Engaging the early adolescent: What do stakeholders say about the *Keeping Kids Engaged in School* program?

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The level of engagement of students in schooling has long been associated with the type of educational outcomes achieved. This relationship is very apparent during early adolescence. It is during this developmental period that young people navigate the transition between primary and secondary school and may disengage from schooling. The Imagined Futures' *Keeping Kids Engaged in School* program is an intervention program designed to promote early adolescent students' desire to stay connected with school. The research explored how students and their parents/caregivers, and key school informants from four participating Government schools in Western Australia perceived the program. Two forms of qualitative data were collected from four focus group interviews with 24 students in Years 5 to 8 who had participated in the program and one-to-one interviews with five of their parents/caregivers and five key school informant staff members. Results indicated that participants from all four schools strongly endorsed the value of the program. The research had a particular focus on honouring the voices of the young people to whom the program was directed. It is their endorsement of the program that is of particular import.

Introduction

Victor Hugo famously stated that "… he who opens a school door, closes a prison" (Google Books, n.d.). The Imagined Futures' *Keeping Kids Engaged in School* program is an early intervention approach designed to facilitate early adolescents' desire to stay at school, foster their sense of belonging, build resilience, and support their transition to, and engagement with, high school. The program began in 2014 in schools in the Perth's (Western Australia) south metropolitan region and was initially developed after extensive consultation with young people about what would "make school cool". Principles of co-design were central to program delivery with students and teaching staff driving program content to ensure the program was tailored to the differing contexts of each school.

The purpose of this research was to ascertain how the Imagined Futures' *Keeping Kids Engaged in School* program was perceived by stakeholders: the students, parents/caregivers and key school informants from four schools participating in the program in 2021. The focus was to provide an opportunity for stakeholders to share their perceptions and, most importantly, to honour student voice. That is, to give students for whom the program had been devised, an opportunity to express their experiences and opinions.

School engagement and the early adolescent

Akey (2006) defined student engagement as "the level of participation and intrinsic interest that a student shows in school (where) engagement in schoolwork involves both behaviors (such as persistence, effort, attention) and attitudes (such as motivation, positive learning values, enthusiasm, interest pride in success)" (p. 3). Akey argued that students who are engaged explore activities, both within and external to the classroom, which promote success or learning. Such students exhibit a sense of "curiosity, a desire to learn, and positive emotional responses to learning and school" (Akey, 2006, p. 13). Implicit in Akey's (2006) definition are three elements of engagement – behavioural, emotional and cognitive. Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) provide further insight into these three elements. Behavioural engagement involves the degree of effort and commitment shown by the student as well as their general level of compliance with school expectations. Emotional engagement is more affective in nature and is extant in the relationships with teachers and peers and attitudes to school. Cognitive engagement is a more "covert" (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010, p. 11) element of engagement and involves elements of meta-cognition, self-regulation and investment in learning. For a student to be cognitively engaged, they need to satisfy the pre-conditions for behavioural and emotional engagement. In other words, they need to be both present in class as well as experiencing a sense of social connectedness and safety (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010).

Students in early adolescence are at particular risk of disengaging from school with the middle years being identified as a time when students' motivation for and engagement in school may decline (Pendergast et al, 2017). Such disengagement manifests in a number of ways, including non-attendance at school, poor behaviour and failure to participate in and complete classwork tasks (Pendergast et al, 2017). Hascher and Hagenauer (2010) also pointed to the noticeable decrease in student achievement in the middle years as well as the widening gap between the low and high achievers. Given the long-term implications at both a personal and societal level of students' failure to complete school (Hancock & Zubrick, 2015), programs that seek to facilitate student engagement are important. Indeed, Hancock and Zubrick (2015) noted that intergenerational persistence of disadvantage is an outcome of student disengagement from school.

