

# Communities and change: selected papers

Edited by  
Dorothy Bottrell and Gabrielle Meagher



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# Contributors

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Dr Dorothy Bottrell is a Senior Research Associate in Child and Youth Studies in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. Dorothy's background is in secondary teaching, juvenile justice, youth and community work and teaching in welfare studies. With a social justice orientation, Dorothy's work aims to shift understandings of disadvantaged and marginalised young people away from categories of 'problem youth'. Identity work, resistances and resilience are central themes of her research, explored in relation to schooling, transitions and community life.

## **Leigh Burrows**

Leigh Burrows has a long interest in working across boundaries in education, social work and health. She has worked in a variety of settings including a women's refuge, Steiner and government schools, universities and the Department of Education and Children's Services as a project officer with a policy focus. Her PhD research is focused on a co-constructed, dialogic and holistic methodology she has developed to respond to highly complex cases involving schools, families and human service agencies. She is currently seconded to Flinders University to work on an ARC linkage project on building capacity for wellbeing in school communities.

## **Everarda Cunningham**

Dr Everarda Cunningham is the Associate Dean of Research in the Faculty of Higher Education at Swinburne University. She is an experienced teacher and an internationally published researcher in educational psychology. Her specific research interest is in maximising the potential of students at risk in the school system through whole school approaches. Together with Cathy Brandon, she is co-author of the *Bright Ideas* program that builds resiliency skills in young people and has been implemented in Australian schools for over 30,000 students. Dr Cunningham is a significant author of the program: *Engaging and empowering students with learning disabilities/dyslexia*.

## **Suzanne Egan**

Suzanne Egan is employed as a Research Officer at Rosemount Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service in Sydney and worked previously in direct service provision in the youth and sexual assault sectors. She is currently undertaking a PhD in Social Work at the University of Sydney.

## **David Evans**

David Evans is currently Associate Professor of Special Education in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. He has had university appointments at Edith Cowan University (Western Australia) and the University of Western Sydney. His research programs include education of students with autism, literacy and numeracy difficulties, whole school approaches to managing diverse learning and behavioural needs, and researching the needs of families catering for a child with disability across the life span.

## **Angela Fenton**

Angela Fenton is completing a PhD at James Cook University where she also currently lectures with the School of Education in the area of early childhood education. She has previously worked substantially in England and Australia as a classroom teacher, Director of Early Childhood services and Manager with the Queensland Indigenous Children's Services Unit. Significant projects have included the development of the publication *Our place ... our dreaming*, an Indigenous child care resource book and the *Building blocks, a child protection resource kit* (QCOSS, 2003). Most recently her work has been focused in adult education as a facilitator, particularly in the area of child protection. Her work has frequently crossed education and social work boundaries and has led to a specific interest in the potential of strengths based frameworks for education.

## **Gabrielle Meagher**

Gabrielle Meagher is Professor of Social Policy and co-convenor of the Social Policy Research Network in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. Her research interests include the organisation and experience of paid care work and social attitudes to the welfare state, particularly social service provision, and to unions. She is Editor of the *Australian Review of Public Affairs* ([www.australianreview.net](http://www.australianreview.net)).

## **Kay Munyard**

Kay Munyard is an English and literacy teacher with 20 years experience in secondary and primary schools. Her main areas of interest are language acquisition and the reasons some students encounter problems with this. Her overall aim is to complement the academic research with pragmatic suggestions and strategies to help classroom teachers maximise learning outcomes for students with learning disabilities. Kay has previously worked in schools with Dr Everarda Cunningham and is part of the Learning Disabilities Project Team at Swinburne. She is a co-author of the professional development program for teachers: *Engaging and empowering students with learning disabilities/dyslexia*.

## **Sue Nichols**

Sue Nichols is an educational researcher with the interdisciplinary Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies at the University of South Australia. Her research interests include families' relationships with education, literacy practices across diverse contexts and practitioner inquiry. She has published widely in international journals including the *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, *Early Years*, *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* and *Early Childhood Development and Care*. She is currently in receipt of an ARC Discovery Grant with Helen Nixon for the project 'Parents networks: the circulation of knowledge about children's literacy and learning'.

## **Jennifer O'Dea**

Associate Professor Jenny O'Dea is a dietitian, researcher and lecturer in nutrition and health education in the Faculty of Education at the University of Sydney. She has been an Associate Editor for Health Education Research for several years. Recent research from Dr O'Dea's group of collaborative researchers and students includes a national Australian Research Council study titled 'Youth cultures of eating' and a five-year study of children's participation in sport and physical activity. Dr O'Dea has conducted several large research studies into body image, weight issues, self-concept, self esteem, and eating issues among children, adolescents and college students. She is the author of four books, the latest being *Everybody's different: a positive approach to teaching about health, puberty, body image, nutrition, self esteem and obesity prevention* (ACER Press, 2007).

## **Margot Rawsthorne**

Dr Margot Rawsthorne is currently employed as a Lecturer (Community Development) in Social Work and Policy Studies at the University of Sydney. She has a long history of policy-relevant research, particular in partnership with non-government organizations. Much of her recent work has aimed at building knowledge about community processes and programs that create sustainable change. She is increasingly adopting mixed methodology in her research. She is a strong advocate for violence prevention, particularly for young people as well as women in rural settings.

## **Kerry Russo**

Kerry Russo is the Regional Education Leader for Blended Distributed Delivery (BDD) and Community Services studies at the Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE (BRIT) in North Queensland. Based at Ingham campus, Kerry holds a Master of Education majoring in Learning Technologies from James Cook University. Prior to commencing a teaching position with BRIT, Kerry was a community worker and counsellor in a women's shelter and neighbourhood centre. Kerry continues to work in her local community as an advocate for people with disabilities and is involved in various community groups. Kerry is passionate about equitable access to quality education for rural communities and maintains technology bridges the gap between urban and rural people by enabling opportunity.

## **Lesley Scanlon**

Dr Lesley Scanlon is a lecturer in education in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. She has extensive experience in the development, implementation and facilitation of mentor programs designed to assist students in the transition to university. Her research work involves developing an integrated approach to identifying and applying better understandings of teacher identity formation and development. Major dimensions of her work include the situated nature of learning and 'becoming'; the place of identity formation in becoming a student and teacher with specific emphasis on the importance of contextual factors and the role of experience; the place and significance of transitional experiences in professional identity formation; and the function of reflection in creating knowledge and identity.



## **Jason Skues**

Jason Skues is conducting doctoral research with Swinburne University of Technology's Learning Disabilities Project Team, with a particular emphasis on assessments and classroom accommodations for those with learning disabilities. He has previously completed research in schools on mobile phone use and bullying behaviours. Jason has published in a national journal and is a co-author of the professional development program for teachers: *Engaging and empowering students with learning disabilities/dyslexia*. In the United States of America recently he completed Susan Barton's course on 'Diagnosing Dyslexia'.

## **Iva Strnadová**

Iva Strnadová is Senior Lecturer in Special Education at Charles University in Prague, Czech Republic, and Honorary Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney. She is currently involved in teaching in special education programs at Charles University, and the Erasmus Mundus Master of Arts (Special Education Needs) program in collaboration with staff from Fontys University, Tilburg, The Netherlands, and Roehampton University, London. Dr Strnadová leads a series of projects examining the experiences of families caring for a child with a disability across the life span. She has other research interests in the area of inclusive education and numeracy and students with dyscalculia.

## **Lyndall Sullivan**

Lyndall Sullivan has a background in education policy and research and also clinical psychology. She is interested in how research in education and psychology can inform school practice to promote positive experiences of learning and social development for all students. She has contributed to the development of many resources to support schools' capacity to deal productively with such interlinked areas as student behaviour and learning, bullying, social competence, and partnerships with communities and families. Lyndall is part of Swinburne University's Learning Disabilities Project Team and is a co-author of the professional development program for teachers: *Engaging and empowering students with learning disabilities/dyslexia*.

## **Frank Tesoriero**

Dr Frank Tesoriero has 33 years' experience as a social work practitioner, manager, researcher, author and academic since graduating in social work at the University of Sydney. His major areas of expertise and experience include community development, cross cultural social work, social development in primary health care and community health settings. He has 12 years' experience working in local communities in south India, as well as experience in Kenya, South Africa and Fiji. He has co-authored a major Australian text on community development with Professor Jim Ife and has published widely in his areas of expertise. He worked and taught in south India for 12 months in 2006 and continues with his action research/community development project in rural south India. He was instrumental, with the Madras Christian College Department of Social Work and university partners in Taiwan, Philippines, USA, Canada, north Europe and UK, in establishing the Centre for International Social Work, based on an international perspective and a human rights foundation.

## **Tony Vinson**

Tony Vinson's professional career has alternated between academic appointments and government and community positions. He has held professorial appointments in behavioural sciences in medicine at the University of Newcastle and social work at the University of NSW. From 1979 to 1981 he headed the NSW Department of Corrective Services during a period of intense reform. In 2001 he was invited to chair a year-long Independent Inquiry into Public Education in NSW, resulting in his receiving an inaugural NSW Government Award for Meritorious Services to Public Education. In 2007 he published a national study of the geographic distribution of disadvantage, called *Dropping off the edge*.

## **Ebeny Wood**

Ebeny Wood is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology, University of Tasmania. Her research focus is social change and schooling and she is particularly interested in how recent social change has impacted teacher's work and young people's engagement with school. Her PhD research is a qualitative study exploring the alternative school options offered to disengaged young people at a public high school in Tasmania. Ebeny is the research and evaluation coordinator at the Beacon Foun-

dation. She is also involved in ‘Future builders’, a project involving the design and implementation of an evaluation framework to be used by not for profit ventures running programs with young people, in order to measure and report on the success of these programs.

### **Lana Zannettino**

Lana Zannettino is a research fellow in the Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies at the University of South Australia. Lana has a background in social work practice and research and has conducted several research projects concerned with the development and evaluation of collaborative models of intervention within and between the areas of child protection and welfare, domestic and family violence, and schooling and student support. She has published in national and international journals including *Gender and Education*, *Women against Violence* and *Journal of Student Wellbeing*. She has recently co-written a research report *Our actions to prevent the abuse of older South Australians 2007* for the Office for the Ageing, Department for Families and Communities, South Australia.



# Preface

In October 2007, the Research Division of the Faculty of Education and Social Work organised and coordinated a four-day ResearchFest. This was part of an innovative action plan and the purpose was to highlight the achievements of Faculty members, to engage productively with colleagues from the fields of social work, policy studies and education, and to enable the Faculty Research Networks to host events focusing on their designated areas. The title ‘Communities and Change’ was chosen as a means of further facilitating and enhancing community and industry relationships and extending shared research and capacity building agendas.

This publication, edited by Dorothy Bottrell and Gabrielle Meagher, focuses on key themes which emerged from the series of events which comprised the ResearchFest. These themes include how change can be both promoted and sustained with regard to disadvantaged communities and children in communities, how professionals can be supported in bringing about community change and how research and evaluative research collaboration can make a difference. These papers not only draw attention to the lively discussion generated, but also emphasise the importance of working together initiatives and inclusive engagement in the arenas of social work, policy studies and education.

The success of the ResearchFest and the production of this publication reflect the hard work of a large number of people. All are deserving of thanks, but the contribution of Patrick Brownlee, the Faculty Research Manager, Raen Fraser, the Administrative Officer and the Directors of the Social Policy Research Network, the TESOL Research Network, the Development and Learning in Children and Youth Network, the Arts, English and Literacy Research Network and the Policy and Professional Practice Research Network, deserve particular mention. Thanks need also to be given to our external collaborators who ensured that the events were productive and that the gains extended far beyond the ResearchFest timescale. It is notable that all the Research Networks continue to build on the achievements of this four day period.

Finally, I would like to thank the contributors to this publication for their enthusiasm and commitment. Some are based in the Faculty, others come from a range of settings. All have developed the discussion in constructive and innovative ways and all have made a major contribution to the broad, yet dynamic arena of ‘communities and change’.

Barbara Fawcett

Professor of Social Work and Policy Studies

# Introduction

## Gabrielle Meagher and Dorothy Bottrell

This volume presents the refereed proceedings of the Communities and Change conference, held on October 22–24, 2007, as part of a week-long Research Festival in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.<sup>1</sup> This significant national conference sought to increase the depth of exchange between disciplines and between universities and the field, within the broad theme of ‘communities and change’. The choice of this broad theme for the conference expresses a core theoretical project of the Faculty, which is to explore the connections between social policy and educational opportunity and to understand the transformative effects of education on communities as well as individuals. These understandings underpin the Faculty’s objective of enhancing professional standards in the key social and public service domains of education and social work. These understandings are also critical in the context of Australia’s development as a ‘knowledge society’ because they can inform the development of policy and practice to support just and equitable distribution of the opportunities and rewards of rapid social change.

The conference aimed to bring together researchers, practitioners and advocates from academia and industry to explore shared concerns – and to raise new ones – with a focus on the contribution of research. The program included a rich variety of papers and fora, drawing on the Research Networks in the Faculty of Education and Social Work, and on the original research of academics and practitioners in education, social work and related disciplines from around Australia. The papers collected in this volume explore different scales and dimensions of research on communities and change, and we have organised the papers in four themed sections.

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<sup>1</sup> Included papers were selected from those submitted for consideration for the proceedings via a double-blind peer review process. One exception is the paper by Jenny O’Dea. Associate Professor O’Dea presented findings from her research on Youth Cultures of Eating at the conference; the chapter included here is a version of a paper based on this research, since published in the journal *Health and Social Care in the Community*.

The first theme, 'Supporting change for disadvantaged communities', includes four papers that examine the impact of social change and, where possible, suggest ways forward.

Tony Vinson's contribution, drawing on his recent major research project *Dropping Off the Edge* (2007), shows how social disadvantage compounds in particular localities. Analysing data from a wide variety of published and unpublished sources, this paper demonstrates the damaging consequences of limited education, poor health and low income when geographically concentrated. These result in an increase in involvement in crime and confirmed child maltreatment. Disturbingly, Professor Vinson's research also shows that many areas with concentrated disadvantage today also showed concentrated disadvantage 30 years ago. However, there is some hope that policy-makers will act on the knowledge set out in the paper: the results of this research have informed the establishment of the new federal government's Social Inclusion Board.

Engaging alienated young people in schooling is the subject of Ebony Wood's paper. Based on qualitative research undertaken in a public high school in Tasmania, this paper investigates whether the change from authoritarian to democratic governance in schools has been an unalloyed success for disadvantaged youth. Change to democratic governance in schools carries the promise of engagement and increased support for students, and Ms Wood does find that students are more likely to engage with school when the climate is less authoritarian. However, democratic governance in schools, as practised in 'Woodfield High', also makes demands on students to be more responsible for themselves and their futures – demands that some disadvantaged young people find hard to meet.

The complex challenges of change-making are also the subject of Frank Tesoriero's study of a community development health project in South India. Dr Tesoriero explores the paradoxical impacts of working at a small scale in a profoundly unequal society. He found that the 'Healthy Districts Project' enabled previously excluded groups – notably women and dalits or 'untouchable' people – to participate in decision making about their destiny. Yet the process of expanding participation also stirred and threatened broader forces and powerful interests, which could not be addressed by the project. At one level, then, the successes of the project caused it to



fail. At another level, many valuable lessons were learnt, and the aspirations of the socially excluded were mobilised and developed.

Jenny O'Dea's contribution tackles the issue of the social distribution of obesity among children, drawing on a large scale survey that is part of the 'Youth cultures of eating' study. Social class differences in the prevalence of overweight and obesity are well-established; this paper explores whether other socio-cultural influences, such as ethnicity, might be involved. The findings of the study clearly support this hypothesis. Associate Professor O'Dea shows that there are measurable differences between children and adolescents from different ethnic groups in the prevalence of obesity and in body image and perceptions of ideal weight. The findings have important implications for health, social and educational professionals in their obesity prevention work among children and adolescents from varying ethnic groups.

Our second theme is 'Supporting change for children in communities'. This section includes two papers that explore the strategies that professionals and parents use as they care for children with disabilities.

Leigh Burrows aims to improve the way schools support the small number of children and young people with complex learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties. She describes how she used a therapeutic story in her work with a young boy who had effectively been excluded from school because of such problems. Through the story of 'Max and the knight', Ms Burrows was able to gather support around 'Taylor' in a holistic way. Her paper advocates for the power of careful observation, sympathetic engagement with a child in context, inter-professional communication, and a well-aimed narrative to reconnect a child to his family, school and community.

The second paper in this section, by David Evans and Iva Strnadová, explores the coping strategies used by mothers who are caring for a child with an intellectual disability. This mixed-method study of 13 mothers with children aged 5–13 sought to identify the causes of stress on these mothers, and how they coped. Finding that the mothers are significantly stressed, sometimes by the experience of services designed to support them, the authors report that mothers employ a range of highly individual strategies to cope. Some strategies drew on 'inner resources', some on

social networks. Some were oriented towards action for change, and others focused on balancing stress by enjoying leisure time and, indeed, life. Many mothers pursued multiple strategies. The authors conclude with the hope that professionals offering support to parents caring for a child with an intellectual disability will be able to learn from the research to help parents find personal approaches to cope well.

The third theme of the collection is ‘Supporting professionals for community change’, and includes four papers focused primarily on educational settings, but with some interesting connections with issues and contexts relevant to social work. Three examine the education of teachers, some in pre-service training and others in a professional learning context, while the fourth focuses on students in a community work studies program.

How and, more importantly, *why* information technologies might be used to engage ‘Generation Y’ students are the questions motivating Kerry Russo’s exploration of the Blended Distributed Delivery (BDD) program in use in teaching community work studies in a Queensland Institute of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). This paper starts by asserting the need for a well-developed *pedagogical framework* to underpin the use of information technologies in education. Ms Russo draws on practice inquiry in the Institute to propose a set of ‘pedagogical parameters’ for consideration in developing BDD programs, which offer ‘a combination of teaching and learning strategies within a pedagogical framework to engage learners’. Practice inquiry demonstrated that BDD provides learning opportunities both for teachers and students, and identified the need for students’ voices to be heard in a shared space of mutual respect and inquiry.

Teacher education programs are often criticised for being ‘too theoretical’, and insufficiently practice oriented. In her contribution to the conference, Lesley Scanlon reports on research into a teaching program that challenges the dichotomy between theory and practice, and shows how pre-service teachers came to understand theory as crucial to informing their developing practice. Surveys and interviews with students participating in an elective course on mentoring found that general sociological theories and concepts – including phenomenology and risk sociology – became powerful frames for students to reflect on their practice and to move from ‘knowledge about’ to ‘knowledge of’ teaching practice.

Teachers are often the only professionals to come into day-to-day contact with children in need of protection from abuse or neglect, and are subject to mandatory reporting requirements. Yet their pre-service training may not prepare them well for these aspects of their role. Angela Fenton's paper reports the results of research into the use and potential of the Strengths Approach for child protection education for pre-service teachers in Queensland. The Strengths Approach emerged out of criticisms of 'deficit' models of social problems in the social services field, and is now being explored in child protection and other fields. Based on her research on a child protection education module that builds on the Strengths Approach, Ms Fenton is encouraged by her initial findings that it seems helpful for pre-service teachers in this crucial area of their education for practice.

Schools are increasingly being required to ensure that students with a wide array of needs and abilities are effectively provided for. Nevertheless, students with learning disabilities may not be well met. In their paper, Kay Munyard and colleagues report on research into a professional development program for practising teachers, designed to help them understand, identify and respond to students with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Based on analysis of participants' feedback on the professional development program, Ms Munyard and colleagues conclude that the program was well-received, and that it has the potential to address an important gap in the capacity of schools to meet the needs of all their students.

The fourth and final theme of the collection addresses 'Research collaboration for change'. Within universities, interdisciplinary research is increasingly being recognised as an important means of addressing the complexity of social, economic, and environmental phenomena in contemporary society. Meanwhile, as non-government organisations take on an increasingly significant role in social provision in Australia and elsewhere, they are developing their own research capacity as they seek to ensure they are working as effectively and accountably as possible. Research collaboration between researchers in universities and those in NGOs is also emerging as a fruitful, if sometimes fraught, way forward. The three papers in this section address these themes.

In their contribution, Sue Nichols and Lana Zannettino analyse the process and challenges of interdisciplinary research in education and social

work in an academic setting. Dr Nichols (an educator) and Dr Zannettino (a social worker) came together as collaborators on a larger research project on integrated early childhood services. Significantly, integrated early childhood services demand inter-professional collaboration in practice, while research on such services demands interdisciplinary collaboration among researchers. Their paper describes how they developed a structured way of working together to explore what they shared – and did not share – in the bodies of knowledge, research questions, methods, sense of the position of the researcher in social relations and sense of the audiences for research that they brought to the project. They aim to contribute to the development of a more explicit understanding of the process of research collaboration, which is particularly applicable to research on practice settings which rely on inter-professional collaboration.

Margot Rawsthorne's paper explores the challenges of developing genuine research partnerships between universities and organisations in the community welfare sector, and suggests strategies for improving such partnerships. Drawing on existing research and her own extensive experience, Dr Rawsthorne explains how challenges to effective partnerships can develop at a range of levels from the inter-organisational to the interpersonal. She highlights the importance of a shared commitment to community development practice in transforming conflicts that may arise along the way. Overall, she is optimistic about the capacity of strong partnerships between universities and community welfare organisations to perform better than working on parallel tracks in the search for solutions to pressing social problems.

As community welfare organisations move into the research field, they need to find models and ways of working that may differ from those prevalent when social and practice research were primarily conducted in university settings. Suzanne Egan's paper examines the research practice in a small community agency, Rosemount Good Shepherd Youth and Family Service, where she works as a researcher. Ms Egan argues that the development of practice-based research capacity within Rosemount has enhanced the organisation's ability to respond quickly and appropriately to issues as they emerge from the 'frontline', and has ensured that the research-practice nexus is visible within the organisation. There are challenges, too, in small organisations where resources and time are scarce.

The paper concludes by calling for more research on the growth and orientation of research positions and units in community welfare organisations, in the context of increasing contracting out of social service provision and rising demands for practice to be evidence-based.

Taken together, the papers in the collection demonstrate the complex, challenging and constructive connections between education and social work, between universities and community organisations, and between research and practice.

## References

Vinson, T. (2007). *Dropping off the edge: the distribution of disadvantage in Australia*. Melbourne: Jesuit Social Services



**Supporting change for  
disadvantaged communities**





# The reality of locational social disadvantage: what could help to reduce its ill-effects?

**Tony Vinson**

It seems somehow appropriate in Australia's oldest university to help launch this festival with discussion of a research method that is approximately of the same vintage. There is a long tradition of studying social inequalities and their effects by comparing geographic areas. Mayhew's (1861) study of the spatial distribution of crime in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Britain and Wales and its relationship to other variables, including illiteracy, was an early example of the social-geographical approach to the understanding of social issues. The approach is thought by its adherents to throw light upon the relationship between an issue of special interest (mental illness, child maltreatment and the like) and what are called 'ecological' variables, such as disadvantage and urbanisation. An early Australian study of the relationship between 'disadvantage' and crime was the study of 72 minor suburbs of Newcastle in the 1970s (Vinson & Homel, 1975). A composite index of disadvantage based on medical, economic and social variables correlated strongly with the residential areas of offenders.

Like every method of research, the social-geographic approach has its advantages and limitations. More recent research in this tradition has relied heavily on census boundaries of varying scales in order to take advantage of population statistics. That is, we tend operationally to define the concept of *neighbourhood* in terms of standard census units. However, the larger the unit, the greater the possibility of losing sight of a spatial concentration of problems diluted in the course of aggregating an area's attributes. Just how important this can be was brought home by some research that I conducted with colleagues in a suburb of Western Sydney (Vinson, Baldry & Hargreaves, 1996). The suburb had been nominated by the NSW Department of Community Services as one with a relatively high rate of confirmed child maltreatment but one of the two census units that comprised the locality had a high rate of 53.0 per 1000 children while

the other had a relatively low rate of 8.1. This was despite the fact that the areas appeared well matched on a range of socio-economic factors. Moreover, there were remarkably few significant differences between them on a range of social measures that we employed, including assessments of social cohesion and the support extended to parents and carers.

This picture changed dramatically when we altered our focus from the census boundaries to clusters of residences in which children with confirmed instances of maltreatment lived. A template encompassing 200 square metres was used and a cluster was said to exist when that space contained at least three homes within which confirmed maltreatment had occurred during the previous three years. Subsequent comparisons were between *cluster area parents/carers* and their counterparts living in the remainder of the suburb. The scales and questionnaire items that had previously failed to discriminate between the high and low risk child maltreatment areas now revealed significant differences. An example: asked to agree or disagree with the statement 'I feel like I belong to this neighbourhood', more than twice as many carers (56%) in the cluster areas disagreed compared with 24% of the carers living in the remainder of the suburb ( $\chi^2 16.0$  (1df)  $p < .001$ ). Cluster area residents gave other indications of being decidedly less attached to their area. On 16 of the 18 items on the Buckner (1988) social cohesion scale the cluster carers took a more negative view of their neighbourhood.

Community service practitioners who worked in the suburb were able to draw the outlines of cluster areas with respect to child maltreatment with a degree of precision that made their estimates a workable proxy for the official data. They described the areas concerned as being characterised by violence, clannishness, addiction, unsociability and child neglect, giving rise to the question of whether micro-social environments may be associated with child maltreatment. That is an interesting issue but the important point to make for the moment is that basing social ecology studies on census units has its advantages but at times other strategies can be more fruitful.

In recent mapping of disadvantage throughout Australian states and territories (Vinson, 2007) use has been made of indicators or 'signposts' which, taken in combination, help to identify areas of concentrated disadvantage. It needs to be emphasised that the primary purpose was not to

reveal causal patterns but rather to bring into focus areas of concentrated disadvantage. To be included, indicators needed to be direct manifestations of disadvantage entailing a minimum of theoretical supposition, for example, about the disadvantageous consequences of people belonging to particular social or cultural groups or having a particular marital or family status. Some of this material can be extracted from the Bureau of Statistics, but much has to be garnered from government departments and agencies; things like confirmed child maltreatment, prison admissions, criminal court convictions, domestic/family violence, and psychiatric hospital admissions. Assembling this data on a national scale proved difficult. In any event it was possible to gather around 25 of the following indicators for all states and the ACT, the social structure of the Northern Territory and the limited data available virtually excluding that jurisdiction from the analyses made on this occasion:

Table 1. Overview of indicators used

Measure	Data Source
<b>1. Social distress</b>	
Low family income Rental stress Home purchase stress Lone person households	Census of Population and Housing, 2006
<b>2. Health</b>	
Low birth weight Deficient immunisation	State Departments of Health (except Western Australia), and Victorian Department of Human Services, 2006
Childhood injuries	Accident Research Centre, Monash University, 2006
Disability/sickness support	Centrelink, 2006
Mortality (life expectancy)	Australian Bureau of Statistics, <i>Deaths Australia</i> , 2006

Measure	Data Source
Mental health patients treated in hospitals	Departments of Health (except South Australia and ACT), Victorian Department of Human Services, 2006
Suicide	Cabinet and Policy Group (ACT); Dept of Communities (QLD); Department of Premier and Cabinet (Tasmania), 2005/06
<b>3. Community safety</b>	
Confirmed child maltreatment	NSW Dept Community Services, 2006; Victorian Department of Human Services, 2006; QLD Department of Communities, 2006; South Australian Public Health Information Development Unit, University of Adelaide, 2002
Criminal convictions	Published and administrative data, State Justice Ministries (except Western Australia), 2006
Prison admissions	Administrative data, State Departments of Corrective Services, 2006
Domestic violence	Published and administrative data, State Justice Ministries (except Tasmania and Western Australia), 2006
<b>4. Economic</b>	
Unskilled workers	Census of Population and Housing, 2006
Unemployment	
Long-term unemployment	Centrelink customised data, 2005/06 and Census of Population and Housing, 2006
Dependency ratio (employed: unemployed)	Census of Population and Housing, customised tables, 2006
Low mean taxable income	Australian Tax Office, 2006
Computer use	Census of Population and Housing, 2006
Access to internet	

Measure	Data Source
<b>5. Education</b>	
Non-attendance at pre-school	Census of Population and Housing, customised data 2006
Incomplete education/training (17–24 year olds)	Census of Population and Housing, customised data 2006
Early school leaving of local population	Census of Population and Housing, 2006
Post-schooling qualifications	Census of Population and Housing, 2006

Of specific interest are the interconnections between the different strands of disadvantage and the ways in which they unfold at different stages of the life-cycle with consequences for individuals, the communities in which they reside and society generally. The ultimate purposes of the project are to promote greater life opportunities where presently they are in markedly short supply and to do so to the economic and social advantage of the society generally. A major perspective in the research is that where an accumulation of problems makes a serious and sustained impact upon the wellbeing of residents of a disadvantaged area, locality-specific measures may be needed to supplement general social policy. When social disadvantage becomes entrenched within a limited number of localities, a disabling social climate can develop that is more than the sum of individual and household disadvantages and the prospect is increased of disadvantage being passed from one generation to the next. That is not to imply that the causes of disadvantage reside entirely within local areas: structural macroeconomic factors also play a part in creating concentrations of poverty.

The social-geographic study of disadvantage is best undertaken at the smallest geographic scale for which relevant data can be obtained. In the present study it has proved possible to employ postcode area data for New South Wales, Victoria and the ACT. The data sources in Queensland and South Australia required analysis at the level of ‘Statistical Local Areas’ and in Tasmania and Western Australia ‘Local Government Areas’

have been used. Needless to say, the raw data in all instances is converted into a rate based on the number of eligible people residing in a locality. For instance, the number of confirmed instances of child maltreatment is expressed as a rate per 1000 of children residing in an area aged 15 years or younger.

The primary interest in this project is in extreme disadvantage, communities that have ‘fallen off the edge’. Most striking are the comparative rates of occurrence of problems within the extremely disadvantaged localities in each state and the ACT and the rest of the population in each jurisdiction.

## Identifying Disadvantaged Areas

Two approaches have been used in *Dropping Off the Edge* to identify areas of marked disadvantage. One is comparatively simple; the other is less straight-forward and of a more statistical nature.

### *Simple method*

The first scan of the distribution of disadvantage was based on the identification of localities with ‘comparatively high scores’ on some – upwards of six and sometimes as many as 12 – of the indicators. The procedure adopted was to rank the geographic units on each indicator assigning first position to the locality with the highest negative score (the highest rate of early school leavers, the highest number of residents on sickness/disability payments and so forth). Then a calculation was made of the number of times each area fell into the ‘top group’ of most disadvantaged places, defined as approximately the top 5% (with minor variations depending on the number of localities involved in each jurisdiction). Thus we derived a first estimate of the relative disadvantage experienced by each locality. Coincidentally, this procedure also throws light on the extent to which ‘high’ (that is, negative) scores are concentrated in a comparatively small proportion of the areas studied. For example, in Victoria, 25 indicators were used and to be in the ‘top 5%’ on each one meant being in the first 40 rank positions. Accordingly, in Victoria there were 25 x 40 (total 1000) positions to be filled. In fact, 1.5% of the postcodes accounted for 13.7% of the top 40 positions – a ninefold over-representation. And so it was generally: across the jurisdictions, 1.5% of localities accounted for six to seven times their share of top ranking positions.

The simple method used to gain this first picture of localised disadvantage turns on the prominence of some areas on some of the indicators. This is different from the second approach which simultaneously takes into account an area's rankings, high and low, on *all* of the indicators. Keeping that difference in mind the first method identifies 20–30 places in the larger jurisdictions and 15 or fewer in the smaller states that are at the extremes on six or more measures of disadvantage. It will be seen that there are considerable overlaps in the results produced by both basic methods. Having high scores on several indicators attracts, for reasons possibly as varied as stressful environments and extra social surveillance, high positions on what might be considered signs of extreme disadvantage – such as confirmed child maltreatment and prison admissions. The principal recurring features of areas prominent on some indicators are:

- limited general education (early school leaving); Year 12 incomplete
- limited computer use/internet access; lack of post-school qualifications (no further training)
- low family income
- unemployment/long-term unemployment
- disability/sickness support
- criminal convictions/imprisonment
- child maltreatment.

## *Statistical method*

### Overall locational vulnerability

The ultimate aim of the project was to pull together the information that we have about the postcode areas, Local Government Areas (LGAs) and Statistical Local Areas (SLAs) with a view to assessing their *overall* susceptibility to social disadvantage. Our goal was the practical one of summing up the information to hand in a way that enabled the localities within each jurisdiction to be ranked according to their relative degree of disadvantage. Our aim was to arrange the localities in an array, like beads on a string, ranging from the area that is most generally vulnerable to the problems represented by our indicators, to the one that is least vulnerable. Thereafter, we grouped like-positioned areas into bands, thereby avoid-

ing the singling out of localities for concentrated public comment while keeping sight of the priority needs associated with a high ranking on the general disadvantage index.

There is a statistical procedure that we can call upon to assist us in this endeavour. Our use of this procedure – called Principal Components Analysis – is conventional and in accord with standard practice when we apply it to the five jurisdictions with substantial numbers of data collection units (Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia). In the cases of Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory we employed Principal Components Analysis in an exploratory way in an attempt to add additional insights, cautiously interpreted, to those already available from the earlier mentioned analyses (Osborne & Costello, 2004). The method examines the structures that underlie the patterns of correlation between the social indicators. If what is called the first *component* accounts for a sufficiently high percentage of the total variance of the 20–25 indicators in each instance, the task of arranging localities according to their degree of susceptibility to disadvantage is reduced to examining scores along a single dimension.

A brief consideration of the results for New South Wales suffices to illustrate the general approach. The principal component or *general disadvantage factor* accounted for 42.8% of the total variance of 25 indicators across 647 postcodes. This result approximates to findings obtained using a similar approach in 1999 and 2004. The general disadvantage factor captures along a single dimension many aspects of disadvantage previously reflected in 25 indicator scores. What were the more salient ones? In the case of NSW 14 indicators correlated with the factor at the +0.60 level or above. The same variables, when available, correlated to an equal extent with the NSW general disadvantage factor in 1999 and 2004. The highest correlating indicators were:

- limited computer use/internet access
- early school leaving/Year 12 incomplete
- limited post-school qualifications
- low family income/taxable income
- low work skills/long-term unemployment/unemployment



- criminal convictions/admissions to prisons
- disability/sickness support
- high dependency ratio (unemployed: unemployed).

Each indicator is assigned a weighting that reflects its relative importance in the principal component. This is gauged by the correlation between the indicator and the factor (first component). Analogous to Pearson's  $r$ , the squared factor loading is the percent of variance in an indicator explained by the factor.

The sum of weighted scores for each of NSW's 647 postcode areas enables the distribution of disadvantage to be represented in a number of ways, from the maps that enable quick comparisons to be made, to the listing of localities within bands of disadvantage, commencing with the top 40 ranking localities and continuing to completion on the project's website (*australiandisadvantage.org.au*).

In Table 2, Band 1 contains the most disadvantaged of the 40 top ranking localities and Band 6 the least disadvantaged localities. The striking thing about those listings is their stability over time, not quite rock-like but very stable indeed. The rank order correlation of the lists in NSW in 2004 and 2006 was +0.90. Notwithstanding the limited range of ten indicators used in 1999, the rank order of NSW localities then and in 2006 correlated +0.81.

Thirty years ago, using similar methods, many NSW locations identified then as highly disadvantaged remain prominent in today's calculations (Australian Government Social Welfare Commission, 1975; Australian Department of Social Security, 1976).

