

School Community links focussed on learning in the middle years

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Abstract

This paper reports on research conducted during 2002 in Sydney's western suburbs into how to more effectively involve parents and local communities in schools to support students' learning in the middle years (Years 5-8)¹. The research aimed to map existing school-community links in the participating schools that support student learning by identifying key participants and describing how they perceive these links. We also aimed to assess the contribution of existing links to improving student's engagement in learning. The methodology was qualitative in nature utilising interviews and focus groups. We found that students, families and teachers commonly expressed the view that learning is limited to schooling; that the interface between schools and communities is not highly permeable and is heavily mediated by school principals, and; we describe a lack of consensus about the nature of communities and the potential of school community links to contribute to enhancing students learning outcomes.

Background

This research was auspiced by the Granville District Collaboration (GDC). The GDC was initiated in June 2000 to support the improvement of learning outcomes of students in four schools in Sydney's inner west. The specific focus was on students in the middle years (Years 5-8) from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds². Participants in the collaboration included the district superintendent and other district personnel; the managers and coordinators of programs targeting low SES students and others students at risk; parents and other community representatives; academic researchers; and four schools in the Granville District.

Throughout this report we use pseudonyms to describe the four participating schools: Parkview High School, Bridge St High School, Tall Timbers Public School and Junction Public School.

In October 2001, the coordinating group of the GDC accepted a proposal from NSW DET Youth Assistance Strategies Section, to auspice research into how to more effectively involve parents and local communities in schools in ways that support students' learning. This proposal was designed to bring parents and communities more strongly into focus within the GDC's core concern: *How can a collaborative approach support schools serving low SES communities to more effectively engage students in learning in the middle years?*

Whilst numerous studies have investigated the nature of school-community relationships³, for the most part, these relationships appear to focus on the provision of coordinated health and welfare services, whereas, the focus of this study is on engaging students in learning in the middle years. Hence, the focus question of this research project was: *In what ways do existing school-community links support schools serving low SES communities to more effectively engage students in learning in the middle years?*

Methodology

For the purposes of this study, the key sites and participants were identified and grouped under the headings: Schools, the District Office, Families, Local community organisations, Government agencies and Business. Our approach was underpinned by the assumptions that any school-community links are dynamic and take place within a particular social, economic, cultural and political context.

Selection of participants

Since this research was auspiced by the Granville District Collaboration, the participants reflect groups associated with this project and its interests, most notably the engagement of students from low SES backgrounds in learning. The significance of this concern is highlighted by the fact that the retention rate to Year 12 for students with low SES backgrounds was 55% compared with 76% of students with high SES backgrounds (MCEETYA, 1997: 94). Hence, those students identified by teachers as being particularly vulnerable to the risk of disengaging from schooling were included in this study, rather than students deemed to not be at risk.

Our mapping of existing school-community links showed that many of these aimed to support these students. Our emphasis on students at risk also aligns with the program priorities of the funding body. In addition, we targeted the parents of these

students for involvement in the study because the literature emphasises the need to engage these parents in order to improve their children's results and likelihood of staying-on at school.

Limitations of the study

Whilst there is a high correlation between SES status and lower retention, anecdotal evidence and local indicators suggest that the four schools in our study were retaining students at a higher rate than the national average. Hence, our exclusive focus on at risk students reflects, necessarily, a limited picture of the experiences of students in general in the participating schools.

The necessity of obtaining written permission from the students' parents or guardians became a limiting factor for including students in the study.

To facilitate parental involvement we conducted phone interviews, but this strategy prevented us from including parents from backgrounds other than English, except through descriptions of their involvement in translated school-based meetings.

Interviews

Of the twenty-eight interviews with staff in schools, the Granville District Office, and local community organisations, all were conducted face-to face, while interviews with six parents were conducted over the phone. The parents interviewed were those whose children had taken part in the student focus group discussions at school and had given us permission to interview them and their children. Three parents had a child at one of the primary schools and three at Parkview High School. Five of the six parents were mothers and the only father had a child going to primary school. Some of the specific questions we asked all participants included:

- Describe your local community?
- Describe links between schools and their local communities?
- What are key issues related to student learning and engagement?
- What do you think are the main barriers to school-community links?

Focus groups

Student focus groups were organised with the support of teachers in each school. Eleven Year 5 students and thirteen Year 8 girls took part in one focus group at each primary school and one at the girl's high school. A number of efforts were made to organise another group of either Year 7 or 8 boys at the boys' high school but without any

success - teachers reported major difficulties with obtaining the necessary parental permissions.

