11.1. Extract from teacher advisor curriculum framework

Year 7	*Year 8*	*Year 9*	*Year 10*
Safety	Belonging and Love Needs	Belonging, love and esteem needs	Esteem
Emotions are useful Managing emotions	Being in charge of what makes me tick	Self-awareness How others see me	Self-awareness Self and community
Attitudes to work and effort Beliefs about learning Motivation	Being a confident learner Being a resilient learner	Self-discipline Impact of major stressors	A confident and resilient learner Learner autonomy
Positive participation Working on strengths and weaknesses	Having goals Getting support Supporting others	Asking the right questions Supporting others Integrity	Citizen values
Communicating feelings	How do I see myself in the world?	Postschool possibilities pathways	Postschool connections and pathways
Metacognitive skills Learning how to learn Organisational skills Graphic organisers	Post-school options Team work Group dynamics Self reflection	Open communications	Study skills Self directed learner Implementing your plan Networking
Bullying Drug education Mental health	Different world views Different learning styles Personal learning goals Post school options	Analysing information	Sharing a world view Critical thinking Academic standards required for post school options

The curriculum activities were made compulsory and taught three days a week in the twenty-minute TA sessions. Teachers signed a summary statement to say that they had completed the learning activity and they provided a brief evaluation of the success, or otherwise of the learning activity in engaging the students and its relevance to their lives. The TA coordinator used this teacher and student feedback to refine the program.

The compulsory nature of the program was the focus of criticism from some teachers who would have preferred more freedom to prepare their own group

activities. However, it serves to highlight the importance the school placed on building the skills required for personalised learning in the challenges of the Ironbark context. Three days of a structured program and two days for more specific teacher or student led activities provided the required flexibility to suit the teaching styles and individual learning needs of specific groups

The learning activities aimed to build relational agency so that teachers could assist students to develop confidence in their own self-awareness of problem solving and critical thinking. Sugarman and Martin (2011a, 2011b) argued that young people learn about their own agency by reflecting on their understandings of themselves, their actions and their life contexts. While the safe and trusting environment of the TA group provided a sound platform to discuss diverse or contentious points of view, the dynamics of those discussions were not insulated from the worldly influences that shaped the tacit and taken for granted assumptions of developing teenagers. Teachers were challenged when students made reference to life experiences and events that were beyond their own sphere of influence of worldly experiences. One student claimed:

> Our teacher gave us some ridiculous suggestions on how to avoid bullying. Her ideas were just dangerous.

Clearly, the teacher's insight into the interpretation of contentious socio-cultural contexts could not be taken for granted. To address this issue the school combined TA groups so that teacher attributes could complement each other. Teachers and groups were paired according to levels of experience, personality attributes, gender, life interests or outlook.

Learning Skills

Students from low socio-economic school settings may not be well supported by learning rich home environments, time or resources (O'Brien & Johnson, 2002). To address this problem the school in this study aimed to facilitate learner self-awareness through the TA program by making learning skills explicit. A comprehensive appreciation of the importance of developing student self-awareness challenges the limited notion that learner attributes emerge in isolation or that students develop problem solving and critical self-awareness as skills that are somehow separate from their daily lives. The whole school approach for personalised learning implemented at Ironbark College explicitly linked learning skills with daily life decision-making in the TA program. The learning skills component of the TA program had two important priorities:

- that students would come to understand themselves as learners;
- that students actively participated in decision making that related to their learning choices and pathways.

In a comprehensive report on personalised learning Meyer, Haywood, Sachdev, and Faraday (2008) claimed that students should be informed of their own learner

attributes in cognitive, metacognitive and affective domains. Student discussions within the TA program related to "How do I learn best?" and "What do I have to do to be a resilient learner?"

In the Year 7 program students began their journey in understanding themselves and their attributes as learners. Angelique (Year 7 student) remembered that "at the start of Year 7 there were a lot of getting to know you activities which we could use in our lives to get to know other people more". Students identified their strengths, interests and abilities in living and in learning and some discussions centred on the processes involved in getting organised for learning. Students were encouraged to understand how they experienced barriers to learning and how these were linked to life choices. Questions such as "What are the consequences for my learning when I stay up all night playing computer games?" were discussed.

The Year 8 TA program linked personal learning goals to potential life pathways. TA groups discussed ambitions and possibilities and explored post- school options and pathways. Year 9 included an investigation of teamwork and how to participate in projects as an effective team member. Year 10 included an analysis of social competencies within a work or community environment. Study skills, planning and learner resilience were recurring themes at all year levels.