The character of the general disadvantage factor for NSW closely resembles that derived for the other jurisdictions. Together the two perspectives – disadvantage gauged by simultaneously taking into account performance on all of the indicators and concentrated disadvantage based on high rankings on six or more of the indicators – convey a picture of the damaging consequences of limited education, deficient labour market credentials, indifferent health and disabilities, low individual and family income, and engagement in crime. Localities with markedly high rankings on these and other forms of disadvantage are areas where confirmed child maltreatment is also likely to be high.

Table 2. NSW: 40 highest-ranking postcode areas on 'disadvantage' factor

<b>Band</b>	<b>Post-code</b>	<b>Localities arranged alphabetically within each band</b>	<b>Estimated total population</b>
Band 1	2469	Bonalbo, Beau Creek, Banyabba, Bingeebebra Creek, Boomooderie, Bottle Creek	4,503
	2839	Brewarrina, Bogan, Gongolgon, Talawanta, Weilmoringle	1,566
Band 1	2440	Kempsey, East Kempsey, South Kempsey, West Kempsey, Crescent Head, Aldavilla, Austral Eden, Bellbrook, Belmore River, Carrai, Comara, Corangula, Euroka, Frederickton, Hat Head, Kinchela, Millbanik, Pola Creek, Turners Flat, Yarravel	22,334
	2834	Lightning Ridge	3,245
	2369	Tingha, Stannifer, Old Mill	902
	2306	Windale	3,075
Band 2	2449	Bowraville, Argents Hill, Buckra Bendinni, Girralong, Kennaicle Creek, Killiekrankie	2,154
	2470	Casino, North Casino	13,233
	2371	Deepwater	1,203
	2879	Menindee	692
	2455	Urunga, Newry, Newry Island, Spicketts Creek, Wenonah Head	3,323
	2820	Wellington	6,913
Band 3	2831	Armatree, Byrock, Balladoran, Bileroy, Brenda, Bullagreen	929
	2471	Coraki, East Coraki	2,315
	2427	Harrington, Crowdy Head	1,633

<b>Band</b>	<b>Post-code</b>	<b>Localities arranged alphabetically within each band</b>	<b>Estimated total population</b>
Band 3	2448	Nambucca Heads	8,438
	2485	Tweed Heads	11,008
	2832	Walgett, Come By Chance, Angledool, Boorooma, Cryon, Cumborah	3,411
Band 4	2428	Forster	21,173
	2327	Kurri Kurri	6,965
	2263	Toukley	22,211
	2326	Weston	6,157
	2476	Woodenbong	813
	2836	Wilcannia, White Cliffs, Gemvil	1,150
Band 5	2409	Boggabilla	1,148
	2559	Claymore, Blairmount	4,798
	2807	Koorawatha	312
	2672	Lake Cargelligo	1,810
	2431	South West Rocks	4,402
	2372	Tenterfield	5,014
Band 6	2361	Ashford, Atholwood, Bonshaw, Limestone, Pindaroi	947
	2840	Bourke, Barrington, Enngonia, Fords Bridge, Gumbalie, Gunderbooka, Hungerford, Louth, Tilpa, Urisino, Wanaaring, Yantabulla	4,043
	2880	Broken Hill, Broken Hill West/North/South	21,391

Band	Post-code	Localities arranged alphabetically within each band	Estimated total population
Band 6	2443	Diamond Head, Camden Head, Bobs Creek, Coralville, Deauville, Dicks Head	8,290
	2466	Iluka, Woody Head, The Freshwater	1,884
	2360	Inverell	12,962
	2770	Mt Druitt	57,196
	2452	Sawtell	9,891
	2430	Taree, Taree South	29,701
	2502	Warrawong	11,826

Whatever other measures are necessary to combat the geographic concentration of the problems highlighted in this study, it is difficult to deny the centrality of limited education and its impact on the acquisition of economic and life skills, in the making and sustaining of localised disadvantage in Australia.

Do these findings really matter? Do the component weights and the statistical paraphernalia not available to Mayhew in the 1860s and the pioneers in this field really help to identify society's highly vulnerable neighbourhoods, areas that may not benefit to the same extent as others on a tide of rising prosperity? The present evidence of substantial differences between areas in their degree of cumulative disadvantage and the stability of those differences over time is persuasive. Another way of gauging the importance of the differences revealed by this approach is to make simple comparisons of the circumstances of areas identified as extremely disadvantaged and the remainder of their state or territory. To illustrate the difference, the 3% most disadvantaged locations – there are 69 across Australia – have been contrasted with the remaining 97% of places. If this framework appears too stringent I need to point out that, less than a decade ago, just the last three of 500 Sydney suburbs ranked in descending order of social prestige accounted for 30% of Sydney-based women

prisoners. The lowest-ranking 5% of suburbs provided more than four times their share of male prisoners (Vinson, 1998).

In the present study, in Western Australia the rate of prison admissions in the 3% most disadvantaged localities is 15 times that of the remainder of the State. Long-term unemployment is 5.5 times greater, disability and sickness support just under five times greater and the non-completion of high school or other training, 2.5 times greater. Confirmed child maltreatment data was not available in Western Australia but in the extreme 3% most disadvantaged areas of New South Wales it was 4.5 times greater, just under four times greater in South Australia and three times greater in Queensland. Long-term unemployment was another recurring feature of the extreme 3% most disadvantaged areas: the difference in rates ranged from 5.5 times in Western Australia and the ACT, to more than three times in South Australia, and approximately 2.5 times in Queensland and New South Wales. Apart from the marked difference in prison admission rates in Western Australia, the rate in New South Wales' 3% most disadvantaged areas was 3.5 times higher than in the remainder, the difference was threefold in Queensland and sevenfold in the ACT. These are remarkable disparities crying out for sustained, effective action.

Can anything really be done to reduce these differences? Can the fortunes of highly disadvantaged areas be turned around, affording life opportunities to those who live in them while reducing the social costs to others? By painstakingly linking information from diverse sources across six states and the ACT we are able to see forms of disadvantage in their social context and the way different strands of disadvantage inter-lock. Our examination of the correlations between them shows a high degree of interdependence so that progress in overcoming one limitation, say, unemployment, can be inhibited by related factors like limited funds, poor health, inadequate training or having a criminal record. This web-like structure of disadvantage restricts attempts to break free of it.

So, the task is undoubtedly formidable and therefore, before focusing upon the repair of social damage that already exists, as a society we should be looking to monitor changes in the wellbeing of localities and intercepting problems before they wreak maximum harm. Here are just a few examples of what is needed. We know that what are called 'place effects' – the net influence exerted by a locality on people's wellbeing after sub-

tracting individual and household disadvantage – are particularly strong during the early stages of life and later adolescence. Post-natal outreach services, parenting support programs and children’s diagnostic and treatment services should be strongly represented within highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods, including those in rural and remote areas. The same is true of adolescent health services.

If disadvantageous conditions are ‘bundled’, in the sense of being inter-correlated, then efforts must be directed to loosening systemic constraints on people’s life opportunities. If, as is commonly the case, unemployment and crime correlate with limited education and limited work skills, then the preventive pathways need to take heed of these interconnections. This is precisely what is happening in Mildura in north-western Victoria where the Rural City Local Government is committed to making its region the most liveable place in Australia within the next two decades. A series of task groups that combine local government, professional and community representatives are working backwards from manifest problems – like childhood accidents, crime and unemployment – to offer ‘up-stream’ opportunities to strengthen individuals’ and neighbourhoods’ capacities to avoid such problems. The policing of disadvantaged areas is being linked with the work of other social agencies in pursuit of improved community problem solving. Preventive work of this kind at the national, state and local government levels requires clear policies backed by an information and skills infrastructure, such as is being firmly established in Victoria but which barely exist elsewhere in our country.

Now the most difficult challenge: what can be done about areas in which disadvantage has become strongly entrenched? A first step is to learn from the characteristics that differentiate markedly disadvantaged from other areas. In the light of the data already presented an intervention plan would need to give serious consideration to:

- education and training/retraining
- work opportunities and placement (sometimes on a regional rather than strictly local basis)
- health promotion and treatment
- parenting skills
- ‘problem solving’ law enforcement

- developing local leadership capacities
- other specific needs of an area identified either by formal indicators or residents.

Is all this worth the candle – does it achieve anything? The kind of data adduced in the present study can be used to at least broadly monitor progress in areas that in recent times have been the focus of NSW Government sponsored ‘community strengthening’ projects generally lasting around three years. The news from three of the four localities it has been possible to study is both encouraging and cautionary. The project areas have generally seen crucial improvements in their disadvantage rank positions including progress in early life-stage wellbeing, but when the support program ceases there is a rebound to previous levels of disadvantage. Problems that have often been decades in the making cannot be reversed in a few short years. The governments of England and many other European countries know that, and in these countries, projects nearer to 10 years duration are the norm. The local findings caution against the view that an inadequate single ‘dose’ of assistance is better than no help at all. When the will of a long-disadvantaged community to deal with its problems is stirred and assistance is proffered, the let down occasioned by the premature withdrawal of help can leave people feeling more hopeless than before the process began. We need firm political and administrative commitments to sustaining community strengthening projects in a manageable number of highly disadvantaged communities in order to ‘turn around’ the life prospects of those who live in them.

## The Role of the Social Fabric

The research has confirmed that there is another very important ingredient that can reinforce more tangible remedial measures. The social fabric of a disadvantaged neighbourhood can aid or hinder its recovery. In areas that have experienced sustained disadvantage, optimism about the prospects of improving the local situation can slump and the will to support neighbours or work cooperatively to improve things declines in the face of pressures to simply survive the day. In Newcastle in the mid-’70s, residents in the most disadvantaged suburbs were significantly more likely to exhibit fatalistic attitudes than residents in other parts of the city. A ‘whatever is going to happen will happen’ attitude prevailed (Vinson, Homel &

Bonney, 1976). There was also less social connection between residents and less involvement in local groups and organisations.

Human service professionals are convinced that such an environment is unhelpful. Speculation of this kind has been encouraged by the observation that some communities burdened by disadvantage appear more resilient than others in overcoming adversities. It has been frequently asserted but less frequently tangibly demonstrated that aspects of the social climate of an area can either dampen or exacerbate the effects of disadvantageous conditions, like unemployment, limited education and poor health. Some of the earliest sociologists sensed that the seat of this countervailing influence is located in the quality of the bonds between community members. Three qualities in particular: trust, reciprocity and common identity, gained early prominence in the literature (Durkheim, 1893; Jacobs, 1961).

Recently it has been possible to study the influence of social environment empirically because it has proved possible to cross-reference our indicator data with the findings of continuous health surveys undertaken by the Victorian authorities. Survey data gathered from 37,500 respondents over the period 2001–2005 has been aggregated and a threshold requirement set of at least 10 survey respondents within a postcode for it to be included in this phase of our study. This approach yielded a sample of 495 eligible postcode areas which were then divided into three sub-categories reflecting their degree of social cohesion. That division was based on responses to eight survey items whose relevance to the generic concept of *social cohesion* is supported in the literature (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2003; Browning & Cagney, 2002; Buckner, 1988; Coleman, 1990; Cooley, 1906; Durkheim, 1893; Fallding, 1961; Putnam, 2000; Sampson, 1991; Sampson, 1997; Stürmer & Kampmeier, 2003; Tönnies, 1957). The eight survey items were as follows:

- i. Volunteering
- ii. Membership of local groups
- iii. Group action to improve community
- iv. Neighbours help in difficult times
- v. Feel safe walking in neighbourhood
- vi. Agree people can be trusted
- vii. Attend local community events
- viii. Feel valued by society.



### *Structure of the social cohesion variable*

If the eight variables tap aspects of the same latent construct one would expect a reasonably high degree of inter-correlation or association between them. This was found to be the case. The association between six of the variables (volunteering, help from neighbours, belonging to groups, local action, safety and trusting others) is greater than with the remaining two variables (attendance at a community event and feeling valued by society). Nevertheless the extensive linkages between the variables suggest the existence of some underlying structure that is common to them.

To identify what the variables share in common we again take advantage of the Principal Components Analysis. The analysis resulted in the extraction of a major factor that accounted for 50.8% of the total variance of the eight variables. We are justified in treating the first component as a *social cohesion* factor that captures along a single dimension many aspects of cohesion previously reflected in eight separate item scores.

Next we calculated a single cohesion score for each of the 495 Victorian postcodes and divided them into high, medium and low categories using the ‘natural breaks’ method which identified three cohesion categories of approximately equal size:

Low cohesion	164 (33.1%) postcodes
Medium cohesion	176 (35.6%) postcodes
High cohesion	155 (31.3%) postcodes

### *Research strategy*

The strategy for exploring whether an area’s location in one of these three cohesion categories affects the impact of disadvantageous social conditions turns on the fact that we know from the literature the established connections between many such conditions and associated variables. The relationships include circumstances like unemployment, limited work skills, early departure from schooling and low income, and associated states of affairs like low birth weight, criminal convictions, imprisonment, childhood accidents, psychiatric hospital admissions, and child maltreatment. There are 24 pairs of such variables within our present study. We have calculated the size of the correlation between each of the 24 pairs of variables across the 495 postcode areas for which we have a cohesion rating and that figure appears in the first column (coloured grey) of the

following table. The crucial question is whether the recalculation of the same correlations between, say, unemployment and imprisonment, or low family income and child maltreatment, *within* the three categories of social cohesion produces a consistent change in the strength of the connections. That is to say, does social cohesion in the way that we have defined it, operate as an intervening variable to constrain or ‘dampen down’ the ill-effects of disadvantageous social conditions?

Judged by the contrasting correlation of coefficients within the ‘low’ and ‘high’ cohesion categories (Table 3), *with a reduction in every instance* in the degree of association between the 24 pairs of variables, social cohesion does indeed exert a strong buffering effect. Overall, the size of the correlations within the high cohesion category was (at least) halved from that in the low category in 17 of the 24 pairs of variables considered.

The contrast of extreme categories is always more likely to reveal a consistent pattern than ‘in between’ categories. Nevertheless, the direction of ‘middle cohesion’ scores in Table 3 is generally consistent with the hypothesised buffering effect of social cohesion. On the research side, it is important to remember that we are dealing here with a construct which affords opportunities for further methodological refinement of the operational definition of ‘cohesion’. Those endeavours are proceeding.

The foregoing overall inferences are illustrated by the figures in the first row of Table 3. The generally accepted association between unemployment levels in an area and that area’s rate of imprisonment is reflected in the correlation coefficient of  $+0.44$  across all of the 495 localities included in this part of our study. The size of that coefficient increased by half to  $+0.67$  in the 164 areas with low levels of social cohesion but decreased by well over half to  $+0.17$  in the 155 high cohesion areas. This latter finding suggests that social cohesion has a dampening effect on the influence of unemployment in this particular sphere. The 176 medium cohesion areas experienced a beneficial but less marked effect. The figures in the second row show a similar contrast between areas in the two extreme (high and low) cohesion categories. However, in this instance the association between unemployment and criminal convictions within the medium cohesion localities remained virtually the same as it was across the entire sample of 495 localities.

Table 3. Associations between antecedent and correlating variables within areas

	<b>495 postcode areas with cohesion scores</b>	<b>Low social cohesion N=164</b>	<b>Medium social cohesion N=176</b>	<b>High social cohesion N=155</b>
<b>CRIME</b>				
Unemployment/ imprisonment	.44	.67	.30	.17
Unemploy./crim. convictions	.49	.67	.48	.30
Early sch. leav./im- prisonmt	.42	.47	.16	.14
Low fam. income/ imprisonment	.48	.64	.17	.09
Yr 12 incomplete/ imprisonment	.16	.25	.09	.08
Low work skills/ imprisonment	.49	.42	.14	.19
Early sch. leav./con- victions	.48	.51	.66	.37
<b>CHILD MALTREATMENT</b>				
Unemploy./child mistreatment	.44	.63	.44	.26
Low fam. inc./child mistreatment	.36	.59	.42	.27
<b>CHILDHOOD INJURIES</b>				
Year 12 incomplete/ injuries	.05	.53	.04	.11
<b>NO PRESCHOOL</b>				
Low fam. inc./pre- school	.39	.56	.44	.17
Early sch. leaving/ preschool	.42	.57	.46	.17

	<b>495 postcode areas with cohesion scores</b>	<b>Low social cohesion N=164</b>	<b>Medium social cohesion N=176</b>	<b>High social cohesion N=155</b>
<b>UNEMPLOYMENT</b>				
Low work skills/ unemployment	.49	.55	.54	.39
Early sch. leaving/ unemployment	.42	.67	.62	.14
Early sch. leav./l-t unemployment	.56	.62	.61	.42
Low wk. skills/l-t unemployment	.34	.37	.41	.18
<b>PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL ADMISSIONS</b>				
Unemployment/ admissions	.30	.50	.35	.12
Early sch. leaving/ admissions	.47	.40	.59	.37
<b>DOMESTIC VIOLENCE</b>				
Disability/domestic violence	.30	.50	.52	.33
Unemployment/ domestic violence	.41	.44	.42	.30
<b>LOW BIRTH-WEIGHT</b>				
Unemployment/low weight	.34	.43	.30	.20
Early school leav- ing/low weight	.19	.46	.17	.11
Year 12 incomplete/ low weight	.13	.26	.18	.14
Low family income/ low weight	.10	.43	.18	.03

## Social Policy Implications

As a professional research and teaching unit within a major university the Faculty of Education and Social Work's mission includes generating insights that can constructively influence social policy. It is, therefore, appropriate to ask whether exercises of the present kind make any impact? The findings of the present research have been promoted to federal and state politicians, their departments, umbrella organisations like ACOSS and NCOSS, community organisations, the general public and the media.

As is to be expected, the impact in some instances has been ephemeral. In others it has been unexpected: local governments have considered differential rating in the light of disadvantage scores; those scores have been used by tribunals concerned with the allocation of poker machines and liquor licences. Numerous submissions for reallocating resources within organisations or seeking external funding have incorporated the disadvantage data. A number of state governments have acknowledged the usefulness of the data in understanding the social challenges facing their administrations, but it is Victoria that has taken the geographic dimension of social disadvantage most seriously at the levels of both policy and practice. 'Strengthening community' projects are an important part of the *Fairer Victoria* policy and it has been acknowledged that *Dropping off the edge* is playing a key role in guiding the implementation of that policy.

The report was formally launched in the Australian Parliament in February 2007. All sides of politics have displayed interest in the findings and have noted the role of limited education in establishing and sustaining patterns of localised disadvantage. It will take time to learn the fate of recommendations like free pre-schooling for three year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds, incentives for experienced, able teachers to teach in disadvantaged schools and commonwealth investment in sustained work in disadvantaged areas. A more direct response has been the Opposition's commitment to establish a Social Exclusion Unit should it gain government, the findings of *Dropping off the edge* being cited as a significant part of the justification for creating such a unit (*Hansard*, August 16, 2007).

The effective implementation of the findings of this research will not simply be a matter of investing for short periods in a succession of disadvantaged areas. That has been the practice in Australia to this point with

relatively short-term benefits. It is time now to avoid playing with this issue and engage in sustained, thoroughly documented interventions – if necessary of limited number – in order to establish whether we can free people, especially children, trapped in webs of disadvantage. All the talk of the Australian ‘fair go’ and children developing in accordance with their endowments will remain just that until we redress the problem of some communities ‘falling off the edge’.

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## From authoritarian to democratic schooling – schooling that empowers young people

**Ebeny Wood**

### Introduction

#### *School disengagement*

This paper is concerned with a group of young people who have been known to educational sociologists variously as ‘lads’, ‘rebels’ and ‘youth at risk’. I refer to the young people who have been alienated from the core youth institution of education, and who have responded to this alienation with behaviour such as truancy, classroom disruption, poor school performance and early school leaving (see White, 1996). A strong body of evidence suggests that it is this group of young people who suffer the greatest social and economic disadvantage post-school. For instance recent research shows that early school leavers are more likely to be in low skill, low wage work, or unemployed, post-school (Wyn & Lamb, 1996; Dusseldorp, 2007). Further, young people who leave school early because of negative ‘push factors’ (such as alienation from school) rather than pull factors (such as securing full-time employment or training) are at much greater risk of facing the above problems (Smyth et al., 2002). In some cases alienation from school can lead to severe and long lasting exclusion from all social institutions (see Wyn & White, 1997).

The question, then, which social researchers have long grappled with, is what can be done to re-engage these young people in school? The most convincing responses advocate school reform (see, for instance, Connell et al., 1982; White, 1996; Wyn & Lamb, 1996; Smyth et al., 2002). This position is founded on the premise that certain types of young people are more likely than others to become disengaged from school (for example, those from the working class and ethnic minorities), and that this reflects a problem with the school

system, rather than the young person per se (see Teese, 2000). Recent recommendations regarding school reform have centred on curriculum restructuring, especially the development of vocational curriculum and training (for example Smyth et al., 2002), as well as teaching practice reform (for example te Riele, 2006).

Both of these areas are important and require political attention. However, unfortunately, as White and Wyn (2004) suggest, in contemporary Australia the worth of schooling is measured by the exchange value that school knowledge has on the labour market. This understanding of schooling promotes a technical-rational approach to school reform which fails to recognise that schooling is foremost a 'relational and emotional practice' (te Riele, 2006, p. 62). Hence, the type and quality of knowledge provided by schools has been a constant on the educational reform agenda (White & Wyn, 2004), while teaching practices have been largely absent (te Riele, 2006). Despite this, the work of, for instance, Freire (1970), Willis (1977), Connell and colleagues (1982) and te Riele (2006) demonstrates that the relation between a young person and their teacher is just as, or more, important to that young person's experience of school than the knowledge available to them. For instance, te Riele's (2006) qualitative study of young people at a 'last chance' school shows how teacher and student relations characterised by fairness, respect and care can encourage longer, happier and more successful student school careers. It is this theme of teacher and student relations and the impact they have on young people's engagement with school that will be the focus of this paper.

### *Schooling relations and school systems*

Teacher and student relations are deeply embedded in the formal and informal 'control systems' of a school (Connell et al., 1982; Connell, 1985). These systems may differ from school to school, especially across public and private, and mainstream and alternative schools, however they remain strongly tied to the socio-historical context in which the school exists (Connell et al., 1982). Traditional systems of school control were structured by a 'knowledge hierarchy'; those with knowledge (teachers) held power over those without knowledge (students). Order was maintained because the teacher held a position of authority within the school and was able to use legitimate force (i.e. detention, suspension, corporal punish-

ment or expulsion) (Connell, 1985). This school system fostered authoritarian teaching practices, as teachers relied on authority to gain the control required to teach (Connell, 1985).

Authoritarian teaching practices are still utilised today in those schools which are able to maintain systems of legitimate classroom authority based on the currency of knowledge. However, these teaching practices were, and continue to be, alienating for many young people and can create a rift between young people and teachers, and young people and school. Willis' (1977) classic study is testimony to this. The young men in Willis' research sought to reject the subordinate position allotted them by the school system through opposing the authority of the teacher. They used disruptive school behaviour and truancy as strategies to combat the teacher's power over them. Ironically this ultimately resulted in the young men's entry into unskilled labour and permanent labour market subordination, as is still the case today (see Dwyer, 1996).

Willis (1977) did not believe that different teaching practices per se would have changed the school outcomes of these young men. He argued that while the young men fought against the unequal power relations of the school they also respected the teachers who fought back against this challenge to their authority. Failure of the teachers to fight back meant a loss of authority, and loss of authority meant a loss of power (see Connell, 1985 for similar findings). Instead, what Willis' work demonstrated was the need for a new system of school control; a system in which teachers and students could have equal power relations and work together, rather than teachers acting on students (see Freire, 1970) and a system in which all young people are treated equally, rather than some young people achieving esteem through mastery of knowledge (see Connell et al., 1982). It is to this idea that this paper now turns.

### *From authoritarian to democratic schooling*

Research such as that by te Riele (2006) suggests that in contemporary Australian society, at some schools at least, the choice is being made to transform practices of school control. Her work depicts a school that fosters more democratic relations between teachers and students, largely because of the different systems of school control it offers compared to mainstream schooling. For instance te Riele contends that:

Students referred to a sense of mutual respect, which contributed to feeling treated as equals and adults ... They found the environment or atmosphere to be friendly and relaxed ... [This] was the result of staff questioning the usual school practices that had not worked for many of their students, and replacing them with practices that served the interests of the students rather than the school (2006, pp. 66–68).

Te Riele's (2006) work makes two important points. First, although it is bound by the limitations of a case study, te Riele's research provides evidence that school wide responses to problems of classroom control have involved a shift from authoritarian to democratic practices. More research needs to be undertaken in schools to identify if this trend is more widespread. However changes to the material taught in teacher training, especially the shift in the proscribed role of the teacher from 'information giver' to 'facilitator of learning', suggests that the changes to teaching practices te Riele observed may indicate a more general trend (see Wood, 2005). Second, te Riele's work suggests that the democratic practices utilised by the school she studied were superior to the authoritarian practices of mainstream schools, as they engaged the young people at that school in learning and helped them develop positive school careers. This finding has support from other research. For instance Noddings (2003) argues that it is necessary for teachers to build care and trust into their relations with students, not only as an end in itself, but also in order to achieve better learning and personal outcomes for students. This is also consistent with more general youth research, which emphasises the importance of trust relations in developing successful life transitions (see Wierenga, 1999).

In this paper, evidence will be given from a qualitative research undertaken in a public high school in Tasmania. Following the argument of te Riele (2006), I argue that this school employed democratic teaching practices in response to recent social and economic change. Further, evidence will be given to support the claim that democratic teaching practices have the potential to re-engage young people alienated from school and create more hopeful post-school futures for these young people. However, this paper will also outline possible negative implications of a shift from authoritarian to democratic schooling practices.

## Research Background

The findings reported in this paper are from a qualitative research project conducted from mid 2006 to mid 2007 at a public high school, which I will refer to as Woodfield High. Woodfield High is situated in a small community, 40 minutes from the closest city centre. The school services a large geographical area of an approximate 25 kilometre radius, which is partly agricultural and partly commercial (Field Notes, 2006). As is the case in Tasmania more generally, the public transport servicing this area is infrequent, and consequently the young people in the area the study was conducted in experience the isolation associated with rurality, even those living within more built up areas (for more discussion of rurality see Looker & Dwyer, 1997). The area is also disadvantaged. The median weekly household income is approximately \$270 below the Australian median weekly household income and the youth unemployment rate is 16.4%, compared to the national youth unemployment rate of 13% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). There is little racial-ethnic diversity, with under 5% of the population speaking a language other than English (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Twenty-eight Grade 10 young people, the four core Grade 10 teaching staff and the school's principal participated in in-depth interviews. The participating teaching staff and principal represented a whole population sample (see Rice & Ezzy, 2005) in that all of the teachers directly related to Grade 10 were interviewed. As this was not possible with the Grade 10 students, an attempt was made to ensure that students of different ability levels and with different attitudes to school and future plans were involved in the study. The Grade 10 young people were selected in two main ways. First the entire Grade 10 student population was invited to participate in the research, and those who were willing to participate were interviewed. However the young people who were disengaged from school did not respond to this method of recruitment (only one young person from the initial 18 participants was identified as dis-engaged from school). After some discussion with the teachers and students it was discovered that formal (in particular written) and 'catch all' (entire population) recruiting strategies were alienating and anxiety provoking for disempowered young people, who did not feel they had anything to say, and who did not want to

say it to someone they didn't know (Field Notes, 2006; see also Wierenga, 2001). The teachers therefore identified a number of relevant young people who had poor school attendance and performance and I approached them individually or in small groups to brief them about the research, to make myself known to them and to explain why they would be important to the research ('you can tell us what we can do to make school better'). The young people then let their teachers know if they were interested in participating in the research.

This was a fairly unorthodox recruitment strategy, and needs greater elaboration than this paper allows. However in passing I would like to make three points. First, it is not unusual in a school situation for young people to be singled out to participate in something (think, for instance of school sporting teams, specialised classes and tests). The young people who were approached generally seemed pleased to have been singled out as important, especially given that this rarely occurred within the school's typical day-to-day activities. Second, not all of the young people approached in the second recruitment phase put their name down to be interviewed. I think this is strong evidence that there was opportunity for those young people who wished to decline the interview to do so. Third, the young people from the second recruitment stage seemed more comfortable in the interviews, were more likely to say that they had enjoyed the interview and more reluctant to finish the interview, than those from the first recruitment stage (which is especially significant, given these were the young people who were most difficult to engage in the first place) (Field Notes, 2007). I put this increased interest and comfort down to the fact that I was able to build rapport with these young people prior to the interview. This may indicate that in some instances the conventional process is not always best. In particular the detached research role and the formal recruitment processes need to be carefully weighed up against the needs of the participating group (for further discussion of researching with disadvantaged young people see Wierenga, 2001).

The aim of the research was to understand the processes involved in young people's engagement or disengagement with school. In-depth interviews were chosen as the main research method because I sought to understand how the way young people experience school was tied to their individual network of resources and cultural understandings of self,



school, work and future. Here I follow Raffo and Reeves (2000), who argue that in contemporary society structural forces, such as class, impact a young person in entirely new ways. They contend that prescribed social characteristics have been replaced by individualised systems of social capital, or ‘dynamic, social, spatially, culturally, temporally and economically embedded groups or networks, which have the young person at the core’ (Raffo & Reeves, 2000, p. 148). That is, young people are immersed in a web of social relations which both support and constrain their actions and outcomes (Raffo & Reeves, 2000). The young person exercises some choice over how this web evolves, however ‘the extent to which individual change and development can occur is heavily dependent on the way individualised systems of people evolve for each young person, which is in turn conditioned by the material and symbolic resources available to these networks’ (Raffo & Reeves, 2000, p. 148).

Consent was obtained from both students and parents before the interviews were undertaken. The interviews were voice recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview transcripts were de-identified and kept confidential in accordance with ethics procedures. In particular, pseudonyms were provided by participants and are used in this paper. All the transcripts were imported into NVIVO and a preliminary analysis was undertaken. Initially, transcripts were coded for data that identified the ‘type’ of student the young people were, such as attitude to school, value of education, behaviour at school, etc. The interview transcripts were then compiled by NVIVO according to each code and I was able to discern patterns within and across each code. For instance within the code ‘attitudes to school’ there were those who saw school as ‘useful’, ‘a waste of time’, and ‘an escape from life’. Those who saw school as a ‘waste of time’ could then be divided into those who had links to the workforce outside of school and those that did not. This paper reports mainly on the three ‘types’ of student and the way that they engaged with school.

## Research Findings

### *The context for change*

The central premise I took to my research was that the young people’s different capacities to engage with school would reflect their different

individualised systems of social capital. I anticipated that the disciplinary practices the school utilised (which I imagined to be fairly authoritarian) would not suit all students, and so some young people would be alienated by the school system. However this premise was incorrect. In fact at Woodfield High changes were taking place, which significantly altered how school was thought of and undertaken. As Nick, the school principal, explains:

Nick: Well, this is not a school as we have traditionally known schools. We're now more a youth centre where all the kids come, some get really engaged with learning, and some don't. It seems to me that we have to provide lots of different choices for kids, because one model doesn't fit all. In the old days we had one model and we said: 'if you don't fit that model hop off.' Nowadays, it's 'you've got to come' so the model has got to change.

Nick refers to the need for a new model of schooling, which he sees as inextricably linked to a change in his school's clientele. This is not a unique position to be in. The decline of full-time unskilled labour, rising credentialism and high rates of youth unemployment have all contributed to a heightened importance of school to young people's future life chances (see Wyn & Lamb, 1996; Smyth et al., 2002). As such, school retention has become a priority of educational professionals, politicians and parents alike. However, for this school in particular, it was becoming increasingly common for middle class parents from local areas to bypass Woodfield High for other schools up to two hours away (Field Notes, 2005). In fact, over the past five years the local bus company has had to add two specialised school bus services to accommodate students traveling to and from distant high schools (Field Notes, 2005).

According to Nick the combined forces of increased school retention and the decline in middle class enrolments have made it *necessary* for the school staff to change the way they go about maintaining order. As he contends:

Nick: If we tried to operate as we did 10 years ago, the school would explode under us. It just wouldn't work.

What the teaching staff of Woodfield High have primarily noticed is that they no longer have the power over a class that they did a decade ago. Power was previously tied to authority, and now is reflected in respect.

Without respect the teachers cannot get on with their main task – teaching – and hence they have to learn how to gain the respect of this different student body. As with the teachers of te Riele’s (2006) study, the teachers of Woodfield High have learnt that what their changed student body seeks is an egalitarian relationship in which the teacher earns the right to guide each young person through learning by knowing and caring about that young person. As Nick and one of his staff, Sue, contend:

Nick: Teachers can no longer rely on being a teacher, say commanding respect, if you like. These days you earn respect. You don’t earn respect by being the kid’s friend necessarily but you need to be seen as a genuine person, a person who is interested in the kids, a person who cares for them, and it seems to me that the most able teachers become much more like a parent figure, so they have to exercise tough love, you know they understand the kids, they know the kids, but they also have to demand that the kids work, have high expectations of their work, but they also have to have some good fun with the kids, they knock around with the kids, take a bit of interest in the stuff the kids are interested in.

Sue: Well, I suppose, if I think about it I would have to say that the most important things that I think about is my relationship with [the students]. And I think, probably when it became really apparent to me was I suppose I had like a really difficult student coming into my class, and I knew he was going to be difficult, and I can’t remember what the story was, but I must have had like a family connection or something like that, that I knew something about them. On the first day I went and made some sort of personal type comment to the kid, just on their own at the start of the day, and I had that kid eating out of my hand for the rest of the year. And I think that really sort of made me realise it’s often that personal thing that makes a real difference, and I mean you don’t even have to give the kid much of your time, it’s a bit humbling really.

Nick and Sue both describe the change to their teaching practices as primarily a disciplinary, or classroom management strategy. Further, the deployment of caring and trust relations is something they know, experien-

tially, that ‘difficult’ students respond well to. To understand why this is the case, I now turn to the students’ experiences of democratic schooling.

### *The advantages of democratic schooling*

Young people who are ‘good’ at schooling will respond to either an authoritarian or a democratic teaching style because they are empowered by both (Connell et al., 1982). They excel at school work, and hence earn positions of esteem within a ‘knowledge hierarchy’. In this way authoritarian school systems, based on knowledge hierarchies produce positive feedback to these students and reinforce engagement in schooling (Connell et al., 1982). For instance Beth, a highly engaged student, identifies the respect she receives from her teacher as her motivation for achieving well at school.

Beth: Yeah, like, for some teachers I like to achieve well. Like, because I like to think that they’re, they care, their teaching is really good.

Ebeny: So is that why you work hard at school?

Beth: I don’t know. It’s just, like, I want to achieve well, like, I don’t want to be the lagger behind. It makes me feel good to [short laugh] achieve well so that I know that I’m doing okay for career and stuff, and I’m not struggling.

However, for a young person who does not get on at school, the absorption of information is a task that is not often easy or enjoyable. The teacher who conceives of education primarily in terms of information-giving effectively reduces the young person to their capacity to perform, and when the young person can’t perform they are defined as a ‘failure’ accordingly (see Freire, 1970). This is compared to a teacher who conceives of the young person as a person in their own right and who is able to work democratically with the young person to encourage them to have a go at learning new knowledge (see Noddings, 2003). This difference is outlined by Dooly:

Dooly: My Grade 8 teacher, the teacher I don’t like, is like ‘do it or else,’ kind of thing. Like ‘do it or you’ll get a detention ...’ It was like if I didn’t know the answer I wasn’t listening or anything like that. They teach you and if you don’t learn well then they don’t care about you, sort of thing. So in Grade 8 I used

to be a kind of 'bluhh' [pulls bored face] kind of person, and then Grade 9 and 10, I was just completely changed, it's good.