Observations

A number of school-parent meetings (one at each of the two high schools), and a district community consultative meeting were attended to observe the proceedings, report on the attendance, the issues covered and the way schools were reaching parents from non-English speaking backgrounds.

Local Context

This section outlines some of the key features of the local contexts in which the study was conducted. The four project schools are located in three western Sydney suburbs – their pseudonyms are Junction, Parkview, and Tall Timbers. The schools are all within a few blocks walking distance of the local train station.

Parkview is the largest of the three suburbs, with more local businesses, a larger shopping strip and significantly more community based organisations and services located in the area.

The schools are located in two local government areas (LGAs): One is made up of seven suburbs and has just over 60,000 residents; the other has 23 suburbs with 139,000 residents (ABS, 2002).

A brief profile of the actual suburbs in which the schools are located (see Table 1 below) sets out a number of their key features. Looking at the socio-economic indicators for all three suburbs, they are among the relatively disadvantaged parts of Sydney – with lower levels of income, higher rates of unemployment, and more people from non-English speaking countries than the average across Sydney.

Of the three suburbs Tall Timbers, which is located in the more disadvantaged southern part of their LGA, and Parkview, emerge as the more socio- economically disadvantaged suburbs, with both having a level of unemployment that is well above the Sydney and their own LGA average.

Table 1 Socio- Economic Indicators (ABS 2002)

	<i>Parkview</i>	<i>Tall Timbers</i>	<i>Junction</i>
<i>Population</i>	26,711	20,923	12,884
<i>Speak other language</i>	19,134 (71%)	12,160 (58%)	8,651 (67%)
<i>Main Languages Spoken</i>	Arabic, Chinese, Turkish, Persian, Tamil	Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, Turkish, Tagalog	Chinese, Arabic, Turkish, Vietnamese, Korean
<i>Median weekly household income</i>	\$600-\$699	\$600-\$699	\$800-\$999
<i>Unemployment rate</i>	14.9%	12.1%	9.7%

Multiculturalism

The area has a rich and varied multicultural community organisation base, with many different language and cultural organisations based in the area. Parkview has many community organisations drawn from their largest language groups - notably Turkish, Arabic, Vietnamese and Chinese. Among the smaller emerging communities there are also Pacific Islander, and Korean community organisations. It continues to be a major centre for the Turkish speaking community in Sydney, with numerous small businesses (restaurants, cafes, food suppliers, travel agents), a number of different welfare and cultural associations, newspapers, and a large Turkish Islamic mosque.

Schools

The following table draws on information from the 2001 Annual Report for each school.

Table 1.3 School Data

	<i>Junction Public School</i>	<i>Tall Timbers Public School</i>	<i>Bridge St High School</i>	<i>Parkview High School</i>
<i>Total students</i>	626	516	614	704
<i>% NESB</i>	86%	Not available	99%	>99%
<i>Attendance</i>	Not available	Not available	90.2%	89.2% (7-10) 88% (11-12)
<i>Retention Rates</i>	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not available	65.2%
<i>Staff</i>	45		72.75	61.8
<i>Mobility</i>	22%	42%	Not available	Not available

Literature review

There is a broad and growing body of literature on the links between schools and communities to support student learning. The importance of identifying and addressing patterns of student disengagement during the **middle years** was highlighted by Johnston (1992):

It is during the middle school grades ...the pattern of absence, truancy and withdrawal that signals imminent departure from school. (Johnston, 1992:100)

Johnston also argued that student disengagement resulted from a mix of social, economic, and educational factors. Hence, a challenge for educators is to develop effective programs that address these factors in the middle school years.

The most important social factors involved in student disengagement from learning identified by Fine (1986) included:

- students believing there is little value in formal education;
- students facing competing responsibilities;
- students having their self esteem undermined; and
- school practices that discourage students from taking part in the life of the school (see Fine quoted in Johnston, 1992 :102).

Developing this approach further Johnston (1992) suggests there are a two major sets of hurdles or impediments that disadvantaged students need to overcome if they are to stay engaged in learning – one set relates to educational impediments and the other to membership impediments.

An important dimension to consider is that there is ‘...a growing group of young people who have decided that there is little point to schooling...this group, those in school and outside of it, are angry and disillusioned [however] schools should not take all the blame for alienation of these young people’ (Thompson, 1998:8). A better understanding of the concept of alienation can help develop more appropriate and effective ways of tackling the alienation of young people – especially while they are still at school.