McGee et al. (2003) found that there was a very strong link between students who experienced difficulties in transitioning between primary and secondary school, and the likelihood of disengaging from education. Transition from primary to secondary schooling, whilst considered a rite of passage (Coffey, 2013) by many students, can also impact student wellbeing and their ongoing future achievement (West et al., 2010). Pendergast et al. (2018) also pointed out that transition has been shown to impact students socially and academically and that these impacts are greater for those students already at risk of disengaging from school. These authors concluded that "nurturing a sense of belonging in school is positively associated with the retention of students who are at-risk of dropping out of school" (p. 17). Thus, strategies that promote school belonging are critical to keeping potentially at-risk adolescents at school.

Aim and research question

The aim of the research was to ascertain how the Imagined Futures' *Keeping Kids Engaged in School* program impacts the participating students. The research question underpinning this project is: What is the impact of the Imagined Futures' *Keeping Kids Engaged in School* program on students' engagement at school with particular emphasis on student voice?

Context

Founded in 2014, Imagined Futures is a collective impact partnership sustained by a local community support centre. The partnership brings together human service agencies, businesses, philanthropists and community members. The aim is to tackle complex social issues (Imagined Futures, 2021, para. 7) across the local government areas of Cockburn, Fremantle and Melville within the Perth metropolitan region.

Keeping Kids Engaged in School is the flagship program for the Imagined Futures' Youth Initiative Working Group, a sub-group of the Imagined Futures partnership. The Working Group members commit resources, knowledge, and experience to addressing challenges experienced by young people. The Western Australian Government includes the program as a prominent example in its compilation of "District Leadership Groups" (Western Australian Government, 2023).

The knowledge and expertise of members of the Working Group was instrumental in informing the decisions regarding which schools to approach. Efforts were made to ensure the program would address gaps in services and supports for vulnerable students and not duplicate existing programs. Schools servicing more disadvantaged communities, and experiencing higher levels of non-attendance, were selected to be invited to participate in the project.

In primary schools the program is delivered weekly, in approximately one-hour sessions in a normal school day, over a full year. Numbers of participants vary between 15 to 25 students. It is focused on leadership and resilience-building and targets students from Years 4 to 6 (ages 9-11 years of age). The students at each school name the program to build a sense of ownership. In high schools the program emphasises leadership and mentoring. The program is called "Change Champions". It targets students from Years 7 to 9 (ages 12-14 years) and is delivered in Terms 3 and 4. As part of the program, mentoring and transition support is provided to Year 4 to 6 students in feeder primary schools. Program participants are identified by key school personnel based on their potential for disengagement from school. Such factors as absenteeism, poor behaviour, and low achievement were taken into consideration but were not the sole determinant of selection. Rather, students who key personnel believed would benefit from participation in the program were chosen.

The program is led by one of the Imagined Futures partners in each school, with each partner drawing upon collective resources. A partner is a member of a working group.

Partners can be representatives from government agencies, research institutes, community agencies, businesses or be local community members. In the case of the *Keeping Kids Engaged in School* program it was mainly community agency and local government representatives delivering the program.

There were four schools involved in this research, drawn from the Department of Education Western Australia. Three of the schools were primary schools and one was a senior high school. These schools are designated at school A, B, C and D respectively.

Research design

The research design underpinning this study was constructivist in nature. The constructivist approach to research is based on understanding the world of human experience and is typically seen as an approach to qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This constructivist research used interpretivism as the theoretical perspective incorporating a symbolic interactionist lens. The aim of interpretive social science is to understand the complex world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who live it (Neuman, 2006). Essential to the notion of symbolic interactionism, a specific theoretical perspective within interpretive social science, is the positioning of oneself in the setting of those being studied, of considering situations from the viewpoint of "the actor". Symbolic interactionism directs investigators to take, to the best of their ability, the standpoint of those studied (Crotty, 1998). Consistent with symbolic interactionism, this study sought to explore the impact of The Imagined Futures' *Keeping Kids Engaged in School* program on student engagement through the experiences and ideas of students, parents and key school staff associated with the program.