Ebeny: Why the change?

Dooly: Probably the teachers. The teachers I've got now are good. Like Mr T, you do something for him and then he'll reward you by giving you some time at the end of the lesson to do what you want. Yeah, he gets me going [involved in work], shows me things, makes me laugh ... And Mr Andrews, cause I've known Mr Andrews for ten years, since I've been here, cause he used to work on the primary side and as we came over he came over. So he knows you. He knows the way I go.

The effect of these different approaches for Dooly's school (and personal) outcomes cannot be underestimated. The 'complete change' he mentions above is momentous and has significant implications for his school career and his life post school. To illustrate this more clearly Dooly provides what, according to his teachers, is a very realistic account of his school behaviour in Grade 8 (with an authoritarian teacher) and in Grade 10 (with teachers who have developed more democratic teaching relationships with Dooly):

Dooly: If a teacher gets me really really annoyed I'll just zone out and just go somewhere else, completely schitz. Sometimes I'd just overload and explode and just say every swear word I knew, every word I had in my head. Kinda like a split personality, you know, here's me and if someone just keeps bugging me and bugging me I'll just schitz at em, start throwing stuff, I'd probably throw a knife if I'd had one. Just really agitate ya, and just didn't get on well. Every day basically. Sometimes, if I got [the teacher he didn't like] in the morning, Mum'd drop me off [at school] and I'd just go down the street to Banjos or something. Then come back about half past 10. I just didn't like her. Now, it's like, good. I'm a good student. Do my work, especially science with Mr T, cause we do all these projects with electricity ... going well in literacy, that's my favourite subject.

Dooly's grades are still fairly low and he struggles to hand in his work regularly. However with support from his teachers he has re-engaged with schooling and is going on to college, with the hope of becoming an

electrician. From the young man he was in Grade 8 this is a significant achievement, and one which he accords to the different ways in which he is treated by his teachers.

*Limitations of democratic schooling: the problem of responsibility*

So far I have focused on the positive implications of democratic schooling. That is the fact that it produces different relations of power, based on respect, rather than authority, and hence has more opportunity to empower all students. However there are possible negative implications of this system of school control, which need to be addressed. In particular, democratic schooling practices do not have the coercive power that authoritarian schooling practices have. There is no means by which teachers can 'make' students do their work. Here I do not want to suggest that a student's school work output is equivalent to their learning. For instance a young person may complete all spelling tests, but might be learning that they are a 'bad' speller. Likewise they may simply copy down the words and learn nothing at all. However, democratic schooling practices do require students to take greater responsibility for their own schooling than previously, when they faced detention, shaming or corporal punishment for incomplete work. As Jan, a Grade 10 teacher battling with some very alienated students, contends:

Jan: I think you can come here [to Woodfield High] and achieve, um, and I think you can come here and do nothing as well. And it seems to be, not okay, it's never okay to do nothing, but it doesn't seem to be the processes in order to force you to do work, um, despite yourself. I know for example at [the closest public school] they give homework and all sorts of things, whereas you don't even attempt to give homework here because you know it's not going to get done, and you know it's not going to be worth the fight, like, save your battles for the classroom, sort of thing.

In particular the teachers of Woodfield High feel that the primary problem is that the students do not value education:

Jan: Sue and I were only talking about it yesterday, we were in Birchalls getting some books [for their students], with a book list. We just issue book packs out and they have no value to

them, they get lost and stuff like that within the first week, you know pens and pencils and that. Because the value of education isn't there, and the value of learning, you know the love of learning, so it's sort of just something they have to do, they have to come to school. They have to come to class, and some of them don't even do that. So it is disempowering [for a teacher.]

The teachers therefore set out on the difficult path of making learning meaningful to the young people they are teaching. This is an important and useful process. However the meaning the teachers draw on is the relevance that school holds for the workforce. As Jan suggests:

Jan: [They say] 'Why should I put the effort in when it's hard? When all of these years it hasn't worked for me, so why now? Why should I do it now? Cause you're telling me to? No, that's not gonna [be enough], [you] don't have that much power.' So it had to be like, 'Well you're going to need this in the workplace and that's why.'

This makes intuitive sense. The school is dealing with a student body that, largely, would have been out in the workforce by Grade 10 a decade ago, and are still planning on 'getting out' as soon as possible. Therefore making a link between school and work is a significant way to engage young people in school activities. In many cases this is effective. For instance one young man, Clayton, receives an apprenticeship from his work experience and the school supports this by allowing him to undertake practical classes relevant to the trade he is entering. That is, he studies maths and literacy as it applies to the practical work he will be undertaking. This re-engages Clayton in learning, to some extent.

Ebeny: What would you say you liked about this school?

Clayton: I don't know it's just, a lot more practical than others, I reckon.

Ebeny: So you thought it was good?

Clayton: Yeah.

Ebeny: Did you learn a lot from it?

Clayton: What practical stuff? Yeah, lot more than theory.

[With theory] all you do is just sit there and write stuff on the board. Us, well every time I had to do it, you don't read it, you just write it.

There are several reasons why this strategy of making school meaningful through linking it to the workforce is both advantageous and problematic (White & Wyn, 2004). This is not a debate I wish to enter here. Rather, I wish to return to the problem of young people being required to take more responsibility for their own schooling within a democratic school system, and the solution the teachers of Woodfield High have adopted, namely making school meaningful to young people through demonstrating the school's link to the workforce. This is effective (more or less) *only* when students have an understanding of what they would like to do when they leave school. For those young people who do not have a future work plan this type of meaning making is not only ineffective, but also alienating. It requires the young person to imagine a future pathway in order to engage with school. This is particularly difficult for young people who have experienced life as chaotic and who are just trying to survive the present; young people like Kirsty.

Kirsty has recently moved to the area, has experienced consistent tension between friends, frequently discusses leaving home to escape family life and intermittently uses drugs. Kirsty understands that she needs to take an active role in planning and organising her life to avoid future disadvantage. However she can't imagine her acting on the world to be successful because her experience of life has been chaotic.

Kirsty: In 10 years whether I'm a bludger or have a family or ended up with kids I didn't really want, it's just a reflection on what I was when I was younger, like I should have planned more, but I don't.

Ebeny: Why do you think that is? What stops you?

Kirsty: I don't know what stops me, I just don't see the point of planning for something when it could all just not happen, like you just waste all the time working towards it and then in the end you can just think like I should have enjoyed being a kid as much as possible.



The necessity to take ownership of their future and to take responsibility of schooling is frustrating and debilitating for young people like Kirsty. The school requires a certain type of cultural capital (in this case future planning) which only young people with certain types of social resources have (see Raffo & Reeves, 2000). However, as indicated by the above example, unawareness of future planning and goal setting is viewed as a personal failure by the young people involved, rather than a cultural disadvantage. They feel the loss of their disengagement with schooling, but are not in a position to change this. In extreme instances this feeling of disadvantage results in the young people seeking more coercive means of school discipline, that is, a return to authoritarian schooling. As Tim explains:

Ebeny: So how would you like to see this school disciplining you?

Tim: What do you call it, the cane thing? I reckon they should bring that back.

Ebeny: Why do you think that would work?

Tim: Worked on my Pop.

Ebeny: Really?

Tim: [Grins.] That's what he says.

Ebeny: Would you like to go to school with someone who's going to cane you if you don't work though?

Tim: Yeah, cause it would make you work wouldn't it. And I'd rather more work, cause I want a good education.

## Conclusion

As classic studies by Willis (1977) and Connell and colleagues (1982) have shown, authoritarian teaching practices are disempowering for young people and can lead to their alienation from school. This is especially likely when the young person involved does not receive the respect that other students have been accorded as a result of mastery of school knowledge (see Connell et al., 1982). Alienation from school is always problematic,

but this is particularly true of the current socio-economic context, in which school credentials have become increasingly important to labour market success, and hence to a young person's future opportunities.

In this paper qualitative evidence from a case study of a Tasmanian public high school has been presented to substantiate the claim by te Riele (2006) that democratic schooling practices based on care and personal support for students are more effective at engaging young people in school than authoritarian teaching practices. Findings presented here suggest that young people at Woodfield High resist authoritarian teaching practices because they do not accept the power accorded to teachers as legitimate. Treating young people as worthy of respect and showing concern for their futures is a means for teachers to earn respect, and hence have legitimate power to teach, without resistance. Democratic schooling practices are empowering because they treat each young person as an individual of equal importance as their peers, rather than allotting esteem hierarchically according to school performance. This is somewhat similar to Noddings' finding that young people seek to be treated foremostly as human beings (2003).

Given this evidence, I contend that democratic schooling practices are superior to authoritarian schooling practices, and need to be explored as strategies to re-engage young people alienated from school. However, the case study I report here also produced evidence to suggest that some young people were disadvantaged by democratic schooling. Those disadvantaged include young people who did not have the cultural capital or previous experience to enable them to develop future career goals and to identify how they needed to use schooling to reach these goals. Democratic schooling practices do not have the coercive capacities of authoritarian schooling. Democratic schooling, therefore, requires young people to take responsibility for their own school careers and to utilise school in a career-directed and individual manner. This means democratic schooling creates problems of its own, for example, it encourages instrumentalism (see White & Wyn, 2004). However most significant here is the fact that it disadvantages particular groups of young people.

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### 3

## Change and resistance to change – community development in a rural caste community in South India

**Frank Tesoriero**

### Introduction

This paper describes a community development project in rural south India, the Healthy Districts Project, and analyses it in terms of its processes and outcomes, and the forces at play which facilitated change and which resisted change. The approach used was a strengths-based approach, Appreciative Inquiry (Ashford & Patkar, 2001). The Project was a partnership between Australian social workers, a local Indian NGO, an Indian School of Social Work and the local community.

The term 'local community', when examined, serves to hide great diversity, power differentials and forces which exclude. In the local community in which the Project was undertaken, as well as there being eight villages and hamlets, there are two dalit (outcaste, untouchable) communities. These two communities are physically segregated and their members experience exclusion from the social life of caste communities, which manifests itself in many forms, notably in such forms as separate religious ceremonies and celebrations, omission of dalit community members from development projects, fewer educational and income generation opportunities for young dalit women, and subtle discouragements to adopt leadership roles in the local community. Added to these exclusions is significant economic dependency of dalits, who are landless, dependent on caste landowners for employment as day labourers.

The community development project, based on principles of social justice and human rights, challenged the exclusionary caste practices of this community and so built in significant tensions which had to be addressed constantly throughout the process. The paper analyses the processes at

the community level. It examines the gains, losses, learning and implications that emerged from the Project, and the processes and complex array of forces which interplayed to produce a multifaceted and contradictory set of outcomes.

The paper draws on core values and particular theoretical bases to describe the process of the Project and to analyse the process and its outcomes. These values relate to social justice and human rights and the theoretical bases revolve around a structural view of social issues. Community development and Appreciative Inquiry are the major frameworks which guide the discussion of the Project process; and participatory action research and reflective practice provide the scaffolding for analysis and drawing conclusions about the Project. Caste, gender and hierarchy, so endemic in rural India, have been constant and powerful dynamics governing social relations; and these dynamics came to the fore as the Project achieved some outcomes, alongside more positive changes resulting from locally-based strategies of participation, local decision making and inclusion. This interaction of competing forces has led to changes and resistances to change; and has resulted in the maintenance of traditional practices and power relations, as well as the discontinuation of some of these in the same form.

## Literature Review

### *Health and development*

The Project which is the focus of this paper worked primarily with women in a rural Indian setting, and included women from two dalit communities. Of the total female population in India, 77% live in rural areas (Raveendaran, et al., 2002). Because of practices such as female foeticide, there are considerably less women than men in the total population (National Commission on Population, 2001). In some areas of Rajasthan where this situation is most acute, when a woman is married, the husband's brothers also participate in the relationship, as a response to the disproportionately low number of women to men.

In underdeveloped countries, women are poorer, less healthy, more marginalised and more oppressed than any other groups. In every aspect of living, women are excluded and exploited in favour of other groups. In

India, when a young woman marries she is expected to be an economic commodity in the husband's family. The illegal practice of dowry still persists and bride deaths in retaliation for inadequate dowries still occur. Within the family, women eat meals last, ensuring men and children have access to nutritional food first. Gender oppression against female children, adolescent girls and women manifests itself in many forms, including social stereotyping and violence at the domestic and societal levels (National Commission on Population, 2001). Dalit women experience a double jeopardy of gender and caste oppression.

In development, women have been afforded low status. Development programs have often been imposed from the top down, and externally from foreign donor organisations and foreign aid. Women, being denied access to credit and having an insignificant economic status, have been ignored by development agencies. This has been the case to such an extent that Shiva (1988) refers to the effects of development on women in developing countries as maldevelopment. Conventional approaches to development, which privilege those who hold power and resources, must be challenged.

'Health' and 'development' are very closely related and each has impacts upon the other (Phillips & Verhasselt, 1994, p. 3). It therefore makes theoretical sense, and contributes to effective practical outcomes, to ensure that approaches to working with communities are holistic in the sense of encompassing both dimensions of the human experience – health and development. This is particularly important when working with marginalised or exploited groups. To take the example of women, theory and practice has come to recognise that promoting women's health is more than addressing maternal and child health matters, and must include 'reproductive rights, political participation and social equality' (Phillips & Verhasselt, 1994, p. 25). Not only are these factors important for the physical health of women, but they are necessary if women are to be liberated from gender exploitation and from carrying an unfair burden of disease, such as HIV. To extend the situation of women to disadvantaged groups more generally, health and development are, together, concerned with human rights, equality, participation and liberation, as well as prevention of disease. Interventions aimed at promoting health and development within disadvantaged groups must address issues of structural relationships between these groups and the economy, society and culture (Lewis & Kieffer,

1994, p. 123). Only when these broader, structural issues are successfully challenged will outcomes at the more local, community level be sustainable over the longer period. The World Health Organisation's Commission on Social Determinants of Health is unequivocal in its stance that reducing inequities in health status requires more than technical, medical solutions, and that intervention for their improvement needs to include 'empowerment of individuals, communities and whole countries' (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2007, p. 15).

### *Conceptualisations of health and health promotion/interventions*

The Healthy Districts Project takes a clear community development approach and is in no way a medical intervention. Implicit in this 'Healthy Districts' concept is the notion of 'health' as something more than simply the absence of disease, but rather a notion which encompasses emotional, social, economic and political dimensions. This social view of health was formulated in the 1978 World Health Organisation's Declaration of Alma Ata (World Health Organisation, 1978) and was restated by the People's Health Movement in Dakka, Bangladesh in the year 2000 (People's Health Assembly, 2000).

The People's Charter for Health, endorsed at the first People's Health Assembly, states:

Health is a social, economic and political issue and above all a fundamental human right. Inequality, poverty, exploitation, violence and injustice are at the root of ill-health and the deaths of poor and marginalised people. Health for all means that powerful interests have to be challenged, that globalisation has to be opposed, and that political and economic priorities have to be drastically changed (People's Health Assembly, 2000, p. 1).

The core issue in relation to health is the inequities between groups in terms of health status.

The World Health Organisation's Commission on Social Determinants of Health describes health as socially produced and as intervention being at four different levels in the chain of the social production of health:

1. At the highest level, addressing issues of structural inequalities by decreasing social stratification in society



2. Ensuring that disadvantaged people's specific exposure to factors which perpetuate ill health are reduced
3. Intervening to ameliorate particular conditions which affect the health of disadvantaged people and so lessening their vulnerability to ill health
4. Organising healthcare in ways that ensure there is greater equality of access to health services for those disadvantaged people who are ill and to prevent further eroding of their economic status (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2005, p. 40).

The social determinants of health have been further highlighted by the UN Millennium Declaration (United Nations, 2000) and Project. This Project reinforces the interrelatedness of many health, economic, social and environmental issues which have an impact on development. Inter-related issues require interrelatedness of strategies and of solutions – co-ordinated and intersectoral collaboration.

The ideas of intersectoral collaboration and community participation in health planning form central planks in many approaches to health and development activity (see Shaw & Martin, 2000; Roussos & Fawcett, 2000; Delaney, 1994; Ashman, 2001; Babacan & Gopalkrishnan, 2001; Mosse, 2001; Teck et al., 2001; Weinberger & Jutting, 2001). The health sector and medicine have little impact on health outcomes. While they treat illness, health is determined by social and structural contributors, as well as local and individual factors. Therefore, solutions which can be sustained over time have to engage the decision makers, power holders and policy makers in those sectors (World Health Organisation, 1986; 1997). If poor housing, for example, contributes to respiratory illness in a community, medical intervention alone will not address the health issue. The housing sector must be involved in addressing the issue. The engagement may be more or less collaborative, depending on context, but nevertheless, intersectoral engagement must occur. Joined up issues require joined up solutions (Cappo, 2006). This is also a central plank in the Healthy Districts approach. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) underscore the interdependence of health, social and economic factors. Targets for poverty reduction, hunger reduction, education, women's empowerment, environmental sustainability and global partnerships for development are closely intertwined with health issues (United Nations, 2000).

### *'Healthy Districts' approaches*

The particular Project which is the subject of this paper, named 'Healthy Districts Project', has its genesis in the World Health Organisation's 'healthy settings' approach to health promotion (World Health Organization, 1999; 2000) and a social view of health (South Australian Health Commission, 1988; 1989) which acknowledges the structural contributors to health and wellbeing.

A Healthy District is one that is continually creating and improving those physical and social environments and expanding those community resources which enable people to mutually support each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing to their maximum potential. (Hancock & Duhl, 1988)

A Healthy Districts approach, then, is one which facilitates, enables and assists people to improve the conditions of the rural district in which they live. It is clearly aimed at building the capacity of communities to support their members' health and wellbeing (Baum & Tesoriero, 2001).

This particular Healthy Districts Project intervened mainly in the first and second levels (1 and 2 above) in the chain of production of health. In the context of rural Indian communities, it attempted to address the power inequalities and exclusionary practices of caste and gender and to lessen factors such as poverty and migration for employment which erode the social support systems of individuals and groups, and the capacity of communities to sustain changes gained, in rural India. These support networks are critical social determinants of health (and also ill health) in rural south India and in many majority countries (Commission on Social Determinants of Health, 2007, pp. 19–21).

### *Rights-based approaches to health/development*

Now, more than ever, 'human rights' is critical to health and development work. The notion of human need refers to 'must haves', such as food, clothing, shelter, water, safety, health and so on and can be provided by the private, for-profit sector. From the 1980s many governments, including India from 1990, opened their countries to the global market. The accompanying deregulation of economies, the privatisation of public resources and the demands of structural adjustment programs all represented a neo-liberal paradigm, where economics became dominant and

the world was constructed as a marketplace. Within this global marketplace, more and more needs are placed on the market to be bought, and such things as education, water, transport and health have been privatised. Public resources have become private goods. While human needs continue to be met in this paradigm, access to resources depends more on ability to pay and inequity increases, with the most disadvantaged missing out. Furthermore, issues of human rights, social wellbeing and health are rarely, if ever, on the agenda of private providers. Within the neoliberal political context and the marketplace paradigm, health rights too have become commodified, and even the World Health Organization's official health reports tend to disguise inequities and inequalities amongst different groups behind bland national indicators of improvements in health (Breilh, 2005, pp. 13–14). However, as Uvin (2004) cogently argues, it is because of the very fact that there are many powerful agents over and above nation states, created by globalisation, that human rights obligations and the role of the duty bearer can be directly applied to non-state entities, including NGOs, for-profit organisations and civil society. Uvin goes on to argue that mechanisms of accountability distinguish 'rights' from 'needs' approaches and distinguish charity from claims. Those duty bearers who violate human rights must, he asserts, be held accountable. Following on from this, human rights-based health and development work will, by definition, focus on 'social structures, loci of power, rule of law, empowerment, and structural change in favour of the poorest and most deprived ...' (Uvin, 2004, p. 131). This focus is further operationalised in the development practice literature on rights-based programming (Theis, 2003; Jalal, 2005; CARE, 2005, Save the Children, 2005; Office of UNHCHR, 2006).

Rights-based programming is based on principles which are consistent with the other theoretical foundations of the Healthy Districts Project, namely equity, participation, inclusion, empowerment, capacity building of system, addressing social determinants and gender equality. Such programming must have two central foci. It both holds powerful people and institutions accountable as duty bearers and it supports rights-holders to demand their rights and participate in societal, political, economic and social decisions.

For activities and projects that subscribe to a rights-based approach, it means incorporating long-term goals and sustainable outcomes and

adopting holistic goals rather than compartmentalised objectives. It also means a commitment to equity by working with the most marginalised groups, strengthening the accountability of those in power, ensuring people participation and working in alliances and collaboration.

A 'human rights' approach to health and wellbeing programs places the issue of rights and obligations, of social injustice, oppression and inequity on the development agenda (Tesoriero, 2004). If health intervention and development work are underpinned by the notion of health as a human right, then the change process becomes one directed towards addressing violations of human rights and social injustice, with this dual focus on rights claimants and duty bearers.

### *Action research for health promoting community development*

If health is a political concept, amongst other things, and a focus on human rights underpins activity, then health intervention and development work become political activities, a change process, in dialogue with marginalised groups and in favour of liberation of the oppressed (Freire, 1972). At the community level, such health intervention has the potential for achieving development and building capacity. 'Health' becomes a useful concept for community change and community work.

Action research which is participatory has its roots in *majority world* countries, particularly South America and Asia, and in rural communities, and has been associated with activism and community development. The approach has three core features: (1) shared sense of ownership of projects between community and Project team/researchers; (2) a community-based analysis of issues and problems; and (3) an orientation towards action, change and transformation.

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988; 2000) refer to action research as 'low tech' research: 'it sacrifices methodological sophistication in order to generate timely evidence that can be used and further developed in a real-time process of transformation' (1988, p. 591). The 'goodness' of action research is not dependent on sophisticated research technologies, but on the quality of the evidence, through reflection, and its ability to contribute towards the transformations that are represented in the goals of the community development projects. The measure of good data is, after critical reflection, the assessment of its accuracy, relevance, appropriateness and

pertinence to the purposes of the participants and its contribution to the transformative/social change goals.

Transformation and change are embedded in the notion of action research. It is in relation to creating change and transforming the conditions in which marginalised and disadvantaged groups live, that Appreciative Inquiry takes on a particularly important role in the Healthy Districts Project's processes for change. Appreciative Inquiry (Ashford & Patkar, 2001) is a change strategy which identifies the strengths and resources within people, groups and their communities rather than taking as the starting point either problem identification or needs assessment. It draws on these strengths to effect positive changes through strategies which are implemented cooperatively with members of the community. Because it is a strategy, it must be one part of a larger development process. It cannot, alone, achieve sustainable and overall development goals in communities. The strategy is a cyclical process which consists of four stages, namely Discovery, Dreaming, Design and Delivery. Strengths, as an approach, has much to offer a change process, but depends on identifying resources indigenous to a community and utilising them for change.

Appreciative Inquiry carries some constructionist (Crotty 1998, p. 42) assumptions. 'Reality' is shaped by what is being focused on and the language that is being used, and therefore, can result in multiple realities. Reality is created in the present, but what is brought from the past will help shape current realities. Therefore, bringing positive aspects of the past, resources, and strengths, is important to health and development (Ashford & Patkar 2001, pp. 42–45).

The notion of strengths emerges as a theme in the theoretical underpinnings of the Healthy Districts Project. It is, however, more than an obtuse theme; it has been developed as an intervention approach. The Strengths Approach supports theoretically the aims and processes espoused by Appreciative Inquiry. It 'is a philosophy for working with people for change, an approach dependent on positive attitudes about people's dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities' (McCashen, 2005, p. v). As such, it makes a positive contribution to the Healthy Districts Project because this approach supports other central concepts underpinning the Project, including a rights-based approach, and it is consistent with, and complementary to, health promotion which focuses on building on

the capacities already existing within individuals and communities. The Strengths Approach's philosophy is one that acknowledges people's agency in engaging in change and the role of workers in creating the structural conditions to enable their participation in change processes. While this approach is in stark contrast to other, 'deficit' approaches, it does not deny problems. In fact, it acknowledges and challenges power imbalances and rights violations, and addresses structural, cultural, organisational and personal constraints on people's abilities to create change.

The conceptual tools offered by Appreciative Inquiry and Strengths Approach bear directly on the analysis of the processes and outcomes of the Healthy Districts Project. Knowing people's strengths and resources enables an understanding of how change has happened in the past; an acknowledgement of structural factors and barriers enables an understanding of how change was resisted and thus how and why the sustainability of community outcomes may have been eroded. Together, an understanding of change and resistance to change provides some insights into alternative ways forward.

## Alanganeri Healthy District Project

### *Aims*

The Healthy Districts Project aims to develop, implement and evaluate health and development interventions (strengths-based community development strategies) in selected local rural South Indian communities. These interventions give primacy to community participation through developing a partnership between community members and the Project team. Within this partnership, issues of importance to the communities are jointly identified by community members and the team, strategies to address the issues agreed upon, and the outcomes of these strategies measured/evaluated in terms of extent of achievement of relevant goals.

The Project also aims to strengthen the capacity of local communities to promote and maintain health through establishing community structures, such as women's self help groups, health committees, youth groups, and any other structures appropriate to issues identified. Furthermore, these structures are to be substantially led, organised and maintained by local community members who together hold appropriate and sufficient skills (for example, meeting skills, advocacy skills, organisational skills) to ensure the structures are durable over time.

### *Project setting*

A panchayat is an administrative unit which sits below the Block level (a Block sometimes comprises about 400 villages, and within the Block, panchayats usually consist of approximately 10 villages each), the District level and the State level in Indian governance structures. It is where Indian democracy plays out at the local level. The Alanganeri Panchayat, the setting of the Healthy Districts Project, is located in Tamil Nadu, South India and is about 160 kms north west from Chennai (ex Madras). It is reasonably typical of most panchayats and consists of one main village, eight hamlets, field huts and two dalit (outcaste) colonies. Dalits and caste Indians are physically separated within the Panchayat. Dalits, or 'untouchables' remain a cruel aspect of the Indian caste system. There are many theories about their origins, ranging from religious, through economic to colonialist. However, they have always been regarded as polluted and so any contact with caste people resulted in the defilement of those caste people. Consequently, physical separation was common and often total: separate drinking water and wells, separate housing, prohibition from entering temples and so on. Dalits generally had no rights and were subjugated economically, socially and psychologically. In states such as Bihar, the killing of dalits still persists. In Tamil Nadu, there are less strict attitudes to dalits, but separation still persists in many forms. There are many coffee houses that have separate drinking vessels for dalits and for caste people. Many Panchayats maintain separate 'colonies' for dalit communities.

The Alanganeri panchayat consists of 414 households (73 in main village). The Panchayat is poor and the highest caste is 'MBC' ('most backward castes') to which 90% of the panchayat population belongs; the remaining 10% are dalits. Alanganeri is the most underdeveloped of the 39 Panchayats in this area and has the lowest health status amongst the other panchayats in the Block.

### *Methodology*

The evaluative and reflective dimension of this community development process utilises principles and methods of action research.

As social/community development, action research involved the Project team and the local community members in planning, implementing, observing, reflecting, further planning and implementation of strategies identified to increase the social health of the community. These strate-

gies included social and economic development strategies. Community participation has been an essential feature of the processes. Central to the reflection is considering the extent to which such strategies are sustainable and capacity building over the longer term, as well as being immediately effective, in their own right and in the short term. In other words, at the community level, some strategies may appear to create positive and exciting changes in individuals and within the community, and indeed do so. However, consideration of how wider, structural factors may erode and undermine these local community changes provides a more incisive analysis and a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of processes and the durability of outcomes. Reflecting on these complexities as part of an action research process, and including the insights of local community members in the reflection process, has enabled the Project team to forge a way forward amidst seemingly contradictory outcomes.

The steps which constituted the Project moved systematically from issue identification through to evaluation and replanning. These are, in effect, the elements of a participatory action research process and parallel to the principles and processes of Appreciative Inquiry, as a strengths-based community development process. While these may seem unremarkable, they have been critical to this Project because they have enabled meaning to be ascribed to the Project outcomes in ways which provide new options and generate new insights and pathways. The Project steps included:

1. *Community identification of issues, goals and aspirations to enhance our understanding of the communities.* This was carried out through a series of initial community meetings. The number and composition of meetings was guided by local community leaders and health workers to ensure cultural appropriateness and maximum inclusivity. Subsequently, ongoing identification of issues was within the arenas of more specific work groups.
2. *Prioritisation of issues in terms of action/implementation of strategies.* These were also developed in the community meetings. Prioritisation may not only result in agreements about the timing of activities, but in agreements about who will take responsibility. In other words, particular groups in the communities took responsibility for different strategies or different discrete community projects.



3. *Community organisation/implementation.* Organising for programs implemented by ‘project groups’ or work groups established in line with agreements made in the community meetings. Project groups decide their own modus operandi in terms of division of labour, frequency of meetings, roles of members, specific intended outcomes and so on.
4. *Observation of processes.* Alongside the processes of implementation, observations were made by team members as participant-observers. Observations were documented by each team member and compared and discussed in team reflective meetings. These documents were also discussed and checked with those community members being observed, immediately after the production of the documents, to ensure accuracy and that no person felt at risk by what has been documented.
5. *Reflection on processes.* Based on observations by researchers and community participants, discussions held within work groups critically examined the activities and processes, both in terms of their effectiveness of contributing towards the Project goals, and in terms of their contribution towards building the capacity of the community (individual participant skills and the collective capacity of the work groups). It was at these meetings, held twice weekly, that the records of observations were re-checked with the broader group of participants to ensure that there was agreement and that no participant felt vulnerable or at risk as a result of the documented observations.
6. *Replanning.* Based on the reflective process, and again, in the work groups, any decisions about revision of program planning were made, and the process continued again through phases 3, 4 and 5.

## The Appreciative Inquiry Process – Giving Meaning to the Project Activity

The participatory action research process and the Project steps outlined above are parallel to the principles and processes of Appreciative Inquiry, as a strengths-based community development process. Appreciative Inquiry was chosen as an approach because it appropriately operationalised the ba-

sic tenets of participatory action research and was consistent with the core values and human rights focus of the Project. It provided a bridge between the values and theory, and the practice and activities of the Project. It also provided a tool for analysis of the activities and gave particular meaning to the process; a particular lens through which the activities could be viewed, given meaning, understood. It enabled informed practice. Furthermore, it was an approach successfully adapted for the rural Indian context and used by a major NGO for the last ten years with over 3,000 women's self help groups in south India. Consultation with the NGO was an invaluable experience and was a significant factor in choosing Appreciative Inquiry. The Appreciative Inquiry approach consists of four stages: Discovery (of individual and community strengths and resources); Dreaming (of a better future); Designing (planning to make dreams a reality); and Delivery (implementation). The approach builds in evaluation as an ongoing activity embedded in all stages.

### *Stage one: discovery*

The Discovery stage consists of storytelling by members of the community about good and powerful experiences, and successful endeavours, in the group or community. The expertise and experience of the community is the basis for work, which gives centrality to their role and their participation. As people tell their stories, the facilitators draw out and name the strengths and resources implied in the stories and the conditions which assisted past achievements and successes.

The Discovery Stage of Appreciative Inquiry is a defining feature of the methodology. Good Discovery exercises create an opportunity for sharing stories that recognise individual merit and mutual strengths. This builds the bonds that are necessary for individuals to invest their efforts in collective action for extended periods.

The opening questions of the inquiry can generate remarkable energy and valuable information. The questions that we ask set the stage for what we 'find', and what we discover (the data) becomes the stories out of which the future is conceived, conversed about and constructed. As such, selecting the focus of the inquiry and generating appropriate questions takes on particular significance (Ashford & Patkar, 2001, p. 11).

Effective Discovery, according to Ashford and Patkar (2001) should contribute to two complementary outcomes. The group or community should gain increased insights into their capacity as a group, and their contributions to the development of their community. Thus, the outcomes have an internal focus, and an external focus on community achievements. The following journal entry captures some of the insights the women from Alanganeri which they shared with the Project team about themselves and their context during the Discovery stage.

They told us how they liked their village, it was a nice place to live, with fresh air, fresh water every day; they had fresh vegetables, fresh fruits, how it was healthy to live here, no pollution, they had good coconut and papaya trees; there was a very good atmosphere in the village, everyone knew each other, they were all somehow related, very calm, no disturbance, no fighting, there was a good community spirit.

They told us about women's situation in India; women were kept down while men had full freedom. However, they said, 'things are changing'. They said, their Self Help Group (SHG) would create awareness for women that they have rights. They had the Magili Kurus where women could go to report violence and ill treatment, and action could be taken against men. But women were reluctant to come forward because of a prestige problem. The husband is considered as a 'god', women cannot easily remarry and many women do not want to make their problems public.

They said that as they moved out from houses to be educated, they had been able to experience and discover the outside world; they could now talk to banks and at school meetings; they had greater confidence in facing the world; they felt happy and really comfortable now; they felt they could much better manage all aspects of the family – money, problem solving, taking on greater responsibility.

They said 'we had water problems, no easy access to water in the village', women had to carry water from a well about one kilometre away and this was difficult for them; but this problem had been solved, the SHG had done a lot; the members of

the SHG got together and met with the Panchayat leader; there were difficulties and opposition but they worked together and crossed the hurdles; the leader heard them out, listened and the problem was solved eventually; they were not hasty; they were polite and calm. They had water taps in the village now.

(Team journal entry of community meeting, held March 21, 2006).

The strengths and resources which the team identified as the people told their stories were reflected back to the participants. The team identified such things as confidence, collective strength in the SHG, an ability to endure hardship, an awareness of the positive aspects of their environment and the village and a pride in and happiness with it. Their stories indicated a good community spirit and harmony. They showed a high level of awareness of women's situation in India and an awareness of member's rights as women in India, in the world. They were also very aware of changes in Indian society, yet at the same time were cognizant of the pressures on women from society's taboos. They had a good appreciation of the importance and impact of education and a keen desire to learn.

After having asked the group about their thoughts and if they agreed about these strengths, one of them said: 'We were not aware of these until you told us, but now we can see how we can come up in life' (Team journal entry of community meeting, held March 21, 2006).

The other women nodded and smiled, in agreement. It was clear that our reflection back to the women about their strengths resonated with them. However, that it took outsiders for them to see these strengths and the role those strengths had played in improvements in their lives attested to both the ability of their environment to perpetuate submissive identities and the importance of an externally introduced process to challenge and transform identities to ones of more powerful actors in their own destinies. With their increased awareness came an opportunity to progress and assert their rights. With the encouragement of the Project team came a confidence to dream a different future and an energy to work together to make specific plans for a better future. This, then, became an important foundation for the Dream stage.

### *Stage two: dream*

In the Dream stage, people imagine their future where the group or community functions at its best, and makes its best contributions to its members. Dreaming consists of building on strengths to better the group and the community.

The group's vision is likely to encompass social relationships, economic relationships, cultural traditions, the environment – natural and human made, governance structures, employment and income generation opportunities, and social infrastructure. The group's vision of the future will represent a compelling possibility when built on the community resources – its strengths as they have emerged from the analysis of past achievements

Two important types of visions emerge from the Dream Stage, according to Ashford and Patkar (2001, p. 19): (1) Visions of the internal functioning of the group; and (2) Visions of a long-term mission of the group in the development of the community/village. These visions encompass notions of empowerment and structural change.

The following extract from the Team's journal and the list of dreams all relate primarily to the second type of vision because they are concerned with community and village developments, rather than visions of how the group may work more effectively into the future. Visions of internal functioning really only emerged later on out of tensions which arose during the planning and implementation of the Tamil Tendril Project (a tailoring unit set up by the women). In this Healthy Districts Project, it was in the Design and Delivery stages that addressing internal functioning issues became relevant for the participants.