Four key dimensions of alienation experienced by students were outlined by Oerlemans and Jenkins (1998). They drew on the work of Seeman (1959) and pointed out that alienated students were experiencing:

- powerlessness;

- meaninglessness;
- self-estrangement; and
- normlessness.

They argue that most remedial programs aimed at young people, ‘generally only focus on one or two constructs of adolescent alienation’ (Oerlemans & Jenkins, 1998:120). However they claim that it is important to address all four dimensions.

A major Australian study by Cumming (1996) explored the nature of student alienation in the middle years of schooling. It found that from the student’s perspective successful student engagement programs:

- improved students’ sense of belonging;
- allowed students to actively engage in the curriculum;
- have a practical orientation, and;
- include some non-school options such as work experience, pre-vocational and life skills training (Cumming, 1996:124).

Supporting student engagement and learning in disadvantaged or low SES communities has also drawn researchers to analyse the role that families and the local community can play. A recent US study (Heymann & Earle, 2000) presented a number of insights about **parental involvement** in its review of the literature. They suggested that the studies show that:

- parental involvement is important for children’s success at school;
- having a supportive adult helps a child learn skills after school, making a difference even if the adult has no training in how to help children;
- teaching adults how to help children is effective across social class;
- adult involvement is even more important for children with learning and behaviour difficulties; and
- parental involvement in classroom programs, school events and meetings is important (Heymann & Earle, 2000:834-835).

They also highlight their findings from their own study of the non-financial barriers to parental involvement in their child’s education. Their study focussed on working class parents who had at least one child in need of help because of educational or behavioural problems and found:

That nationwide low-income parents are significantly more likely than middle and upper income parents to lack the paid leave and flexibility to help children who

are doing poorly academically and children who have frequent behaviour problems.(Heymann & Earle, 2000:842)

In drawing on extensive work with disadvantaged middle and high school students in the USA, Clark (1992) argued that social background alone does not determine school achievement. He suggests the importance of a number of different ‘ecological contexts – the home, school, the neighbourhoods, and other community institutions like churches, recreation centers, ...grocery stores, playgrounds’ (p. 67).

Clark (1992) also suggested school success depends on the amount of ‘constructive learning activity’ carried on by students outside of school. Key out of school components include:

- deliberate out of school learning such as homework, study, tutorials, part-time work, or learning an instrument or a language;
- leisure activities that involve reading, writing, problem solving, or decision making;
- recreational activities like watching TV, playing games, doing hobbies, or group sports; and
- health maintenance activities (p. 70).

A more recent American study (Shumow et al., 1999) of the impact of the urban neighbourhood on students from low income families, followed student academic performance over years from third to fifth grade. It concluded that as children become more aware of their neighbourhood, the neighbourhood can exert a negative influence and is a risk factor for fifth grade students - especially those students with less impulse control and lower levels of competence (p. 325).

The study did find that parental involvement could offset the negative impact of neighbourhood risk and suggested that high quality programs sponsored by community agencies may contribute positively to student learning and further research was needed to determine this impact.

Research into **school-community partnerships** has emerged as an area of policy interest among educational administrators in North America, the UK and Australia. There have been a number of national (DETYA, 2001; DETYA, 2001a; DETYA 2001c) and state studies and reports in NSW (DET, 2001; NSW PSFP, 2001; DSP, 1999; DSP, 1999a) that include reports of school community programs or activities.

