

PUTTING TEACHERS AND LEARNING COMMUNITIES INTO THE POLICY EQUATION AROUND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND SCHOOL RETENTION

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1.13 Introduction

Discourses on the vexatious issues of student disadvantage, disengagement and withdrawal from schooling are commonly constructed around the perceived deficits, needs and pathologies of schools, families, communities and minority groups (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Dei, 2003; Hursh, 2006). Barely a day goes by without some reference in the mainstream media to a supposed ‘crisis’ in public schooling—a crisis constructed around claims of falling literacy levels, poor teaching standards, a lack of values in public schools, and undisciplined and recalcitrant youth. Because schools and teachers are to blame for this state of affairs (according to popular rhetoric), they must fix the problems. The official policy response is to bear down on schools, teachers and students with greater accountability measures, mandated educational programs and testing regimes. What is largely missing from government prescriptions is any serious attempt to challenge the inequitable structures and practices that contribute to social exclusion and educational disadvantage in the first place (Connell, 2003).

Drawing on recent research in low socioeconomic communities (Smyth & Down, 2004; Smyth & Angus, 2006), this paper challenges the efficacy of current responses to these issues and argues that meaningful and sustainable change can only occur when governments tackle the root causes of the problem and when teachers and learning communities are placed in the centre of the policy frame. Although the focus in this paper is on the Australian scene, matters pertaining to school completion, alienation and disaffection are universal concerns at a time when global forces are dramatically changing the ways in which we conceive

of the purposes of schooling. These changed circumstances call for an approach to educational reform that moves beyond the naivety of the school effectiveness movement to embrace the notion of school/community renewal.

The paper is divided into four sections. Firstly, I present a brief overview of the magnitude of the problems and the economic and social consequences. Secondly I discuss the official policy responses to the inter-related matters of school completion, disengagement and educational disadvantage and consider the damaging impact of these so-called 'solutions' on the most marginalised students and school communities. Thirdly, I focus on the largely unrecognised pedagogical knowledge that teachers bring to these matters and show how many are working with (and frequently against) the official policy discourse to re-invent themselves for young people. Fourthly, I turn my attention to the question of school/community relationships and argue that school renewal and community renewal must go hand-in-hand if there is to be any significant improvement in the educational achievements of students in disadvantaged communities.

1.14 Background

Schooling is not working for many young people. It is estimated that somewhere between 30 and 40 per cent of young people in western countries do not complete their secondary education and as many as two thirds of the United States high school population may be disengaged from schooling and actively contemplating leaving (Cothran & Ennis, 2000). According to United Kingdom statistics (Ofsted, 2003) there may be 10 000 children missing from school rolls—students who have slipped through the safety net when it comes to school provision. Although rates vary somewhat across Australian states and territories, it is clear that national apparent rates have declined appreciably over the past decade. Data from 2002 show secondary school completion rates as low as 66.7 per cent in South Australia and 53.0 per cent in the Northern Territory (Lamb, Walstab et al., 2004). Whilst some students leave school for employment reasons or because of traumatic events in their lives, as many as 30 per cent drop out because they see little relevance in their schooling (Smyth, Hattam et al., 2004; Broadhurst, Paton et al., 2005). These figures are cause for alarm but they only tell part of the story; problems of attrition, retention and participation are

greatest in indigenous communities, remote locations and low socioeconomic districts—particularly those ‘rustbelt’ zones (Thomson, 2002) that have suffered most from the effects of globalisation and the decline of manufacturing industries.

There is no denying the seriousness of these issues, both in terms of the economic loss to nations and communities of such a large proportion of disaffected and under-educated young people, as well as the lack of personal and social fulfilment for individuals and their families. What is in dispute is the way in which these problems have been named and the appropriateness of intervention strategies employed. All too often issues of school retention, disengagement and student disaffection are described in a language that ignores the sociological dimensions of schooling and the deeply entrenched injustices in society. Instead, we have what Margonis (2004) refers to as a middle-class tendency to label students in terms of individual or family deficits and to blame them for their lack of success in school. These students who are variously categorised as ‘failures’, ‘losers’, ‘dysfunctional’, ‘alienated’, ‘disaffected’, ‘marginalised’, ‘at-risk’ or ‘disconnected from school’ are commonly regarded as problems in urgent need of a policy fix.

1.15 The policy response: coercion, compliance and conformity

Internationally, policy responses to the complex issues of student engagement and school retention nest within the broader political and economic goals of neoliberal/neoconservative governments, notably competition, deregulation of the economy, dismantling of public sector services and the privatisation of the public provision of goods and services (Hursh, 2006). From this vantage point, education is seen as a vehicle for micro-economic reform in a policy discourse that pays homage to the market and the principle of parental choice. In the drive towards marketisation and a user-pays approach, greatest primacy is now accorded to individual capacity and rewards, rather than the ideal of education as public good (Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid & Shacklock, 2000).