They said they wanted a road, transport to the main road was a problem; they had gone to the Panchayat president but land owners were not willing to give some part of their fields for the building of the road. They needed this road to allow school buses to come and to give them options about which schools they sent their children to; children could go to better schools and have better future. This would be easier for everything and everyone. One woman said, 'with the road many changes will occur'.

They said they wanted their children speaking fluent English.

(Team journal entry of community meeting, held April 10, 2006).

Other dreams which were added during discussions included (in no order of importance): to build a house next to the main road; a water tank; a hospital; a village shopping centre; a higher secondary school; maintaining the village's natural beauty; more comfortable and well furnished houses; a computer; a university; improving children's education; employment for people who had received education; a village tailoring unit – generating income collectively by drawing on their present skills, which included bag making, tailoring, garments making. They dreamed of building to an export quality (Excerpt from Project journal, April 4, 2006).

All of these dreams were prioritised through processes which were most inclusive of all community members. So for example, where people were not literate, strategies which rely on written language were avoided. After a long process (three meetings), the participants chose a tailoring unit as their first priority.

The choice of a tailoring unit was to hold particular implications for the Project. Firstly, a tailoring unit had the potential to transform economic conditions and social relations for women in the community. But with the attendance of dalit women from the two dalit colonies, existing and longstanding caste relations would necessarily be challenged. A tailoring unit, producing export garments, would also necessarily challenge existing dominant gender relations and power relations within the community. However, while there was now potential for tensions and resistance at the local level, the group rallied external support from nearby NGOs, other similar and successful community projects and the Panchayat Council. The formation of these alliances created power and made the priority dream feasible.

### *Stage three: design*

The objectives of the Design Stage are to assist group members develop the structures and strategies needed to take action on their short- and long-term goals. Practical steps are defined through intensive and methodical participatory planning to direct group and individual actions.

The design stage is intended to bring together the participants to prioritise goals and develop specific action plans through dialogue about creating their desired future: how to build social systems that might redefine approaches to leadership, governance, participation and capacity building. It

is clear that the action-oriented collective work at this stage is a vehicle for empowerment and advancing human rights.

As strategies are explored, participants discuss how to protect the qualities of community life they value and incorporate the relationships they want to achieve. Dreams turn into action by establishing roles and responsibilities, developing strategies, forging relationships with organisations and mobilising resources to achieve goals. Detailed planning begins at three levels: short term, easily achievable objectives; longer term strategies for more difficult goals; and thinking through structural changes to reinforce changes (Ashford & Patkar, 2001, p. 27). The following extract from the Team's journal exemplifies the discussions about short term objectives and longer term objectives. Such things as tailoring training and locating necessary equipment were relatively easily planned for. More complex goals, such as establishing a viable export factory, required more thinking and discussion, including discussion with and support from other established and successful projects.

When asked how many villagers would be interested in tailoring training, they said 'there was a list of women interested but it would be necessary to discuss with them again'. Asking how many women present at the meeting would be interested, ten raised their hands (Team journal entry of community meeting, held May 15, 2006).

Fifty women registered and joined the venture.

The women said 'they needed further training, a tailoring unit, and tailoring machines'. We discussed about the location of the unit and they said 'it had to be discussed with the Panchayat president, who would have first to approach the MLA and then see with the government if they could have some support to either get government land, or private land partly paid by the Tamil Nadu government'.

And then they said they 'did not have much experience in business and did not know how to know what there was a demand for on the market; they needed to learn to understand this'. We said we knew about a successful tailoring unit in the area and asked who would be interested to visit this place. 'We surely want to go, all of us,' was the reply.

They said they 'would prepare a list of interested people as well as a list of questions for the tailoring unit visit for the next session'.

(Team journal entry of community meeting, held May 15, 2006).

The interpreter translated into English the 11 questions or issues raised by the women:

1. The need for a location for the unit.
2. Obtaining legal permissions – which departments have to be approached?
3. How many people and machines will be needed?
4. What is the production capacity of each tailoring machine?
5. What is the minimum and maximum output per person per day for the unit to operate successfully?
6. What is the amount of capital needed to start the unit? Profit and production to be discussed.
7. Where we can we obtain the capital needed for unit?
8. What are the issues about time management and working hours of the unit that we need to know?
9. What should be the daily income of each person in this Project?
10. What do we need to know about marketing products?
11. How should the unit be run? Who will manage the unit: committee, appointing a person?

(Team journal entry of community meeting, held June 5, 2006).

The discussion and planning of the Design Stage reflects the priorities set in the Dreaming Stage, and takes the dreams further by developing actions and tasks that will bring the Tailoring Unit closer to a reality. There is an emphasis on gaining knowledge and skills and building support from external sources. This is a significant emphasis because armed collectively with skills, knowledge and surrounded by a support network, the ability of the women to achieve their goals (empowerment) is strengthened. Of note though, is the absence of discussions about barriers and threats to



the planning. The effects of this were to be later felt when change was met with resistance to change by external power holders.

### *Stage four: delivery*

In the Delivery stage, the action plans are implemented. In this stage group members mobilise resources, form new relationships, acquire new skills and implement action plans. Collective vision directs collective action; goal oriented collective action is an important conduit for building power and achieving transformation. All the while, resources which are inherent in the group are strengthened and harnessed, rather than building over-reliance (and therefore dependency and vulnerability, which are features that perpetuate disadvantage) on external resources.

Effective Delivery emphasises innovation, continuing learning, nurturing an 'appreciative' eye, institutionalising the appreciative inquiry process, self reliance, monitoring the progress and revising plans where appropriate, participation through shared responsibility for decision making, resource mobilisation and implementation, and transparency (Ashford & Patkar, 2001, p. 34). These emphases support a process and outcomes of liberating transformation through collective action and reinforce the relationship between health and development.

### *Follow-up: keeping the cycle going*

As a cyclical process, a new cycle of discovery, dreaming, designing and delivering can occur at any point, at any time. Appreciating the strengths in people and their communities, and asking questions, listening to stories, and drawing out themes which identify these strengths gives people hope and motivation to realistically anticipate a better future and to better meet everyday challenges in their lives. Using the stages over and over fortifies gains made towards empowerment and asserting rights. The concept of 'strengths' is central to the process of Appreciative Inquiry.

## Successful Outcomes and Achievements

The Appreciative Inquiry process used in Alanganeri was meticulously documented and evaluated in a manner consistent with participatory action research. There were mixed outcomes but several significant successful outcomes were identified by participants and facilitators.

The first outcome was the commencement of a tailoring unit, comprising 50 women from eight of the 10 communities in the Alanganeri Panchayat. The Unit, named Tamil Tendril (meaning Tamil Breeze), included 10 women from the dalit colonies amongst its members and the tailoring teacher was also from one of the dalit colonies. Twenty percent of the Project participants came from the 10% Dalit population of the Panchayat. The women negotiated for, and secured, 8 sewing machines from the local partner NGO and they secured a rental building (the rooftop and two rooftop rooms of a caste family home) in which it held tailoring and embroidery classes. The group was assisted with the legalities to enable it to form a society, with office bearers and a bank account. The women commenced skill training in areas such as collaborative decision making, conflict resolution, roles and responsibilities of group members, making linkages with outside organisations, finance and accounts.

With regard to a range of external relationships, contacts were established with possible retail outlets in Australia, with a view to the Unit becoming an export production unit. Support was requested from, and subsequently offered by, a close by community-based export tailoring unit and a local weavers' cooperative agreed to supply cloth to Tamil Tendril. After discussions with the Panchayat Council, agreement in principle was obtained for assistance in being allocated land, and for State government and NGO assistance in providing building materials for a permanent Project office and a tailoring unit building in the Panchayat.

In terms of the Project objectives, these achievements are indicative of progress towards individual and group capacity building and generally represent the use of effective strategies to this end. In summary, the participants of Tamil Tendril organised themselves and worked collectively towards their dream. In so doing, they created a structure in their community which was not there previously, one which had the potential to support members of the community in a range of ways, from securing income to socio-emotional support. To this extent, structures and relations in the community changed.

Individuals also learned skills, which ranged from technical skills to those which increased their social power, such as skills of negotiation and harnessing resources. However, these achievements at the community and individual level are only part of the picture of change.

These achievements, as exciting as they were, must be contextualised, given the Project's framework of social and structural determinants of health and wellbeing, and a human rights perspective which implies accountability of duty bearers. In other words, to what extent were structural relations of power, especially in relation to gender and caste, changed to the advantage of the less powerful?

## Broader Forces, Sustainability Eroded

While the above outcomes are certainly positive outcomes at the community level, changes at this level do not occur apart from the wider socio-political context, and this broader context determines the level of sustainability of more local changes. In this wider arena, forces are at play which are well able to erode and undermine gains at the local community level and severely compromise the sustainability of any such gains.

Change which alters power relations can represent a threat to those who traditionally have held power. Therefore Appreciative Inquiry, as with any change strategy at the local community level, needs to be seen within the context of a larger development process, a broader and longer term development plan which addresses the broader forces, including those involving issues of power and powerlessness, institutional relationships of exploitation and oppression. Such a broad development plan must include the following factors for successful development outcomes: vision, values, strategy, capability, motivation and feedback (Ashford & Patkar, 2001, p. 38). All of these factors, together, can then contribute towards positive development outcomes. The absence of one or more of these factors will weaken efforts at sustainable development outcomes and compromise the outcomes themselves.

Appreciative Inquiry can be effective in establishing an inspiring group vision, articulating values, creating a sense of ownership, generating new ideas and action for sustainable change and providing a useful feedback tool. But Appreciative Inquiry does not, of itself, create new resources or transform broader societal power relations. Other strategies must be used to do this and other stakeholders must be engaged, particularly those that hold resources, whether they are social resources, political resources or material resources. Unless there is a broader development vision and process, traditional relations of power and hierarchy will persist and dominate despite any changes at the local level or challenges to those exploitative and oppressive relations.

In Alanganeri, the Project team had an explicit, clear, strong and persistent focus on including dalit people in the process. Their inclusion built unrelenting tensions into the process, tensions which were managed but which required seemingly never-ending effort, discussion, conflict management and negotiation, and compromises amongst participants. With this focused concentration on managing group tensions, attention was not paid to the broader implications of local people taking control and traditional caste practices being violated. In rural India, there are powerful and traditional oppressive institutional relations. Gender, caste, hierarchy, patronage and the elitism which comes with education and professionalisation of NGO workers, amongst others, remain prevailing and dominant. These forces infiltrated their influence in Alanganeri. Somewhat paradoxically, the critical set of resistance forces emanated from the local NGO, which was a partner in the Healthy Districts Project. The longstanding relationships between NGO workers and community leaders – all male and from caste communities – were central to the Project team's work being accepted in the communities. However, these relationships also circumscribed the limits between acceptable and unacceptable interventions, and acceptable and unacceptable change. The NGO partnered in the Project because development was its core work and there was also potential kudos from achieving outcomes in an underdeveloped part of its patch. However, its approach to community development within a rural Indian context was highly patronising, in alliance with the traditional power holders, and one which over the years had cemented its status and power, and the status of its workers, who were almost exclusively professional, university-educated males from higher castes. Thus, despite engaging in community 'development', the NGO was itself an embedded part of the social structure and its activities reinforced and perpetuated traditional social relations and power balances. Within the NGO, the rigid hierarchical organisational structures, combined with autocratic leadership, shaped the workers' activities in ways that ensured the ongoing approval of the organisation and the leader. Not only was the leadership autocratic, but the Director was new and had a clear focus on establishing his own power and authority in no uncertain ways. Hence, when the NGO became aware of the increasing power of people in the community, particularly dalit

women, and their demonstrated ability to work collectively, self-reliantly and to achieve goals, and heard more and more demands, it perceived its traditional position of power as being threatened and it began to withdraw its support. Its support of the Project was essential because it held long standing power and resources and so above all else, local people were afraid to risk its disapproval and suffer perceived, consequent losses. Accordingly, the NGO workers, keen to maintain their positions and alliances within the organisation hierarchy and eager to establish their relationship with the new NGO leadership, responded to subtle but powerful messages from their Director and withdrew support. Workers who had been critical allies in change began to actively but subtly undermine the Project work and so too, the achievements which had been made at the community level. While the workers' actions were clearly a withdrawal of support, their personal feelings, as they expressed them in different ways, were very ambivalent.

In the end, long standing dependency relationships proved to be the stronger forces. The perceived costs of gaining power at the local level were considered by local people as ultimately too great and so the sustainability of the Tamil Tendril as a self-reliant, income-generating project benefitting women from both caste and dalit communities was eroded. The intended expansion of community-building activities beyond Tamil Tendril to other groups in the community, such as youth, was now not possible. The resources which were held by the NGO or which it could harness externally to support the local people's aspirations, were denied them. Hopes and expectations were not realised and old power relations remained intact. The most significant change which had occurred was that the local people had experienced, at least for a short time and to some extent, success, and were active in achieving their goals within a partnership model. Empowerment and asserting rights was realised, but not in a sustainable way. Appreciative Inquiry strategies had worked, but the broader development processes which should have supported those successes were not adequately or effectively attended to.

The turn of events in the Project highlighted the need to break those traditional dependency relations which make the cost and the risks of social change too great for local people. This requires broader strategies,

because dependency is not only social and political, but economic as well. Dalits, as noted previously, mostly depend on caste landowners for day work as their only source of income, which is meagre and often in-kind.

How did the Project fare in terms of human rights? The assessment sheet must conclude with 'erratic', if not inconsistent and variable. Proclaiming a human rights approach became far more challenging than the team initially anticipated and the Project fell far below the mark of ensuring human rights are not violated. However, it remained a powerful indicator, a clear monitoring mechanism and a commanding generator of insights to pave ways forward. In terms of participation, commitment to equity, capacity building, inclusion, gender equality and other aspects pertinent to the focus on rights claimants, the Project maintained a high level of consistency and achieved some transformations towards greater rights at the local level. However, it failed to effectively make progress on the second focus of holding power holders accountable for violating the rights of marginalised groups.

## Where from here?

The changes achieved at the local level were severely corrupted. Continuing to work in the Alanganeri community was no longer viable. Turf had been reclaimed by the NGO.

And what remains of the Healthy Districts Project beyond Alanganeri? It has a continuing commitment to work from a human rights basis, including the right for all people to participate in development. It also has a continuing commitment to reflective practice and to search for effective strategies to transform oppressive power relations. The Project was forced to withdraw from the community in which it was working. Threats to the Australian partner meant that it was unsafe to continue, and this was also the assessment of Madras University in relation to itself continuing.

The Project has now sought new partners in South India and has entered into a multilateral partnership with the Department of Social Work at Madras University and five other international universities, including ones from Taiwan, the Philippines, Canada, USA, Africa, Australia and the Netherlands. We have interrogated each other's values and have made a collective commitment to adopting a human rights perspective and an

international perspective. We have formed a consortium – the Centre for International Social Work. We have developed an explicit agenda to develop strategies that effectively take account of traditional power differentials, particularly caste and gender. We are building alliances with dalit organisations and with projects which have achieved some degree of success in breaking traditional relations of power and dependency.

Healthy Districts Project is now continuing in some tsunami-affected communities, working in a complementary way with another local project, but specifically working with youth to enable them to reach their aspirations. We are also working alongside projects which are creating such ventures as broad-based people-owned credit unions to offset the traditional dependency on day labour income from higher caste groups. Many puzzles remain to be unravelled and the struggles continue, but we are now struggling in alliances with local projects and movements, which themselves are addressing exploitation and oppression.

The commitment of the new set of partners to learning and the dissemination of learning is an investment in maintaining core values and a climate of discussion, reflection and discovery. A collaborative research project proposal has been submitted to the British Council in Chennai to engage in participatory action research to develop community development strategies that can effectively address local practices of exclusion, including dalit exclusion.

The context of the new setting (tsunami-affected communities south of Chennai) is riddled with complex forces. Of course, traditional social relations still exist; however, as a result of the tsunami reconstruction efforts, the Tamil Nadu State government has instituted new arrangements. For example, the newly constructed houses can no longer be solely owned by the husband; ownership is joint. Inheritance of the houses can no longer go to the eldest son, but must go to the eldest child. Many of the newly built fish drying and freezing units are run and managed by women. It remains to be seen, whether the massive natural disaster, which inadvertently allowed the state to challenge old gender relations, may also support local community development activity, such as that embarked on by the new Healthy Districts Project. However, consistency in reflective practice, underpinned by solid values, will generate insights that will lead to more sophisticated knowledge and more effective skills in social change.

The Healthy Districts Project has meandered, but reflecting on its meanderings has created new opportunities to further engage, with new partners and a renewed collective commitment to human rights work, in processes of discovery to generate new knowledge for social and community development in communities of exclusion – to seek out effective outcomes in the mire of change and resistance to change. The reflective process, as part of participatory action research, was central to creating new opportunities and generating new knowledge. Without reflection, the outcomes of the Project could easily, and too simply, have been labelled as a failure. Failure leads nowhere. Thwarted outcomes with reflection lead to new and emerging alternatives and ways forward.

## Conclusion

The Healthy Districts Project attempted to create a healthier local community in rural south India through a community development/action research project. The process of change was guided by a strengths-based perspective and the Appreciative Inquiry process, underpinned by a social view of health and a commitment to human rights. These proved to be powerful resources which challenged some local exclusionary practices while at the same time being a catalyst for local people to raise their awareness of their own, collective capacity to create changes. Local people identified a collective income generation program as their goal or dream and then worked to achieve this. Social relations are complex and driven by strong agenda and interests. Processes of change are similarly complex. The multiple players and layers make change efforts at the community level a somewhat treacherous journey. Achievements are not simple, unilinear sets of positive changes for all. There are perceived winners and losers of change.

The achievements are paradoxical. In creating the necessary social changes which enabled women and dalits to participate in decision making about their destiny, broader forces and powerful interests were stirred and threatened. The Project failed to find ways to address these broader forces. This meant that the Project successes resulted in Project failure. However, the lessons learned have been taken into a different setting and the process of learning, being an ongoing process of reflection and action, gives rise to optimism that forces of oppression and exploitation can be effectively



dealt with. Furthermore, the aspirations of local people, including those who are now marginalised and excluded, can be reached and gains sustained through more effectively addressing the structural inequities which perpetuate disadvantage and powerlessness.

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## Preliminary findings from the National Youth Cultures of Eating Study – gender, social class and ethnic differences in childhood obesity

**Jennifer O’Dea**

### Introduction

Childhood obesity prevention has rapidly become one of the most controversial topics in current community, clinical and school health education debates. There is much talk of a global ‘epidemic’ of obesity in the academic literature (World Health Organization, 2003) as well as in the popular media. Some exclaim that the so-called ‘epidemic’ of childhood obesity will be ‘modernity’s scourge’ (Waters & Baur, 2003) and may reverse the observed improvements in life expectancy trends (Olshansky, Passaro & Hershow, 2005) whilst others more cautiously argue that current social comment about obesity is based on moral issues rather than true health risk (Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, & Gaesser, 2006; Gard & Wright, 2005; Rich & Evans, 2005). Others observe that children and adults can be both ‘fat and fit’ (Blair, 2005; Telford, 2007) and that the health risks of fatness may be largely over-ridden by physical activity. An important message for health professionals, school educators and social workers is to ‘first, do no harm’ when working towards obesity prevention among children (Ikeda, Crawford, & Woodward-Lopez, 2006; O’Dea, 2004). This is a particularly salient message for those working among different ethnic and cultural groups in the community.

Among the hundreds of published articles about childhood obesity there is a marked paucity of comment from the children themselves, and very little input invited from their parents (O’Dea, 2005). In one of the few studies of the socio-cultural contexts within which young people become fat and lay conceptualisations of fatness, Wills and her colleagues (2006)

interviewed obese and overweight teenagers from socially disadvantaged areas in Scotland. In this study, the researchers found that these young people of low socioeconomic status (SES) had a high degree of body acceptance and rarely mentioned any health-related consequences of their fatness (Wills, Backett-Milburn, Gregory, & Lawton, 2006). Of weight-related importance to these young people, were fashion related issues and being physically ‘slowed down’.

Similarly, in successive studies of Australian adolescents over the past 15 years, I have observed social class differences in the prevalence of overweight and obesity as well as varying perceptions of the students’ weight and body image. In my earliest study of mid-adolescent girls from disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged backgrounds in 1991 (O’Dea, 1994) I found that the non-disadvantaged girls were significantly more likely to eat breakfast, dinner and an evening snack; take vitamin supplements and have better nutrition knowledge. The girls from disadvantaged backgrounds were nearly twice as likely to be obese or overweight (33% versus 19%), yet the desire to lose weight was present in nearly half (42%) of all the girls, irrespective of their SES. A later study was designed to further examine and clarify the SES, weight status and body image of 1134 children and adolescents in early 2000 (O’Dea & Caputi, 2001) and results reinforced the earlier findings that children of low SES were more likely to be overweight, obese and skipping breakfast. An illuminating finding of this study was that there was less body image concern and greater body esteem and physical self esteem among overweight boys and girls of low SES in comparison to their overweight middle or high SES peers. It appeared that these children and adolescents were clearly overweight, but it did not seem to bother them. A later study conducted nationally, confirmed the social class differences in overweight and obesity among nearly 5000 students from 38 randomly selected schools from every state and territory of Australia (O’Dea, 2003).

An obvious research question to evolve from these studies was whether the observed trends in obesity and SES were mainly related to SES via income, parental education or social disadvantage or whether there were other socio-cultural influences involved. One influence that was likely to be relevant was ethnicity or cultural background, as these factors had been identified among children in the USA (Kumanyika, 1993). Hence, the main aim of the current study was to examine the intersections of class,

gender, age, and ethnicity as major factors affecting obesity, body image, food consumption and its meanings.

The importance of identifying cultural and ethnic issues in the management and prevention of weight-related disease has been recognised by several authors and is well illustrated in a recent study of Pakistani and Indian patients with Type 2 diabetes, conducted by Lawton and her colleagues (2006) in the UK. This study found that issues of social role, familial duties, perceived family cohesion and other issues related to the social roles of men and women in South Asian communities in the UK, were much more highly valued than self care (Lawton, Ahmad, Hanna, Douglas, & Hallowell, 2006). The authors of this study state that, 'Education may play a role in physical activity promotion; however, health promoters may need to work with, rather than against, cultural norms and individual perceptions' (Lawton et al., p. 52).

This article aims to explore the associations between obesity, weight perceptions and gender, ethnicity, culture and social class in a large national study of Australian schoolchildren. The paper also explores the most appropriate and effective approaches for educators, social workers and community health promoters when planning weight-related programs for children and adolescents.

## Defining and Measuring Overweight and Obesity

In any discussion of weight, it is important to first understand the definitions, meanings and limitations of the measurement instruments. The strict definition of 'obesity' refers to 'over fatness' and is normally defined using some sort of measure of percent body fat such as skin fold thickness standards. Because of the costly, time consuming and invasive nature of these measures, most researchers undertaking large population studies of 'obesity' are necessarily required to use a proxy for obesity and overweight as defined by a measure of weight-for-height, the Body Mass Index [BMI] a measure of weight in kilograms divided by the square of height in metres. Many studies, including the current one, employ a general 'international childhood BMI standard' which has been developed by Cole, Bellizzi and Flegal (2000). The international standard creates a statistical distribution of BMI by extrapolating the childhood BMI distribution to track childhood and adolescent BMI equivalents to adult BMI

cut off points of overweight (Adult BMI of 25 or more to 29.9) or obese (Adult BMI of 30 or more). Hence, the current international definition of childhood overweight and obesity is essentially a statistical definition of weight-for-height and gender and not body fatness *per se*. BMI is a screening tool, useful for making surveillance observations, but it is not a diagnostic tool and children with a BMI indicating obesity or overweight do not necessarily have any illness, clinical complications, or health risks associated with over fatness. More in-depth clinical assessment of individual children is required to ascertain their current health status and their future health risk (Flegal, Tabak, & Ogden, 2006) and the measures need to be monitored regularly over several years. Nevertheless, the current BMI-based definitions of overweight and obesity are generally useful working definitions that are valuable for public health surveillance, screening and community assessment.

Using various US and international BMI standards the prevalence of childhood overweight, obesity and increases in these over time have been measured in various countries to date. In the USA, the prevalence of childhood obesity has tripled since the 1960s with a low prevalence of about 3% in the 1960s to about 7–10% in the 1980s and 1990s (Flegal, Ogden, Wei, Kuczmarski & Johnson, 2001). The current prevalence in the USA is estimated at around 15% (Ogden, Carroll, & Curtin, 2006).

In the United Kingdom, analyses of three cross sectional studies of British children between 1974 and 1994 resulted in similar upward trends in childhood obesity prevalence to those observed in the USA (Chinn & Rona, 2001). Increasing prevalences have been observed in Australia (Magarey, Daniels, & Boulton, 2001), France (Huede, et al., 2003; Romon, Duhamel, Collinet, & Weill, 2005), Finland (Kautiainen, Rimpela, Vikat, & Virtanen, 2002), Portugal (Padez, Fernandes, Mourao, Moreira, & Rosado, 2004), Chile (Kain, Uauy, Vio, & Albala, 2002), Germany (Kalies, Lenz, & von Kries, 2002), Brazil, China and Russia (Wang, Monteiro, & Popkin, 2002).

Whilst the imminent risk of any illness in obese children is not considered common (Flegal et al., 2006), the risk for the development of insulin resistance and Type 2 diabetes is considered much more likely and serious with some cases of adolescents with these conditions already being diagnosed (Fagot-Campagna, 2000). Examples of such health risk for adolescents also includes an ethnic component with the vast majority of cases, whilst



small in actual number, being diagnosed among very obese and very sedentary adolescents (Drake, Smith, Betts, Crowne & Shield, 2002), with a strong family history of Type 2 diabetes who often come from Indian, Pakistani (Ehtisham, Barrett, & Shaw, 2000) or African American or Native American backgrounds (American Diabetes Association, 2000). Similarly, about half of the 43 cases of Type 2 diabetes and related conditions identified over the 12 years from 1990 to 2002 in children and adolescents in Western Australia were found among Aboriginal children (McMahon et al., 2004) compared to those from other ethnic groups. A recent study of all medical register data on Type 2 diabetes in children and adolescents aged 7–18 years in the state of New South Wales (Craig, Femia, Broyda, Lloyd, & Howard, 2007) found 128 cases over the six years from 2001 to 2006 (about 21 cases each year). The authors reported that 90% of cases were overweight or obese. Aboriginal children were six times more likely to have Type 2 diabetes than their non indigenous peers and 75% had a family history of the disease. Whilst these ethnic and familial effects on Type 2 diabetes risk are not always apparent (Wiegand et al., 2004), they remain an important consideration.

Hence, any study of childhood obesity and its implications for child health and/or health education in our communities should currently include an assessment of gender, risk of actually developing any illness, and ethnicity.

## Methods

Data in this study was collected as part of the National Youth Cultures of Eating Study which is a three-year, government funded study of health, weight, culture and eating among nearly 8000 schoolchildren drawn from every state and territory of Australia between August and November, 2006. The major aim of the study was to examine the intersections of class, gender, age and ethnicity as major factors affecting obesity, body image, food consumption and its meanings.

The questionnaire was constructed from previously validated instruments (Gracey, Stanley, Burke, Corti, & Beilin, 1996; O'Dea & Wilson, 2006) and completed by students in years 3–11 during regular class times under the supervision of trained research assistants. The questionnaire was developed for school years 3–4, 5–6 and 7–11 and measured demographic details of gender, age, ethnic background, weight perceptions (Do you think

you are too thin (1), about right (2) or too fat (3)?); as well as other food- and nutrition-related questions, including those assessing eating habits, consumption of breakfast, nutritional quality of breakfast and beliefs about food and nutrition. Some open-ended questions were included in the instrument, but qualitative analysis of responses is not reported here. The details of the questionnaire have been described elsewhere (O'Dea & Wilson, 2006). Height and weight were measured by trained research assistants. Where literacy was an issue, the questionnaire was read aloud to the student by a trained research assistant.

Completed questionnaires were checked, edited, entered and cleaned to produce an SPSS data file. Descriptive and Chi square analyses were undertaken to provide details of the prevalence of obesity and overweight using the international standard with age in years taken to the 0.5 year cut-offs (Cole et al., 2000). Chi square analyses were used to examine group differences in prevalence of overweight and obesity between various ethnic and social class sub-groups of children and adolescents. BMI was analysed as the dependent variable using ANOVA performed separately for boys and girls with age as a covariate and ethnicity and SES as independent variables. All continuous data were checked to make sure they were normally distributed. Residuals were examined for normality, linearity and homoscedasticity and these assumptions were met.

The study was approved by the University of Sydney Human Ethics committee as well as each school principal and each of the Departments of Education in every state and territory of Australia. All students with informed parental consent were eligible to participate and each student's verbal consent was obtained on the day of the study. No follow-up visits were undertaken.

## Results

### *Participants*

A total of 47 randomly selected primary and high schools were recruited from every state and territory of Australia and included 7889 children in school years 3–11 from government, private and Catholic schools. Data was collected from all 47 schools between August and November in 2006 with an 82% response rate. The socioeconomic status [SES] of schools was based on a written questionnaire of all families attending the school (Commonwealth Department of Education, 2005). This method of de-

fining SES was considered adequate and it provided continuity of results, as it had been used in earlier studies (O'Dea, 1994; O'Dea & Caputi, 2001). Schools were categorised as being of low, middle, or high socioeconomic status (SES) based on a direct federal government measurement of parental income (Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training, 2005). SES status of the school community was verified by each of the state departments of education and the school principal. Total family income was assessed with 21.9% of participants from low SES schools; 58.1% middle SES schools and 20.0% high SES schools. These SES categories, were also confirmed in an interview with each of the school principals in order to verify the SES of the majority of children attending the school and the sample matches the quintile distribution of SES reported by the current Australian Bureau of Statistics social trends data for 2006 (ABS, 2006).

Participants were able to self select their ethnic/cultural background(s) from the following categories which were based on ABS Census methods (ABS, 2007): Anglo/Caucasian; Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander; Southern European/Mediterranean; Chinese/South East Asian; Middle Eastern/Arabic; Pacific Islander; Indian; African and Other. Adequate numbers of participants to enable analyses by gender and ethnic category as well as by comparison with ABS population statistics (ABS, 2007) were recruited from Anglo/Caucasian (72.2%); Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander (5.9%); Southern European (8%); Chinese/South East Asian (7.4%); Middle Eastern/Arabic (1.9%) and Pacific Islander (2.4%) backgrounds and these have been included in the analyses. Ethnic categories of students from African and 'other' backgrounds were omitted in analyses due to low numbers.

### *Prevalence of overweight and obesity*

Prevalence of obesity was examined by age group, gender and ethnic/cultural background and these results are presented below. Analysis of obesity by gender produced no statistical differences in primary school-children aged less than 12 years with 6.4% of males and 5.6% of females obese:  $\chi^2(1) = 2.16$ ,  $p = 0.34$ . Analyses among high school students aged 12 years or older found more males were obese than females (7.7% versus 5.7%,  $\chi^2(1) = 9.13$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 1. Prevalence of obesity, overweight and normal weight by age group gender and ethnicity among Australian schoolchildren in 2006

	Anglo/ Caucasian	Aborigi- nal/ Torres Strait Islander	Southern European	Asian (Chinese, South East Asian)	Middle Eastern/ Arabic	Pacific Islander/ Maori	Chi Square (obesity x ethnicity, df=5)	P value
Age Group	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)		
<b>6-11 years</b>								
<b>Male (n = 1267)</b>								
Obese	5.5 (53)	8.6 (7)	7.4 (5)	9.5 (9)	10.0 (1)	18.8 (6)	11.5	0.02
Overweight	15.7 (150)	16.0 (13)	13.2 (9)	17.9 (17)	10.0 (1)	21.9 (7)		
Normal weight	78.8 (754)	75.3 (61)	79.4 (54)	72.6 (69)	80.0 (8)	59.4 (19)		
<b>Female (n = 1370)</b>								
Obese	5.5 (55)	6.8 (7)	4.5 (4)	2.0 (2)	13.3 (2)	15.6 (5)	5.9	0.04
Overweight	17.6 (175)	12.6 (13)	23.9 (21)	19.8 (20)	26.7 (4)	15.6 (5)		
Normal weight	76.9 (765)	80.6 (83)	71.6 (63)	78.2 (79)	60.0 (9)	68.8 (22)		

Table 1. cont.

Age Group	Anglo/ Caucasian	Aborigi- nal/ Torres Strait Islander	Southern European	Asian (Chinese, South East Asian)	Middle Eastern/ Arabic	Pacific Islander/ Maori	Chi Square (obesity x ethnicity, df=5)	p value
	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)	% (n)		
<b>Age Group</b>								
<b>12-18 yrs</b>								
<b>Male (n = 2561)</b>								
Obese	7.0 (134)	6.8 (9)	10.4 (20)	5.6 (11)	21.9 (7)	23.6 (13)	33.7	<0.001
Overweight	19.5 (376)	22.7 (30)	16.1 (31)	13.8 (27)	12.5 (4)	25.5 (14)		
Normal weight	73.5 (1417)	70.5 (93)	73.4 (141)	80.6 (158)	65.6 (21)	50.9 (28)		
<b>Female (n = 2691)</b>								
Obese	4.6 (85)	9.1 (13)	5.8 (17)	2.6 (5)	17.2 (15)	23.4 (15)	70.7	<0.001
Overweight	19.0 (355)	19.6 (28)	24.1 (71)	9.8 (19)	27.6 (24)	32.8 (21)		
Normal weight	76.4 (1428)	71.3 (102)	70.2 (207)	87.6 (170)	55.2 (48)	43.8 (28)		

Note. Chi square for all students (N = 7889) for obesity x ethnicity = 99.6, df = 5, p < 0.001

The prevalence of obesity, overweight and normal weight by age group, gender and ethnicity among Australian schoolchildren in 2006 are given in Table 1. There was an observable and statistically different variation in obesity prevalence between different ethnic and cultural groups. Results of Chi square analyses were highly significant:  $\chi^2(10) = 134.2$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . Differences between separate weight categories of obese, overweight and normal weight varied significantly. Obesity was significantly more prevalent among boys and girls of all ages from Pacific Islander backgrounds. Among adolescents, those who were most likely to be obese (4–5 times more prevalent,  $p = 0.000$ ) were boys and girls of Pacific Islander or Middle Eastern/Arabic background. The least likely to be obese in both genders and all age groups were the Anglo/Caucasian or Asian students and in particular, the girls. Clearly, obesity among Australian schoolchildren is largely affected by ethnic and cultural factors.

The prevalence of obesity by ethnic group is illustrated in Figure 1. Further analysis of the data also suggests a social class effect (Table 2).

The clearly graded pattern of association of obesity, overweight and SES among both primary and secondary schoolchildren suggests an influence of social class indicators upon their weight status with those of lower and middle SES having a consistently greater prevalence of obesity than their higher SES peers:  $\chi^2(2) = 25.3$ ,  $p < 0.001$ .

The graded effect between class and obesity is further illustrated and explained in terms of ethnicity in the following results. Whilst the trends related to SES are evident in the graphs illustrating the results of ANOVA (Figures 2 and 3), a more complex picture of the relationship between obesity and class, ethnicity and gender emerges in several ethnic groups, in which the BMI of middle SES children is much closer to that of low SES children than it is to higher SES children. There is a discontinuity between middle and higher, but not lower and middle SES for predicting BMI. This trend is particularly evident among Caucasian, Asian, Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander girls and Caucasian, Aboriginal, Southern European, Asian and Pacific Islander boys.