The chosen methodology of qualitative content analysis provided a vehicle for analysing the data collected in the one-to-one and focus group interviews through a process of "identifying, coding and categorizing the primary patterns of the data" (Patton, 1990, p. 381). This process involved six stages or phases: familiarisation with the data; generation of initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; and producing the report. Specifically, the researchers reviewed the data from the fifteen interview transcripts and independently identified emergent themes. The final themes were settled following several iterative sweeps of the data and consensus between the researchers.

Participants

Participants in this research fell into one of three categories: key school informants (nominated by the school principal), students, and parents/caregivers. There were six key school informants: a principal, two deputy principals, two teachers and a mental health program coordinator. A total of 24 students participated, five secondary students and nineteen primary students. All participants in the program were approached by the key informant to participate in the research. Finally, five parents/caregivers responded to the invitation to participate in the research. A distribution of participants per school is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Distribution of participants per school

School	School informant	Students	Parent/caregiver
A	1	10	2
B	3	6	1
C	1	3	1
D	1	5	1

Data collection

A total of eleven one-to-one interviews occurred with the six key school informants and five parent/guardians. On average, these interviews went for 40 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded with permission and subsequently transcribed. The four focus group student interviews ranged from 20 to 30 minutes. These interviews were also audio recorded with permission and transcribed. All fifteen interviews occurred on the respective school sites for the convenience of participants. The focus groups and semi-structured interviews focused primarily on gathering information pertaining to barriers to school engagement, factors that promote school engagement, the impact of the Imagined Futures Program on the participants and, aspects of the program that could be improved. A research assistant was employed to conduct and audio record each of the fifteen interviews. Ethical approval to conduct the research was obtained from the University of Notre Dame Australian Human Research Ethics Committee as well as the Education Department of Western Australia. The research was conducted at the University of Notre Dame Australia.

Results

The results from the semi-structured interviews conducted in the four participating schools will be presented from the students, parents/caregivers and key informants respectively.

Students

The students were asked questions with respect to the length of their participation in the program, aspects of the program they liked, how they felt they had been impacted by their participation in the program and aspects of the program they recommended be changed. In each of the four schools the response from the students was overwhelmingly positive and there was considerable similarity in the responses of the students to the interview questions. An overview of student responses is presented in Table 2.

In three of the schools the program is known by a distinctive name and students could easily identify the program – Ideas Hunters (School A), Rocketeers (School C) and Change Champions (School D). In School B the students did not know the name of the program but chose to call it "Leadership". Length of involvement in the program varied from several years to having just commenced earlier in the year. It was evident from the student responses that they were enjoying and valued their participation in the program.

Table 2: Student responses

Themes	Great variety of activities
	Ability to share emotions in a safe environment
	Opportunities to make friends
	Develop teamwork and communication
	Develop a healthier lifestyle
	Positive adult facilitators
	Positive change: being happier, less negative, increased confidence, improved school attendance

For example, one student expressed their sadness at having to leave the program when they moved to high school saying that they would "miss all the fun we had and all the emotion we write down on our piece of paper."

The students were quick to identify the central features of the program with several key themes emerging across the schools. Firstly, there was great variety in the activities undertaken and being out of the regular classroom, students had the opportunity to do different things and have a degree of influence over what they did. Another theme expressed across the four schools was that students had the capacity to share emotions. Students expressed the capacity to "talk about feelings", "let feelings out" and "express feelings without judgement." Closely related to the notion of emotion was the capacity to develop a sense of gratitude. Underpinning such statements was a third theme whereby children felt safe to express emotions to peers with whom they did not normally associate. One student (School B) summed this up with the comment that "it's a place where you can share your feelings, but feel safe saying it." Students at School C referred to the location in which the program took place as a 'calming area'. The following comments were also noted: "it lets you express your feelings without anyone judging you and it's not gonna go anywhere (School D); "I like being in a space where no one's gonna put you down about anything that you do, and it's a way to talk about those things." (School B).

Also noted by the students was the way the program provided opportunities to get to know other students and make friends. In so doing students could identify that this opportunity provided the chance for them to use teamwork and cooperation and develop their communication skills. These skills are important elements of leadership and in Schools B and D a strong theme to emerge was the manner in which participation in the program developed students' leadership skills. As noted above, students at School B referred to the program as Leadership. For students in the secondary school, the ability to mentor younger students in the Rocketeers program at a nearby primary school was noted as a feature of leadership skill development.