Coercion, compliance and conformity are the hallmarks of an agenda that has a narrow focus on literacy and numeracy outcomes, an obsession with standardised testing programs and performance monitoring regimes, and a preoccupation with vocationalism and the utilitarian purposes schooling. At the extreme end, the *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) of the United States embodies punitive measures for schools receiving federal funding (Harris & Chapman, 2004) that is not dissimilar to the ‘naming and shaming’ of underperforming schools in the United Kingdom. In a new managerialist environment, public schools are placed in competition with one another as they seek to find a niche in the education market. Largely ignoring the socioeconomic context of schools and the deep-seated nature of structural inequalities, these policies have effectively turned the blowtorch on disadvantaged schools in expecting them to improve student engagement and participation through their own efforts.

What of the situation in Australia? Faced with declining school retention rates, high levels of truancy and disengagement, particularly in the middle years of schooling, one of the immediate responses of state governments in Australia has to been to compel students to stay longer at school by raising the leaving age from 15 to 16 years of age, and to 17 years in some states. Amongst other measures, state education systems have reviewed senior school credentialing arrangements to accommodate vocational education pathways, moved towards an outcomes-based approach to curriculum, especially in the compulsory years of schooling, and funded (albeit in a limited way) alternative school structures and programs for students in the adolescent years of schooling. Although curriculum reform has been a priority in some states, a good deal of emphasis has been attached to extensive monitoring and compliance measures to improve attendance and participation.

It is at the national level that the greatest impact of the neoliberal/neoconservative agenda is being felt as successive federal education ministers in the Howard government have used the fiscal authority of the Commonwealth to bludgeon state governments into signing up to national curriculum agreements. Under the pretext of making Australia a globally competitive economy, governments have used a carrot and stick approach to education reform that combines increased accountability measures with targeted (though meagre) resources and programs for so-called ‘at-risk’ students. The *Commonwealth Schools Assistance*

Act 2004 stipulates that state education systems that have traditionally exercised a high level of curriculum autonomy must certify that schools are reporting to parents on literacy and numeracy attainment against national benchmarks, that reporting on student achievement is in plain English, and that the schools have functioning flag poles and a values framework chart prominently displayed in classrooms. Some of these measures are in direct conflict with curriculum practices in state education systems; for example, some states have moved towards outcomes-based education, but schools are required to assign grades specifying student achievement in every curriculum area from reception to year twelve. More to the point, these regressive requirements, which seem to hark back to the 1950s, run counter to authentic assessment and reporting practices that are well-documented in Commonwealth-funded reports (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000).

In what could well be described as a politics of derision, senior government figures, including the Prime Minister, have consistently used the mainstream media to attack public schools for their lack of attention to values education, poor academic standards—especially in the areas of literacy and numeracy—and a failure to maintain proper discipline. A good deal of the federal government’s criticism has been voiced through Kevin Donnelly, an education consultant and former adviser to Workplace Relations Minister, Kevin Andrew. In his book, *Why Our Schools Are Failing* (Donnelly, 2004), Donnelly argues that Australia’s international competitiveness is threatened because of a lack of academic rigour and declining standards in our schools. Responsibility for this state of affairs, he suggests, can be sheeted back to: a failure to recognise the strength of either a syllabus or standards approach to curriculum development; an uncritical adoption of a process-approach to learning at the expense of content; an undue emphasis on student-centred learning, and the pernicious influence of ideologically-driven educators intent on radically changing society and turning students into ‘politically correct, new age warriors’ (Donnelly, 2004, p. 3).

The solution to this problem, according to critics like Donnelly, is to: maintain a strong discipline approach to school subjects, especially in the secondary years; define clearer educational standards; implement a nationwide testing program in literacy and numeracy; return to the education basics with an emphasis on phonics, rather than a whole language approach to literacy teaching; and a greater measure of system

accountability that identifies underperforming schools. What is most alarming about these proposals, which have found a receptive audience amongst conservative policy makers, is that they amount to a plea for a return to a traditional competitive academic curriculum—a curriculum that has persistently failed students from working-class communities (Connell, 1993). Moreover, they fly in the face of well-documented government reports on the merits of integrated studies, negotiated curriculum and middle schooling approaches (MCEETYA, 2000; Lingard et al. 2001).