The notion of understanding the self as learner developed as students became informed of their achievement levels on national benchmarks or curriculum standards. Many students were initially dismayed to find that their literacy or numeracy skills were two, three or even four years below their age level peers on national benchmarks. The process of negotiating learning goals helped to address the discordance experienced in performance, expectation and achievement. The TA began the conversation and more information was gathered from the teacher in the particular domains such as English, mathematics, science or humanities. Together the teachers and student made informed choices about learning goals that were both realistic and aspirational. The student involvement in this process increased over each year level as students realised how much they could achieve, how barriers impinged on their learning, how organisational and resilience skills influenced commitment and progress, and how their goals connected with their learning and living futures. The students reflected on questions such as: 'What do I want to achieve?', 'How will I do that?' and 'Who can help me achieve my goals?'

The reality check provided by an informed understanding of achievement levels needs cautious consideration from the TA. Encouragement has to be provided with learning structures that are relevant to each student to maintain motivation and a purposeful focus on achievement. Personal support, care, high expectations and encouragement from the TA can only make the learning goals achievable if students maintain a level of ownership over their own learning. For many of the students at Ironbark lack of self-confidence in learning stems from their family background. In families that experience entrenched unemployment, students may have been afforded limited opportunities, and limited access to, or aspiration for, higher education opportunities.

The school aimed to identify and encourage aspirations that could overcome the barriers of low socio-economic backgrounds and empower students to see learning as a tool to achieve personal and ambitious goals for life and learning. Visitors were invited to the school to motivate students to consider a range of possible pathways towards employment and career options. Doctors, nurses, lawyers, musicians, film producers and sound technicians discussed life stories and pathways as school activities merged and complemented the structured TA program.

Students connected in many ways with the local community to experience and model positive learning and engagement practices. For example, they participated in "coaching" lessons at the local primary schools, visited elderly people in their homes, and cared for pets at the local pet rescue. Science students built energy efficient cars to compete in a community competition while music concerts, film productions and art galleries provided realistic and community connected learning activities that motivated students to achieve high levels of participation and encouragement.

The effect of these multiple ways of broadening students' horizons and encouraging their aspirations is reflected in these general comments on his goals by Sam (Year 8 student):

> At the start of the semester we do learning goals and stuff like that. My learning goals are generally just to keep improving as much as I can. I want to be an architect when I get older so I want to work towards that. I want to go to uni when I get older. My main goal is just to keep improving as much as I can.

The important role of the TA as learning guide and mentor can be deduced from Sam's comments. Sam displayed enthusiasm and high aspirations but at Year 8 level, would need considerable guidance and encouragement to more specifically work out what he needed to do to reach his goal, to set pathway steps in place, and to work with the people who would help him to realise his dream.

ADVOCACY

Advocacy was a significant part of the TA role. The TA teacher was expected to advocate for the needs of each student in their group in learning, behavior and social contexts. The TAs knew their students well and through the discussions related to learning goals they made expectations explicit. The TA aimed to promote student aspirations, understand their learning strengths and difficulties, become familiar with their out of school interests and activities and, most importantly, to be the first and most reliable contact between the family and the school. In the often complex relationships between the students and home settings the TAs learned from the neighbourhood leaders who modeled problem solving and effective communications with parents in contentious situations.

In broad terms of relationships the teachers were mostly comfortable in their relationships within the TA groups and in their areas of discipline expertise, yet the

demands of the problems that characterised their students' lives were an ongoing challenge. The reality of the contentious issues in students' lives was mirrored in the purposeful discussion of contentious topics in the TA learning activities. This made teachers and students feel most vulnerable in the TA structure yet it also gave the TA curriculum relevance and currency. Discussions about contentious life circumstances provided a boundary tension for the teachers and a challenge for the program planners. As experienced teacher, Hilary, reflected:

> It's a teacher/student relationship. It's not over familiar but you get to know them well. You talk to the parents on the phone, you talk to the kids a lot, you know what's going on in their lives. If there is something concerning them it comes out quickly and easily and gets dealt with too. It's a lot more caring and there's a lot more family feel to it.

A Year 10 student described the development of positive, nurturing relationships within the TA program as an acculturation process:

> The Year 7s come in and try to assert themselves with fights and swearing and they think "I've got to prove myself" then they get over it and it gets better. I think that is because in primary school the teachers are the authority figure whereas in high school the teachers are still an authority figure but they are more like your mates or something. They still have to keep you on track but it is more your own responsibility.

Themes of belonging and aspiration recurred in the students-as-researchers (SAR) component of the study. When asked to depict their perspectives on the purpose of the TA group the students proposed:

> TA group makes me feel confident. I can fly like an eagle. I am flying towards the future. I am strong and free.