Across all four schools a further theme was the notion of the program helping the participants develop a healthier lifestyle. Food was frequently mentioned as a major feature of the program. On some occasions food was provided and in others, the students prepared the food. Students appreciated the opportunity to eat healthy food with one saying "we have smoothies and fruit bowls, and the watermelon and … strawberries"

(School A). Another commented that "it tastes really good in the end and I wanted to eat more healthy because it tastes nice." Physical health, primarily through the boxing program in School D featured strongly in the comments from students as a positive aspect of the program. The following comments are typical of those made by students at School D: "The boxing … you're not just learning how to. You can feel like really angry or something and you can just get all your anger out by punching into one of the pads or something. It's a good way of getting your anger out if you need to"; "if you're feeling emotional you can just take it out on the pads, not at people." The notion of an improvement in their mental health was also mentioned by some students. For example, a student from School D noted that the boxing program had assisted them in a number of ways:

> Well, I like it how we have boxing and all the mentally healthy stuff, 'cos we're being
> healthy with our minds, but we're also being healthy with our bodies. And all that
> together just makes it better.

A final feature of the program that students identified was the facilitators who ran the program. These people were described in positive terms by the students. For example, a student from School D noted that one of the best features of the program were "the staff who help run the program, because they make you have fun but also feel safe at the same time". A student from School B stated that "there's not much negative energy" and another commented that "I like how no one's telling off anyone; … there's styles of people and if there's something bad, she's not – the teacher's not going to force them to do it."

To develop a sense of students' perceptions of the program's impact on them, they were asked whether they had changed due to their participation. Several themes were evident. One of the most significant was students perceiving that their ability to regulate their emotions had improved. Given that many respondents had indicated that the program was strongly centred around helping them express emotions, it is perhaps not surprising that comments would be made about the impact on their emotions. Students frequently commented about being much happier, a better friend, changing the way they react to things and being not so 'cranky'. Typical of the comments was the following from a student at School C who said that "I was actually a bit, like, always upset, disappointed, angry with people before I started Rocketeers". A student from School D stated that "Before Change Champions, when I was angry or mad at someone I used to yell at them, like yell my emotions. But since being in the program, I've learnt how to respectfully voice my opinions and emotions without yelling". A student from School B noted that:

> I learnt that I used to be a very sad girl, but as I go there, I started getting happy, and my
> feeling started changing as I was writing my feelings on a piece of paper, and now that
> I'm looking back on that piece of paper, thinking how much I changed from them.

Frequently students alluded to being less negative in their disposition along with being much nicer to others. One student commented that they were "kinder to teachers." Related to the capacity to recognise and regulate their emotions a student from School B

stated that having the facilitators from the program gave them "someone to talk to if I'm feeling down, and the other people that I don't know can help me too and cheer me up." A student from School C expressed the change that they had noted quite simply stating that "I just have a bad attitude before I came to this, but my attitude has changed completely." The following comment from a student from School B perhaps best summarises the sentiments across the focus groups: "I think I've made a very impressive mood change. I'm better at being a leader, I need to be more mindful of people's feelings and stuff, and it's taught me to be a really good friend."

Another theme evident from student responses was that they have developed confidence and were now less shy. A student from School B noted that along with being not so negative and nicer to people, they were "more confident to speak in front of people that I don't really know." Coming out of their comfort zone was also mentioned by the students. A student from School D stated that they were "not that quiet anymore. Like, I used to be that person that sits in the corner, and now I'm out in the world." The program provided opportunities for the students to engage in new and challenging activities but in a safe and supported environment. In so doing they had expanded their social network by making new friends. A concomitant aspect of the development of their personal skills, as noted previously, was several students indicating that participation in the program had make them a better leader.