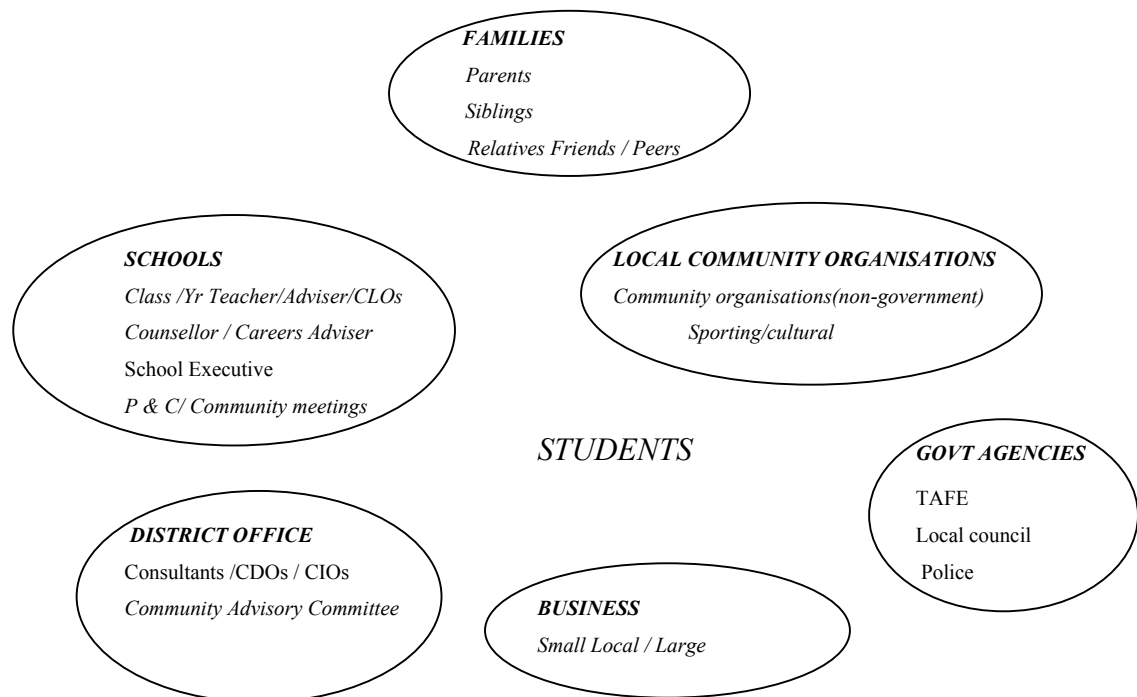
Generally speaking, much of the literature is written from the perspective of schools and educational administrators, which places the school at the centre of student learning – locating the school as the dominant player in any relationship involving student learning. In addition, many studies are descriptive, outlining projects and programs, and there are few studies that have focussed specifically on links to support student learning in the middle school years. However a number of useful analytical papers and insightful critiques are reviewed.

A major study in Scottish schools (Martin & Tett 1999) found that most partnerships focussed on the provision and use of school facilities, and there was very little community or parental involvement in curriculum issues, participation in school decision-making or involvement with non-school agencies.

Identification of key participants and how they perceive existing links

The key participants are grouped within sites of learning in the figure below.

Figure 1 Key Learning Support Sites and Participants



Students

Students generally had a fairly narrow view of what learning involved and focussed predominantly on learning within the classroom. There was limited evidence of student involvement in community-based activities that had a central focus on learning.

The Year 5 students expressed positive attitudes towards such opportunities and could identify people and places that could provide them with learning opportunities beyond their schools. But these attitudes and understandings were not as evident in Year 8 students. However, they did acknowledge seeking help from older siblings with their homework.

For both groups of students their relationship with their teacher was seen as the key to their learning. The Year 8 students saw this relationship mainly in negative terms. They had difficulties communicating with some teachers. Also some teachers were disrespectful to them, did not listen to them and were unwilling to help them in class.

At-risk students perceive their categorisation in negative terms as a function of how they are positioned in schools rather than the result of their disposition, background or ability. They are not hopeful that this status will change and frustrated by how it positions them within schooling discourses. This categorisation itself appears to contribute towards making these students more susceptible to disengaging from schooling. The apparent drop-off, relative to Year 5 students, in their attitudes towards learning opportunities beyond the school, has the potential to isolate them even further from learning resources and programs.

The students who participated in the focus groups were able to articulate the type of learning they valued and enjoyed in schooling but they had limited expectations of being able to shape their learning experiences within or beyond the school.

Parents

All the parents indicated a strong commitment to their child's learning. Among the year 5 primary school parents they could clearly identify specific student learning difficulties that they felt needed to be addressed - in particular reading, maths and doing homework. These were issues, that if not dealt with, are linked to future disengagement from school and learning. At this stage parents were looking to their link with their child's class teacher or turning to people in their immediate neighbourhood to help address these issues.

By high school the year 8 parents interviewed were expressing real concerns about how their children were being treated by some teachers and the ability of their children to stay engaged in learning. They also identified specific student learning difficulties - their child's homework, behaviour and school attendance.

Once again the main focus was on the class teacher or teachers - they were seen as the key people who could make a difference to their child's engagement with learning.

Parents said they wanted to get help to support their child's learning, and felt they did not really have the skills to address the issues around learning. The parents felt powerless to stop their child's disengagement. By Year 8 some parents were starting to give up trying to make contact at school and were looking outside the school for their child's future. Some already had alternatives – such as encouraging their child to move into vocational learning.

Parents' limited understanding of how to support their child's learning is commonly constructed as a lack of interest or ability on the part of parents. However, those we interviewed demonstrated high levels of problem solving and perseverance in their attempts to understand and participate in schooling discourse. Despite their efforts they expressed high levels of frustration and, like their children, were at-risk of disengaging from schools. Significantly for these parents their involvement with the school was limited and they did not see that the wider community could assist with their child's learning and engagement with school.