Figure 11.1. Students' perspectives of the positive outcomes of the TA group

STUDENT AGENCY

The nature of student agency is complex and unclear in most school contexts. On the one hand, students' developing confidence in their own abilities to solve problems in life and learning contexts occurs over time and is mediated through life and school experiences. In the TA program, the students examined information about their own learning attributes. They explored dreams, ambitions and set goals. Networks of friendships and collegial relationships supported their efforts through successes and challenges. On the other hand, however, the agency that students developed through their interactions in the TA group, the school, community and their peers was constrained by factors that, in some cases, were beyond their control. We have already acknowledged the influences that poverty and unemployment have on limiting student choices. We now need to consider the balance between developing student agency and activating a responsive school system where students have a say in determining learning pathways and decision-making processes that suit their own strengths, interests and abilities.

Bland (2006) and others (Keeffe, 2007; Keeffe & Andrews, 2014) claimed that students-as-researchers (SAR) projects could create an empowering voice for students to have a say about their own learning contexts. The SAR project conducted in this study provided a framework for students to critically reflect on the TA program and to provide the researchers with a level of insight into students' perspectives on the purpose, nature and conduct of the TA group. Eight Year 10 students (community leaders) met each week for one semester to develop and implement a research design that would allow them to investigate students' perspectives of the TA program. After a researcher-facilitated discussion about the purpose of research the SAR students determined the following research questions:

- What are the advantages of the TA program?
- What are the barriers to participation?
- How do students experience voice and choice through the TA curriculum?

The SAR group decided on a research design that included four phases:

1. Peer interviews identified the scope and possible issues for investigation. This involved a broad discussion about the strengths and difficulties associated with the TA group.
2. Four focus group interviews with 12 students randomly selected from each of the 4 learning neighbourhoods (48 students). The notion of garnering student perspectives from students who were not fully engaged with school activities was an important consideration for the SAR group.
3. Photo elicitation of the recurring themes in the focus groups. SAR students used their phones and flip cameras to identify photographic symbols of the components of the TA program.
4. An analysis and discussion day at the university. This involved: explaining the symbolic representations in the photos; clustering the photos into themes; and

> presenting the summary photographic clusters to the SAR group for discussion. The discussion about positive aspects of the TA group, improvements that could be made, and students understanding of their own sphere of influence through the TA group were summarised and coded by consensual opinion.

The SAR students demonstrated quality leadership and respect during the focus groups. They made the groups feel comfortable and confident that their opinions would be valued. They asked broad questions of the group and specific questions of individuals and pursued topics as students raised different issues. They sought clarification when unsure of the students' perspectives. During the post focus group discussion the SAR students offered interpretations from the insights they had in connection with the broad student experience. Their findings informed the photo elicitation phase of the SAR project.

The SAR group summarised the advantages of the TA program in terms of an embedded level of trust and respect between the teachers and students and between the peers in each group. This resulted in a feeling of safety and an appreciation of the diverse needs, backgrounds, talents, interests and difficulties of everyone in the group. Discussions about contentious topics in the TA group (high risk behaviours, bullying, arguments, friendships) led to the expression of personal beliefs and reflections, but it was in the daily sharing of time, school and personal issues that the students developed an understanding of the complex lives they each shared in some way. One student explained:

> We are all different but we all get on. It is not so much that we like each other like friends but we respect each other. We would pretty much just go nuts if we had to go straight into school.

It seems that this level of respect and support provided the safe environment to help students cope with the challenges of school. The timeliness of the TA session at the beginning of the day provided a social connection that was distinct from difficulties they experienced at home and it also helped to get students organised for learning. As Ben (Year 9) explained, "She (TA) sees if I have a pen or if I have done my homework. Yeah, she sort of gets me ready".

The students suggested that some activities within the TA program needed review. Students requested fewer worksheets, more activity, more challenging and interesting activities that involved sport, music, Youtube or DVDs, and they would have liked more say in the TA process, school decisions and learning pathways. Students at the SAR debrief offered the following overview of student voice:

> I think you have to know that at this school, if a kid has something to say they will say it. You speak your mind. We know that people will listen to us. I don't think the Year 7's know that because they have too much of the cliché stuck in their heads about this school (negative) even though it is nothing like that.

Positive aspects of the TA group included images of: belonging, risk, safety, respect, encouragement, friendships, sharing, future oriented, and decision making. Barriers to participation in the TA group included: boredom, repetition, lack of relevance, not enough time to explore some issues, and the negative influence of a selfish or narrow minded teacher.