Some students commented that their attendance and performance at school had improved. For example, one student from School C stated that "I'm usually here every single Thursday. When I [ever have] a sore tummy or something I don't come [but now] I tell my Mum, "I need to go because I have Rocketeers today." Further, another student stated that "I wanted to go to school more, because I found that it was really fun and I enjoy it a lot" (School A). A student from School D commented that "Like if I'm feeling sad, I'm like, oh, Thursday I've got Change Champions" and would be motivated to go to school. A student from School D stated that "I used to never study, and now I study. And my grades have gone higher, like a lot higher." Along similar lines a student from School A noted that being part of the program had "taught me how to think more lateral, so I become a better thinker now, so I can solve more problems and things."

Students were asked to identify the aspects of the program that they would like to change. Most students indicated that there was little that needed to be changed in the program. Of those who did make suggestions most recommended having more time for the program, more food, more projects (School A) and adjusting the time of day in which it ran. Inherent in these comments was the sense that the students were satisfied with their participation in the program and were keen to see it continue. A student from School B commented that "I think it should keep going. Well, yes, because it's a place where, if you want to get it off your back and you don't want to talk to any of your friends it's a good place to go." The notion of a break from the complexity of the school day underpins this statement. Another student from School B stated that they would like to continue because "normally I don't like coming home when I'm not happy, and I come home [after the program] and I'm happy and joyful." The students felt that the program that ran in their

school offered enjoyment, the chance to do new and different things, and to be in a safe environment with other students.

Parents/caregivers

Parents/caregivers were asked questions about their knowledge of the program, what aspects of the program were working or not working, any changes they had noted in their child and whether they wanted their child to continue it the program. Levels of knowledge about the program varied but tended to be minimal. Some parents/caregivers indicated that they had direct contact from the school. For example a parent/caregiver from School C noted that:

> [Name]'s teacher spoke to me about it at first and asked if I'd like to be a part of it, explained vaguely what it was about, how it would help not only [name] but the school and other kids, and then I got a letter back a couple of weeks ago just wanting us to sign up and be a part of it.

In contrast other parents/caregivers indicated that they had minimal or no information about the program and had received no information from the school. One parent from School B commented that they would "like a bit more information about the program, and why my child's involved in it and just what the purpose of it is." Communication of this type of information was deemed important by the parents. Another commented: "I think as a parent, it would be nice to get a newsletter or maybe like an information sheet: 'this week we're doing this' or 'this is what your child will be doing'". This person remarked further, "I obviously ask him what he is doing, and I get little bits and pieces, but I don't get all the fine details."

Despite this lack of information each of the five participating parents/caregivers noted that their child was enjoying the program and benefitting from their participation. One parent from School B commented that:

> He seems to really enjoy it. He always speaks positively about it. I think the food aspect helps with that too. He always looks forward to what they're going to eat each week. But yeah, he enjoys the discussions and I think he enjoys that… not specialist but being selected to be involved with it.

Given that many of the parents/caregivers lamented that their child did not share a great deal with them, it is interesting to note the positive tenor of the comments made about the program. One parent/caregiver (School C) indicated that they always knew the day their child would be involved in the program as their child would say "I can't be late today, I've got to go to Rocketeers; Rocketeers is on today." Overall, the feedback from parents/caregivers about their child's participation was positive.

When asked whether they had noted any change in their child since their participation in the program, all parents/caregivers were able to cite positive examples. Many noted how their child's confidence had improved and that the children saw themselves as special for having been selected for the program. A parent/caregiver from School D stated that:

> I see him working harder, because I know he misses out on a little bit of schoolwork, and it makes him a bit more diligent during that particular term, because he knows he has to catch up and I think that he fears that if he doesn't hold a good grade then he's going to have to leave the group.

Moving to secondary school can be a daunting experience for many young adolescents. A parent/caregiver from School D noted that participation in Change Champions had been of great benefit for their child:

> When he first started Year 7, he was very, very nervous and he was petrified of high school. He even had a couple of times when he had some teary moments at school. He had this warped perception of school, and he felt like everyone was going to bash him.