Among girls, (Figure 2) and after controlling for age, BMI was greater among those from Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander backgrounds compared to girls from other ethnic groups:  $\chi^2(5, 3992) = 10.46$ ,  $p < 0.0001$ .

Table 2. Prevalence of obesity, overweight and normal weight by school socioeconomic status (SES) among Australian schoolchildren in 2006

	Low SES (n = 1728)	Middle SES (n = 4583)	High SES (n = 1578)
Obese (n = 509)	8.8 (152)	6.3 (289)	4.3 (68)
Overweight (n = 1458)	19.2 (332)	18.9 (866)	16.5 (260)
Normal Weight (n = 5922)	72.0 (1244)	74.8 (3428)	79.2 (1250)

*Note.* Chi square test for trend for obesity x SES = 27.2, df = 1, p < 0.001;  
 chi square test for obesity x SES = 27.3, df = 2, p < 0.001

Girls of low SES had a generally greater BMI than girls of middle or high SES:  $\chi^2(2, 3984) = 6.22, p = 0.002$ .

Among boys, (Figure 3) and after controlling for age, BMI was greater among those from Middle Eastern/Arabic and Pacific Islander backgrounds compared to boys from other ethnic groups,  $\chi^2(5, 3758) = 5.78, p < 0.001$ . Within SES groups, boys of low SES had a generally greater BMI than boys of middle or high SES,  $\chi^2(2, 3759) = 3.92, p = 0.02$ .

### *Weight perception among obese children*

The weight perception of children from different ethnic backgrounds was a crucial part of our analyses because this investigation has never been undertaken in a nationally representative sample of Australian children to date, despite several smaller studies suggesting a link between both obesity prevalence and body image among different ethnic and cultural groups. There were no significant differences in weight perceptions among obese male participants. Among obese males of all ages the number who perceived themselves to be 'too fat' was 58.3% Anglo/Caucasian; 50.0% Aboriginal; 56.0% Southern European; 52.6% Asian; 66.7% Middle Eastern and 55.6% Pacific Islander. The remaining percentages of boys perceived their current weight to be 'about right'. These differences were not statistically significant:  $\chi^2(5) = 0.3, p = 0.83$ .

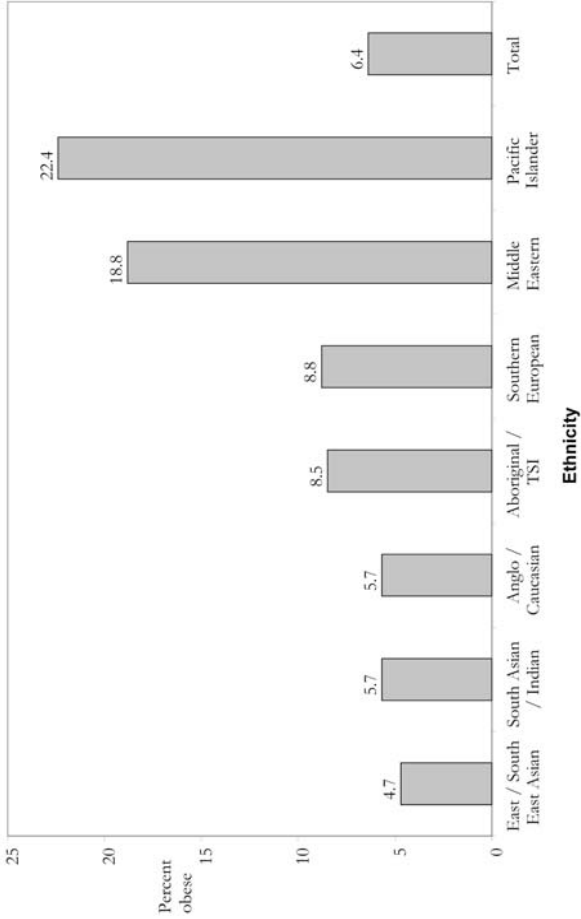
Among obese female participants of all ages the number who perceived themselves as 'too fat' was 68.3% of Anglo/Caucasian; 61.1% of Aboriginal; 61.9% of Southern European; 100% of Asian; 41.2% of Middle Eastern and 65.0% of Pacific Islanders. The remaining percentages of girls perceived their current weight to be 'about right'. The differences were not statistically significant:  $\chi^2(5) = 5.1, p = 0.28$ .

This finding that a significant number of obese participants perceive their weight as 'about right' was similar but more pronounced in boys and girls aged less than 12 years.

Among obese girls aged 12 years or older, the vast majority of girls from Anglo/Caucasian (83.7%) and Asian (100%) backgrounds perceived their weight as 'too fat'. This proportion was somewhat lower among obese girls from Aboriginal (72.7%), Southern European (70.6%), and Pacific Islander (73.3%) background, a larger minority of whom were significantly less likely to perceive themselves as 'too fat'. However, in one group, obese

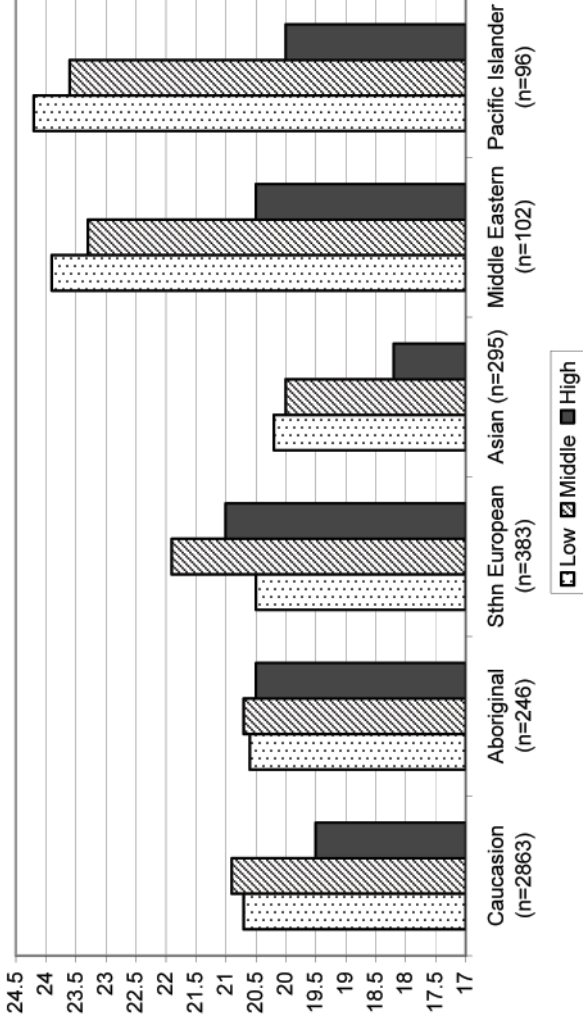


Figure 1. Prevalence of obesity by ethnic group among Australian schoolchildren in 2006 (N = 7889)



*Note:* Graph does not include African refugees (N=53) and ‘Other’ ethnicity (N = 11) due to low numbers

92 Figure 2. Mean body mass index of girls by ethnic background and socioeconomic status [SES] (N = 2985)



Middle Eastern/Arabic girls, a majority (60%) perceived their weight as 'about right'. The differences between the weight perceptions of ethnic groups of girls were statistically significant using a 2 by 6 Chi square:  $\chi^2(5) = 13.7$ ,  $p = 0.008$ . The differences between obese Anglo/Caucasian girls and Middle Eastern/Arabic, Pacific Islander and Aboriginal girls were all highly significant:  $p < 0.001$ .

The ethnic difference between the body image perceptions of obese boys was not as clear as those differences among the same grouping of girls. Among obese boys aged 12 years or older, the percentage with a self perception of 'too fat' was: Anglo/Caucasian (65.7%), Aboriginal (55.6%), Southern European (61.9%), Middle Eastern (66.7%) and Pacific Islander (64.3%) boys. The differences between ethnic groups were not statistically significant using a 2 by 6 Chi square,  $\chi^2(5) = 0.92$ ,  $p = 0.92$ .

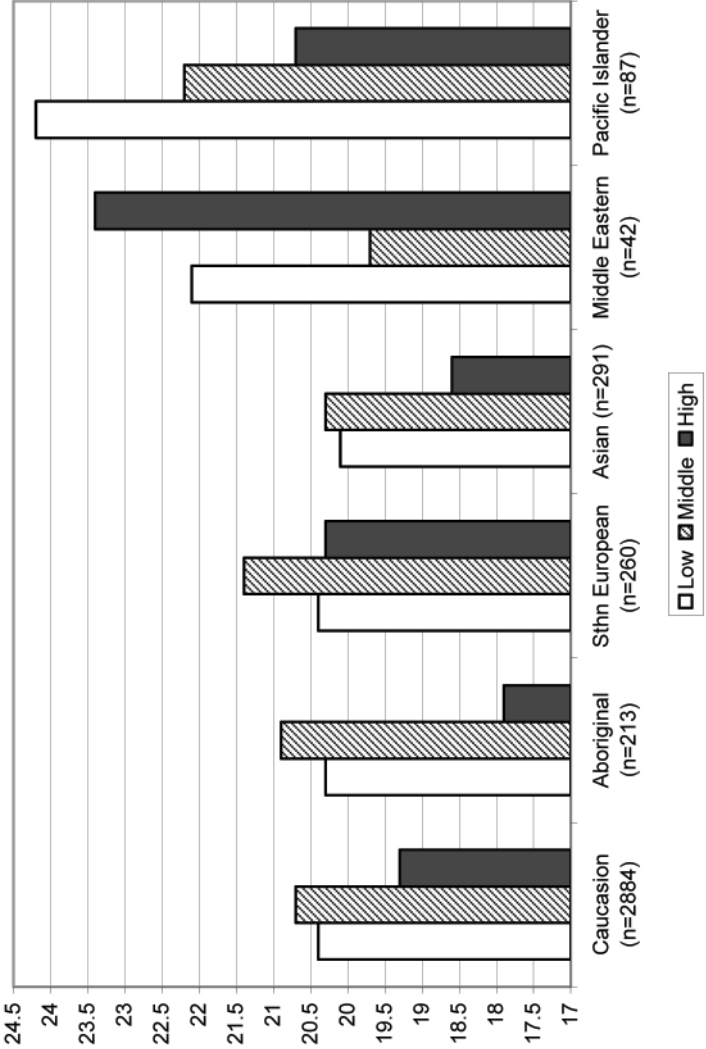
Chi square analyses of the data among obese students by gender, SES and ethnicity revealed no statistically significant differences.

## Discussion

The current study investigated the prevalence of obesity and overweight, weight perceptions and patterns of ethnic, gender and social class influences among a large, representative sample of Australian schoolchildren aged 6–18 years in 2006. The strengths of the current study include the large, nationally representative sample that includes both ethnicity and SES with a high response rate. The weaknesses include some low numbers in ethnic groups, particularly those of males from Middle Eastern backgrounds and students from India and Africa as well as the necessity to define SES using school SES rather than an individual measure of SES for each child.

In a dataset from the same survey conducted in 2000 (O'Dea and Wilson, 2006), using the international standards (Cole et al., 2000), an overall prevalence of 5.1% obesity was found, and in 2006 this had increased by 1.3 percentage points over six years to 6.4%. In comparison, the level of obesity does not appear to have increased at all among 6–12 year-old boys and girls of Anglo/Caucasian, Southern European and Asian background or 12–18 year-old girls of Anglo/Caucasian background and boys and girls of Asian background (Table 1). These findings suggest an ethnic, cultural or racial effect on the risk of obesity among children and adolescents.

94 Figure 3. Mean body mass index of boys by ethnic background and socioeconomic status [SES] (N = 3777)



Interestingly, whilst still showing a general upward trend, the overall prevalence of obesity does not appear to have continued to triple as suggested by earlier trends (Magarey et al., 2001). The increase in obesity prevalence of 1.3 percentage points between 2000 and 2006 (O'Dea, 2003; O'Dea & Wilson, 2006) among data from students from the same schools represents an annual increase of approximately 0.2% per year. This rate is half the rate of 0.4% per year over the 10 years reported by Magarey and her colleagues (2001) and this trend suggests a slowing of the increase in obesity prevalence and certainly defies the suggestion that childhood obesity continues to triple as it did between the 1980s and the 1990s (Magarey et al., 2001). There is also a suggestion that the obesity prevalence trend is declining in adolescent girls, especially those of higher SES and this trend has also been recently observed in another large study of schoolchildren in New South Wales (Booth et al., 2007).

These results obviously need to be further analysed and compared in more detail to determine whether the rise in childhood obesity was statistically significant, ethnically-based or related to socioeconomic status, but the trends in this study suggest that obesity is more common among low and middle SES students and those from Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander backgrounds. The prevalence of obesity in these groups of children was about 20% compared to the prevalence among children from Anglo/Caucasian backgrounds of the same age (5–7%). This finding, that obesity may be four times greater among certain ethnic groups compared to Anglo/Caucasian children, gives rise to current and future concern about the incidence of health risks, particularly insulin resistance and Type 2 diabetes among these young people.

This current result relates to other reports of Type 2 diabetes in children (Craig et al., 2007, Drake et al., 2002; Ehtisham et al., 2000; Fagot-Campagna, 2000; Sinha et al., 2002; Wiegand et al., 2004) wherein the ethnic background of the obese child, together with a family history of diabetes and a sedentary lifestyle largely predicts the prevalence of this disease. Those working with young people in clinical and community settings would be well advised to monitor obese, inactive children for the risk of Type 2 diabetes, especially if there is any family history of the disease. An interesting finding of the current study was the apparent lack of concern and significant level of body satisfaction among obese boys. Among

obese boys of all ages, only half considered their weight to be 'too fat'. This may reflect a desire for 'bigness', muscularity, strength or masculinity among boys and young men which has been previously identified (McCreary & Sasse, 2000; McCreary, Saucier, & Courtenay, 2005; O'Dea & Rawstorne, 2001). Further research should be undertaken to establish whether this acceptance of obesity may also reflect social class mores, sporting aspirations or some other socially derived perception or desire among young males. We have also collected qualitative data which is expected to explain some of the weight related cultural beliefs and attitudes that have been identified in the current quantitative study.

The body image findings among girls were equally surprising and interesting with more than a third of the obese Aboriginal, Pacific Islander and Southern European girls seeing their weight as acceptable and possibly even desirable. This difference was marked in the obese Middle Eastern girls, nearly two thirds of whom perceived their weight to be about right and it was glaringly absent in the obese girls from Anglo/Caucasian and Asian backgrounds, with nearly all of these girls seeing themselves as 'too fat'. These findings may reflect a way of holding on to their cultural identity in spite of the Western cultural ideal of being slim and this may be a way of balancing their need for cultural preservation with cultural adaptation.

There were measurable differences in both the prevalence of obesity and the body image and desired weight of obese children and adolescents from different ethnic groups. The body image differences of some young people in this study may reflect cultural body ideals wherein a larger body size is socially desirable for both males and females. This finding has also been recorded in studies of Fijian men and women (Becker, Gilman, & Burwell, 2005). The results also reflect widespread Western ideals of feminine beauty such as the slim ideal among Caucasian and Asian girls (Streigel-Moore, & Franko, 2002) and suggest that those children from more traditional cultures such as Pacific Island, Middle Eastern and Aboriginal cultures, may be less impacted by Westernised ideals of slimness and beauty. For some cultural groups living in Australia, fatness may remain traditionally desirable, despite their being immersed in the Western ideal of slimness.

The desire for 'bigness' among boys was particularly apparent, even among those who were obese and this finding is likely to reflect both tra-

ditional and recent Western ideals of masculinity (McCreary et al., 2005) or socially constructed gender roles (see for example, Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; McKinley, 2002). The limitations of the BMI as an instrument of fat measurement among growing children and adolescents must not be excluded as a factor in the determination of these findings, as people from Polynesian backgrounds are known to be tall and muscular (Craig, Femia, Broyda, Lloyd, & Howard, 2007; Swinburn, Ley, Carmichael, & Plank, 1999) and it may be these factors which contribute to their weight for height, in addition to their body fat.

Whilst the prevalence of childhood obesity has been reported as increasing in Westernised countries over the past three decades (Flegal et al., 2006; Chinn & Rona, 2001) the limitations in measurement must again be clearly defined. A common, but not necessarily acceptable practice in Westernised countries is to combine children who are overweight together with those who are obese to create a category called 'overweight and obese'. This practice ignores the fact that the categories of overweight and obesity are different because they correlate differently with percent body fat, health risk and morbidity (Flegal et al., 2006). Those working with young people must realise that whilst it is tempting to 'advertise' such combined statistics in order to draw attention to the health risks of obesity in children, it is not helpful or clinically accurate to combine statistics of overweight children with those who are obese.

For instance, if this limited and very simplistic definition were applied to the current study, the number of children and adolescents from Middle Eastern or Pacific Islander backgrounds who were categorised as overweight and obese would be nearly half. Clearly, this crude and clinically inaccurate measure should not be used to unnecessarily identify, stigmatise, blame or shame large children or their parents (Campos et al., 2006; Ikeda et al., 2006; O'Dea, 2004). Such methods of communicating the risk of child illness and potential disease, which may be undertaken quite innocently under the guise of 'patient information' or 'community education', may quite correctly be perceived as racially motivated, prejudiced, divisive and unhelpful among the community groups in which these weight messages are targeted. Likewise, such negatively, problem-focused messages among already socially disadvantaged groups may be seen as even more socially marginalising and victim blaming.

Longitudinal studies of children and adolescents in the USA (Freedman, Dietz, Srinivasan, & Berenson, 1999) report higher levels of blood pressure, serum lipids and other factors associated with heart disease in adulthood but the actual risk to the child is an assumed future risk rather than a clear, valid or strong marker of current disease, ill health or 'sickness'. Clearly, a fat child is not necessarily a sick child and this commonly held belief in Western societies is more of a myth than a scientific fact. Some would argue that the myth of 'fatness equals illness' is based on moralistic judgments from the protestant work ethic, wherein gluttony and sloth are assumed to reflect moral weakness, laziness and sinfulness (Gard & Wright, 2005). Consideration of biological factors in the development of obesity are also important, but the complete lack of cultural, gender and ethnic input into these narrow viewpoints of presumed 'fatness' is astounding.

The results of the current study may assist in a better understanding of the important interplay between these crucial socio-cultural variables by first observing the ethnic differences in obesity and body image and also weighing up the likelihood of illness, particularly Type 2 diabetes, among obese adolescents. Those who work with young people should be able to see that certain ethnic groups in Australia are both at a high risk of obesity and diabetes, but also likely to reject health education messages based on weight loss or the notion that there is something undesirable about their weight. For example, many cultures value fatness as a sign of family prosperity, fertility and success. Traditional South Pacific Islanders for example, consider 'bigness' or 'obesity' to be desirable, although fewer among the younger generation may hold these cultural perspectives (Becker et al., 2005). In order to better explain these phenomena, especially among adolescents of Middle Eastern and Pacific Islander background, we are currently analysing the qualitative focus group data from the current study.

Women and men from Pakistani and Indian backgrounds living in the United Kingdom consider the idea of spending time away from family activities and daily duties as 'selfish' and inappropriate, irrespective of the urgings from their doctors, nurses and other health professionals for them to undertake physical activity for the benefit of their own diabetes and their health (Lawton et al., 2006). It is likely that their children may feel the same and may adhere to similar social roles when they become adults.



Similarly, a recent report conducted among Australian women identified several cultural barriers to women participating in sport and physical activity (Cortis & Muir, 2007).

Clearly, the challenge for nurses, health educators, community workers and other health professionals is to help people from culturally diverse backgrounds become 'healthier' within a broader context of their personal, family, community and cultural constructs of 'physical, social, mental and cultural health'.

Those working in clinical, community or educational settings with young people and in particular, obese young people, should be aware that obesity is likely to be more prevalent, more culturally acceptable and perhaps more desirable among children and teens from low and middle SES communities and/or Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander and Aboriginal backgrounds. Health and social work professionals should be careful not to exaggerate the risks of obesity among higher SES Anglo/Caucasian or Asian communities as these children do not appear to be at a high risk of obesity and there is the potential to increase the risk of body image problems and disordered eating, especially among females. These different body image perceptions and socio-cultural factors should be taken into account when planning clinical, community or preventive health promotion initiatives among children or adolescents from varying ethnic groups.

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**Supporting change for children in  
communities**





## 5

# Max and the knight: how a therapeutic story provided a connection point for child, family, school, human service agencies and community

## Leigh Burrows

Stories deal with powerful realities. Realities that cannot be dealt with in other ways.

(Kornberger, 2006, p. xiv)

Stories are medicine, they have such power, they do not require that we do, be, act anything, we need only listen.

(Pinkola-Estes, 1992, p. 15)

## Introduction

Education departments are increasingly being challenged by small numbers of children and families who test their resources, expertise and personnel in providing for their needs. In this paper I argue that current ways of supporting children and young people with complex learning, emotional and behavioural difficulties need to change, and move towards more holistic, collaborative and strengths-based approaches. I suggest that a different approach is needed, one that does not try to control or change a child's behaviour but rather works from within to find new ways of creating and expressing energy, creativity and emotion. The story of 'Taylor', an eleven-year old boy, and his family provides an example of how a holistic approach led to transformational change in a child and his family, and in those educational and welfare professionals who supported him, through the use of a therapeutic story.

I first met ‘Taylor’, his family, teachers, social workers and other support staff when I was asked by a senior manager to provide advice in a case that was presenting a significant challenge for the education department at school, district and central levels. I brought a range of practical and theoretical resources gained through roles in a women’s refuge and in special education and at school, university and advisory levels to my work on this case. My experience also included solution focused counselling and family therapy.

I begin by sharing Taylor’s situation when I first became involved. I draw on information gathered from interviews and conversations with the child, his family and education department and other professionals, and from extensive reports and assessments. I then draw out the key issues and areas for potential intervention and locate these within a critical consideration of existing research on working across departments and agencies and approaches to working with children with complex needs. A narrative approach is used to describe, in depth, one aspect of the holistic intervention: showing how the use of a therapeutic story created a social network and space (Baldwin, 2005, p. 5) between child, family and professionals. A description of the stages of the intervention is interspersed with accounts of the way a therapeutic story was able to create connections, and with sections of the story itself. My aim is to convey a sense of the way the intervention unfolded organically over nine months. I conclude by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention.

## Interagency Work and Children with Complex Needs

The intervention designed for Taylor was developed as a result of conducting a literature search as part of an inquiry into what previous educators and consultants working on the case may have missed. A number of micro and macro themes were identified and used to inform the intervention.

A majority of children and young people are catered for by universal care and education services, and a smaller group of individuals and groups may benefit from targeted interventions. However, a much smaller number require an individualised strategy or tailored intervention to cater for their complex needs (DECS, 2007, p. 11). Findings from a national survey

of the mental health of young people in Australia in 2000–2001 (Sawyer, 2001) showed that many mental health problems become apparent during the school years. Sawyer argues that this presents an opportunity to provide access via schools to programs and interventions to support those with mental health difficulties and those at risk for developing these in the future (2001, p. 807).

Most published, evidenced based programs that schools use to support children experiencing anxiety and challenging behaviours are cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) programs (Campbell, 2007, p. 60). However, not all CBT programs work for all children. Very young children are likely to have difficulty in understanding some of the abstract concepts in this approach (Campbell, 2007, p. 61). Furthermore, because CBT programs are highly verbal, they may not be effective for children and young people with language disorders or multiple diagnoses of disability and mental health difficulties. Cognitive behavioural and behaviourist approaches that focus on changing behaviour may not be appropriate for children who have experienced trauma and are likely to intensify challenging behaviours (Jureidini, 2006).

An alternative approach, ‘self-relations’ or ‘self-generative’ psychology (Gilligan, 1997) in adult psychotherapy, takes as its starting point the view that symptoms are often a form of communication. Thus symptoms such as violence and withdrawal emanate from the frustration of not being able to express oneself in a skilful way. The self-relationship or self-generative approach focuses on supporting the process of self expression, allowing and helping it to grow, rather than immediately practising specific techniques to fix or eradicate symptoms. The role of the therapist or any support person is to be what Gilligan (1997) calls a ‘sponsor’, to help to awaken in the person a sense of their strengths and their inherent goodness, and help them to connect with this and bring it out into their life and the world. Gilligan suggests, for example, that Anne Sullivan served as a ‘sponsor’ for Helen Keller’s process of awakening (1997, p. 87). This approach has the potential to be adapted for working with children experiencing difficulties in a range of education and community settings, especially those with disabilities and mental health difficulties.

If practitioners take the time to identify strengths, interests and resources in children and families, and attempt to build a collaborative relationship rather than focusing on the correction of skill deficits and weaknesses,

there is increased likelihood of a positive impact. This orientation involves a strengths-based and solution-focused orientation at the micro level, which focuses on a family's potential for change rather than on their problems. This general point is emphasised repeatedly in the solution-focused counselling and family therapy literature (Duncan, 2007; McNeilly, 2000; Selekman, 1997) and is being increasingly integrated into some school interventions in California (Duncan, 2007).

There is clearly a need to develop interventions that are developmentally appropriate and that recognise and cater for individual differences (Campbell, 2007, p. 65). Campbell (2007, p. 65) suggests that the incorporation of therapeutic approaches such as storytelling, artistic activities, play therapy and sand tray work could assist children with emotional and behavioural problems. Storytelling and artistic activities can support anxious children experiencing difficulties with self regulation, by providing a safe environment for children to consider and express negative emotions (Burrows, 2007; Campbell, 2007, p. 63; Moustakas, 1997; Jureidini, 2006, pp. 4–5) and stress reduction (Bartak, Bottroff & Zeitz 2005, pp. 320–22). Children may also be more engaged by non-verbal activities that do not require sophisticated language skills, and that are developmentally appropriate and engaging. As Campbell (2007) has suggested, therapies for children are still evolving. There is a need for practitioners and researchers to continue to trial and develop individualised and innovative ways to help children who experience anxiety and trauma. It is also important that teachers begin to look beyond the labels and see the uniqueness of the child (Van Manen, 1986, p. 18).

Therapeutic stories are one innovation. Therapeutic stories are stories written to help address unsolved issues, difficult transition or arrested development, or to help in preparation for a challenge (Kornberger, 2006, p. 94). Kornberger (2006) calls it the 'art of the new Scheherazade', the creative therapist and healer for the future, and suggests that:

Stories that are tailored for the individual soul are powerful medicine ... effective because they are made with the recipient in mind ... part of the imaginal conversations that link one soul with another. (Kornberger, 2006, p. 94)

Such stories can assist in healing and in making a strong connection with an individual child, particularly when the right tale is told at the right time (Korn-

berger, 2006, p. xiii). Storytelling works with the expressive, imaginative 'way of knowing' or form of intelligence and is a more holistic way of understanding the realm of human cognition (Perrow, 2003, p. 3). The process of active story making takes courage and imagination where stories are recreated and tailored for particular situations (Kornberger, 2006, p. 93). Creating our own stories involves a creative process that is passed on to the child along with the healing power of the story content (Perrow, 2003, p. 2).

Not all professionals, however, are likely to be comfortable with using therapeutic stories. Teachers may not believe they have had enough opportunity to develop their own capacity to imagine and to use this in their teaching and guiding of young children (Perrow, 2003, p. 3). Many teachers believe they have not been sufficiently trained to use holistic approaches, and lack access to resources. That said, teachers who do participate in professional learning sessions incorporating holistic approaches often find them useful and engaging (Burrows, 2007). Further, school counsellors, special education teachers and primary class teachers are more likely than some other teachers to be able to incorporate stories and artistic activities into their work in the classroom.

A holistic approach may be needed not only in the form of therapeutic interventions for the child but also as an approach to forging strong partnerships between home and school (Burrows, 2004; Mickelson, 2000) and between family, school, agency and community (Sidey, 2001, p. 20; Teghe et al., 2003, p. 4; Tomison, 2004, p. 17). Working across departments and agencies can present challenges. Sawyer (2007) argues mental health interventions in schools will only be successful if close cooperation is achieved between staff working in health and education services (2001, p. 807). As a number of writers attest (Sidey, 2001, p. 12; Teghe et al., 2003, p. 8; Tomison, 2004, p. 4), however, education and welfare systems tend to have an uneasy relationship, leading to difficulties in collaboration, and young people and families not being able to access the supports they require. Sidey (2001, p. 23) has suggested this uneasy relationship is reflected at both local and international levels.

Sidey (2001, p. 25) argues that there are several reasons that organisations and professionals do not work more collaboratively. Schools often do not want to work with people without a background in education. Schools also tend to operate in a crisis response mode rather than one that is pro-

active and preventative. Further, schools tend to want to solve problems 'in house'. Teghe and colleagues (2003, p. 8) also highlight the impact on collaboration of a lack of knowledge of the roles of each agency, about education, or social services, a lack of confidence and trust in other agencies, and a lack of knowledge of policies and procedures.

There is a need for government departments and agencies to begin to address the barriers to communication and collaboration both within and across their organisations. Communication within organisations such as education departments can also be problematic (Teghe et al., 2003, p. 5, Sidey, 2001, p. 24). Sidey (2001, p. 5) comments on the hierarchical nature of the Australian education system, while Fitzpatrick (in Fitzpatrick & Taylor 2001, pp. 3–4) has highlighted some of the complexities of working across the school, district and central level of education departments. He describes powerful experiences of confusion, contradiction, fear, anxiety, feelings of betrayal, competing loyalties and intense 'top-down, bottom-up' tension when he moved from a school based to a district based curriculum advisory role. He found that each level tends to operate separately, creating obstacles for those who wish to work more holistically. Pressure placed on schools, district and central office levels of education departments by disability discrimination legislation and policies of inclusion has added a layer of complexity to this problem (Keefe, 2004, p. 19).

Social workers are likely to be well placed to work with schools and to support them to coordinate more effectively with outside agencies due to their generally holistic, cooperatively and flexible approach (Teghe et al., 2003, p. 3). Teachers, however, tend not to have sufficient training or knowledge about where to get help or access supportive services (Teghe et al., 2003, p. 3). Teghe and colleagues (2003, p. 7) note that collaborative consultation between professional support systems with the schools and between agencies in their research in Queensland was minimal and at times even adversarial. They also argue that improved linkages between education systems and social services are essential if the current situation of fragmented social services is to be transformed into a system that addresses the multiple needs of children and families in a more comprehensive ways (Teghe et al., 2003, p. 4).

Tomison (2004, p. 8) suggests that a revolution has begun among pro-

professionals in Australia working in the child protection and child welfare areas, with a focus on health promotion and wellness type programs. Pril-letenksy and Nelson (2003) argue that there are three dimensions of well-being: personal, relational, and collective. Each needs to be addressed so that individuals are able to know themselves, relate with others, and connect with their community. This wellbeing revolution is also beginning to impact on schools and education systems, through the development of wellbeing frameworks and policies at federal and national levels (Burrows, 2006). It has the potential to link professionals working in different agencies through a more coordinated approach with a proactive and preventative focus, such as is beginning to occur in South Australia (Government of South Australia, 2007).

The absence of specialist mental health services in rural and regional areas can, however, add to the challenges for education and welfare systems of supporting children and families with complex needs. Many local services are under a great deal of pressure with most of the mental health services being delivered by generalist health and human service workers in rural and regional communities (Sherwood, 2003, p. 1). Sherwood (2003, p. 4) suggests that there is a need to deliver holistic interventions that use expressive as well as cognitive therapies to address the systems in which clients live.

## Methodology

This paper describes an organic process of ‘interventive’ research. Information gathering and synthesising (Poulter, 2006, p. 334) has guided each step of the intervention and is assisting in the development of a theoretical and practical approach to inform future interventions. Tomison (2004, p. 4) has highlighted the difficulties in investigating complex highly sensitive real-world phenomena and the challenges of translating findings into useful forms. A narrative approach has the capacity to convey ‘the messiness of the real world’ and the ways in which education is deeply connected with emotion (Brookfield, 1990, p. 254).

In her research into the experiences of mothers of children labelled ‘behaviour disordered’, Mickelson (2000) found that a narrative approach was able to reveal the complexity and diversity of women’s experiences intersecting with professionals. She found this method was also able to convey a sense of ‘the synergy engendered by relationships in collabora-

tion when we have to figure things out together' (p. xii). Mickelson found very little previous research that emphasises the voices of parents (2000, p. 55) and determined that this was an important area that needed further development. My own research into parent-teacher partnerships and parent voice confirmed her finding (Burrows, 2004).

The decision to use a narrative case study approach was also informed by my interest in contributing to practice-based knowledge around working with children who challenge schools and education systems. Rich stories of actual experience have the potential to stimulate insight and introspection and can even move people to action (Pugach, 2001, p. 442). The uniqueness, complexity and potential of this case study to be a form of revelatory research (Janesick, 2004, p. 43), and its usefulness for purposes of demonstration, led to a focus on this single case for an extended research project, of which this paper is a part.

Within the narrative that describes the unfolding of the story of Taylor and his family reconnecting with their resources, each other, the school and the community is also contained a therapeutic story I wrote for him. I was inspired in the writing of the story by the Russian fairy tale 'Baba Yaga' (in Pinkola-Estes, 1992). In this story the child Vasilisa is given a magic doll to help her deal with the impossible tasks given to her by the wicked witch – the fearsome Baba Yaga. The doll represents the keeper of the child's wishes and intentions for her life and conveys blessing, consolation and help in the hour of need. The doll thrives on attention and helps Vasilisa, who left to her own devices could not accomplish her many tasks. With the doll's help, however, anything is possible. I generated therapeutic metaphors for the story by starting with a focus on a magic knight who is a new, wise character that can represent the part of the child's unconscious or higher self that can provide a solution and 'sort everything out' (Kornberger, 2006).

The story of Taylor tells of his beginning at a new school and his transformation over nine months from a child who saw no reason to live, to one who could sing, draw, play, dance, laugh and enjoy life. Taylor's story is an opportunity to study a student in a real-world context where the boundaries of home, school, community are often blurred (Janesick, 2004, p. 73) and are certainly highly interconnected.

During the process of the intervention I collected correspondence from



Taylor's mother and a range of professionals involved in the case. To include both the voices of these participants and enrich the narrative, I cite (with permission) selected extracts from this correspondence. Correspondence is not always presented chronologically, in particular those from Taylor's mother, who kept a diary and sometimes sent me emails relating back to earlier events. Taylor's parents gave me free access to all documentation, and told me that they wanted their story told because it may help other children. Taylor's mother chose the pseudonym for her son. I have not revealed any identifying details.

## The Intervention

### *Overview of the intervention*

The intervention eventually designed for Taylor unfolded organically during a period of nine months. The intervention emphasised a strengths-based approach and building connections and communication. The approach was indirect, in that I visited the regional centre where Taylor lived on only five occasions during the intervention. I made connections with professionals involved in the case and maintained these relationships via email, sharing information and updating them on any new developments. During the visits I met with Taylor's family and various professionals, and supported the school in the development of an individual education plan and in understanding disability legislation and policies. I did not work directly with Taylor but rather worked through his mother. The intervention was primarily delivered through her. I suggested activities, she tried them out and let me know how he responded, and we continued to fine-tune as we went along in a co-constructed process.

### Stage I: listening to stories and building connections

From the outset, as I investigated the circumstances of this case, I aimed to 'trawl the history for clues not symptoms' and to view the child's behaviour as an attempt to communicate and perhaps to tell us that things were not quite right in his life (Jureidini, 2006, p. 11). Jureidini argues that if a child's behaviour is problematic to others 'we know that, at least temporarily, those around him have not been able to scaffold his imagination and contain his feelings' (2006, p. 6). Jureidini recommends that

professionals ask, 'What is this child's predicament?' rather than trying to find out what is wrong with him or her (2006, p. 11), and that behaviour should be understood before it is managed (2006, p. 5).