Despite the documented efforts of the schools to communicate and include parents, most of the parents we spoke to wanted more information and a widening of the opportunities for them to be involved in schools.

Both parents and teachers acknowledged the value of parental involvement in their children's learning. However, where mechanisms existed for involving parents these only allowed access to a narrow range of opportunities. And school personnel generally expressed little confidence in the capacity of some parents – especially of students considered to be at risk of disengaging from school - to contribute to their children's learning.

Schools

Schools have been broadening their view of their links with parents from a narrow view that just focuses on providing information about school activities, student learning progress and test results to a broader one that takes on the need to further develop parent skills.

This approach recognises there are a number of barriers to parental involvement in student learning and seeks to address language and cultural barriers to parental

involvement at school and develop specific skills to assist parents support student learning.

Various programs, or one off sessions are being organised with the involvement of other educational providers or community agencies to help parents develop specific skills such as English language proficiency, literacy, talking and listening; computing; and ways of managing their child's behaviour. There is also a program to assist newly arrived parents better handle their settlement issues.

Language barriers are a major and persistent concern among all parents for whom English is not their first language.

Embracing the cultural differences within their parent body is leading the schools to put considerable effort into reaching out to try and include parents from non-English speaking backgrounds – especially the largest language groups. Strategies that have been effective include improving communication with their largest non-English speaking communities by translating of information and documents, providing simultaneous interpreting of P & C or community meetings for parents. The use of Community Liaison Officers (CLOs) within the four schools and District based NESB Community Information Officers have proved to be especially effective with Arabic speaking, Turkish, Chinese, and Korean speaking parents.

School Executives

There was general agreement among School Executives that links with community organisations became more important in the later years of schooling as students became more aware of their communities and more aware of what it had to offer them such as work-based programs and experiences.

The prevailing motivation expressed by Executives for establishing links with communities was in terms of how these links could benefit the school and its programs through additional funding and resources. There was very limited recognition of how the school could resource and contribute to the community, and how the community could contribute directly and in a relevant and effective way to the school's programs and student learning. However, it should be acknowledged that lack of time and resources were identified as major factors limiting the development of stronger links with local communities.

Teachers

Teachers acknowledged that it was a major challenge to link up with parents. Schools were organising programs and activities to strengthen parents' skills in supporting their child's learning and addressing behavioural issues. However, they were aware that they were not reaching some parents at all – especially parents of those students who were experiencing learning difficulties or were at risk of disengaging from school. As previously noted, the parents of these students that we spoke with also indicated a desire for better communication with teachers. This tends to suggest that there may be some structural barriers limiting this form of communication.

For primary schools the work of their parent representatives and parents through the school P & C was seen as a sufficient connection with parents and the local community. While high schools saw their community consultative mechanisms (including CLOs and P & C or community meetings) as working effectively enough with both parents and local community organisations.

Community focussed personnel

The Granville District employs a number of Community Information Officers, a Community Development Officer and various consultants to work on school - community issues across the district.

All four schools employed school-based Community Liaison Officers, who played a critical role in involving parents and the community in the school through a range of formal and informal mechanisms. They also help the school reach into the community and understand its particular features. In Bridge St High School the central and prominent location of the CLOs office is seen as an important symbol and mechanism for encouraging parental involvement in the school.

Both district and school based personnel said that links with their local community were important but the main focus seemed to be on the link to parents. In the middle school years parents were seen as the most important part of the community affecting student learning and engagement.

The role of both district and school based community development or liaison staff was acknowledged as a way of helping schools to build more effective links with particular groups of parents and local community organisations. However, teachers did not place a high priority on establishing links with local community organisations particularly in relation to student learning issues in the middle school years. For primary

school teachers these links were not seen to yield any real value on student learning or engagement matters.

More important was their link to local high schools - especially as a way of addressing school transition issues for students. High schools also saw transition from primary school as important and were developing closer links with feeder primary schools.

High schools have developed programs to address various learning issues for students in the middle school years and have also focussed on their links to parents. As far as their links with the wider local community, high schools were interested in receiving information about programs and events from local community workers and working with those organizations whose programs matched the needs of their school.

Local Community Organisations

In the Granville district there are a number of important community consultative mechanisms and networks at a district and school level; a district advisory committee, a joint community consultative group, and interagencies involved with families and young people. At this stage these processes mainly involve district high schools. They are an important way of sharing information and making initial contact and seem to provide a good basis for developing and strengthening further school community links.