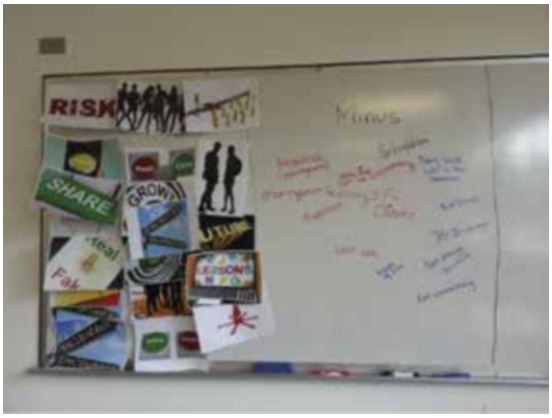

Figure 11.2. SAR student summary of TA positives and negatives on university feedback day

CONTENTIONS WITH AUTHENTIC STUDENT VOICE

The SAR feedback provided a strong affirmation of the supportive culture that the TA groups created within the school. Student identified barriers and challenges that were largely operational as students wanted a more relevant, engaging and embodied approach to the learning activities. While the participation of all students in the focus group, interviews and students-as-researchers project was insightful and informed, the unspoken boundaries of student decision making, as argued by Lodge (2005), could still be identified, particularly as they related to links with learning. Students were still locked into set learning pathways that were limited by the difficulties they experienced in core subjects rather than the strengths they had in other subject areas. The systemic problems of encouraging students to know and understand themselves as learners must be fully supported by more flexible approaches to curriculum and study or career pathways. This problem extends beyond the students, the TA group, and the school culture to political possibilities for further education. One student explained:

> I am not real good at school but I do like cooking. I plan all my own menus and cost them out and my teacher challenges me with different tasks just like Master Chef. I would rather do cooking than any other subject at school. I like coming to school on the days I have cooking.

Student voice in decision-making is another area of concern identified in this study. Professional development in recognising levels of student voice (Hart, 1997) was not able to change the practices of a student council that made arbitrary decisions about student involvement. Authentic participation in decision-making with regard to their own learning and school policies that influenced their own destinies was an ongoing developmental task for the school leadership. On the ethics involved with an understanding of authenticity, Taylor (1991) alerts us to three conundrums that can inform our understanding of the success, or otherwise of the TA group experience.

A significant challenge in establishing an authentic student voice can be the pressure within school cultures for conformity to long-established norms. The SARs were able to assert the balance that existed between recognition of their own value and worth alongside the cultural and life-long aims of the TA group and its links with school culture, the community and their futures. The structure of the TA program progressed from a personalised focus on individual identity to a community awareness of roles and responsibilities. Students gradually realised that they had more to gain from belonging to the wider community culture of the school than by trying to argue against its norms. They aspired to belong because they felt safe and respected in such a community. It gave the students a sense of higher purpose. They believed that their friendships were lifelong and the school was a better place because they contributed to its culture. The conformity of consensual identity has many strengths for those students who belonged. Our evidence did not 'find' the opinions of those who struggled to belong to the school culture even when we actively sought those opinions. However, the school needs to be alert to the possibility that some students will find such loyalty confronting and will choose not to belong.

A further challenge to authenticity in student voice and experience is the economic rationale that underpins school policy and design. Perhaps the greatest costs to the school in initiating and progressing the TA program were the changed expectations of the role of the teachers and the time commitment the program demanded in order to make a contribution of strategic importance. Each year the school had to justify continuing the program against a raft of centrist priorities and requirements. It was an annual argument to justify the time and effort required to maintain the program's integrity. Issues that recurred included: induction of new staff; active student participation; local needs; and reflection on feedback. The TA group would not be as effective if the structures of support were not readily available to students who experience a crisis, yet, due to financial constraints, the roles of counselor, nurse and career advisor were constantly rationalised. To address the perceived vulnerability of these services, the school developed a strong network of community interactions to promote shared responsibilities and student engagement. The issue of flexible learning pathways is an ongoing national accreditation problem in which Ironbark College has an active and respected voice.

A final challenge for authenticity in student involvement in their own learning futures involves the political agenda as it relates to poverty, unemployment, abuse and neglect. Our understanding of authentic student voice leads us to believe

that students will be empowered to make informed decisions about their own life circumstances and learning futures. The aims of the TA program linked a critical awareness of the students' own life circumstances with choices they could make about study, careers and life-long learning. However, while the TA program at Ironbark College was imbued with admirable intentions, the reality of present and future options for many of their students were not as positive. Unemployment and various contentious issues that the school has minimal control over will remain a recurring theme in the community. It is commendable that the TA group provides an influential life experience in a safe environment but the contention remains: Will the student's self-awareness and learning skills be robust and resilient enough to help them through a lifetime of challenges and opportunities?

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