I have constructed the following summary of Taylor's situation out of my reading of the many files I received to assist in planning and guiding an intervention aimed at supporting him to attend school full-time. The summary is complemented by a direct quote from Taylor's principal.

Taylor is eleven and has not been able to attend school for more than 1.5 hours per day since beginning school at five. He has been labelled 'ineducable' due to his behaviour. Taylor's behaviour difficulties began when he was at kindergarten when he used to run away, hide, or refuse to go. He had been diagnosed with a language disorder and was recommended to begin kindergarten a year early with the aim of helping his language. It was not known at that time that epileptic seizures were causing brain damage to the language centres of the brain. He was videoed at kindergarten during an undiagnosed seizure as evidence of displaying aggressive behaviour and began school with a label of 'behaviour disordered'. He was later diagnosed with autism and epilepsy. His IQ has been identified as below average, with a marked deterioration since the first test at age five which indicated a high average intelligence.

He and his family and school have struggled to manage his violent behaviour over many years. He has missed so much schooling that learning and socialising in a classroom presents many challenges. The principal, teacher and school support worker held the view that his behaviours resulted from his need to control and manipulate others and his need for increased boundaries and clear consequences. This view was supported by an external consultant. There was also a view that there were too few boundaries in his home environment and that this was contributing to his aggressive behaviour.

A 'calm down' room was used initially as a strategy to support Taylor to choose safe ways of dealing with his frustration and aggression. The room was later used to contain and confine him which caused many ongoing problems. At this time he was found trying to get into the rubbish bin, saying 'I am just a piece of rubbish, put me out with the bin'.

When Taylor attended school the following year he worked one-to-one in an office with a school support worker. If he completed enough work on his

worksheet he was able to invite another child to play a game with him. This was quite often unsatisfactory because Taylor would either refuse to comply with the task, or the other child would refuse to play by his rules and Taylor's aggressive behaviours would lead to him going home early. The frustration of not being able to attend school and be part of a class contributed in part to violent outbursts in community environments, leading at one point to him being held down by five medical staff in emergency department of the local hospital and given high levels of medication. His behaviour and lack of school attendance had contributed in the past to family breakdown and increased stress levels and intensification of mental health difficulties. He has attempted to kill himself, is hypervigilant, has extreme reactions to threatening circumstances, and has sleep disturbances.

The perceptions of the principal of Taylor's school at the beginning of the intervention add further contextual information:

We need unity in our decision making with this case. The lack of unity with school and outside agencies puts extra pressure on the parent and the school. Complex cases are handed on without deep understandings (especially the political agenda). Add to this the actively negative attitudes to the schools from services when they have no understanding of the reality of school life.

We need to balance the directions to seek advice from other 'experts' who come from different fields and have different perceptions and interpretations – if one fix doesn't work, try another then another and then start again with someone new. I wonder if there are other cases where the schools feel bombarded by reports/advice and have to pick their way through a mountain of stuff and or get sent to other services that don't offer what we think they will.

How can we support the front line in a proactive and preventative way? Teachers and leaders at the school felt all services were in effect gathered against them. With the driving focus on inclusion. Face to face with a child in rage is enormously different than reading it in a report.

I believe everyone individually did the best they could with the knowledge they had. Hopefully more systemic thinking will help us work more effectively and proactively. (Principal,

personal communication, April 16, 2007)

After spending time reading the files I met with Taylor, his family, teachers, school and district support staff and social workers from outside agencies. Initially I met individually with each person, with follow up emails to both clarify information and establish connections.

First, I met with Taylor's mother in a place of her choosing. She was obviously very stressed, and concerned about her child. She told me later that she opened up because I did not give her 'the party line' and she could see that I was prepared to listen to her story. She gave me some valuable background information and told me that she had not been asked by any education department professionals for her perspective before this. She spoke to me of how she had to approach her son as she would a traumatised and wounded dog. She said that he was so anxious about the 'calm down' room incident that he was always on the lookout for signs of disapproval, or words that could mean failure, which might mean something bad was going to happen to him. She told me that he slept most of the time in a caravan out the back or under her bed as these were the only places he felt safe. She also said that he often drew pictures of a man hitting a child.

I then met with Taylor at the school. During my meeting he told me that his father had told him to tell me all his problems and I would sort them all out. I asked him what was bothering him most. He told me that he wanted to play with his friends and he was often not able to because he did not complete his set work in time. I wondered aloud if it might be possible to combine learning and being with friends. This comment seemed to have a negative impact on him as he picked up his bag and walked out of the room. I felt that I had clearly not chosen my words well and was somewhat embarrassed about this. The principal then appeared and said I had best not follow him as anything could happen. I was struck by a strong sense that he was a child who had experienced trauma, and was highly anxious. His principal however replied that she would 'never have seen him as a child who was traumatized'. I felt that this disjunction could be a clue – that it could indicate that she and other professionals who had been involved at the schooling level over the years had missed something.

I decided to leave the school for that day rather than add to the stress Taylor was obviously experiencing. I heard later that Taylor was very sur-

prised I was leaving because apparently he was only going down to the car park to see if his mother was still there, as he thought she would be able to explain his situation more clearly. Later that day I spoke with Taylor's mother on the phone. She said that in many ways it was good that I had had this experience because it gave me greater understanding of the challenges involved.

During this conversation I asked her about his strengths and interests and heard that he had a strong interest in drawing, but that his pictures had begun to appear less often, and he was no longer using colour. I asked to see some of his pictures. My next meeting with Taylor at school the next day was spent looking over them, admiring them and asking open-ended questions. This was a much more comfortable and enjoyable meeting for both of us and it was clear that Taylor enjoyed drawing a great deal. After a while, he said:

I want to be an artist when I grow up. I remember seeing my mum drawing when I was three years old and I knew I wanted to be just like her and be an artist. (Taylor, personal communication, March 19, 2007)

When I later shared this with Taylor's mother she was amazed that he was able to remember back that far and communicate this wish so clearly to me, especially since he had a language disorder and memory difficulties. She told me that she had previously been employed as an illustrator but had had to cease her work due to Taylor's seizures and behaviour difficulties. It became increasingly clear to me that working with this family's strengths and interest in art would be a likely way to facilitate the bringing about of a new, more positive direction within the family and other social contexts (Selekman, 1997, p. 17). I also began to notice that when this child's mother spoke about her child's drawings, we were having a different kind of conversation, the kind that McNeilly (2000) calls 'conversations to help healing' (p. 144). Such conversations bring more positive, meaningful and relevant experiences into conscious awareness. In these moments, her and her child's difficulties seemed to be less present, somehow.

As I began to investigate more deeply the situation of this child, I met with professionals from education, health, social and disability support organisations and found that most of them were experiencing high levels of frustration in relation to this case. The situation had become increas-

ingly out of control and there was a lack of overall coordination and communication. As one education department policy and funding manager later noted in a reflective communication:

I can understand why the family was so frustrated. Nothing seemed to happen in between meetings although a number of valuable ideas and recommendations were put forward. The main obstacles seemed to be a lack of communication and coordination rather than funding. (Personal communication, July 11, 2007)

After I had spent three weeks actively engaged in gathering information and establishing connections with a range of professionals and the family, Taylor's mother, for whom things were clearly not progressing quickly enough, wrote an email to me and others involved in his case:

Dear All

Frankly I am not sure who I should be contacting so here goes all. Taylor has had a busy weekend with lots of things happening. However after another disappointment with his only constant school companion (1 1/2 hrs pw) being unavailable as he was at a friend's house, Taylor has once again displayed his longing for peer socialisation. He says he would give up all his birthday and Christmas presents forever to be in a class of 'people'. He says he no longer wants to go to school anymore. He cried himself to sleep for just under an hour before falling asleep about an hour ago. I believe he has reached the end of his tether and he will refuse to go to school from now on under the current conditions.

I want an answer for this long standing problem. I do not believe a child should be so isolated from his peers in a school environment. I reiterate our preference for him to be returned to his enrolled class or to a class at the special school. I believe Taylor has been incredibly patient. I want him to be part of the community and not segregated from it. I would like firm plans for this to occur in term 2 this year. I would appreciate a prompt response to this email. (Personal communication, April 1, 2007)

### Stage II: accessing diagnostic information to inform planning

In this stage I decided that it would important to develop strong links with

as many people involved in the case as possible in order to create connections and share information about actions taken by the department to support Taylor and his family. I therefore kept in regular email contact with the social workers from the different agencies as well as with the principal and with a central office manager with whom I was in close contact.

I believed that the family and professionals needed a clear understanding of the role of trauma, anxiety and fear in Taylor's behaviour. Therefore, I recommended that Taylor and his mother met with a child psychiatrist. I believed that if I was able to draw into the mix an official diagnosis of what I had intuited, I would be better able to drive an intervention oriented towards building Taylor's sense of security and reducing his stress levels. I also hoped that if he were to be diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, it would help school staff understand that he had not been choosing to misbehave and that they would need to take a different approach to behaviour management.

The psychiatrist's report did indicate that Taylor had experienced trauma:

(His) experiences of schooling, seizures and autism have contributed to him having an anxiety disorder which has only recently been diagnosed. This approach led to him experiencing trauma as a result of 'time out' practices at school. His language and cognitive difficulties aggravated his fear due to his lack of understanding of the circumstances and his inability to communicate his emotional state. While the seizure activity has contributed to his language difficulties, his interrupted and fragmented schooling has limited his access to learning and the psychological factors, in particular the anxiety, have contributed to the observed deterioration. (Psychiatrist's report, May 2, 2007)

As anticipated, this report did help school and district education department staff to see the situation differently. Previous advice sought by the school and district office by a cognitive behavioural psychologist led the school toward trying to control his behaviour and increase boundaries. The principal told me that if she had known earlier that he was traumatised they would have proceeded quite differently (personal communication, May 9, 2007).

On the basis of the new information, central, district and education department staff met with Taylor's parents to propose that he attend a local special

school where his special language needs and his need for a safe environment (and a 'fresh start') could be better supported. His parents agreed to this proposal and it was decided that he would begin transition visits to his new school in Term 2 and then begin attending each day in Term 3. It was decided that the new information would be shared with all relevant professionals in a professional development session and used to inform the development of a collaboratively developed individual education plan.

### Stage III: addressing the anxiety and trauma through a focus on strengths

I now knew I needed to find a way to support Taylor to feel safer and secure within himself, his home and in his local environment. He was not secure in his home or community environment, and I believed that he would not feel safe at school until he had experienced safety at a more fundamental level. Jureidini (2006, p. 6) has suggested that the professional will be of most use to the child and family when she can use her imagination to solve problems. With this in mind, I looked out for ways I could creatively engage the family as a way to connect both with me and with each other and begin to generate the capacity for more optimistic thinking and greater self efficacy. As school holidays were coming up, I wanted to find a project that Taylor could be positively engaged in at home, that would help to ease the stress he and the family had been under and that would support him in the transition process.

I had already become aware of the family's interest in art so I suggested writing a therapeutic story that Taylor could illustrate during the holidays. Taylor's mother thought that he would be interested in such a project, so I wrote the story one Sunday afternoon and emailed it to her. The next day the illustrating was already under way. Taylor's mother later told me she felt that he initially took on the task of illustrating the story because of the interest I had shown in one of his previous drawings, and he felt that I had asked him because he was a 'good drawer'. His mother wrote that the illustrating became a worthwhile project to him because:

He felt like he was achieving something and gave him purpose to his days. The reason I think that is because it had been difficult to get him to commit to anything much long term and he persevered through this process and even dreamt one of the pictures. (Per-



sonal communication from mother, July 22, 2007)

The aim of the story, both in content and illustration, was to reconnect Taylor with his inner resources. I also felt it was important to include Taylor's mother in the process as it not only allowed the same process to work on her, but also so that their relationship, which was tested at times, could be strongly reconnected. She later told me that:

It gave him a thrill to show and share each picture as it came along with me. So the sharing happened whilst he was doing the illustration even before he had the chance to show yourselves and people at the school. (Personal communication, July 29, 2007)

### *Max and the knight*

Somewhere in the world, I cannot tell you exactly where, there lived a boy called Max. Max had been feeling for quite a while that something was missing in his life. He couldn't quite put his finger on it, but things just didn't seem the same. He was sometimes unhappy but not all the time. One night he had a strange dream ...

In the dream, he was walking along a path, when he met an old lady. The old lady said to him, 'Max, I have something special for you. See this little wooden knight with the magic sword? I am giving it to you, it is something my own father gave me and you must never show it to anyone. It is just for you. Always carry it with you wherever you go. He will help you whenever you are in trouble and he will comfort you. Whenever you need help, go somewhere quiet and give him something to eat and he will tell you what to do'.

Then Max woke up and it was time to get up for school.

He didn't think any more about the dream. He wasn't feeling very well that day, he was a bit tired and then he got a bit upset when he didn't understand something his teacher wanted him to do. Some of the other children laughed when he showed his confusion and the teacher thought he hadn't been paying attention. This made him feel a mixture of sad and angry, but he was used to feeling like this, more and more lately it seemed.

Then suddenly he remembered the dream, put his hand in his pocket

and there was the little wooden knight with his magic sword!

He happened to have some nuts in his other pocket, so without anyone seeing, he fed the knight as the old lady had instructed him to.

As soon as the knight began to eat, his eyes shone as though they were human and he suddenly became alive.

Max was shocked for a moment, but the knight smiled up at him and said: 'Don't be frightened Max and don't be confused about what you need to do at school. Sit down quietly here with me and relax and after that you will feel better.' Max gradually found his confusion slipping away from him and soon he did begin to feel much better.

After that, any time Max felt anxious, or sad, or angry, he would turn to the little knight for comfort. With his help, his difficulties became easier to bear.

Soon Max started telling the knight all his troubles. How he was sometimes hurt, and felt that people were not listening to him and that they didn't understand him. Sometimes he even felt his friends didn't understand him. The world really was a very confusing place for Max! Sometimes he felt like he was in a fog, or a glass bubble, living in a different world than everyone else. Other times the fog would lift and he felt much better . . .

Taylor had a powerful dream about Max which indicated how much the story had been able to connect with him, as his mother describes:

The other day Taylor fell asleep for a couple of hours and when he woke up he had had a dream of Max in a bubble. He was so fixated on getting his dream on paper that he asked if [he] may stay up later. Max appears entrapped in this bubble with so many people and people's faces crowded in around the bubble but never reaching Max through the bubble. He is so happy with his book project and it is having a real calming effect and giving him something worthwhile to focus on. (Personal communication, May 20, 2007)

*Max and the knight (continued)*

Anyhow, he told the knight about all these feelings and he felt for the first time as if someone really understood his plight. He felt like he had someone in his world now that made him feel safe and secure.

Max asked his mother to make sure he always had a handy knight sized pocket in his jeans and shorts, but he did not tell her why. He kept the little figure in his hand all night long, too. Sometimes he woke up in the night and would give the knight a nut or a seed or two, or a couple of crumbs from a cake he had made, so he would wake up and talk to him.

It took him a while to trust that his new friend the knight was always with him. Sometimes he would go to school or the shops or be somewhere that made him a bit anxious and he would start feeling panicky and frightened. He didn't like this feeling at all as it would get really strong and he felt like it would take him over. This didn't happen as much anymore but if it did, the little knight would leap up and down in his pocket, jiggling furiously until he realised, touched him and straight away he could feel himself calm down. Somehow, too, at those times when he felt really bad, the knight seemed to sense it and just wake up of his own accord without being fed.

Gradually Max began to feel better about a whole lot of things in his life. It made such a difference to have a friend there any time he needed him. And sometimes his friend was able to help him with things he needed to do at school, like remembering the rules of a game. Max developed a special code for communicating with the knight, so no-one would find out about him. The knight was right about just about everything but sometimes his spelling or his sums weren't quite right!

Sometimes if Max was faced with a particularly difficult task he would feed the little knight with the magic sword with one or two of the sunflower seeds he always kept in his pocket and ask him how to do it. Sometimes he still felt he couldn't do it, it was just too hard, and his little friend would say 'Codswallop! You learnt to walk, didn't you, you learnt to swim, didn't you, you learnt to draw, and to make cakes! So you can learn to do this ... especially

with me here to help you! It doesn't matter if you don't get it right straightaway, everyone needs a little time!

I gave the main character, Max, a problem which did not replicate, but paralleled Taylor's difficulty. I also used a parallel learning situation from a previous success, such as when the knight says 'Of course you can do it Max! You learnt to walk, didn't you, you learnt to talk didn't you, and so you can do this!'

When Taylor was busy illustrating the story, he was heard telling each new visitor to the house his own version of it, as he internalised it and made it his. It even went further than that, as many people he knew and some he didn't know celebrated the story with him and even shared their interpretations with him. These developments accord with Kornberger's description of 'the stage of imaginal empowerment and creative activism. At this point the patient becomes the healer, the listener becomes the teller and the reader is the new maker of tales' (2006, p. 95).

Taylor did appear to be showing signs of a greater sense of optimism, as this email from one of the social workers involved in the case suggests:

Just a bit of an update, I had a very positive and energetic home visit with Taylor and his mum on Friday afternoon. We had a bit of a joke in regard to what you've done with this book! I've never seen Taylor so full of energy and so excited about something ... (Personal communication, May 7, 2007)

The following email, sent to me by Taylor's mother only six weeks into the intervention, shows the dramatic turnaround it is possible to achieve through a strengths-based approach:

Again I must say I can't believe the gains Taylor is making in such a short time ... you won't believe how many false hopes we have been given over the years – but this is different, it's not manipulating his environment or behaviour management but changing the very way in which he perceives things through giving him a sense of self value. (Personal communication, May 24, 2007)

Around this time the content of emails from the previous principal, social workers and a local ex-principal who had been appointed as a liaison began to reflect the impact the story was having as it became a focus of discussion in the home, school and community as something positive that had engaged the family and was evidence of Taylor's artistic ability and his

perseverance. It was if the entire focus of the case had shifted – to what could be achieved rather than the number of obstacles.

### *Max and the knight (continued)*

So Max knew he could count on the little knight with the magic sword, although now and again he thought he shouldn't call on him all the time because he might need a rest. His new friend said not to worry though because he wasn't like human beings and didn't need as much sleep.

Max felt a bit tired himself when he heard this and while he was yawning he heard the little wooden knight with the magic sword say gently, 'Max my boy, why don't you have a nice rest here by the stream near the willow tree. Just have a nice little relax and I will stay awake and keep guard so you are safe.'

'Have a nice restful time, listening to the gentle swish of the leaves in the wind and let the sunlight wash gently over you – have a really good rest, better than you have had for years, because you are always safe with me and I love you.'

Max hadn't really intended to go to sleep, here by the stream in the day time, but he was tired and after all he knew his friend the knight would be there to protect him ... and gradually he felt his eyes shut and he heard the swish of the leaves in the wind and felt the soft sunlight on his skin and there he was in dream land, all the while holding on to his dear friend, the knight, who was sitting on his chest, keeping guard there in that place where Max lived.

The End

### Stage IV Utilising resources

I asked Taylor via his mother which part of the story he liked the most. He explained to her that he liked the part where Max and the knight are resting by the stream under the willow tree. I had included language in this part of the story to calm and even induce a trance- like state.

On one particular occasion, Taylor did not want to go to school as he was anxious about something, but eventually changed his

mind, put his bag on his back and his toy knight in his pocket and headed out the door saying 'Now I am just like Max!' (Personal communication, June 7, 2007).

On another occasion Taylor's toy knight accompanied him home from school for the holidays. In a game (recounted to me on June 22, 2007) the knight can now fly and asks his mother 'Do you need rescuing?' 'Yes' she replied. The knight then turns to Taylor in the game and says 'Come on Taylor, you know what to do!'

As Peacock and McNeilly (2007, p. 3) have noted, when we first meet a client or person in need of support they are generally out of touch with their resources. The Max story first reconnected Taylor with himself, but also with his mother, then family friends as they visited the house and wanted to hear his version of the story and then, gradually the wider community through a 'launch' of the book and restorative visits, for example to the police station.

The launch was organised by a social worker from one of the agencies closely involved with the family, with the catering paid for by the education department. The social worker worked closely with Taylor to jointly plan the celebration, including doing the food shopping and decorating of the venue. In this way it was possible to use, as Selekmán puts it:

an audience of friends, relatives, and significant others in the identified child client's life to bear witness to his or her competencies ... The telling and retelling of the child's new evolving story of competency is empowering and can create possibilities (1997, p. 21).

In this 'audience' were Taylor's new and previous principals and teachers, along with extended family, family friends, carers, local minister and workers from a range of outside agencies, including a head of disability services to childcare. This linking of the people around Taylor helped with the transition to the new school. 'Max' was now heading out to the wider community to weave his magic.

The story eventually became an authentically co-constructed artefact that was professionally printed, launched in the community by a local historian/writer and distributed as a gift to extended family members, education department managers at the central level, principals, teachers, ex-teachers,

social workers, lawyer and advocate, police officers, pastor, after school care and domestic violence workers and the local doctor.

Even before the launch, Taylor's mother wrote that:

*Max and the knight* is touching people already and is going far and wide. We are facing a dilemma now – so many people are interested in a copy of this book! Grandparents, us, his sister, carers, next door neighbours and they are all even willing to pay for a copy! (Personal communication, May 20, 2007)

The book provided an opportunity to set up links between people so they could be a resource and support for one another. During the launch, workers, family, educators and community members were able to interact in positive and connecting ways, sharing and celebrating Taylor's growth and allowed for the creation of positive meaning through a revision of old stories and the construction of new, generative ones (Selekman, 1997, p. 21). Many of those who attended had heard about each other but never met, or else they had met during intense meetings called to address a particular crisis.

After the launch Taylor visited the local police station to drop off a copy of the book, since the police had previously been called to the home during aggressive episodes. His mother later emailed that:

The police officers were suitably impressed and said that he was most welcome back to talk with them at any stage or especially to bring them another book ... It's pretty amazing after his last visit to the police station and his response then to now! The policewoman was very interested in the story and picture and promised to pass the book on to the police officer who was bitten by Taylor, whom Taylor has accepted made a mistake in pinning him down, but who was sorry for the confusion and for scaring him afterwards. She is going to put something more positive in the files than the current document which includes 'this kid has teeth and knows how to use them!' (Personal communication September 19, 2007)

After the book launch a meeting was held at the new school (which he had been attending part-time for a few weeks) with central office, district and school staff, Taylor's parents, and the social worker from the disability agency to develop an individual education plan. This documented

Taylor's strengths, interests, learning style, difficulties, and agreed upon strategies for communication and learning and managing behaviour. It was decided that he would gradually build up to full-time attendance during that term.

During the course of the intervention Taylor moved through various phases of development where he was first able to feel more at ease at home, then in the community in the presence of his family, and then at school, eventually building up to almost full time attendance. This was a dramatic shift in a period of nine months since the intervention first began.

Taylor's mother wrote that:

Absolutely his whole life interpretation has changed. He no longer just accepts that the world hates him, that he has to be perfect, and that he has nothing of value to offer. His physical signs, language, concept understanding, independence, short term memory problems and social graces are most definitely drastically showing improvement as his self esteem improves. (Personal communication, July 15, 2007)

This increased sense of community connection had a positive impact on the family, with many people noticing the changes. Being part of a community was an important part of his healing, as was being part of a school community, as his mother wrote:

He really is a part of a class now isn't he, and in all the things that happen when you are part of a community and not just a visitor. (Personal communication, July 28, 2007)

### Stage V: maintaining the connections

By the final term of the year Taylor had attended school almost full-time. Most of the changes were already in place and life for the family was becoming more settled. From time to time issues arose at school to do with relationships with children and teachers. I suggested that Taylor's mother set up a sand tray at home, to help him process his emotions safely. He was having a conflict with his teacher at one point and dealt with that by drowning the 'teacher' figurine in the sand tray. This final stage of the intervention also focused mainly on supporting Taylor's mother to support her son, by suggesting activities, providing feedback and listening. Communication from



Taylor's mother had by now dramatically reduced, because she had developed a greater sense of trust in the education department at the school and district level. She has also become engaged in helping newly arrived refugee children and their families to the region, through the use of stories and drawing. She was now much more able to trust that Taylor will be safe at school and she is no longer required to wait for a phone call from the school to go to collect him due to a behavioural disturbance.

School and district staff gradually took over managing the case and central office staff were only occasionally called upon. Workers and educators began to be more familiar and comfortable with one another. Social workers are now invited into the new school, to be part of meetings with the parents where Taylor's successes are celebrated and his needs discussed. One of the social workers was also invited to the school to talk about the role of her agency and what it was able to offer the school and its clients. The principal and teacher were now attending the children's hospital child development unit meetings and video links with the psychiatrist, paediatrician and neurologist along with social workers and representatives from other agencies. Education department, disability and child mental health service and vacation care workers were now given the same updated information as to Taylor's physical and mental health situation with the aim of facilitating a more coordinated and consistent approach to support his learning, emotional and physical needs.

## Discussion

While each case requires an individual approach to some extent, there are also key elements in Taylor's intervention which could be helpful for other cases. I will now discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the intervention.

The issues in this case were intensified by the breakdown in communication between the education department, the family and outside agencies. Each group appeared to believe the problem lay elsewhere and that the obstacles were insurmountable. The process of inquiring into the case and interviewing all those involved to get their perspective was helpful in that people had the chance to tell their story and be validated in their attempts to support Taylor. While the hierarchical nature of the education department did create difficulties at times, with professional relationships

being tested by territoriality and conflicting intra-department allegiances (Fitzpatrick & Taylor, 2001), a 'top down approach' was also of some benefit in this case. Bringing in an outsider, from central office, with a mandate to find out what had been missed and to come up with an intervention made it easier to access people and assessments and make recommendations. I also did not have any history with the family or the region and was therefore able to begin afresh.

Building a positive relationship with the parents was crucial but may have led to teachers and principals having the perception that I was aligned with them. It is important to strongly validate the work of teachers as well as parents (Duncan, 2007, p. 40); something that is often missed. In future cases it would be helpful to ensure stronger alliances are established with school staff through validation of their efforts (Duncan, 2007). In particular, hearing the stories of the parents, asking them about their hopes and dreams for their child, and meeting Taylor helped them to begin to trust in the department again and to re-invest their hope in a positive outcome. The positive and trusting relationship that developed helped to recast the family at the central level of the department and people who had previously been involved and not sought out the views of the parents began to realise what they had missed. The parents also began to speak more positively about sections of the department and in combination with the linking with professionals with outside agencies, also helped to recast the department in a more helpful light.

It is also important to support parents in ways that do not disempower them. At one stage the parents did not feel that they had a voice in the school unless I spoke for them. I realised I needed to take a step back and begin to listen, support and encourage them to be more proactive on their own behalf.

In this case, central office education department support assisted the principal and district officer to begin to work and communicate more effectively in a case that had potential legal ramifications in relation to disability discrimination. This potentiality was likely to have contributed to the communication breakdowns both within the education department and across agencies. Previous research has found that principals tend to become very anxious and fearful in such situations, rather than acting more proactively and preventatively earlier on (Keefe, 2004). The relationship building and networking that occurred through the vehicle of the story and extensive

consultations helped to break down some of the barriers to successful inter-agency collaboration identified in previous research (Teghe et al., 2003; Sidey, 2001; Tomison, 2004) and also helped to reduce fear by changing to a positive focus.

A key factor in the success of this intervention was the involvement of Taylor's mother. She was able to take up many ideas and suggestions for activities, such as drawing and sand tray work, and to implement them at home. In another situation a parent may not be able or available to take up this role. However, in my experience it is usually possible to find a teacher or support worker who is able to connect with a child to work holistically and therapeutically with support, guidance and resources.

It is important to appreciate that the social workers involved in the case also wanted to work in more holistic and connected ways (Teghe et al., 2003), but were limited in their ability to do so. Their stories indicated that they encountered significant difficulties in working with the education department at the district and school level on this case and others. As two communicated to me:

I felt blocked by the department. It wasn't clear to me who was involved. I am relieved about this new involvement. The department needs to listen more to other agencies and not just support the school directly. I feel that my expertise has not been valued, I have not been drawn in. (Personal communication, August 11, 2007)

I have found that some schools are easier to work with than others. The department seems very autocratic, each school is defined by its own leadership. I can get into some schools and do a lot of work, others won't let me in. I don't think my expertise is really valued by many schools. Schools generally don't tend to respect social workers. They are marginalised. I heard about one school that had a social work student placed there and she said no-one talked to her and she never wanted to go into the staff room. (Personal communication, August 11, 2007)

These perceptions are somewhat countered by the claim of an education department manager, who corroborated the principal's view that it was outside agencies who were difficult to deal with and often did not follow

though (personal communication October 15, 2007). A common view expressed to me by a number of professionals across different organisation was that each was hampered by its own ‘red tape’ which made it difficult for them to share information and work collaboratively.

The social workers involved with the family had already understood Taylor was traumatised, but they had not been able to get an official diagnosis due to a lack of specialised mental health support at the local level (Sherwood, 2003). One of the social workers had been trying for many years to support him to process his powerful emotions. However, she had believed that unless the schooling situation was sorted out, her interventions were not likely to be successful (personal communication, August 9, 2007). Social workers also told me that there were limits to the services they could provide due in part to the amount of time it took to support the family with what they saw as a problem that should be owned by the education department.

Yet there were also difficulties within the health sector as well, as is clear from the Child Development Unit’s report (October 10, 2007) on Taylor:

This case is important in demonstrating how things can go awry for a child who needs help through more than one specialist, the lack of communication between these specialists, but that things seem to be finally on the right track.

Taylor had seen many specialists, each with their own orientation, but a psychiatrist had not been involved until this intervention began. It is possible that the stories told about the child by education department and other professionals led to a focus on outward behaviours, and the need to change them through medication for epilepsy, or cognitive behavioural strategies for the autism. Another way to approach Taylor’s situation was to consider his inner world and see the aggression and withdrawal as forms of communication indicating something was not right with that world (Gilligan, 1997; Jureidini, 2006). Once Taylor’s anxiety and experience of trauma had been officially acknowledged it became easier to gain acceptance for a holistic approach that was focused strongly on helping him to feel safe, firstly at home, then in the community and then school.

Working with the child and family’s strengths, interests and resources (Selekman, 1997) through the story, art and sand tray activities was a key factor in the success of this intervention, as it allowed Taylor to begin to

express some of his inner turmoil and fear, in a safe way (Jureidini, 2006; Campbell, 2007) and alongside his mother, who also benefitted from returning to her earlier love of art. In this case the interest in art certainly helped to facilitate a holistic approach. In a case where a child and family did not share this love of art, a different approach would need to be taken, but it is possible to build interventions, as has been done previously, based on a love of, for example, cats, wheelchair rugby, poetry and martial arts, if a professional is able to use her imagination to help a child (Jureidini, 2006). Not all teachers are comfortable with a holistic approach to curriculum, however many teachers are familiar with the notion of finding out more about how a child prefers to learn and helping them to draw out their strengths.

In this case, the writing, sharing and illustrating of a therapeutic story was a useful vehicle to engage Taylor and his mother's interests as well as to foster links between and among professionals and the family. The illustrated book became a symbol of what Taylor was able to achieve after many years of being unsuccessful at school, without the usual homework, project tasks and term reports, and he was able to share his success with his extended family and friends. The story became a positive focus and connecting point as there was now something positive to share and talk about, whereas previously the difficulties with schooling were overwhelming and tended to dominate any meetings. The story led to family, friends and professionals being able to share in a joyful process of a child's engagement and achievement. It was as if this was a common goal for all and therefore transcended traditional professional territories and boundaries. In another case the focus could be on a child's project, a sporting achievement or other product or activity.

The story also operated on a powerful metaphoric level identified by previous researchers (Kornberger, 2006; Pinkola-Estes, 1992), by suggesting it was possible that Taylor, like Max, could access support when he needed it and that he did not have to carry the burden of having to sort everything out himself. It also helped Taylor to relax as he thought of Max, with the knight with the magic sword sitting on his chest, keeping watch while he slept by the stream.

Previous research by Campbell (2007) and Bartak and colleagues (2005) supports the conclusion that the holistic and developmental approach in this intervention led to enhanced wellbeing, increased sense of personal safety, trust and reduced stress and symptoms of autism and anxiety. Tay-

lor was able to progress at his own rate and his mother gradually felt secure enough to give him the space to make friends, have sleepovers and attend a camp away from home and parents for the first time.

The medical specialists involved are unable to explain medically the improvement in Taylor's language and memory skills and the reduction in his seizures. I suspect the psychiatrist would see this as being due to Taylor's increased feelings of safety, security, belonging and self efficacy (see also Jureidini, 2006).

It could be tempting at this point to base a model of intervention on the use of a therapeutic story written especially for a child. However, while some people might see a technique or strategy in this case study, and want to apply it in other situations, a therapeutic story may not necessarily be appropriate or successful in a different context. From the perspective of a solution oriented approach to counselling, the point is not that a universally applicable technique has been discovered but rather that *in this particular case* a professional had the mandate, and also the willingness, to connect with this child and his family and to find the best way to draw out their inner resources (see Peacock & McNeilly, 2007).

## Conclusion

I conclude with a description of a dream Taylor's mother had about her son and generously shared with me. The dream gives a rich picture of the situation of her child and his inner and outer development during the time I was privileged to work indirectly with him, via his mother:

Taylor put on a coat of nails when he was young. Some of the nails were facing inwards, some outwards. It was quite heavy – being made of nails you see – but over time that very heaviness became reassuring. That heaviness however also limited growth and movement. If someone came too close to him the risk was he would be injured by the nails sticking inwards or they would be by the nails sticking outwards. At home we saw the coat of nails and waited for him to come to us as we did not want to hurt him. At school they did the opposite and came in close not seeing the coat of nails and were perplexed when they got hurt and were unable to see that he too was hurt when they were.

Then you came along – you saw the coat of nails – it was obvious to you. You thought that maybe there was a reason behind him wearing it. Soon you thought to ask him if he wanted to keep wearing it. No-one had ever asked him that before so he didn't know it was an option. The coat had been on so long that he didn't know how it would feel like not to have it on. This is why he needed you – because you had been the one who suggested he take it off. Initially he felt vulnerable without the weight and the strange security he felt by having worn it for so long ... But you are right, without that weight and movement restriction he is able to exercise his muscles. (Personal communication, July 12, 2007)

The case study of Taylor provides an example of how a therapeutic story allowed a disconnected child to reconnect with his most resourceful state so he could then move in his life outside in a way that made the 'extra-therapeutic effects more available' (Peacock & McNeilly, 2007). Perhaps we can learn something from the psychologist Erickson, who apparently almost never met a problem he could not solve and was able to 'ferret out strengths and abilities in the midst of seemingly intractable pathologies' (O'Hanlon, 2006, p. 87). I hope that this account offers some insights for readers into ways of working with complex children who require an individualised approach. It will not give us a formula for doing so. Nonetheless, many people have been heard saying they wished they too had their own knight.

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## 6

# Examining the range of strategies mothers use to cope when caring for a child with an intellectual disability.

**David Evans and Iva Strnadová**

## Introduction

The functions of a family, including reproduction, care of the individual and education can be disturbed in a family that has a member with a disability or special education needs. In such families there are reports of heightened levels of stress (Mulroy, Robertson, Aiberti, Leonard, & Bower, 2008) and, at the same time, a need to acquire strategies for coping with stress (Iwoy, Connolly, & Novak, 2007). While there may be a number of variables that may contribute to heightened levels of stress in these families (e.g. socio-economic status, marital harmony) this paper is primarily concerned with the stresses identified in caring for a child with a disability.