This parent/caregiver commended further that the boy really felt unsafe until:

> ... he did this [Change Champions] and he definitely came out a much better, stronger child. I think some of that's him maturing as well, and just getting used to the environment and growing up, but I did see a big difference after this program. I think it's a very… it's a nice comfortable, safe environment for him.

The parents, as noted in their comments above, had indicated that participation in the program had assisted their children in their social skills and that they had made new friends. A parent from School C affirmed this notion with the comment: "He doesn't get along great with kids. He's been brought up around a lot of adults and hasn't had a lot of contact with kids, and he finds it really hard to have friends." This parent remarked, "Going to Rocketeers, even though they are co-students that he goes to school within a regular class, he seems to fit with them better in Rocketeers." These sentiments were also echoed by a parent/caregiver from School B who noted:

> I definitely noted a big change in [name] this year. Whether the program is part of that ... I'm sure it has contributed. So last year, he had significant anxiety issues and it was a real struggle to get him to go to school, and he just kind of lacks a bit of confidence and struggling a bit. But this year we've seen him… really happy to go to school, we've seen a lot of confidence in hi … that attitude of wanting to be a leader and wanting to take on… we've noticed more confidence in him.

A parent/caregiver from School A noted that the opportunity for their child to do more 'hands-on' activities and being out of a regular classroom environment helped them to thrive.

Whilst the parent/caregivers were able to identify specific changes in their child, they were less able to identify specific features of the program but rather general things that their children had mentioned. The following comment from a parent/caregiver from School D typified the terms in which parent/caregivers responded to the question about what their child had shared with them about the program: "Whatever he's getting out of it, he feels like he's accomplishing something."

Parents/caregivers were also asked whether they wanted their children to continue in the program. The responses were unanimously positive. An interviewee from School A stated that, "I think it's been great for him, and I'd really love my daughter to be in it next year if she can. This interviewee continued:

> I've had five boys beforehand, and I wish they were in it if there were such a thing before. I think that it's really beneficial, especially – well, for my boy it has been, and I think for my other five boys it would've been as well.

Because of their limited understanding of what the program entailed, parent/caregivers had more difficulty making suggestions as to how the program could be improved. Parent/caregivers did note that their children were more likely to discuss what had occurred in the program rather than other facets of the school day. It was suggested that some sort of 'showcase' be conducted whereby students would have the opportunity to show what they had learnt. A parent from School D stated that "it would be nice for the kids to be able to go 'this is what we've been doing, this is what we've achieved, and this is what we've been focusing on'." Interestingly, the notion of a showcase was put to the students who overwhelmingly voiced their apprehension at the idea of having to 'perform' in front of others. Parents could see value in their child's participation and even though they were missing regular class time, the children were not falling behind in their schoolwork. For one parent/caregiver from School C, Rocketeers was an extremely important part of the school week for their child. The program had assisted the development of their child's social skills and ability to focus in class and, as such, was an important adjunct to the sessions with the School Psychologist.

Key informants

Data from the key informants denoted five themes: reasons for offering the Imagined Futures program; features within the program students appreciated; aspects of the program that were working well; improvement in the engagement of students because of the program; and areas for improvement. Staff from the four schools suggested very similar reasons as to why they offered the Imagined Futures program at their schools. They targeted students who they believed were at "educational risk" and "social and emotional risk". They looked at children who were struggling with their resilience, coping mechanisms, friendships and perhaps difficult home-life.

Key informants raised a range of program features they believed resonated with the students. These included the children being empowered to develop ideas to make the school better, the notion of student voice and giving the students ownership for the program. One key informant suggested the sense of togetherness and being able to work as a team. Another key informant commented that "a lot of these kids are sort of shy and need some genuine help with public speaking" which the program provided. Yet another key informant highlighted the opportunity for the students to share and gain some "emotional literacy" around what resilience is and what it looks like., One key informant identified the informal nature of the program, that the program was "very personable". This key informant commented favourably that "we've got Palmerston sexual health

quarter, Headspace and Young Boxing Women's programs". In particular, the key informant believed the students "love the boxing, even the scared students love that side".