As part of this conservative push, successive Coalition education ministers, Kemp, Nelson and Bishop, have sought to deride the educational value of popular culture and media studies—areas of learning which have an immediate connection with young people’s lives—whilst simultaneously arguing for the restoration of the traditional literary canons. More extreme advocates, including the Prime Minister, John Howard, have called for the return of a history curriculum that privileges Australia’s British heritage over and above a critical multicultural perspective which might encourage students to question the taken-for-granted values and ideals about Australia’s national character (Henderson, 2005). Many so-called ‘controversial topics’ are now regarded as out-of-bounds for student debate, a phenomenon which Flinders (2005) refers to as a *nul* curriculum—that which schools do not teach. For example, in the United States the topic of the Iraq war is so rarely discussed in class that most students claim that their knowledge of the issues and attitudes is gleaned from their families and the media (Flinders, 2005). Maybe some schools view a study of these topics as a distraction from their academic mission in an era of standards and high stake testing, or perhaps the influence of the New Right is so pervasive that these topics are untouchable if not ‘unteachable’.

One of the features of the Coalition’s approach has been a deliberate attempt to discredit the social justice agendas of schools and state education bureaucracies, especially their efforts to promote critical literacies, multicultural education and programs of social activism. In response to a school student’s criticism of Australia’s involvement in the Iraq war, the federal treasurer, Peter Costello accused teachers of promoting anti-American bias in classrooms (*The Australian*, 23 August 2005). In the same week, the federal education minister, Brendan Nelson, launched a stinging attack on Western Australia’s public education

system, claiming that the outcomes-based education (OBE) curriculum was the result of a ‘crippling ideology of playing politics’. He went on to deride the fact that the 3Rs of reading, writing and arithmetic had become ‘republic, reconciliation and refugees’ (*The Australian*, 24 September 2005). Attacks of this kind, which are regularly reported and endorsed in the mainstream press, help to reinforce a public perception that schooling is an apolitical process, that educational disadvantage, if it really does exist, can be solved by a back-to-basics approach to education, and that the real business of schools is about teaching students to become more literate and numerate, rather than engaging in social transformation.

What has been called a ‘manufactured’ crisis (Berliner & Biddle, 1995) has helped to shift public attention away from the broader issues of social inequalities to a narrow focus on literacy as the key to improving the life chances of young Australians. Matters of class, gender, poverty and disability have been laminated over in a policy discourse that leaves little place for socially produced disadvantage. Under Commonwealth policy, disadvantage is described as educational and hence able to be ‘fixed’ by schools (Thomson, 1998). In this simplistic scenario, poverty can be solved through improvements in literacy levels. Increasingly, literacy is becoming ‘a surrogate for other forms of educational inequality’ (Henry & Taylor, 1999, p. 14), and the notion of disadvantage is now being constructed around individual deficits. In other words, the ‘self’, rather than the ‘social’, prevails. Young people who are regarded as most ‘at risk’ of underachieving in schooling are typically described in policy documents as coming from severely damaged family relationships or lacking the social skills necessary to succeed. Many of the ‘at risk’ indicators tend to consign the causes of disadvantage to the individual subjectivities of young people, rather than to economic, political and social inequalities. Correspondingly, the solution to these inequalities resides with individuals, their immediate families or caregivers and schools.

In summary, patterns of educational inequality are widely known but are rendered invisible in the public debates on education; more to the point, policy makers are largely indifferent to the extent of social suffering and inequality in what is supposedly a liberal, democratic society (Christie, 2005). Mandated solutions to issues of student engagement and school retention take little heed of the appalling conditions under which many children live out their lives and the differentiated nature of school communities. A

rhetoric of choice, excellence and merit barely conceals the reality that many young Australians do not enjoy the fruits of national prosperity and will struggle to ‘become somebody’ (Wexler, 1992) without a better-funded public education system (Vickers, 2005). Parental choice has become the mantra of education policy, but it is a mockery in low socioeconomic communities where parents have little real choice when it comes to selecting schools for their children. While there is no denying the crucial importance of raising literacy and numeracy standards as a means to improving the life chances of students, educational disadvantage cannot be solved by ‘quick fix’ literacy programs and testing regimes or by compelling students to stay on longer at school. Unfortunately, official policy responses seem to confirm the view that the most important correlates of educational achievement are individual biography and the collective history of the social groups with whom students are identified (Australian Curriculum Studies Association, 1996).

Largely missing from official policy responses is recognition of the pivotal role of teachers and efforts to improve student engagement and achievement in disadvantaged school communities. In the next section I focus on the pedagogical knowledge of teachers and the importance of relational learning in the construction of successful educational identities of young people.