A number of studies highlight the stress factors influencing the functioning and the well-being of families of children with an intellectual disability (e.g. Baker, Blacher, Crnic & Edelbrock, 2002; Emerson, Hutton, Llewellyn, Blacher, & Graham, 2006; Mulroy et al., 2008; Margalit & Kleitman, 2006; Oelofsen & Richardson, 2006). The coping strategies developed by families to overcome or manage these stressors are not always clearly articulated due to the type of research methodology (e.g. use of surveys, questionnaires) and depth of analysis. The use of a more open-ended interview based methodology may assist in realising, to a greater extent, the stressors families face, and the coping strategies they develop.

The purpose of this paper is to identify those variables that create stress in the lives of mothers caring for children aged five to 13 years with an intellectual disability, and examine the range and type of coping strategies

reported by mothers to address these stressors. In conducting this study, parents were selected by a mediating service (i.e. the school), evidence of stress was established through more than one source of data (i.e. survey, interview) and stressors and coping strategies identified through analysis of interview data. Concluding commentary will focus on future research being conducted into coping and stress in families raising a child with an intellectual disability.

## Literature Review

There are a number of models that conceptualise the stress and coping process in families of children with an intellectual disability. The general model of transactional stress posed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) indicates, 'an individual's response to a potential stressor is determined by a two-stage process of appraisal' (Oelofsen & Richardson, 2006, p. 1). An assessment is undertaken of the current stressor and the existing resources are thus examined in light of their suitability in coping with the potentially stressful situation. Coping, in this model, as within a number of models, is defined as the manner in which the person engages or interacts with their environment in order to deal with the stressor. This interaction could differ from one occasion to another, depending on personal resources (e.g. well-being), and other events that may mediate the interaction (e.g. drawing on external services).

The 'Process Model of Coping' by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) continues to be the foundation of research in the area. It articulates two groups of coping strategies, emotion-focused coping strategies (e.g. relaxation, religion, avoidance of stressful situations, releasing emotions by crying/laughing, adopting the 'one day at a time' approach to life, developing further as a person) and problem-focused coping strategies are also cited. The problem-solving coping strategies are further divided in relation to those that are directed at an external source of stress (e.g. learning a new skill, asking for social support for practical help, believing in improvement in terms of their children's abilities, searching for information) and those directed at an internal source of stress (e.g. cognitive reappraisal, reminding oneself how much worse the situation could be, drawing on strategies learned from professional support).

The model posed by Lazarus and colleagues (e.g. Lazarus, 1996, 2000; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) to conceptualise the stress and coping process has been the basis for other models. The Double ABCX model of family stress and coping developed by McCubbin and Patterson (1983), for example, draws from the model by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The adjusted model posed by McCubbin and Patterson includes two key variables important for intervention in families when supporting adaptation to stress. These are (a) use of family resources and (b) perception of stressful events (Orr, Cameron, & Day, 1991). While this model retains the first part of the model proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (i.e. the assessment stage), it places an emphasis on time and situation (e.g. number of demands being placed on the parent), and ‘the mediating influence of adaptive resources ... on parental coping’ (Oelofsen & Richardson, 2006, p. 2). These resources complement those identified by Folkman, Schaefer and Lazarus (1979) which included (a) general and specific beliefs, (b) health/energy/morale and (c) utilitarian resources (e.g. money, tools, training programs).

The purpose of this study is to (1) investigate the level and sources of stress experienced by mothers of children with an intellectual disability and (2) to examine the coping strategies used by the mothers to resolve or minimise the impact of these stressors.

## Methodology

The presented research focused on the life experiences of mothers of school-aged children with an intellectual disability, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the stressors in the families and the coping strategies the families adopted in order to cope with the stressors. As the researchers were aware of the complexity of the social context of their research, they decided to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative techniques of research. As stated by Morse (2002; in Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004), ‘by using more than one method within a research study, we are able to obtain a more complete picture of human behaviour and experience’ (p. 113).

For the purpose of this research, the *Parenting Stress Index – Short Form* (PSI-SF) was used to identify the level of stress within families. This measure has been used in previous studies examining stress and coping in

families caring for a child with an intellectual disabilities (e.g., Most, Fidler, Laforce-Booth, & Kelly, 2006; Shin, Nhan, Crittenden, Flory, & Ladinsky, 2006). This measure has robust technical adequacy and overcomes the short comings of not having a strong measure of mothers well-being identified in previous studies (Emerson et al., 2006)

A semi-structured interview was designed to follow the life history of the family with a focus on bringing up their child with an intellectual disability. This approach allowed for an open-ended approach, ensuring that mothers experiences were not limited. The life history approach allowed greater insight into 'the life experiences of individuals from the perspective of how these individuals interpret and understand the world around them' (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 604).

The life history approach allowed the researchers to 'examine how [mothers] talk about and retell their experiences and perceptions of the social contexts they inhabit.' (Goodson & Sikes, 2001, p. 1). This approach permitted the relationship between the mother, their child and family, as well as their community to be explored over a period of time. It also allowed for the development of coping strategies to be examined over time, and whether they changed as a result of time.

### *Participants*

Participants were drawn from two schools in metropolitan Sydney catering for students with special education needs. The primary diagnosis of each child in these two schools was a mild to moderate intellectual disability. Students in a number of cases had secondary diagnoses (e.g. autism, sensory disability, mental health issues). The education programs formulated for each student were based on the aims and the priorities that had been identified through an individual planning process.

Each of the two schools had more than 60 students enrolled with intellectual disabilities; these students were in classes from Kindergarten to Year 12. The schools were located in middle-class socio-economic areas of metropolitan Sydney. Students participated in their educational programs in classes comprised of six to eight students led by a qualified teacher, who was assisted by a teacher's aide. One of the schools had a strong religious base, and this influenced their education programs, and the way that students, staff and parents engaged in school programs.

A total of 13 mothers were interviewed as part of the study reported in this paper. One participant did not have English as a first language, and therefore questions required careful articulation and wording. Another mother undertook the interview based on her experiences of having two children who had been identified with special education needs.

The 13 mothers ranged in age from 36 to 52 years, with a mean age of 42.2 years. All but two mothers designated that they worked at home; two mothers were involved in full-time work that fitted in with their child's school hours, while two mothers stated that they saw their role at home as their primary employment, but undertook part-time paid employment. From the group, 10 of the mothers were in a relationship (i.e. married or a long term partnership), the remaining three mothers being separated or divorced after the birth of their child with a disability.

The children with disabilities came from thirteen families. The mean age of these children (10 male, four female) was 10.2 years (range: 5.1 to 13.5 years). In 11 families there was more than one child (including the family with two children with a disability). In four families the child with a disability was the oldest, while in eight families the child with a disability was the youngest member of the family. The remaining two children were the only children in the family.

### *Procedure*

Mothers involved in this study were drawn from two schools, schools with which the second author had professional links. Within these schools, staff was seeking to understand more about the needs of families in their school (e.g. stresses they faced, how the school may assist). Hence, this study was undertaken as part of work by the authors, while providing independent information to the school executive and community. Information was provided on those variables that parents found stressful, what strategies they were using to overcome these stressors, and how to formulate a way forward for addressing these stressors in the future.

Parents of children involved were sent a participant information letter to outline the project. The letter was delivered to parents via directors of those schools involved. On return of a signed consent form, signed in all cases by the mother of the family, a member of the school executive contacted mothers to arrange a time for them to visit the school and par-

ticipate in an interview conducted by the second author. Across the two schools, four days were set aside to conduct the 13 interviews.

When mothers attended the interview, they were welcomed to the school by a member of the school administrative staff. The second author conducted interviews in the room allocated to the school counsellor. This room was typically quiet, and provided privacy for the interviews. The participating mothers were reassured that the interview would be confidential, that the interview would be audio-taped, and they could withdraw from the interview and study at any time. The interview followed a semi-structured interview protocol, which guided the mothers through a history of experiences related to their child. The interview questions covered general information (e.g. age, marital status, mother's educational background). The questions posed also asked for details in regards to the diagnosis of the child's disability. Other areas of focus, which were reflected in the interview questions, were: (1) the impact of the disability on the relationship of the parents, (2) their experiences with accessing services and schooling, (3) coping strategies adopted by the family in regards to stressors that arose as a result of having the child with a disability, and (4) the mother's expectations for their child's future.

The second author, who was experienced in conducting interviews with mothers of children with a disability and sensitive to their needs, conducted the interviews. The first author, and a research assistant, transcribed the interviews verbatim. Transcripts were checked by both authors for accuracy of transcriptions, then analysed by the second author. This strategy for preparing the data allowed the researchers to become familiar with the interviews, and interpretations of voice tone and interview behaviour.

At the conclusion of the interview, mothers were asked to complete the *Parenting Stress Index – Short Form* (PSI-SF) (Abidin, 1995). This measure had been used in previous research investigating stress and ways of coping (e.g. Hassall, Rose, & McDonald, 2005; Kersh, Hedvat, Hauser-Cram, & Warfield, 2006) and provided a general indication of the level of stress that mothers were experiencing. Mothers responded to 36 items of the PSI, using a five point rating scale of 'Strongly Disagree' to 'Strongly Agree'. The measure comprises a Defensive subscale, three subscales and a total. The mothers were encouraged to question the researcher in case they did not understand the items.



## Results

### *Parental Stress Index – Short Form*

The administration of the PSI-SF permitted a standardised, and well recognised instrument to confirm that mothers were experiencing stressors in their life, and that this stress was higher than typically found in the general community. An examination of the Defensive Response (DR) subscale, an indication of how defensive mothers were in completing the PSI-SF, showed that in general mothers may not have been open in their responses, or may have attempted ‘to present the most favorable impression’ of themselves (Abidin, 1995, p. 55).

The total score on the PSI-SF across the group showed that ten mothers recorded ‘clinically significant levels of stress’ (Abidin, 1995, p. 55). Two mothers reported moderate levels of stress, while one mother was found to be at the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile. This latter result must be examined with caution when considered in regards to the Defensive Response outcome of 10 (below the recommended minimum of 24). Generally, it was established that the group of mothers interviewed for this study were experiencing significant levels of stress. The following discussion of interview data will be used to establish whether this stress was related to raising a child with a disability, what were some of the major sources of stress, and what strategies mothers used to cope with these stressors.

### *Interviews with parents*

The interview data were analysed using the constant comparative analytic approach to establish themes and patterns within the data relating to stress and coping (Bryman, 2004). Transcripts of the audio-taped interviews were read a number of times by the second author who identified the key words and sentences connected with the purpose of the research (i.e. identification of stressors in the lives of mothers, identification of coping strategies to meet the demands of these stressors).

In the following steps the emerging themes connected with coping strategies were identified and arranged into a synoptic figure. The results were then forwarded to the first researcher who confirmed or questioned interpretations. The penultimate phase was an important part of the analysis process, as both researchers removed themselves from the data for a pe-

riod of three months. The time distance allowed them to see the results with ‘fresh eyes’ and complete necessary adjustments.

In conclusion, a model of coping strategies used in respective families was formulated and is shown in Figure 1. The major coping strategies developed by mothers of school-aged children with intellectual disability are: (a) building/using social networks, (b) using inner resources, (c) taking action, and (d) being able to enjoy life or to make use of their leisure time. In the following section, each of these coping strategies will be highlighted in the context of stressors identified by mothers.

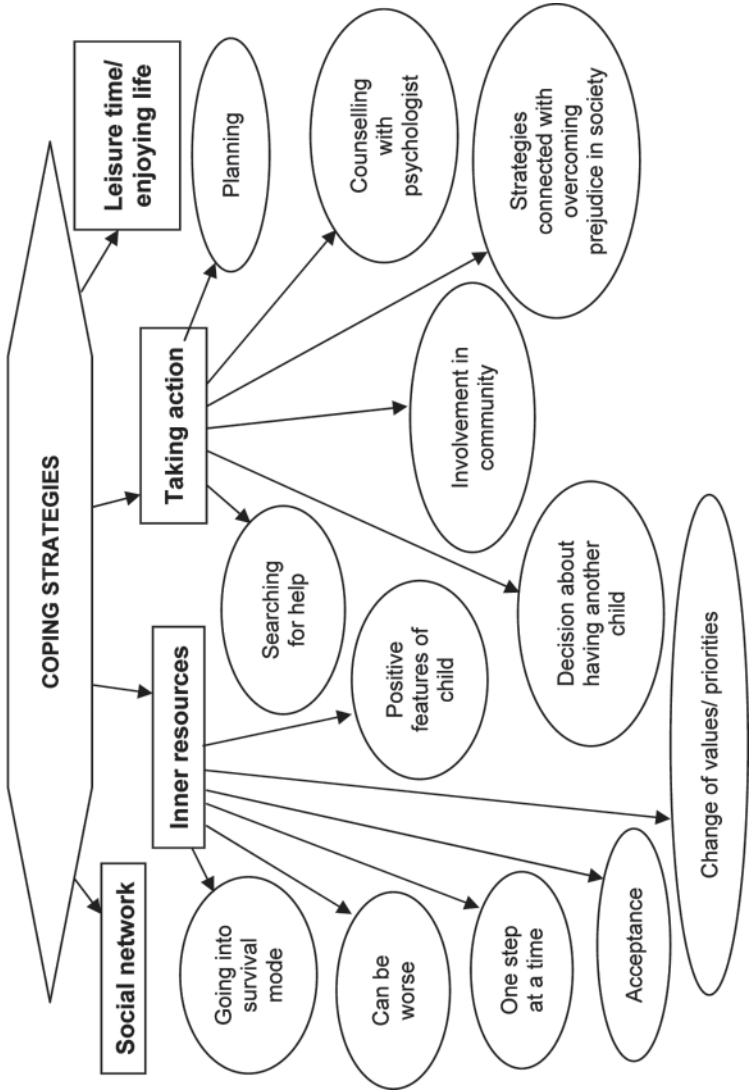
*Building/using social networks.* Social networks (i.e. friendship for emotional, physical and social support) with partners/husbands and friends were an important avenue for mothers in developing coping mechanisms in the face of stressful events or processes. These partnerships were, in some cases, themselves the casualties of stressors arising from caring for a child with an intellectual disability. The impact of a child with an intellectual disability on marriage/partnerships of parents was emphasised by a number of mothers.

In the case of those mothers in this study, the financial impact of accessing services to meet the needs of their child with a disability was highlighted.

I would say we were lucky that we never separated the first two years. Definitely ... under lots of pressure. Under financial pressure because ABA was very expensive ... So, the natural therapies were expensive, ABA was expensive, I wasn't working, I was at home with a child – with the children, as there wasn't much difference between both. My husband was working in X, and used to come home at weekends. So I was doing it on my own. I would say that we were very lucky that we survived.  
(Mother 14)

Though the demands of raising a child with an intellectual disability placed stress on partnerships, it did not necessarily mean that families were dysfunctional (Beckman, 1991) as other factors play an important role in terms of stability of the partnership. For example, one of the mothers noted that past experiences, including the way parents themselves had been raised, played an important part in keeping relationships intact.

Figure 1. Model of coping strategies in families of children with an intellectual disability.



The role of the child's father in caring for the child was addressed in the interviews. The manner in which fathers coped with the stresses of raising a child with an intellectual disability was varied and impacted on the type and quality of the relationship between parents. In the words of one mother:

He wasn't really supportive; I had to really support him ... Because the fathers think, ah, that they are the provider of the family. I've done this. This is all my fault. You know, that's what they think. And I'm like, don't be stupid. This is just ... you, know, they really feel guilty like it is their fault. It was really hard for him. (Mother 12)

It could be interpreted in some cases that fathers found a coping strategy in their employment, resulting in mothers feeling lonely and isolated.

I think it was a lot harder for him and I don't think he accepted it for a long time, for years, probably, well it took a while anyway and so he would work really long hours and travelled a lot so he wasn't here for a lot of the early years. (Mother 9)

While mothers were sometimes critical about the support from their husband/partner, when asked whether there was anything was missing from her partner in terms of support, one mother responded in the following way: 'No, he was probably missing from me. I probably gave everything into my son, and put him by the wayside for a little while' (Mother 14).

*Using inner resources.* Coping strategies coded from the interviews as inner resources indicated that mothers relied on resources from within to address the impact of stressful events. Mothers, for example, mentioned the 'one step at a time' approach.

We just get over one thing at a time. At first I would try and think, you know, about all of her life. But then you can't do it. You stress out. One thing at a time, get over this hurdle, then we get over the next. (Mother 12)

Some mothers highlighted an approach that was seen as going into survival mode. In the following example, this 'survival mode' impacted negatively on the opportunity to draw support from social networks.

... school holidays, the Christmas holidays, the six week ones, are really hard and I just tend to stop and I tend to go into survival mode, and I just stop ringing friends and stop going

anywhere because it's just too hard, so I think that's just a coping mechanism. (Mother 9)

An important inner resource for mothers when coping was focus on the positive features of the child. Most mothers mentioned the loving and empathic personality of their child with an intellectual disability. In the words of a mother of five children:

She's loving, she's different than the other kids. She will come ... she asks me all the time, 'Mum, but are you okay?' You know, like it's different, you know. They've got a different personality, they are loving, and they want cuddles, yeah, yeah. She always tells me that she loves me. The other kids do too, some don't ... a couple of them don't. (Mother 12)

The mothers were also able to reflect on the way that parenting a child with an intellectual disability had changed them in terms of their values, priorities and personality. In reflecting on the impact on their lives, mothers were also aware of how they had become stronger. Many mothers mentioned patience, humility and being a better advocate for their child as the most important areas in which they had changed.

... it made me see what's important. And it taught me a lot of things. It taught me patience, like I've always been a pretty patient person, but it taught me to have much more patience ... Humility, I suppose, I don't know, but ... special children teach you a lot. [That's true.] Because they have to go through so much ... that other people take for granted, and even like their parents take for granted, it just, it knocks, it just knocks you over. The respect and the love you have for them. (Mother 13)

I think ... in the beginning you don't think it makes you better, no, you hate God. You know, my husband disbelieved everything. I think now over the years, it does make you a better person over all, yeah, it does. (Mother 12)

While mothers reflected on the positive impact of their child on them personally, they were also open about how they sometimes consider less positive feelings. One mother, for example, indicated that having a child with intellectual disability changed her in a negative way: '...you sort of

lose yourself, you become a disability mother and you forget who you are' (Mother 11). This negative state seemed to be linked, however, to where parents were in their acceptance of their child strengths:

I think when we were trying to do all the things to cure him, that's when the family was under the most stress. I think once we actually accepted the fact that this is it, this is what we have got, we can make him better but can't change the fact that he has got autism. Then the family settled down. (Mother 14)

*Taking action.* In contrast to the use of inner resources, taking action strategies involved parents undertaking overt actions in advocating for their child. A common 'taking action' approach was to regularly seek medical advice for themselves and/or their child (e.g. psychologist or psychiatrist), and actively looking for help from within educational, community services, or health systems to help meet the needs of their child.

In a number of cases, however, these services were the source of considerable stress (e.g. waiting lists for therapy services that extended beyond 18 months, services where staff were not appropriately trained to meet the needs of a child with a disability, limited access to early intervention services). Mothers in a number of cases felt they were helpless in overcoming these obstacles, despite their actions of requesting access to services and putting their child's names down on waiting lists. These significant obstacles were a source of significant stress that in more than one case reduced mothers to tears.

A number of mothers reported their actions of seeking out alternate services for their child. This was a typical action in the early stages of identifying whether their child was having difficulties in their development, as early intervention services were often slow to come available:

... we tried alternative medicine before we tried traditional treatments. We have never tried drugs with him. We tried all the natural treatments, and we have done a lot of ABA, you know the ... We have done the Lovas program, we done Lovas for about two and half/three years. (Mother 14)

Accessing early intervention services was an action taken by all families involved in this study. The number of services available was reported by mothers to be insufficient, and this created considerable stress. The bu-

reaucratic nature of accessing services was found to be bewildering and puzzling, while in some cases the annual nature of funding left families unsure about continuity of services. In these cases families took action, and sought out alternate services (e.g. diet, herbal therapies). This action is in line with findings from a recent study by Roberts and colleagues (2007), where some families with a child with autism reported to have accessed more than twenty therapies and services for their child.

As a group, mothers were worried about the future of their child, especially what would happen once they, as parents, were no longer there. As a result, families were involved in a range of problem solving actions in regards to future planning for their child. Mothers outlined strategies that included making financial arrangements for their child, envisioning siblings of the child with an intellectual disability to be prospective caregivers, or building support networks with other parents/friends or relatives to ensure life-long care for their child.

I'm quite at peace with the fact that my oldest son will probably always need somebody to make decisions for him or sign things for his welfare. And, ultimately that responsibility will fall to his siblings because my birth family is not up to that and I'm perfectly aware of that. So, I ... my thinking was that God gave us my youngest child so that the burden would be shared, not all squarely on my second born son's shoulder because it is a big job. And as his mother who loves him the most, I am perfectly aware how much of a right it is. Look I know about caring for him later on, but I'm quite at peace with the idea that my son will be with me until the day I die. And then, they look after caring for him, but it will still be on their shoulders. It will still be up to them, so they have got each other then, which gives them not only feedback but somebody else to ... burden, share the load with. Because it is, it's a huge load. (Mother 18)

In another instance, the mother was pregnant with a second child, with an expectation this child would provide support to their brother with a disability in adulthood.

I would also hope that a sibling would help. Absolutely, that's ... whether a child has special needs or not, that's a duty as a family member, like I look after my mother who lives nearby,

and that's a welcome duty. So, that's also the other contributing reason for having, pursuing a sibling, for my son. (Mother 7)

When mothers were asked to make a wish about what they would like from life, in many cases their wishes focused around ongoing, and safe care for their child with a disability. The mother of a child who required long term care stated:

For her health, to make sure that her health would be good. And then also for her to look more like one of us. I suppose, if they could get her the best they can get her. And then ... I don't know ... support for ... her brothers to keep an eye on her all through life, you know. (Mother 12)

In other cases, mothers highlighted plans that involved considerable financial planning within the family in order to overcome the concern about what would happen to their child with a disability once they were unable to care for them. One mother stated that, 'Financially I have set him up with shares. Security wise he will have the house that my husband and I have when it is our time to pass away' (Mother 7).

Other mothers indicated they had undertaken substantial plans for their child using a combination of financial resources, and network supports they had developed. For example, one mother stated:

We have got another three friends who have got children with disabilities, and what we are hoping to do is eventually buy somewhere between the four of us and try and get the children in there. And to get the government to provide a full time carer, but for there to always to be one parent or one sibling as a carer so there is always somebody from the inside. (Mother 14)

A source of stress for some mothers was evident around the way people in their environment reacted to their child. Despite the general climate toward people with an intellectual disability changing over the last two decades, the reactions of some people to a child's disability appeared to be negative. One of the mothers admitted her anger about ongoing comments made by people in public about the behaviour of her son, and her action was to withdraw from going into some public domains.

I actually physically stopped going to our mall for like eight months because I just was not in the place where I could not,



not say anything anymore. I actually nearly slapped a woman, it was only that I had my son with me that stopped me. And because, honestly ... it was somebody my own age. That's what horrified me most. That's somebody who is as educated as I am in the ... because no person that age isn't educated in Australia in this day and age. A well dressed woman, with children of her own, obviously, you know, just a normal person. Having somebody my own age behaving in that way was just horrifying to me. (Mother 18)

Some mothers gave up on efforts to explain to the public their position, and coped by way of silent 'resignation' or an 'acceptance of the status quo'.

Like people look at her. There is something different about her and they look at her. In the beginning it used to annoy me. A couple of times, a couple of old people ... when she didn't have her fingers released, they used to say, 'Look at that, look at her fingers.' They used to go, 'It looks like she has got mittens on.' In the beginning, it used to annoy you a little bit, but then it never used to. You used to, like, want to educate people like it's ... it didn't worry me. (Mother 12)

A major source of stress for mothers was centred on making a decision whether to have another child, with the knowledge that they already had a child with a disability. In 10 of the families represented in this study, the child with a disability was the only or the youngest child in the family.

I was scared ... if it wasn't for her pediatrician, suggesting for me to have more kids. It would be good, it'll be good for her, you know. And I did, I did ... but having the one after her was very scary, because we didn't have that feeling, it's all scary. And then when I pushed him out, I wouldn't open my eyes. But has he got eyes, are his lips all right? Has he got a nose? I was so scared. My husband was going, 'Open your eyes, he's alright'. (Mother 12)

Mothers who gave birth to another child after the birth of their child with a disability articulated their anxiety about the possibility of having another child with a disability. While celebrating the arrival of each child, and identifying the valuable learning experience that surrounded raising her some with a disability, one mother echoed this anxiety:

Because I am terrified, I am absolutely terrified and won't be happy until he is two. Oh, look it's just as much as you reconcile yourself during pregnancy that it's a risk, because I had every test known to man this time ... and you say that you are okay with it. I am still very anxious. And, we are actually involved in a few programs so that I can have professional feedback along the way to make sure, because, I am anxious and once it's in your family there are chances. And him being male scares me, because my second son is okay but, it's the higher incidence of males being affected that scares me. But, having said that I am much more capable and educated this time about play and the sort of play to look out for and what changes ..and just by being insistent you get to know lots of things. (Mother 18)

In the words of one mother, giving birth to a healthy son following the diagnosis of her first son with a disability was a defining moment in her life.

I was already pregnant before my son's problems had started to show. They are actually only 21 months apart. So, having the second son come through okay was also a defining moment because it meant that I didn't just make broken babies. (Mother 18)

*Being able to enjoy life or to make use of the leisure time.* Mothers were aware of the necessity to relax and take opportunities to enjoy life, however, they often lacked the chance to do so. The ability to relax is also dictated to a degree by the age of the child. Mothers participating in this study often mentioned that, during the first years of parenting a child with an intellectual disability, constant care of the child was required. As time passed, the feeling of being exhausted became apparent for these mothers and they realised the need to relax.

The most common ways of relaxation were: reading, sporting activities, taking the opportunity to sleep or visit friends.

I really like to walk, so of a morning I always try and get up before everyone gets up. I go for a walk, and plan the day. That relaxes me, and gets me ready for the day. And I always feel that no matter how stressed out I am at the end of the day I always feel better if I have been for that walk in the morning. Because I know that I have my time, that time for myself. And

I have to say it, I like a glass of wine when my daughter goes to bed. I go out into the backyard, and sit out the back and have a glass of wine, in the cool, whatever, watch the news or something, and I enjoy that. I do that most nights. I have a glass of wine, and just try and unwind a little bit. (Mother 13)

Finding time to relax was also achieved through accessing respite care services. Gaining access to this service was a source of great stress to a number of mothers, with the perception that government services, or the support of respite care, was being reduced or eliminated. In the case of one mother, who claimed that support networks had broken down from stress arising from issues related to caring for her child with a significant intellectual disability with severe behaviour difficulties, to access respite services on a regular basis was a major source of stress. In this case, the coping mechanism adopted was based on drawing from inner resources, as taking action was ineffectual with government agencies with limited resources. She also resigned herself to meeting the needs of her child through her own skills and knowledge as she did not have the financial resources to fund respite and therapy herself.

## Discussion

The study reported in this paper investigated the level and sources of stress amongst 13 families with a child with an intellectual disability and the strategies that the mothers used to cope with these stressors. Using an interview protocol, this study reported the coping strategies that mothers and families used to respond to various stressors they linked to raising a child with an intellectual disability.

The mothers in this study showed, through scores reported on the PSI-SF, evidence of stress levels that were higher than the general population of parents. This outcome supported findings of previous studies (e.g. Margalit & Kleitman, 2006; Oelofsen & Richardson, 2006; Twoy et al., 2007), those families raising a child with an intellectual disability report higher levels of stress than those families who are not raising a child with a disability. This observation should not be taken as making a specific or causal link between the two areas, but mothers in this study were clear in reporting that caring for a child with a disability was challenging and rewarding, but at times stressful.

Participants provided evidence of a number of sources of stress related to raising a child with an intellectual disability. Common sources of stress were connected with negative attitudes of some people in their environment towards their child, and service provision. Provision of services during the early stages, when establishing the nature and severity of a disability, was a particular source of stress for mothers, followed by difficulty in accessing sufficient, quality early intervention services. As children reached school age, stress focused around locating an appropriate education setting and program, and sufficient respite care to allow families to manage demands of life, relationships and other children.

The strategies for dealing with service agencies were mixed. Mothers generally reported that if they were able to access services, the quality of it was sound. Stress arose in terms of accessing a sufficient quantity of services. A couple of families reported they had spent large amounts of money in purchasing alternate, non-government services. These services provided in excess of 20 hours of therapy per week, the recommended minimum number of hours of early intervention for students with autism (Roberts & Prior, 2006). As a result, mothers made changes to their lives and the priorities they had for themselves and the family.

The value of providing services to families in order to cater for a child with a disability was considered essential by families, yet appears to be discounted by governments and services at most parts of the journey that parents in this study had traveled. Health services, for example, are often responsible for delivering the news to parents that their child has a diagnosed disability. This task is not an easy one, yet is essential to assist parents to access services. Mothers in some cases (e.g. where a disability was clearly evident at birth or in the first months) reported how these services were immediately available and supportive. However, a number of mothers reported, in very emotional terms, stories of having to fight for service provision (i.e. taking action or advocating for their child), or for acknowledgement of their concerns about their child, because health services were reluctant to make a definitive decision that a child had a special need or disability. The results of this study found that the indecision in responding to parental concerns about their child's significant difficulties was a stressor for parents. The results of this study point to a need for a review of how children are identified as being eligible for early interven-

tion services. That is, provision of assistance to access services in cases where a child is not reaching typical milestones, but has yet to be given a recognised diagnosis (e.g. intellectual disability).

The results of this study, supported by other researchers (e.g. Turnbull, 1985; Behr, 1990; Stainton & Besser, 1998), highlight the need to bring the positive aspects of parenting a child with a disability to the attention of professionals, and to use these findings when working with families (e.g. support groups facilitated by professionals who can help parents to address stressors that may be linked to caring for a child with a disability). This study, for example, uncovered positive stories about support agencies, with schools rated by parents as being sensitive to their needs.

An underlying source of stress from mothers was the long-term well-being of their child with a disability. In some cases mothers had adjusted their life priorities and accepted that they would be responsible in some way for the care of their child until their death. Mothers also made it evident that they had considered alternate plans leading up to this time, and beyond. This included expectations that siblings would care for the child, financial arrangements for ongoing professional care, and the use of support networks (e.g. joining forces with others families with a child with a disability to establish a community house with part care provisions). This finding is supported in part by research by Taunt and Hastings (2002), who reported that while some families were anxious about the long-term future of their child with a developmental disability, in general families had positive perceptions about their child's well-being.

Mothers in this study were found to have developed, over time, considerable inner strength in regards to advocating for their child with a disability. In some cases they felt they needed to deal with the stress of people in the community making judgments about them and their child by taking action (e.g. reacting to comments, explaining to people their child's condition). On other occasions, it would appear that mothers felt that taking a deep breath, or drawing on some inner source of strength (e.g. 'one step at a time', going into survival mode) would allow them to cope with stressful events. The one strategy that was not apparent in this study, but had been found in previous research, was the reliance on spiritual or religious beliefs (Bayat, 2007; Taunt & Hastings, 2002).

Mothers and families drew strength from, or considered there to be a positive impact of, raising a child with a disability (e.g. greater compassion, greater confidence in themselves). These results concur to some extent with work by Scorgie and Sobsey (2000) who reported that some families went through similar personal transformations as those in the study when raising a child with a disability. These authors reported findings that were not found in this study to the same degree. That is, some parents went through personal transformations (e.g. advocacy for their child, changed role in their community from being in a community to being part of a community), relational transformations (e.g. stronger marriage, expanded friendship network) and perspective transformations (e.g. a feeling of serving others).

The interview data in this study were analysed to identify a number of stressors and the coping strategies used by mothers to manage the demands of these stressors. The analysis of data identified a number of coping strategies that were organised around the variables in Figure 1. An examination of these strategies provides ongoing evidence to support the Process Model of Coping posed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The interview data shows that emotion-focused and problem-focused problem solving strategies are predominant, linked, and are interdependent on each other (Lazarus, 2000). In this study, mothers who were stressed when dealing with agencies (e.g. lack of respite care) often drew on inner resources to cope with this stressful event (e.g. 'one day at a time', focusing their energies around the variables that they could manage).

This study reported the outcomes from thirteen mothers raising a child with an intellectual disability. MacDonald, Fitzsimons and Walsh (2006) reported that female caregivers tended to use problem solving coping strategies more than male caregivers. While this comparison was not possible to confirm in this study, the results correspond with our study in that mothers were perceived as more efficient when developing problem solving strategies of either an active (i.e. taking action approach) or passive (i.e. inner resources) nature. The general perception of fathers, or partners, by the mothers in this study was that they found it difficult to cope with the stress of raising a child with a disability. This perception does not match the outcomes reported by Trute, Hiebert-Murphy and Levine (2007) who found there to be no gender difference in regards parental appraisal of the impact of a child with a developmental disability.

While the failure to include fathers is a limitation of this study, it provides fertile ground for future research in the area. The authors of the study are also aware that they interviewed a small number of mothers, from two schools, in a middle class area of Sydney. While caution is required in interpreting the results of this study, a number of findings support the work of previous research in the area. However, the life history approach to collecting interview data allowed for a differing perspective to be taken on the experiences of mothers caring for a child with a disability. Further studies could advance the use of this methodology, while also addressing the limitations listed above.

## Conclusions

The aim of this study was to examine the stresses parents faced in raising a child with an intellectual disability, and the strategies that they have developed in order to cope with these stresses. The mothers in this study had developed a wide range of coping strategies, including the use of support systems offered within their social network, how they viewed and advocated for their child, and using inner resources to explore ways of enjoying life and relaxing. The knowledge of different – and undoubtedly very individual – coping strategies might help professionals working with children with intellectual disabilities and their families to answer their needs in a more appropriate way.

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**Supporting professionals for  
community change**



## Communities@work – engaging Gen Y in community work studies through blended distributed delivery

**Kerry Russo**

New technologies are continuously being examined by educators, researchers, and communities in an on-going effort to enhance professional development, encourage lifelong learning, provide education opportunities to traditionally underserved populations, and conserve limited resources ... All our students must have equal opportunities to find the resources and the knowledge of the world those resources offer (Schrum & Berenfeld, 1997, p. 159).

### Introduction

In the rush to adopt the new learning technologies, have educators become too focused on how to use the technology instead of why? The new technologies open many avenues for educational delivery. Addressing the potential for technologies to transform education, Schrum and Berenfeld (1997) assert the need to continuously examine how new technologies may create equal learning opportunities. Whilst technology enables educators to globalise their classrooms, Lorimer (1996) suggests that technology has not ‘influenced the art of teaching’; in fact, the ‘instructional process remains largely the same’ (p. 113). In their analysis of constructivist and learning technologies Jonassen, Peck and Wilson (1999) assert ‘the internet is not a blackboard’, that constructivist and cooperative learning are characteristic of this medium as opposed to instructivism (p. 48). The relationship of technology and constructivist learning central to the discus-

sion of the research presented in this paper emphasises the importance of pedagogical frameworks. Technology based pedagogy was the focal point of the program. Lankshear, Snyder and Green (2000) maintain that educators fundamentally need to keep 'educational purposes and standards clearly in focus' (p. xiii), but call for educators to 'know how to create learning activities that will connect in meaningful and motivating ways' (p. 153), thereby situating technology use within a pedagogical framework.