Staff noted various elements when asked what aspects of the program were working well. One key informant commented positively on the selection of staff running the program. As this person observed, "you can have a really good program, but if it is not implemented well, then you might as well not have the program to begin with". This point was reiterated by a second key informant who stated, "I think the people they have sent have been excellent". Another key informant highlighted the social skills taught in the sessions, for example "the little things such as food-taking, manners, emotional regulation and self-regulation". This person also remarked that "fun would've been a factor". Other comments included group activities, building friendships, deciding on how to spend the time, the hands-on nature of the program, and the food. As one participant noted, "food is a real drawcard for our students. A lot of them don't bring food to school, they don't bring money to school".

Key informants were strong in their belief that they had seen improvement in the engagement of the students. One key informant highlighted a student "who had improved drastically in terms of confidence, in terms of taking calculated risks". As that person remarked, "I think Imagined Futures has definitely supported that student in terms of what they've been learning in the program". Another key informant mentioned two students, one who "made great strides in his confidence and willingness to have a go at things". The other student "went from being quite an anxious, shy person to definitely showing more confidence". There was also the observation that students in the program tended to come to school more. All key informants were unanimous that they would maintain the program in the coming years.

The main issue key informants believed needed changing or improving was greater clarity behind Imagined Futures. As one key informant remarked, "the end goal is fantastic, but how we get there is a little blurred for me". Linked with this comment was the idea that there needs to be more structures in place "to allow that bit of flexibility to work with what the school wants". Other key informants commented, that as teachers, they would like to know the program's objectives, focus and overarching goal for the term. As one person observed, "I was really blindfolded in terms of what was happening".

Overall, key informants had the feeling that parents probably did not have a strong idea about the Imagined Futures program, similarly "to many activities at school". One key informant, however, remarked that "I do know that the kids have been talking about it more with the parents". Key informants believed it was an area for both the School and the Program organisers to address.

Discussion

The success of the programs in each of the four schools is evident from the perspectives provided by students, parent/caregivers and key informants. One of the key features of the *Keeping Kids Engaged in Schools* program is that it is not a 'one size fits all' approach.

Instead, the program is able to evolve organically to serve the needs of the particular students in each of the participating schools. The students could clearly identify with the program and were proud to be involved. Common features of the programs in the schools were the provision of food, regular timeslot each week, program facilitators with whom the students could relate and a variety of different activities. In this way, the program unfolded differently in the different schools with a title that was unique to that school. Being co-designers in the program enables the students to develop a sense of ownership and purpose (Durl, et al., 2017). Indeed, including young people in decision-making is acknowledged as integral to their rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989).

All three groups of stakeholders identified similar benefits of participation in the program. Students were developing enhanced interpersonal and social skills (becoming better friends, were kinder to others and better able to communicate), were better equipped to manage their emotions, learned healthy lifestyle habits and attended school more frequently. It is noteworthy that the students were able to identify how they had changed and grown through their participation in the program. These social and emotional skills do not develop naturally, but rather are nurtured through the provision of safe and supportive environments. Main and Pendergast (2017) pointed out that social skills are "competencies and not character traits" (p. 51) The students, through a focus on working together in groups, developed a keen sense of cohesion and 'mateship' from their participation. This sense of working together then impacted other facets of their lives. The transference of the social skill development to their everyday lives is a strength of the program and may contribute to a stronger sense of well-being.

Another important skill that students developed through participation in the program was their contribution to the determination of the 'projects' that were undertaken. In other words, they were the co-designers of the activities. This fact may have led to the difficulties that students had in identifying aspects of the program that needed improvement. Having a strong sense of 'ownership' made it somewhat difficult to name aspects that could be changed. Gillett-Swan (2020) observed that young adolescents are best placed to speak about the impacts on their own lives and it is the insights of young people that should be utilised by teachers and other school personnel when making decisions about implementing different programs within the school.