1.16 Putting teachers back into the policy equation

Teachers are at the frontline when it comes to putting educational visions and community expectations into action. They have the most direct responsibility for providing young people with relevant, engaging and fulfilling educational experiences in what are often complex and challenging environments. Teachers rather than distant policy makers and bureaucrats, deal on a daily basis with the impact of technological and economic change, and with the debilitating effects of poverty, unemployment and oppressive social relations on children’s lives. ‘They know where the shoe pinches—where things are not working well’ (Connell, 1993, p. 58). Teachers play a pivotal role in nurturing the formation of young people’s identities in schools and supporting their transition to adult life. Collectively, they and their professional associations have enormous funds of knowledge and experience of what actually works with students in disadvantaged

schools (Connell, White & Johnston, 1992). As Connell (1993) points out, they can be a vital resource for change. However, by and large, teachers have been silenced and systematically excluded from decision-making forums when it comes to the national policy directions described in the previous section.

Moreover, their work is being construed and regulated in restrictive and instrumental ways that threaten not only their professional autonomy but the very ideals of an inclusive and socially just education for young people.

The preliminary research from the Australian Research Council project which informs much of this study (Smyth & Down, 2006) suggests that teachers are frustrated and confused with many of the official policy prescriptions for improving school retention and student engagement. In our initial conversations, teachers talked of the pressures to perform in a highly competitive environment in which public schools are often struggling to retain their share of academically able students. They spoke of the difficulties of:

- raising community expectations of education;
- contesting deficit views of working-class students;
- motivating and engaging significant numbers of seemingly apathetic young people, especially in the middle years of schooling; and,
- dealing with the fractured lives of students and intrusions of violence and antisocial behaviour into their classrooms.

Maintaining student interest and engagement in the senior years of schooling is becoming quite problematic following the state government's decision to raise the school leaving age to 16 years of age—a decision taken with little teacher consultation. A teacher in one of the poorer communities explains the concerns as follows:

We have a major problem with retention with year 10 which has dropped from 90 per cent to about 80 per cent attendance over the past few years. We are concerned about the effects of the raising of

the school leaving age. A lot of kids are at school because they have to be, not because they want to be. This causes teacher stress and lots of behaviour management problems. (Teacher)

There was a strong view that such coercive measures were unlikely to succeed without a major investment in resources to support curriculum development, school organisation and teachers' learning. In the absence of viable pathways and engaging courses, students commonly withdrew their labour from the learning process. A teacher describes this political act played out in the high school in the following way:

We have a small number of students who come into the school but don't sign in. We have a second group who sign on but don't come to class. There is a third group who come to some classes only, and we have a fourth group who go to all classes but don't engage. (Teacher)

In some ways, the 'cherry-picking response' of the third group affirms the crucial role of dedicated and passionate teachers in sustaining the interest and commitment of students to some aspect of their learning when all else seems uninspiring and irrelevant. This is not to suggest that student engagement is contingent on the efforts of super-teachers but it does highlight the capacity of individual teachers to make a difference for the most disadvantaged students. However, from our observations it was apparent that more sustainable change required a whole school response directed towards the development of rigorous and challenging educational programs.

The teachers we interviewed explained that their greatest challenge was to engage students in intellectually demanding and relevant learning that connected closely with their lives and communities. A good deal of research suggests that students categorised as 'disadvantaged' are less likely to receive a rigorous and engaging curriculum than their middle-class counterparts and that those most at risk of failure are condemned to mediocrity (Lingard et al. 2001; Zyngier, 2003) or to what Haberman (1991) described as 'a pedagogy of poverty'. Writing of his recent observations of classroom practices in poor inner-city schools in the United States, Kozol (2005) argues that this kind of pedagogy is still prevalent. Indeed, he suggests that the imposition of mandated curriculum and high stakes testing programs have resulted in a greater

emphasis on teacher-directed learning. He notes how teachers are inclined to stick to a script to the detriment of experiential learning, how standards and objectives dominate assessment practices, how schools in poor districts relied extensively on teacher-proof packages, even though teachers see these as boring and uninspiring resources. From Kozol's perspective, it appears that learning in this context only has real meaning when it is connected to measurable objectives. Such an environment generates great anxiety for teachers who feel the pressure to conform to a narrow conception of curriculum and it places a great deal of strain on students who did not meet the required achievement levels. These students felt especially demoralised when their scores were announced to their peers in the classroom.

The teachers whom we interviewed indicated that they were under some pressure to teach to the test, to quantify improvements in student outcomes against targets, and to comply with uniform and somewhat narrow provisions of assessment and reporting practices. In the face of new accountability requirements, they were trying to navigate a pathway between meeting system requirements and applying their own knowledge of what actually works for students in their own community. Invariably, this involved a degree of compromise and ambiguity. Regardless of the difficult navigation, these teachers emphasised the primacy of relationships and the personal relevance of learning as crucial for successful engagement for young people. Teachers told us:

Kids will stay if they feel valued and safe and are achieving something ... It's about treating the kids as individuals. They need to know why they need to know.

