

## The effects of partnerships

Family-school and community partnerships of the kind we have seen in this research – and in other research we have conducted in recent years – can be transformative in ways that go well beyond the classroom.

The transformation builds social capital by creating new social networks, crossing ethnic boundaries, helping people understand the Australian way of doing things, raising people's self-esteem, teaching them new skills and knowledge and, by virtue of all this, empowering them to participate in community life and to assist positively with their children's education. With this increase in social capital comes a concomitant increase in community capacity. People who once had no capacity to engage in civic life now put themselves forward for community duties – as volunteers, members of community groups and as advocates for the school and community in the wider world.

The education of pre-school children benefits from attendance at play groups and pre-school, where the qualities required for school readiness are developed. The children's school education benefits from the parents' presence in the school, their learning how to help the child academically and gaining the confidence to do so, and their demonstrating, by being involved, the importance of education.

The story from one site visit will serve to illustrate how these interlocking benefits accrue.

The school serves a community on the fringe of a major city with the highest unemployment rate in the metropolitan area, where 92% of families receive the education maintenance allowance and 62% of students are from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

When the present principal arrived seven years ago, he found relations between the school and parents to be what he called "a disaster". Parents were wandering the corridors, breaking in on lessons, yelling at other people's children and yelling at him. There was a fractious relationship between parents and the front office, and no proper arrangements for parents to interact with the school on a constructive footing at all.

Teachers regarded the staff room as their safe haven from all this.

On the positive side, the school had an Early Learning Centre where parents were constructively engaged, and had been for years. However, the benefits did not transfer across to the school itself when those children started school.

The principal told us quite seriously that if at any time in his first two years he could have left the school, he would have.

One of the first things he did to try to turn this around was to open the staff room to parents in the morning before school started. He took the "staff room" sign off the door and invited parents in to have a cup of tea and read the paper. He said to us:

"There was a lot of angst about that among the staff. I told them I wanted parents in the school. I wanted them to feel welcome. A couple of staff were really angry at me, that the parents were going to 'my safe area'."

He and his assistant principal made a point of going in there and striking up conversations with the parents. The idea was to engage them on whatever topics they wanted – what had happened at the weekend, what was in the papers – and so get them used to seeing the staff as human beings with whom they could have an ordinary conversation.

The purpose was to create a situation in which parents who had an issue they wanted to raise, could do so in a civilised way. It hasn't all been roses. The principal had to speak privately to one very angry man whose swearing was offensive, and that family subsequently left the school. But on the whole he regards it as a success. There is a core of parents who are there every morning, but a bigger number who come and go.

"It's a matter of how you talk to them: speak to them as equals; show respect."

That was a big and important symbolic gesture, but it was to have bigger consequences.

A couple of years later, the State Government decided that this school's neighbourhood was so deprived, it would be a good place to start what it called its Neighbourhood Renewal program. This entailed forming a group of residents who would work with government agencies rejuvenate the community, make it safer, give it facilities it was lacking, and plan for the future.

The trouble was, they couldn't find a group of residents. There was no civic infrastructure. They went to the local shopping centre but found nothing. They tried knocking on doors to see if they could locate some group with whom they could start. Eventually they turned up at the school's Early Learning Centre, and found the 30 or so parents who were involved there. And over in what used to be the staff room they found 20 more.

Suddenly they had a core of residents on which they could build the neighbourhood renewal project.

This is a vivid example of a phenomenon that is increasingly to be seen in all kinds of places: the school as the centre of community life, sometimes the only locus of civic infrastructure a community has.

The Neighbourhood Renewal project has brought considerable benefits to the parents. Some are now employed to do neighbourhood surveys; others are employed by the church missions who are part of it to run a breakfast program at the school. This has required them to do a food-handling course. Others are on a range of working parties making decisions about their neighbourhood. One father, who has six kids and was described to us as someone who barely spoke a word, recently led a deputation to the Premier to advocate on behalf of the school and the community.

At the school, in addition to the Early Learning Centre and the Breakfast program, there is a multicultural garden where parents grow a wider range of vegetables. This has had some effect on dietary habits in the home. One mother didn't know a carrot when she saw one, and while helping at the school chopped it up, skin and all, into big chunks and doled these out to the children.

The school runs a "Fruit Friday" and tries to arrange for the children to have a piece of fruit every day.

What has any of this to do with education? I will quote verbatim the response from the woman who runs the Early Learning Centre:

"It is a shift in how you see your core business. If you look carefully at your approach to education, and if it's the universal approach that you take, and you see the child in the context of its community and see how you develop the child's education in that context, you must involve the community.