The development of resilience is a key challenge during early adolescent years yet the decline in resilience during this period of development is evident (Main & Pendergast, 2017). Fuller and Wicking (2016) noted that during early adolescence too many students feel disconnected, alienated and disengaged as well as failing to apply the capabilities that they have. The students were clearly able to identify that they had developed a capacity to come out of their comfort zone when participating in the program. However, they were able to try new things in an environment in which they felt safe and that they would not be judged. Duell and Steinberg (2019) highlighted three features of what they term positive risk taking. These features include the overall benefit to the well-being of the student, the mild nature of the risk and the social acceptability of the risk. Within the confines of the program the students were able to step out of their comfort zone and take

a risk. The consistency of attendance at the program – same time, same place, same classmates and same facilitators – is a contributor to the development of a safe environment where students are free to take risks. The creation of such an environment is not accidental and must be carefully crafted. Developing group cohesion and 'norms' for participation in the activities takes time. The importance of the facilitators in each of the schools in fostering a sense of safety cannot be underestimated. Virtue (2019) noted the importance of positive relationships with peers and teachers in helping young adolescents "develop a sense of responsibility, identity development, making a difference, and authentically engaging in one's environment" (p. 162). The commitment of the schools in creating time each week for the program is noteworthy. It can sometimes be the case that 'extra-curricular' programs can be targeted when time needs to be found for more 'regular' school activities.

Whilst not necessarily attributing all of the observed changes in their children to the programs, parents/caregivers acknowledged the benefits of their child's participation in the program. Indeed, their children were more likely to talk about what they had done today in their program rather than other aspects of their school day, which opens up important channels for communication. Parents/caregivers were keen to receive more information about the program, so it is recommended that each school look to address how more information can be better shared with the parents/caregivers. Whilst parents/caregivers would like to see some type of 'showcase' of the program, students were not so keen to see this happen. It is recommended consulting with the students about alternative means of showing to their parents what they had learnt or produced. It was clear from the student interviews that students felt a sense of pride in their accomplishments. They certainly did not feel that they had been withdrawn from regular classes for a particular 'deficit.' The following comment from a student from School D perhaps typifies student sentiments: 'I would love to continue doing it. It's like no other program I've ever done. It's different; it makes me actually feel safe and lets me actually express myself.'

Potential knowledge added to the field centres on those key features of the program contributing to its uniqueness which are related to the design principles upon which it is founded – collective impact, place-based, co-design, strengths-based and relationship-based. These principles provide a key platform for schools to develop programs that would assist in keeping students at school and engaged in their learning. Empowering young people to have a voice in the design and running of the program is important and has been noted above. This empowerment fosters important skills of communication (including listening), compromise, conflict resolution and reflection. Based upon feedback from each of the stakeholder groups, these skills were clearly nourished by the students' participation. For schools contemplating either the development or implementation of similar programs, opportunities for students to co-design the program are important. Similarly, the use of skilled facilitators who can work effectively with young adolescents is important. As noted above, the development of a safe space does not occur by accident. The students enjoyed their interaction with the program facilitators and, working together, were able to create an environment much larger than 'the sum of the parts.'

Limitations

There were two main limitations to the research. Firstly, to protect anonymity, no demographic information was collected concerning the schools and from the participants. This fact may well impact on the understanding of participant experiences. Secondly, although student voice was a focus of the research and a good number (24 students) participated in the study, the small number of parents/caregivers (5) and school key informants (6) who participated places a potential limitation on generalisability.

Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to ascertain how the Imagined Futures *Keeping Kids Engaged in School* program was perceived by stakeholders – students, parents/caregivers and key informants from each school. In a special way, it was to honour student voice and provide an opportunity for students to provide feedback about facets of the *Keeping Kids Engaged in School* program that resonated with young adolescents. Acknowledging and empowering the voices of those for whom the program is targeted is perhaps the most salient way of determining program outcomes. Together with the students, parents and school personnel have provided strong endorsement for the value of the programs in their school. The true impact of "Ideas Hunters", "Rocketeers", "Leadership" and "Change Champions" may never be measured. The fact that students, parents/caregivers and key school staff could so eloquently speak of the program and the impact it had on young adolescents might well be the most important endorsement of all.

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