All the participating schools encouraged local community use of school facilities. But generally this use did not appear to translate into any learning involvement or engagement for the school's students.

A feature across the Granville district is the range of community cultural events that are now organised throughout the year. Some are based in schools but an increasing number are being organised in the local community and provide schools with various learning opportunities for their students. Consultative mechanisms are providing schools with links with their local council and community organisations and the opportunity to work collaboratively on various community based cultural events.

There was a real interest among community workers to be more engaged with their local schools in local events or programs. Local council staff, police, youth centres and welfare organisations all indicated an interest in strengthening their links with local schools. They said they valued the opportunities to take part in community consultative processes - particularly at the district and high school level.

On student learning issues community workers felt they had only a minor role to play - a supportive one limited to running specific programs or sessions like homework support, drop-in programs, crime prevention workshops, or organising community cultural activities.

A number of community organisations were running programs in conjunction with schools for those students who were disengaging from school just after the middle school years - in years 9 and 10. Programs like *Links to Learning* involve high schools working with a local community agency to try and re-engage students in learning and explore pathways into further education. There were also a number of new initiatives being developed to support high school students while they were suspended from school.

Building links with key community organisations such as the local council, local interagencies local clubs, and local businesses - especially around specific projects - is one way of moving towards a more collaborative community based learning approach in schools. Links to the local council, clubs and interagencies could also open up potential funding opportunities such as each local council's CDSE fund.

Mapping of existing school-community links that support learning

The mapping of school-community links undertaken for this study includes student focussed links based in schools and communities; parent focussed links aimed at supporting basic communication and family development; and community focussed links coordinated at the district and school level.

A key feature of the student-focussed links was that they generally target students at risk of disengaging from schooling. All are set out to support student engagement in learning, to maintain attendance, or help modify student behaviour. They include homework programs, lateness and attendance monitoring and various support programs.

There are a range of parent focussed programs and activities operating in the Granville District and the four schools in this study. They include Granville District programs, school organised classes, and school sessions specifically for parents. Applying the model of parental involvement developed by Shepard et al (1999) suggests that these activities are of the type described basic communication or family development. We saw limited evidence of activities that would be described as community outreach or advocacy.

A major development in recent years at the four schools and across other Granville district schools is the growth in activities and programs that work on family development – aimed at developing the skills of parents to support student learning at home. This includes programs on literacy, computing, understanding and managing behaviour and child development, as well as assisting some parents to improve their English language skills or learn more about cultural differences.

This is in addition to the traditional activities organised by schools that provide opportunities for parent-teacher interactions; ensure parents are sent out basic information; and involve a small proportion of parents in the school P & C, community or consultative meetings. Parents from the largest non-English speaking communities at the two high schools were encouraged and assisted in their involvement in these aspects through the work of language specific staff.

The main community-focussed links that we mapped at the district and school level included district and school level consultative forums, and their link to local interagency forums helped support the connection of community based organisations to school executive.

We also mapped numerous examples of community use of school facilities and a range of cultural events organised by local councils and/or community organisations.

However, based on UK experiences of school-community partnerships, as reported by Martin and Tett (1999), while at each school the local community did use school facilities, there were limited examples of participation of the community in decision-making and no links that supported collaboration in curriculum content.

Analysis

Most of the beyond the school constructive learning activities that we mapped involve school related learning, such as homework, research and tutorials. However, learning a language or a musical instrument were also commonly reported. Other types of types of activities were not reported as being related to learning. These activities might have included participating in leisure activities that involve reading, writing, problem solving, or decision making; recreational activities like watching TV, playing games, doing hobbies, or group sports; and health maintenance activities (Clark, 1992). We interpret the fact these other activities were not mentioned as an indication that they are not highly valued as school related learning activities, rather than as an indication that they are not taking place.

Whilst there are many benefits to be gained from easier access of the parents and the community to schools as sites of learning, there are also many benefits to be gained from a broader of recognition and acknowledgement of sites of learning beyond the school fence. Many of the goals for schooling that have been identified in *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century* (MCEETYA, 1999) can be supported through constructive learning activities based in the community. These goals include

- the capacity for, and skills in, analysis and problem solving and the ability to communicate ideas and information, to plan and organise activities and to collaborate with others;
- self-confidence, optimism, high self-esteem, and a commitment to personal excellence;
- the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice;
- the capacity to think about how things got to be the way they are, and to be active and informed citizens;
- employment related skills, the use of technology and the ability to contribute to ecologically sustainable development.