Students explained that trust, faith and respect were important qualities they looked for in their teachers:

Our teacher doesn't tell us; he asks us to do things. He treats us as adults ... Our teachers believe in us. They know you can do it.

These comments represent a small sample from a larger study, and they underscore the importance of relational learning that is largely absent from the prescriptive agendas of policy doctrines. No amount of

testing, phonics language teaching, rote learning, compulsory citizenship studies, attendance monitoring procedures and recourse to behaviour management sanctions will keep students at school if they do not want to be there.

Smyth and McInerney (2007 in press), describe the structural, cultural and pedagogical elements of a progressive approach to school reform in the middle years through an archetype of the pedagogically engaged school. In what follows, I will highlight some aspects of this heuristic to illustrate the ways in which teachers in challenging and complex schools are able to reinvent their practices to support the identity formation of young people. These teachers:

- display an awareness of the socioeconomic features of the community and the impact of poverty and various forms of social exclusion on students' lives;
- actively contest deficit views of students and their families and foster a sense of optimism, belongingness and trust amongst students;
- value and utilise local funds of knowledge to enhance student learning and school/community relations (Warren, 2005);
- foster a success-oriented approach to education and provide feedback to students on their achievements and areas for development, despite the policy imperative to assign grades;
- strive to develop a connectionist pedagogy (Goodman & Kuzmic, 1997) through projects and tasks which link classroom learning to the diverse lives, backgrounds and aspirations of their students;
- utilise the notion of situated pedagogy (Orner, 1996) through learning activities which encourage students to explore their own personal interests and those of their community;
- incorporate generative themes into the curriculum arising from popular culture, youth identity, media studies, the arts, local heritage, the physical environment and new technologies so that learning is more meaningful for students;
- display flexibility in programming and are open to the teachable moments that arise from current events and matters of deep concern to students;

- recognise that they have a responsibility to provide a challenging and rigorous curriculum that enables students to access further study and vocational pathways;
- support students to become resourceful, independent and creative learners and engage students in negotiating meaningful aspects of their learning with their peers and teachers.
- actively promote student voice and dialogic learning (Shor, 1992).
- sometimes seized opportunities to promote critical literacies through community projects (Comber, Thomson & Wells, 2001) and to engage in more activist forms of teaching for social change (Shor, 1987).

These practices are indicative of the pedagogical knowledge and community awareness that teachers bring to the issues of student engagement and school retention. While there is no denying the importance of system-sponsored reform arising from the concerns of schools and communities, national frameworks and practical strategies for addressing school reform need to be developed in collaboration with teachers and those whose lives are most directly connected to students' lives. Putting teachers into the policy equation is a step in the right direction, but a much bigger and potentially sustainable project involves the shift towards the idea of a community engaged school.

1.17 The community engaged school: linking school improvement to community development

'It takes a village to raise a child' says an old Nigerian proverb. If we apply this to education, it should drive home the message that education is everyone's business; that it is neither possible, nor desirable, to place rigid boundaries around the school and the community when it comes to educating young people. Bringing about changes in disadvantaged school communities, where participation rates are historically low and students have little experience of academic success, demands that the whole village gets involved. Fundamentally, this requires some major rethinking about the nature of school/community relationships, and a questioning of a prevailing wisdom which typically positions schools and education systems, rather

than the local community, as the drivers of school change. Discussing the New Community Schools initiative in Scotland, Nixon et al. (2002, p. 348) make the argument that:

Schools urgently need to progress beyond the dominant ‘school effectiveness’ paradigm ... [they] need to understand that their own effectiveness is dependent on the effectiveness of civil society as a whole: families, play groups, community centres, youth clubs, neighbouring schools, etc ... They require a paradigm that acknowledges that they can only become effective if they engage their commitment to learning across boundaries and on a broad front: not a ‘school effectiveness’ paradigm but a ‘community engagement’ paradigm’.

The case for an alternative paradigm is well made but it does raise some crucial issues about how the school might contribute to community capacity building and community renewal and whether it is possible to bring about any substantial improvements in schooling outcomes without first improving the economic and social conditions of community life. In the following section I will explore these ideas around the interrelated concepts of school/community engagement, the learner-centred school, school/community renewal and capacity building.