In our view, there is great potential for these goals to be supported within the community if more resources are allocated for this purpose. Maintenance of current levels of government funding through DET will ensure that a narrow, but necessary, focus on engaging student at risk continues. Increased funding could be put towards raising the levels of awareness of community organisations of the important educative role they can play - independent of schools. This is premised on the need to break down the pervasive views that learning *only* takes place at school and that teachers are *the* experts when it comes to curriculum matters.

A core consideration in publicising and promoting sites of learning beyond the school fence is the continuing need to challenge deficit views of families and communities, especially those views held by school-based personnel. This has been a long-term focus of targeted programs such as the Priority Schools Funding Program, and the Disadvantaged Schools Program before it, but deficit views persist and play a significant role in limiting the nature of school community links initiated and supported by schools and, more particularly, by school principals.

Challenges to these views should be set against clear and explicit agreements about the purposes and values of education. Whilst it is necessary for schools to exercise some autonomy in this regard and to respond to their perceived local conditions, Australia's long history in the provision of redistributive funding to achieve more equitable outcomes from schooling, aligned with policy support, reinforces the importance of common and agreed goals for all public schools. Our research suggests that systemic leverage, perhaps in the form of targets for community involvement in decision making, are required in order to move schools towards more democratic processes that are accessible to their communities.

There was a strong sense that the key link in the middle school years was between the teacher and the student; that this is a time when students needed the most support; and that it is also when teachers felt they could still make a difference. Our interviews with students at risk in Years 5 and 8 confirm the critical role that relationships with teachers play in the levels of satisfaction they express with their participation and success at school. It appears as though students in the middle years view teachers as members of their community and, therefore, important facilitators and supporters of their daily traverse across the school fence.

Identification of barriers to effective school-community links

The two main issues most commonly mentioned as barriers to effective school community links were lack of time and limited resources. Although participants acknowledged the importance of school community links other concerns took priority. For parents, this was due to juggling work and other family commitments. School personnel expressed a reluctance to be involved, in the absence of specific release time to carry out school community activities, given all the key functions and tasks they were required to perform within their schools. For District staff, their time pressures were due to the large number of schools they had to work with and hence the limited amount of time they were able to spend with each individual school. While community workers faced increasing pressures on their time and few if any of their projects were funded to work with young people in the middle school years or to focus on learning issues with young people, limiting their ability to effectively engage with schools.

The lack of funding and resources for programs was also seen as an important barrier. While policies encouraged school community interaction, little extra funding was being provided to support and enable projects and new initiatives to develop.

Among parents, school and district staff, and community workers there was a view that additional funding was needed to support ongoing activities, but they claimed that funding had been cut back over recent years.

According to parents the main barriers to effective-school community links were:

- poor communication with teachers about student learning issues;
- lack of information from schools about educational programs;
- language barriers; and
- lack of interest by school staff.

There were a number of factors identified by school and district office staff as barriers to more effective school community links. They included:

- the lack of time and resources;
- the difficulties of making connections with parents;
- the cultural and social diversity among the local community;
- the culture of the school;
- lack of school community 'champions' in a school;
- lack of appropriate skills in the community on student learning issues; and
- school community links are not a core activity and are of marginal value to student learning.

Among the community organisations the community workers felt the main barriers to more effective school community links were:

- schools were not interested in community based projects and initiatives or contact with local community organisations when these projects did not focus on young people and their needs;
- school teachers indicated that involvement with community creates extra work; and
- there was often no real reason for a school to establish or maintain a link with a community organisation.

Conclusion

Our analysis has been aided by thinking of the interface between schools and communities as a boundary, literally a fence, that contains and excludes; it tends to be impermeable and opaque; it is crossed with difficulty; affords limited views of the other side; and it is marked by shifts in organisation, authority and sometimes in language and culture. Thinking of the interface between schools and communities in this way brings

into relief difference and power as key considerations in any attempts to analyse activities that operate across it. It also highlights the fact that students make a daily transition from the culture, customs and language of their homes and communities to those of their schools; and they make this transition with varying degrees of ease.

The opaqueness of this interface and the difficulties associated with crossing it suggest that parents, teachers, district personnel, community workers and others have limited access to each other and limited opportunities for understanding each other. This context emphasises the need for active and continual communication to build understanding, tolerance and acceptance between schools and their communities. It also emphasises the need to actively build shared understandings of key concepts such as the nature of community and learning; a recognition that learning takes place beyond the school; and that teachers as well as parents, extended family and members of the community have a role to play in facilitating young people's achievement of a broad range of academic and social learning outcomes.