School/community engagement

The idea that schools and communities should work together for the good of children is hardly new. As Nixon et al (2001) point out, this so called ‘new’ community engagement paradigm is really the latest expression of an old idea: ‘the idea was, and is, democracy’ (Apple & Beane (1999, p. 3). But in spite of attempts to integrate education and community services, promote community partnerships and foster parent participation, a school-centred model of school/community relationships generally prevails in Australia (Mills & Gale, 2004). Typically, community engagement is viewed through a lens that is sharply focused on the agenda of the school or the education system, rather than the local community, and there is still a tendency on the part of some educators to see the school as an independent entity that is somehow separate from the rest of the community. Generally, initiatives to promote the ideal of a ‘learning

community' are confined to the immediate school (Pendergast & Renshaw, 2001), rather than the broader community. In some instances, an 'institutional boundary between family and school' (Nixon et al., 2001) fosters a 'them' and 'us' mentality, especially when the school is seen to be working against, rather than with, local residents. Urban schools, in particular, are often disconnected from the communities they serve, especially in disadvantaged schools where teachers tend to reside in middle-class suburbs and may have little sense of identity with, or empathy for, the local neighbourhood.

Hierarchical arrangements in high schools further inhibit school/community dialogue and are especially disempowering and alienating for the most marginalised students and parents. Despite rhetoric of parent participation and local decision making, power generally resides with the most powerful members of the community. Usually the well-educated, professional, articulate parents occupy prominent positions on governing councils and school committees whilst working class parents tend to remain 'on the periphery' (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). As if to reinforce this divide, schools are generally oriented toward middle-class values, interests and aspirations and are often dismissive of the funds of knowledge in poorer communities. Not only is curriculum disconnected from the lives of working-class students' lives but, as suggested earlier, some teachers have a tendency to view these students, their families and their communities through a deficit prism. As a consequence, what may be offered is a 'pedagogy of poverty' (Haberman, 1991), rather than a rigorous curriculum.

In spite of these limitations, there is a well-documented history of grassroots school reform for social justice in Australia (McInerney, 2004). The Disadvantaged Schools Program (DSP) allocated funds to local schools to support whole school programs aimed at improving the educational prospects for groups of students in disadvantaged communities. As a bottom-up model of school reform, the DSP involved a shift in the modes of power and control from the centre to schools characterised by more local decision making, school-based curriculum development and community education programs (Connell, White & Johnson, 1992). During the 1970s and 1980s, the notion of a community developing school was given further impetus through the growth of community schools which promoted closer links with local communities through shared school/community resources, community outreach programs, integrated health, welfare,

education and family services and community education programs. While part of the motivation for these centres was undoubtedly an economic imperative to avoid unnecessary duplication of school/community facilities, there was also an attempt to break down some of the traditional barriers between schools and communities by promoting greater parent participation in the life of schools and encouraging the concept of the school as a learning community for all.

The school as a learning community

To conceive of the school as a learning community is to recognise that education, participation, success, inclusivity and collaboration are important ideals for the whole community; that the spaces in which teaching and learning occur are not just confined to classrooms; that the community has pedagogical resources and spaces that can actively support the work of schools; and, that teachers are not the only adult educators and young people are not the only learners. From this perspective, the boundaries between the institution of the school and the community are somewhat blurred and there is a general recognition that long-term gains in student achievement depend very much on developing educative and cooperative relationships between schools and parents (Hattam, McInerney, Lawson & Smyth, 1999; McInerney, 2002)).

In a similar vein to community capacities, the concept of funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) is based on an understanding that all people have knowledge, skills and experiences that can be utilised in productive ways to support student learning. In their study of household and classroom practices within working-class communities in Tucson, Arizona, Moll et al. (1992) drew attention to the broad range of underutilised cultural and cognitive resources and the importance of developing relationships between schools and families through household visits. Commenting on lessons learnt from the next phase of their studies, the Puente project, Gonzales and Moll (2002, p. 623) argue that ‘instruction must be linked to students’ lives and that details of effective pedagogy should be linked to local histories and community contexts’. They claim that ‘building on what students bring to school and on their strengths has been

shown to be an incredibly effective teaching strategy (p. 627), especially when students are engaged as active researchers (ethnographers) within their own communities.

The move towards a community engaged school requires some rethinking about the architecture of schools, age-grading arrangements, timetabling practices, decision-making structures and the way in which power is exercised. According to Warren (2005), there is only so much that a school can do to build social capital without confronting the power inequalities that exist in schools and their communities. Because many parents and students experience schools as hierarchical institutions where power is exercised in a unilateral manner, the real challenge is to democratise decision-making processes and to promote the notion of relational power. Unless parents and students have ownership and pride in their schools, little will change for the better. Clearly there are some limits to what educators can achieve in ameliorating educational inequalities, but as a starting point there needs to be an acknowledgement that schools cannot teach children well if teachers do not understand the culture and lives of their students and their communities, or worse still, if they see them in a deficit light (Warren, 2005). Just as importantly, if we want to improve learning for students in disadvantaged schools, we have to engage in community rejuvenation.