School-community links are important for students at risk on a practical level because they provide access to learning supports that may not otherwise be available. Our focus groups with students at risk also emphasised the significance these students place on the quality of their relationships with their teachers. Positive socially supportive relationships contribute to their sense of belonging. They expressed anger at being constituted in ways that reflected factors outside their control. They viewed their at-risk status as an effect of schooling discourses rather than an effect of their behaviour or background. They expressed a sense of frustration with their position in the school and acknowledged their inability to shift this positioning despite their efforts.

Parents of children identified by their schools as students at risk also reflected some of these frustrations and indicated that they wanted more information about learning programs and access to decision-making process. There is a sense in which the parents recognise the role of schooling in contributing to their child's life opportunities but they feel generally powerless to guarantee or claim this as a right. Teachers act as gatekeepers to information about their child's education and the school fence remains a barrier to their involvement in the school.

Teachers and principals did not generally perceive parents or their local communities as resources for learning. Whilst the participating schools had all made significant attempts to improve basic communication with parents, they generally focussed on how they could develop the family to support the school rather than how

they could develop the school to support families. We did not observe any initiatives of the type recommended by Cairney (2000) that are based on more equal sharing of agendas, open dialogue between parents and teachers, and a concerted effort to value and encourage genuine collaboration and partnership.

There was widespread acknowledgement that schools are busy places and that school-based personnel are already overworked. Whilst this is certainly the case, there is limited recognition of the role that parents and communities might play in easing the burden of schooling and actively supporting teachers and schools. There is limited evidence of the belief that education needs communities as much as communities need education (Martin & Tett, 1999). This raises fundamental questions about how the school fence functions as a means of containment and exclusion. It signals that learning happens within it, that those who can teach are contained within it and that valued knowledge is constructed within it. Hence, sharing power, responsibility and ownership with schools requires a fundamental reconceptualisation of schooling discourses. It also requires recognition of the key-mediating role played by the principal in determining the nature and scope of school-community links (Cranston, 2001).

At the District level, there was general recognition of the importance of the district and school-based consultative forums as a means of networking among schools and local community organisations and service providers. We have mapped a large number of school-community links coordinated out of the district office that are focussed on parental involvement. However, we note that most of these fall within the categories of parental involvement identified by Shepard (1999) as basic communication and family development. There is limited support for initiatives that would fall within the categories in this model related to community outreach and advocacy.

There is a lack of consensus about the value and purposes of school-community links across all levels of education. Programs that target low SES communities, such as the Priority Schools Funding Program, and programs aimed at re-engaging young people in learning such as, *Links to Learning*, are notable exceptions to this claim. These are important initiatives of the NSW DET. They include a specific focus on the development of school-community initiatives, projects and activities in these schools. Also, school District Offices like the Granville District Office are funding a number of staff at both a district and school level to support and develop these initiatives.

The mapping study highlights the importance of the work being carried out by Community Liaison Officers at schools and District consultants - as staff dedicated to this work within schools. Along with the various community consultative processes they provide a basis for further developing the links between schools, families and local community organisations and to focus them on improving student learning and engagement in the middle school years.

The study has found some examples of programs and activities that involve links between schools and parents, as well as schools and local community organisations, with a student learning focus. A number of these are actively working with youth who are at risk of disengaging from school, have been suspended, or have left school. There are also programs to reach parents aimed at developing their skills to support student learning. These programs need ongoing support and analysis to ensure their effectiveness with diverse groups of students and parents, both of whom are at risk of disengaging from schooling.

A major finding and key issue is that the study highlights the narrow and limited understanding that the majority of key participants have of the value and possibilities of school- community links.

While concerns about students disengagement from school and learning in the middle school years were acknowledged and a range of learning difficulties were identified, the main focus continues to be on the teacher-student relationship, and the student-parent relationship. There was little awareness of the way school and community links could be harnessed to develop richer, collaborative, and locally grounded learning experiences for student and teachers.

The resources and organisational structures of schools compared to parents and communities will ensure that schools remain the drivers of school community links. The challenges for schools are to identify and reach diverse communities; to embrace cultural difference; recognise the views, concerns and interests of various stakeholders; support a broad understanding of learning; and recognise the opportunities for learning beyond the school fence.

¹ The research was commissioned by the Youth Assistance Strategies Section, NSW Department of Education and Training, The final report *Beyond the school fence: School-community links in the middle years* is published by the Centre for Popular Education at UTS. *School-community links in the middle years*.

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³ See <http://www.detya.gov.au/schools/publicat.htm> for an overview.

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