School and community renewal go hand-in-hand

Writing about the limits of school reform in the United States, Berliner (2006) claims that the most powerful policy for improving student achievement is a reduction in family and youth poverty. The argument is made that, because schools and families are generally situated in neighbourhoods that are highly segregated by social class, efforts which focus solely on teacher quality, curriculum change and school organisation are unlikely to make substantial difference to the alleviation of educational inequalities. The bigger challenge envisioned by Berliner (2006, p. 988) is to set about 'building a more economically equitable society'. In a similar vein, Warren (2005) poses two provocative questions:

What sense does it make to try to reform urban schools while the communities around them stagnate or collapse? Conversely, can community-building efforts and development efforts succeed in revitalizing inner-city neighbourhoods if the public schools within them fail their students? (p. 133)

Warren reminds us that the fates of individual schools and their communities are inextricably linked and that any attempts to improve education for young people must necessarily engage with poverty and the structural inequalities that pervade society. [See also Anyon (2005), Kozol (1992)]. Families in economically depressed areas suffer from a myriad of social problems including low incomes, financial insecurity, increased levels of homicide and domestic abuse, a higher incidence of physical and mental ill-health, lower life expectancies and a much greater proportion of children with multiple and severe disabilities (Thrupp, 1999; Berliner, 2006). Under the headline ‘The deadly reality of disadvantage’, the *Adelaide Advertiser* (Tuesday 11 July 2006) cites statistics from the latest edition of the *Social Atlas of South Australia* which reveal that people in the state’s poorest suburbs and towns are more than 70 per cent more likely to die of preventable causes than those in affluent areas. The harsh reality is that students cannot learn effectively if they are malnourished and live in substandard homes that lack the most basic resources and amenities to support child development.

Clearly, there is a crucial need for governments and community organisations to work with local groups and residents to generate employment opportunities and to improve the overall health and welfare of families as part of a broader strategy for reducing the educational achievement gap between the haves and have-nots. However, the problem is that governments often impose bureaucratic solutions on communities, thereby reinforcing a sense of dependency on outsiders. In contrast, a capacity building approach that begins with an insider’s view of what needs to change has the potential to achieve more sustainable community development.

Community capacity building

Discussing the exercise of power and freedom, Rose (1999) argues that one of the endeavours of liberal democratic societies has involved an attempt to identify a third way of governing that occupies a space between the extremes of welfare state socialism and individualistic market-based solutions associated with neoliberalism. Rejecting both the neoclassical models of free competition and the highly centralised state

planning model, governments in the United Kingdom and elsewhere have begun to place greater faith in a politics of 'civil society' (Rose, 1999, p. 170). A key element in this approach involves recognition of:

the significance of relations, of interpersonal trust, local and community-based networks, collaboration amongst enterprises sharing a commitment to a particular geographical region. (p. 168)

The local community, rather than the nation state, is now viewed in some quarters as the appropriate centre for civic action and development. With the rise of communitarianism (Etzioni, 1997), there is a renewed emphasis on the capacity of communities to draw on local strengths, leadership and resources to improve the quality of life for citizens. This represents something of a paradigm shift in thinking about community development. Historically, policy makers have adopted a needs-oriented approach to school/community renewal in which poor urban communities were conceived as problems to be solved by outside experts. McKnight and Kretzmann, (1996) sum up the prevailing attitudes and policy responses as follows:

[M]ost Americans think about lower income urban neighbourhoods as problems. They are noted for their deficiencies and needs. This view is accepted by elected officials who codify and program this perspective through deficiency-oriented policies and programs. ... As a result, many low-income urban neighbourhoods are now environments of service where behaviours are affected because residents come to believe that their well-being depends upon being a client. They see themselves as people with special needs to be met by outsiders. (p. 1)

One of the consequences of this deficiency-oriented social service model is that local people 'are often subjected to systematic and repeated inventories of their deficiencies with a device called a 'needs survey' (p. 4) which often ends up as a map of the community's social problems—criminal activity, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy—that simply reinforces this deficit view.

As John Smyth has described in his contribution to this volume, a prevailing paradigm of school and community reform is a pathologising one that has little faith in local leadership and the capacities of people to bring about improvements in their own lives. In contrast, a capacity-focused alternative recognises that all communities have assets, skills and resources that can, with support of governments and other agencies, promote significant community development. (It has to be said that in an age of economic rationalism this approach has some appeal to conservative policy makers keen to reduce government spending.)

Underpinning the capacity-oriented approach is the belief that:

significant community development only takes place when local people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort ... you can't develop communities from the top down, or from outside in. (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1996, p. 2)

Community capacity building is now an established objective in public policy and planning programs in a number of Australian states and territories, most notably Queensland and Victoria (Hounslow, 2002; Thompson, 2005). The Victorian government's urban renewal program incorporates a commitment to community strengthening through an integrated approach to community services in 15 disadvantaged communities. Howe and Cleary (2001) define community capacity as 'the ability of individuals, organisations and communities to manage their own affairs and to work collectively to foster and sustain positive change'. The emphasis is on private/public partnerships (Thompson, 2005), local knowledge and participation, community strengths and assets, rather than deficits, and local solutions to local problems. All of this sounds very empowering, but addressing the magnitude of social and economic problems in the most economically depressed communities will require a significant allocation of resources over many years. There is a real danger that the emphasis on 'bottom-up' initiatives will shift the responsibility for addressing the problem away from governments to local residents who can then be blamed for any failures.

The capacity developing school

Local schools are accorded a prominent place in efforts to develop community capacity because they often act as a focus for community life and have potential resources, expertise and networks to support ongoing community development (Brennan, 2000). Such a vision is contained in the New Community Schools (NCS) initiative in Scotland (Nixon et al., 2001) and recent moves to establish community access schools and full service schools in Australia. These initiatives aim to develop a stronger sense of school/community connectedness and to offer a more holistic approach to the delivery of human services. Almost without exception, they have occurred in low socioeconomic communities. In other instances, schools have acted as models for sustainable development, developed service learning programs and participated in joint school/community projects aimed at fostering civic pride and responsibility.

The capacity developing school views the community as a significant educational resource that can complement and enhance learning for students. Community-oriented schools are able to draw on the intellectual, cultural, economic and social resources of government and non-government agencies and community organisations in addressing such issues as poverty, racism, homelessness, health initiatives, human rights and the environment. Not only do schools draw on the expertise of community workers, but they also seek to involve students in community based social action programs. Brennan (2000) argues that ‘schooling is a resource for the community, with active roles for students in doing worthwhile and valued activities in building community (p. 16).

It is claimed that schools have a potential for community development by virtue of their capacity to enhance social capital—‘the processes between people which establish networks, norms and social trust and facilitate co-ordination and co-operation for mutual benefit’ (Cox, 1995, p. 15). Cox views social capital as ‘the basis on which we build a truly civil society’ (p. 17) and stresses the role of families, schools, neighbourhoods and workplaces as sites for the accumulation of trust and civic values. To the extent that schools aim to foster belongingness, educative relationships and a sense of community, they clearly have a potential to develop educational, social and cultural networks that extend into, and strengthen, local communities. However, the notion of a community always raises the question of who is in

and who is out when it comes to social inclusion (Pendergast & Renshaw, 2001). To what extent does a school function as an inclusive community? Who gets the greatest share of social capital? How does a school establish networks, norms and social trust in a community which is deeply fractured by class, gender and racial differences?

These are ongoing challenging issues for educators and those engaged in community renewal but amidst a 'conservative assault' and 'new authoritarianism' (Giroux, 2005), there are glimmers of hope in the form of neighbourhood renewal projects, community schooling initiatives and connectionist pedagogies that acknowledge the interdependence of schools and communities in capacity building and the identity formation of young people.

1.18 Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that we need a major rethink of the ways in which the so-called 'problems' of school retention and student engagement are named and addressed. What we have at present amounts to a misrepresentation of the real problems, that of educational inequality and unjust schooling arrangements, in which responsibility for a lack of school success is sheeted back to young people, their families and schools. Missing from this deficit discourse is any real recognition of the economic and social damage inflicted on struggling communities by neoliberal governments, and their negative impact on schools and the aspirations of students. A muscular policy response, generated partly through a manufactured education crisis, has sought to 'raise standards' through testing regimes, literacy and numeracy benchmarks, and accountability frameworks. These policies have been developed at arms length from schools and are largely dismissive of popular culture and the funds of knowledge in communities. Taken to the extreme, they are a prescription for a pedagogy of poverty. Although teachers have a great deal of pedagogical and relational knowledge of what works with students in low socioeconomic communities, they have largely been excluded from providing input into the shaping of policy.

In rethinking the question of school reform and educational disadvantage, I have argued that we need to move away from a school effectiveness paradigm to a community engagement approach that recognises the interconnectedness of schooling and community. But beyond mere engagement, the bigger challenge is to reposition the school as a vehicle for community capacity building. The task of rejuvenating schools for young people has to proceed in tandem with community renewal, and schools, by virtue of their physical, cultural and social resources, are well placed to contribute to this process. In seeking to improve the education for young people we need to be guided by a local view of what is needed, rather than by a needs-oriented approach which says 'we know what's best for kids in poor communities'. What this amounts to is a willingness to engage in authentic dialogue with parents, students and community members as a means of developing a sense of local ownership and leadership. It is also to acknowledge that quick policy fixes are hardly a prescription for sustainable improvement. Finally, if we are to address the major problems of educational disadvantage confronting many young Australians, we need to put teachers and communities firmly into the policy equation.

1.19 References

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