This paper, presented as a practitioners' guide, examines issues for consideration in the development of a Blended Distributed Delivery (BDD) program and addresses the challenges of working with 'Gen Y' learners. 'Gen Y-ers' are the generation of young people born between 1980 and the mid-1990s who have grown up with the new technologies and are very connected and 'wired' (McCrindle, 2006). The study centres on the delivery of Certificate II in Community Services Work by a team of community workers/teachers with the Barrier Reef Institute of Technical and Further Education (BRIT) in rural North Queensland.

Certificate II in Community Services Work is a pathway qualification that introduces students to a variety of community work fields. These fields include community development, youth work, drug and alcohol counseling, disability work, child care and community education. The program is delivered part-time over two years in conjunction with the student's senior schooling. The aim of the research is to examine the pedagogical parameters of a BDD model and propose practice-based issues for consideration. The case study considers the significance of a set of rules referred to as pedagogical parameters in the delivery of a BDD program. These pedagogical parameters have been established through practice-centred inquiry and are not intended to be arbitrary or rigid, but rather the basis of a fluid contribution to discussion on the development of a technology based pedagogical paradigm.

## Pedagogical Parameters of Blended Distributed Delivery

The Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE defines BDD as learning models that are based on pedagogy that centres on the needs of the learner and combine a variety of teaching and learning strategies that are aimed at

maximising education and training outcomes for each individual learner. These blended learning models cross boundaries of distance and time by integrating information and communications technology into teaching and learning.

The term BDD refers to the combination of teaching and learning strategies within a pedagogical framework to engage learners. Reeves (1999) suggests that many educators 'assume that the WWW (world wide web) is a magic box, and that simply putting content on the Web guarantees better learning' (p. 3). However, this assumption may amount to 'eReading' not 'eLearning'. BDD is founded on pedagogy and instructional design that is learner focused and innovative; the more effective the level of instructional design the more likely eLearning will be achieved. Reeves (1999) asserts 'the WWW does not guarantee learning any more than the presence of a library in a school guarantees learning. The Web is simply a resource which must be designed to support effective instructional dimensions' (p. 3). Jonassen et al. (1999) maintain that instructional delivery is the wrong issue. 'When learners are passive receptacles of technology-delivered messages to be consumed and regurgitated, they are not learning meaningfully. When students learn by using technologies as tools for growing and sharing ... they are learning meaningfully' (p. 218).

BDD is more than the use of the new learning technologies; it is an educational process that is suggestive of a new pedagogical practice. Reeves and Reeves (1997) address the uniqueness of web based instruction (WBI) and assert it is more than a 'mix of media features'; it is 'the pedagogical dimensions that WBI can be designed to deliver' (p. 59). BDD enables the distribution of learning thereby creating access and equity. Learners within a BDD program can access quality educational opportunities that are steeped in collaborative, active and reflective learning strategies that create meaningful learning activities.

Table 1 illustrates the BDD set of tools available for educational delivery within the Institute. This table is not intended as a static document. It is a representation of the ever-changing new learning technologies and teaching and learning strategies potentially in use within BDD.

Table 1. BDD Set of Tools used by BRIT.

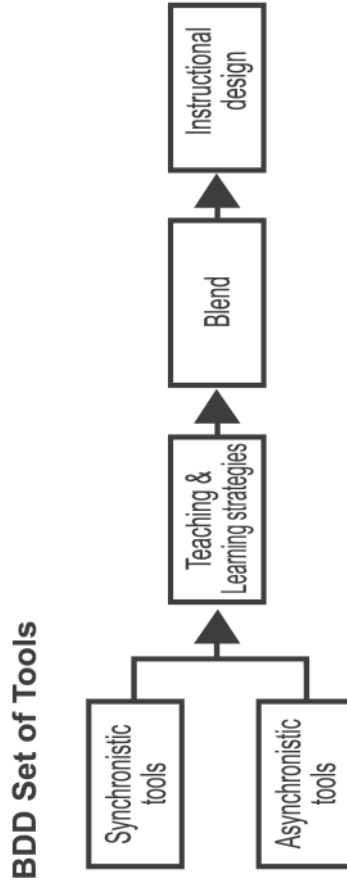
<p><b>Synchronistic</b> Refers to same time interactions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face-to-face classes</li> <li>• Tutorials</li> <li>• Video conferencing</li> <li>• Online conferencing or webinars (lectures or workshops delivered online).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Asynchronistic</b> Refers to interactions not occurring at the same time, enabling flexibility</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Video streams</li> <li>• Websites</li> <li>• Blogs (online journals)</li> <li>• Wikis (websites that enable participants to edit and create content)</li> <li>• Web-based activities</li> <li>• Email</li> <li>• Phone and SMS</li> <li>• Workbooks</li> <li>• Learning management systems, Toolboxes (software learning objects that provides simulated scenarios).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Teaching and learning strategies</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project based assessments</li> <li>• Industry placement</li> <li>• Practical and block training</li> <li>• Learning support in BDD is contextualised through integrated literacy support.</li> </ul>

The educator blends the tools most appropriate to meeting the learner's needs. It is these blends that become the foundation of the BDD program's instructional design, including synchronistic tools, asynchronistic tools and teaching and learning strategies as represented in Figure 1.

Further examination of these tools and their utilisation in the Certificate II in Community Services Work program will be discussed later in the paper. However, before choosing a blend, educators need to consider the pedagogical parameters of a BDD program.



Figure 1. BDD Set of tools



In the development of BDD programs certain pedagogical parameters must be maintained. Thus, Hung and Wong (2000) propose a framework that situates learning as a ‘transitional process between subject, object and community’ (p. 33). Both Jonassen et al. (1999) and Hung and Wong (2000) stress the need for students to be engaged in ‘meaningful learning opportunities’ whereby they are actively processing information collaboratively, so that problem solving is a co-operative effort. The active learning approaches to project-based assessments ‘give students an opportunity to do, rather than just hear about the subject of study’ (Jonassen et al., 1999, p. 27).

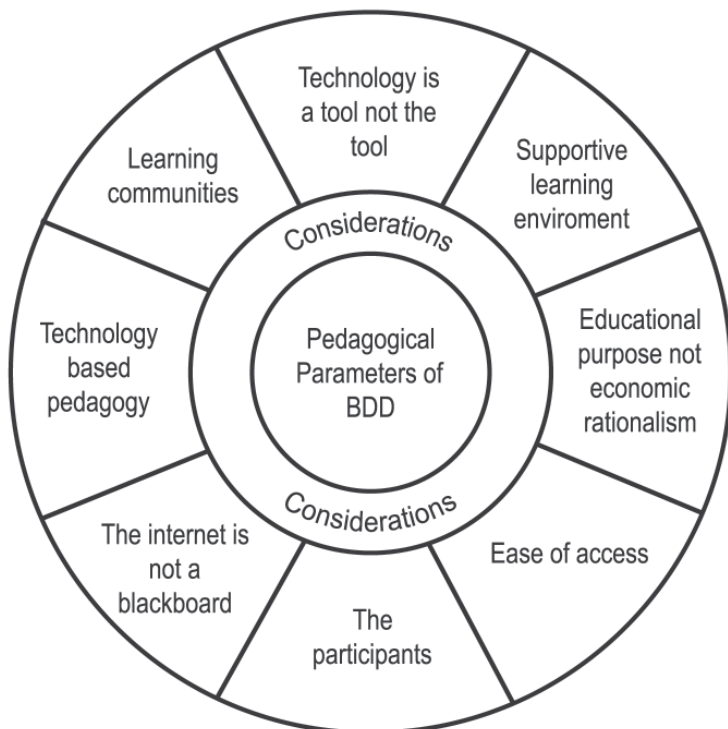


Figure 2. Pedagogical parameters of blended distributed delivery

The Certificate II teaching team suggest certain tools and considerations be retained when developing a BDD program. These pedagogical parameters of BDD promote learning opportunities and engage learners in meaningful and collaborative learning as illustrated in Figure 2.

The pedagogical parameters of BDD are influenced by reflective practice and grounded in ‘personal interpretive framework’ (Levy, 2004, p. 50). Through observation, practice, reflection and examination of literature, pedagogical influences were identified for improved delivery of a BDD program. Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson & McConnell (2004) emphasise that ‘The centrality of human interaction, in our conception of networked learning, carries with it some pedagogical commitments and beliefs about learning. In short, there is no point to networked learning if you do not value learning through co-operation, collaboration, dialogue, and/or participation in a community’ (p. 2). A variety of influences on the pedagogical parameters of BDD are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Influences of pedagogical parameters

<b>Pedagogical parameters of BDD</b>	<b>Influenced by</b>
Educational purpose not economic rationalism	Students are not interested in learning via the new technologies if it is simply a repackaging of the learning material online. Lankshear, Snyder and Green (2000), refers to this as ‘old wine in new bottles’ (p. 22). BDD requires professional and economic commitments, but commitments wherein the focus remains on educational processes. BDD should not be used for economic rationalism.
Technology is a tool not ‘the’ tool	Technology must not to be used primarily because it is available. It must have an educational purpose and meet the student’s needs.

<b>Pedagogical parameters of BDD</b>	<b>Influenced by</b>
The internet is not a blackboard	The blackboard concept suggests students will learn from technology. Jonassen (2000) maintains ‘students do not learn from technology, rather, students learn from thinking in meaningful ways’ (p. 24).
Technology based pedagogy	Technology has to be participative, meaningful, accessible, inclusive, relevant and easy to engage within a paradigm that is people focused.
Supportive learning environment	Inglis, Ling and Joosten (1999), in their concept of best practice for quality delivery with the new learning technologies, reinforce a supportive delivery with the emphasis on care, support and quality relationships. Teacher/tutor contact and support create supportive learning environments.
Ease of access	Access relates to overcoming the barriers of BDD and includes technology deficiencies, culture and literacy. Technology allows for greater equity, access and flexibility. However it is to no avail if the student cannot access the technology.
The participants	‘The bottom line is that the technology should not drive the course. Instead, the desired outcomes and needs of the participants should be the deciding factors’ (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 63).
Learning communities	Learning communities or communities of practice enable participants to engage with the learning within a socio-cultural perspective.

## Methodology

The methodology utilised in this study was practice-centered inquiry based on action research. It draws on the vast scope of practice-centered inquiry enabling insights into the subjective nature of educational practice as espoused by Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994) and Burns (2000). The study required examination of the practitioner's educational practice and responses to that practice and encapsulates an insider's view of the field (Burns, 2000). According to Grundy (1995), the aim of action research is to understand practices and improve them through involvement in cycles of research based change. The study sought to improve understanding of both the practice of BDD and the engagement of Gen Y-ers. Action research was chosen as the methodology to advance professional practice in BDD. The study does not seek to replace other approaches with a rigid set of rules and practices, but rather to engage practitioners in a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of BDD in the engagement of Gen Y students. As stated in the introduction, the pedagogical parameters of BDD are seen as a fluid contribution to discussion and reflective of Grundy's (1995) assertion that action research is cyclical and on-going for continuous improvement in both teaching and learning.

### *Data collection*

*Observation and reflection:* Through the critical observation of student responses to their educational practice and feedback from students and tutors, the practitioner-researcher was able to capture behavioural responses, interactions, reactions and significant activities. Just as Grundy (1995) addressed the need for reflective practice to be 'a dispassionate view of what went on in order to make a rational and supportable assessment of the worthwhileness of what occurred' (p. 10), in this instance, it is acknowledged that while the subjectivity of the study reflects practitioner values, a critical reflective approach is maintained. Through an awareness of these values the practitioner-researcher is able to maintain objectivity following processes of logical reflective non-judgemental (respecting others' perspectives) practice.

*Formal and informal discussions and evaluations:* The collaborative approach to action research included the practitioner-researcher meeting regularly with team members on video conference or face to face to discuss issues as they arose in course implementation, conducting student evaluations

and encouraging team members and students to participate in the development of the program through informal questioning. Team members and students were asked to express their thoughts openly and honestly throughout the study to identify the strengths and deficits of the program. This information was then gathered and discussed at team meetings. Inclusion of the observations of the students and the team ensured the authenticity of the study.

*Information gathering:* Further information was gathered from the technology helpdesks and IT teams at the schools and within the TAFE sector. Through observation, recording and reflecting on the Helpdesk's and IT team's interaction and informal feedback, the practitioner sought to identify the integration and constraints of the new technologies within the program.

### *Data analysis*

Data collected represented the presence of multiple realities and socially constructed meanings as is often evident in qualitative research. The data was thematically analysed and interpreted within three contexts:

- (a) the use and significance of technology to the program
- (b) the constraints and facilitators of teaching and learning with BDD
- (c) the engagement of Gen Y students.

These contexts were chosen as they reflect key themes in the literature on technology in education and BDD. Within each context, a number of issues were identified in staff reflections and student feedback. The key issues reported are those that had significant impact on course implementation according to staff and students. The findings reported from the data analysis are indicative of the ongoing reflective processes of action research. Reflections on practice were compared with the current approaches in the literature on the use of the new technologies and where they fit within the pedagogical paradigms of eLearning and specific requirements for the engagement of Gen Y students.

### *Research context and participants*

The study considered the issue of how to engage Gen Y students through BDD. The students were situated over a large area of North Queensland and many challenges had to be overcome before the learning could begin. Working within the BDD pedagogical parameters identified in Figure 2,

the team has for the past three years been delivering Certificate II in Community Services Work to secondary school students and young people disengaged from school. Under the new Queensland government policy 'Education and Training Reforms for the Future' (ETRF) stipulates 'that all young Queenslanders are now required to be either learning or earning until they turn 17 years or complete a qualification' (Education Qld, 2007). Consequently, many disengaged or at risk students are entering the TAFE sector. In the first year, the team worked collaboratively with Tropical North Queensland Institute of TAFE before striking out on its own. The delivery team now comprises one teacher and three tutors. They are all experienced community workers who openly share their knowledge, experience and skills with learners through modelling behaviour, attitude and aptitude appropriate to learning and working in communities.

Students currently enrolled in the program are from the four North Queensland communities of Ingham, Townsville, Charters Towers and the Whitsundays which encompasses an area of 36,000 square kilometers. The student population comprises young people who are in the vocational stream at school, or who have left school and are seventeen years old or less.

The engagement of students in community work studies presented a number of challenges:

- Students were situated in geographically diverse areas
- Several students were from remote indigenous communities
- Several students were disengaged or at risk of disengaging from school
- Some students experienced mental health and child protection issues
- Several students had a history of poor academic performance
- Few expectations had been placed on the students
- Some only chose community work because the other option was chemistry
- The team were vocational educators who had never taught school aged students
- To educate or 'edutain'. Edutainment is the engagement of students through the use of the new technologies and is removed from the traditional education approach of instructionalism.

## *Engaging Gen Y learners*

Development of quality educational programs focuses on the learner (Oliver, 2000). The learner in this case is a 'Gen Y-er'. Generation Y is renowned for being wired, global and consumer and technologically savvy. Huntley (2006) maintains in study after study that Generation Y is described 'as optimistic, idealistic, empowered, ambitious, confident, committed and, passionate' (p. 14). This generation is the product of the Baby Boomers who instilled the assertion of rights as a key value. However, the student population in our program is clearly disadvantaged in a number of ways ranging from geographical location to socio-economic background and family dysfunction. Many students commented on feelings of isolation and disempowerment. For the Certificate II team, the concern was that the students would tune out. Therefore, the challenge was to not only create a program that would engage learners, but one that would maintain their attention, possibly requiring elements of 'edutainment'.

To educate or 'edutain' is a concern for many educators and one that faced the delivery team. How was the team to develop a program that would engage the student in the learning and have the educational outcomes required of the course? Consideration was given to the social and cultural context of learning with particular attention paid to socially and culturally constructed instructional design. Henderson (1996) asserts instructional designers 'influence and are influenced by particular world views; their class, gender, culture, values, and ideologies; selected learning theories; and particular instructional design paradigms' (p. 85). These considerations informed the incorporation of the following learning principles into the program's BDD.

- A variety of technology tools could be utilised to engage the learner
- The learner was used to constant stimulation
- The learner was immersed in the new technologies
- Edutainment would hold the learner's attention
- Constructivist focused pedagogy.

These learning principles in turn influenced the instructional design for the community work program encapsulating the pedagogical parameters of BDD, shown in Table 3, Community Work BDD Set of Tools.



Table 3. Community work BDD set of tools

<b>Synchronistic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face-to-face classes</li> <li>• Tutorials</li> <li>• Video conferencing</li> <li>• Online conferencing</li> </ul>
<b>Asynchronistic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Video streams</li> <li>• Websites</li> <li>• Blogs (online journals)</li> <li>• Web-based activities</li> <li>• Email</li> <li>• Phone and SMS</li> <li>• Workbooks</li> <li>• Toolboxes</li> </ul>
<b>Teaching and learning strategies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project based assessments</li> <li>• Industry placement</li> <li>• Learning support</li> </ul>

The blend used in the community work program demonstrates a commitment to being learner focused in the engagement of secondary school students, especially those at risk of disengaging, or who have disengaged from the school system. As stated in the influences of pedagogical parameters, the primary deciding factors were the participant's needs, not the availability of technology. Established around the principles of constructivism, active learning, learning collaboration and teaching partnerships, the program continues to evolve to meet the learners' needs.

The team's strong pedagogical base arose from the successful delivery of a separate community services training program to mature aged students. This knowledge situated their pedagogical parameters and experience in the use of the new technologies and enabled the team to focus on the needs of Gen Y. The identification of these needs influenced the choice of blends. One of the tutors commented that 'we are flexible enough to enable the student time out to sort through any personal problems before having them refocus on the learning'. This holistic approach to learning reinforces the pedagogical parameter of supportive learning environment.

## *Findings*

This section begins with a discussion of how the identified challenges (above) associated with pedagogical parameters were encountered and addressed during the implementation of the course. These challenges are important to developing appropriate BDD in light of the needs of learners, aims for teaching and learning and practical issues of incorporating technologies and specific pedagogies. Here the findings are drawn together as a set of issues for consideration in the development of BDD. The following sections analyse key aspects of the data around the theme of engaging Gen Y students. Reflection on the behavioural issues identified by the teaching team, informed by students' perspectives, suggested the significance of belonging and collaborative learning to engagement in learning and positive outcomes for students. These in turn led to new understandings of significance for BDD and technology based pedagogies.

### The learner

The aim was to create a shared space that would nurture, stimulate and motivate. In particular the team sought to establish a sense of belonging to reconnect some of the students with social bonds. Xin Ma (2003) asserts 'students' sense of belonging to school is a critical research topic in education' (p. 341). The promotion of supportive relationships and collaborative achievements were part of a caring ethos that contributed to the reconnection of students' social bonds. This was achieved through the development of collaborative and cooperative learning opportunities such as participation in community meetings and events outlined later in the paper. The more the students felt they were heard, the more connected they felt to the community. Students often commented that they couldn't believe other people were interested in their opinions.

### Access

Access, in various forms, was another challenge. In rural North Queensland, access to broadband was an issue. Without broadband, the learners could not access the video streams or online conferences. Furthermore, some of the learners were from disadvantaged socio-economic groups and did not have access to a computer, let alone broadband. In order to overcome these difficulties, the team worked with the schools, local libraries and community agencies to provide computer access to students.

In order to ensure literacy was not a barrier for students wanting to access the program, an integrated literacy support service was available for students requiring extra learning support. The service is delivered within a strength-based model of integrated literacy and works with the student in the context of the learning.

The importance of interagency and interdepartmental collaboration is integral to facilitate and support BDD learning. One of the key differences between a face to face class and BDD is the interaction and involvement of other departments and outside agencies. A BDD program requires the coordination of key stakeholders to support learning, technology and access.

### Online requirements

Once the issues of access were resolved, another obstacle arose that was to prove far too difficult to overcome. Firewalls, protective structures that establish internet security, excluded a significant learning tool from the program. 'Centra', an online conferencing platform had to be dropped from the program. Centra enables video and voice over internet, Power-Point presentations, web searches, text, file sharing and whiteboard. Centra was one of the program's blends. It was to be used as a synchronised tutorial for students geographically dispersed. The issue arose when dealing with eight different high schools, two different school systems, Education Queensland and Catholic Education, and six different TAFE campuses. Trying to synchronise and configure firewalls in what were effectively 16 different systems was an insurmountable task. Technological issues became the focus of the program and a conscious decision was made to refocus on pedagogy. The pedagogical parameters of BDD include ease of access as an important component of the program. The frustrations associated with technology access issues cannot be underestimated. Many students left the program during this time. Student evaluations noted their disappointment with the use of technology and conveyed their perception that if the technology did not work, then the program was deficient. This illustrates two important points. Firstly, the significance of maintaining the focus on pedagogy and perceiving technology as the only tool. The mistake was that the team became caught up with trying to have online conferencing operating and overlooked the pedagogical dimensions of the program. Furthermore, the pedagogical parameter of technology as

a tool, not *the* tool, was ignored. The team needed to reinforce the collection of teaching and learning strategies that make up BDD. Secondly, the team needed to educate and prepare schools and students for the use of a technology platform. Before the program commenced, the team should have established processes for dealing with technological issues and networked with the schools, help desks and IT teams. Further orientation of the students in the use of the technology was also required.

### Interaction

In a discussion on constructivism and learning technologies, Jonassen and colleagues (1999) address knowledge construction using technologies as ‘engagers and facilitators of thinking’ (p. 13). The focus of the discussion is that learning is reliant on a social context which enables the construction of knowledge through support, learning-by-doing, conversing, collaborating and reflecting (Jonassen et al., 1999). The blend chosen to enable an active construction and sharing of knowledge was video conferencing. A weekly one-and-a-half hour video conference enabled connection with students in all towns and provided a nurturing and stimulating shared space with opportunities to engage with each other and the learning as ‘active processes’ (Rogers, 2002). Each video conference is approached as a production with different camera angles, student involvement, no more than a ten minute talking head and PPP presentations. The teaching team worked collaboratively in partnerships. For example, at the end of the teacher’s PPP presentation, student feedback was sought from each town. Tutors engaged with the teaching partnerships by presenting their view or stance on the issue under discussion. The resultant effect was one of a large learning community engaging and participating in the learning.

The focus of the video conference is on facilitated discussion, and its constructivist approach ensures that the teacher is not seen as the font of all knowledge, but rather, the conduit of group knowledge, thought and opinion (Rowe, 1993). It follows Rowe’s (1993) description of the role of a teacher as ‘a facilitator and co-learner’ (p. 111). The group includes the teacher, tutors and learners who facilitate joint discussions by drawing on each other’s knowledge and experience during the video conference. The tutors facilitate discussion with their local group, then feed back this information to all the groups involved in the video conference. The vid-

eo conference also enables students to build social connections. In each town, students brainstorm local site discussions on the whiteboard and write personal notes to others in different towns. Furthermore, students give local feedback to the main group during the video conference.

In addition, our *Communities@work* website and blog enables interaction, connectivity and reflective learning. In discussing a writing process approach incorporating collaboration and feedback for creating and communicating meaning, Grabe and Grabe (2001) promote web-based activities to enable students to collaboratively reflect on their learning. They are further supported by Godwin-Jones (2003) who refers to the blog as a self-publishing tool that 'encourages ownership and responsibility on the part of students, who may be more thoughtful (in content and structure) if they know they are writing for a real audience' (p. 12). In the course, the blog adds value to the learning process as students work collaboratively and submit their group project based assessments online for other groups in different towns for review and comment. The blog in this instance is not used as an online journal, but rather as a forum for students to engage and comment on various web-based activities.

The website enables access to video streams on a variety of topics and toolboxes from the Australian Flexible Learning Framework. Toolboxes are computer generated learning objects that enable students to construct their knowledge by engaging in a simulated environment. In the Orientation to Drug and Alcohol Work toolbox, students listened to a podcast on an alcoholic's family dysfunction and then placed their reflections on the blog. Student evaluations demonstrate the student's thoughts. Opinions and dialogue are valued and contribute to discussion and class knowledge. Elisha, one of the students, commented that 'everyone was able to talk and contribute, anything said was welcomed and heard.' Another student, Megan said, 'The class was like a friendship. We had conversations. It was not a normal teacher/student class.' The students' point of view situates all learning within the program and the scope for their perspectives to be incorporated into BDD design is paramount to its success.

The preceding discussion is summarised in Figure 3, a diagrammatic presentation of the issues for consideration in the development of a BDD program.

The study's findings indicate that the practitioner needs to consider the

learner, their level of access, the coordination of key stakeholders, and both the online requirements and level of interaction necessary within the program. Consideration of these issues within the context of the pedagogical parameters of a BDD program is supported by the emphasis (Goodyear et al., 2004) on the centrality of human interactions in the new technologies, and the notion (Jonassen et al., 1999) that cooperative learning is distinctive of this medium. The continuous loop that characterises the interrelationship between learners, teachers and technologies cannot be underestimated. The experience of the Certificate II program demonstrates that learners need to connect with each other, the teacher, and the technology in order to engage and achieve. When the learners could

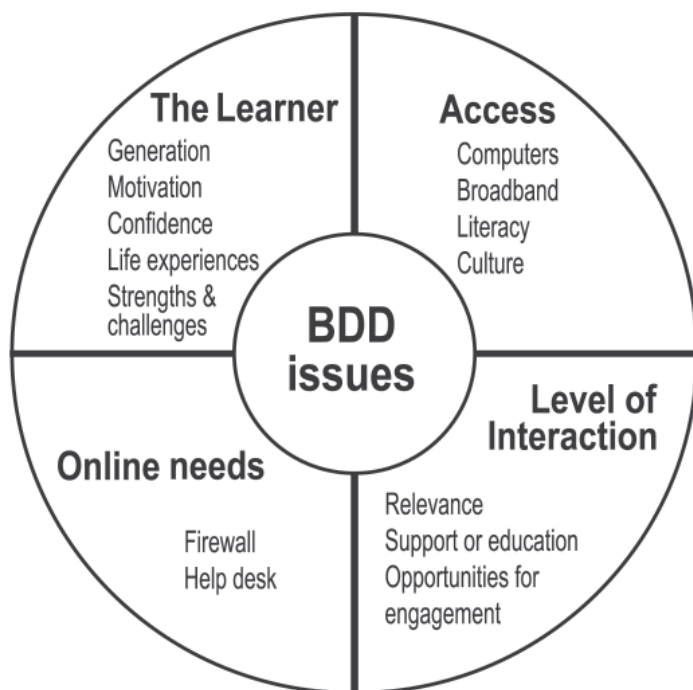


Figure 3. Issues for consideration in the development of a BDD program

not use the online conferencing tool they described a disconnection and conveyed their dissatisfaction with the program. Palloff and Pratt's (1999) assertion that learners' needs and aspirations should remain the deciding factors of any BDD program is consistent with the study's findings. The students needed to interact with others in the program and to develop a connectiveness. The findings further illustrate collaboration as the key to developing a sense of belonging. Students' comments indicated the value placed on working with others and building communities of inquiry through the use of the new technologies. All of these considerations constitute the complexities involved in the development of a BDD program and are illustrated in Figure 4.

BDD is not just a way of delivering a program over a large geographical area. In order for a BDD program to be successful and achieve student goals, it requires a strong pedagogical foundation and must maintain the human connection through interaction and the provision of support. The addition of this humanistic approach to learning ensures that the students are not trapped in what may otherwise be an impersonal technological vacuum. The findings demonstrate how the appropriate use of the new technologies and pedagogy as illustrated in Figure 4 enable students to engage with the learning.

### *Behavioural issues*

This is not to say all is well within the program. The delivery team encounters problems on a weekly basis from students' lack of attendance, motivation and focus. The team has noted that a number of students within the class have no demonstrated social bonds or connections to institutions. This could be indicative of the family problems acknowledged by students and their lack of participation within the community. The connection and reconnection of young people with social institutions may be achieved through establishing a sense of belonging. Whilst families generally provide social bonds, societal changes have led to many young people having no connection to any institution. Brendtro and Long (1995) suggest that 'Today, having lost our tribes, we rely on a tiny nuclear family of one or two overstressed parents. Schools are now being asked to become the new tribes, but seldom are prepared to play this role' (p. 102).

Students' needs for belonging were illustrated during the cultural studies

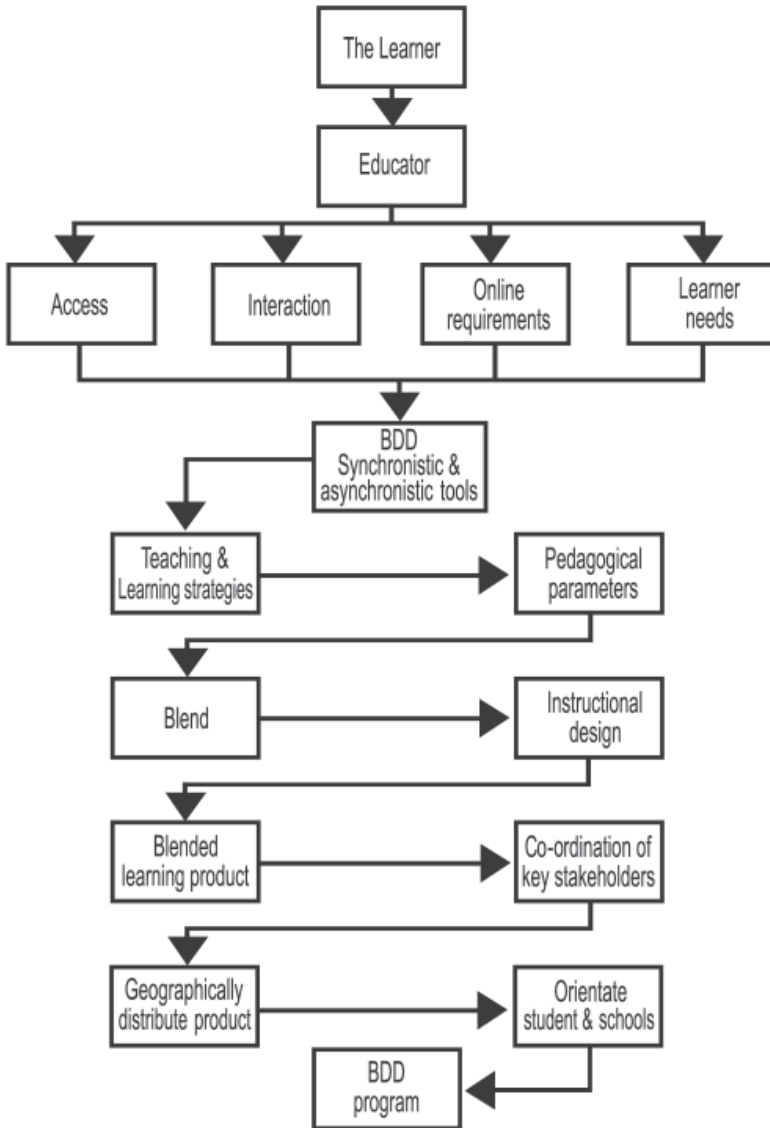


Figure 4. Development of a BDD program



component of the course. Elaine, an Indigenous student with strong family support, spoke about Indigenous kinship ties. Elaine explained that she calls three people 'Dad'; her Grandfather and her two Uncles. Furthermore, Elaine explained that in her culture, the lines are very blurred about family and that a cousin four times removed is a cousin and part of her immediate family. The envy in the classroom was palpable with many students commenting they 'wished we were indigenous and part of a large mob like Elaine'. Elaine's strong sense of belonging reverberated in the class reinforcing the teaching team's observation that some students lacked connection to social institutions and that this connection was important to the students. Thus, a lack of belonging contributed to some of the disengagement issues demonstrated in class. For example, some of the students were very under-motivated and did not have any expectations placed on them from home or school. They were not working to their potential; university was seen as a strange and foreign prospect. One of the tutors commented that 'the challenge in the engagement of the learner was the lack of expectations placed on the students for most of their lives. Leaving school half way through Year 11 to work in a small remote hotel was seen as a real option for one of these students'.

Within this context, the team met to develop the program's behaviour management strategy. Underpinning the strategy is the need to provide a community that situates students in a non-judgmental and supportive environment. Garbarino (cited in Brendtro & Long, 1995) maintains that 'school needs to be a refuge where their lives can be put back in balance' (p. 103). Easier said than done, for though Huntley (2006) asserts, 'members of Generation Y are intensely tribal creatures' (p. 25), the class comprises students from four different towns and diverse groups of school students and unemployed young people. It was imperative for the team to find and maintain a common link between the students. Some shared identity could only be achieved by engaging the students in a supportive learning environment. The team sought to develop a caring approach through the promotion of collaborative and cooperative learning activities. Tutors often reminded students to be supportive and not judgmental of each other. An often used phrase was 'step into the other person's frame of reference'. The team discussed with the students the importance of not judging others or buying into stereotypes and continually modeled

a caring, nonjudgmental approach. This approach was essential to the establishment of a sense of belonging to the group and created an environment to achieve. The tutors and teachers knew students' circumstances and supported any students having difficulties at home or school to work through their problems, by giving them time out, listening, and referring them to appropriate agencies, as promoted by Cassidy and Bates (2005) and Xin Ma (2003).

As community workers, the delivery team has brought the values and beliefs of their profession to the program. Just as the team do not put themselves forward as the font of all knowledge, the team also does not play an authoritarian role. Students are able to use their mobile phones and MP3 players during class time. The only rule enforced is one of respect. The team connected with the students through the provision of a non-judgmental shared space based on mutual respect and learning collaboration. The team encouraged and supported the students in their learning by scaffolding the learning to promote success. Finally, the team provided opportunities to the students by valuing their participation in the video conference and their engagement in project based assessments that contributed to the community. The continued participation of some students who left school and began working within the community illustrates the positive impact of the sense of belonging and shared purpose that developed within the program (Albert, 1991).

### *Learning collaboration*

Reeves and Reeves (1997) maintain learners benefit both educationally and socially 'when web based instruction is structured to foster cooperative learning' (p. 63). Group project-based assessments sustain learning collaboration. The appeal of project based team assessments involved the students in active learning communities and introduced them to community services. Oliver (2000) addresses the need to 'help the learner integrate new ideas with his or her own familiar model' within a constructivist approach by grounding 'activities in everyday contexts such as realistic cases, expressing topics to be learned in multiple perspectives, and encouraging student collaboration whereby divergent peer views are reconciled' (p. 5). Our aim in the Certificate II course is to challenge students to locate information that may alter their mental model of a concept by providing tasks that motivate and engage, and to present information in a stimulating format.

Students working together in groups have participated in a variety of project-based assessments from public awareness campaigns on alcohol and drug abuse, and sexual harassment issues. They have also surveyed their communities to identify youth needs and issues. For example, the student's youth work assessment task was to identify a youth issue in their community and produce a public awareness campaign that would raise community consciousness and provide information. Assessment criteria were given to the students, but how they were to achieve this task was defined by the group, with no restrictive boundaries imposed (Schrage, 1995). Hung and Wong (2000) advocate student project work and suggest, 'The creation and evolution of community artefacts by student teams promotes thinking' (cited in Oliver 2000, p. 6). Students place their campaigns on the blog for other groups to view and comment. The assessment tasks have produced a variety of community consciousness raising opportunities. Following are three examples of the orientation to youth work projects.

### *Party safe short films*

Group A chose to develop short films on raising community consciousness of unsafe youth behaviour at parties. This adheres to Schrage's (1995) theme of various representations and playing with presentations. As a group, the students developed a storyboard that included demonstrations of binge drinking, out of control behaviour, and the vulnerabilities that these unsafe behaviours generate. The students played the lead roles in the films and used the college car park as their location. The film was edited with Microsoft Movie Maker. The 'Party Safe' short films are to be distributed to students in other towns for comment. Some schools are also keen to use the films in awareness raising campaigns.

### *Community lakes*

Group B surveyed young people in their community situated in north western Queensland. The survey results demonstrated the lack of youth activities in the town and identified the need for a water/fun park. The students, with their tutor's support, then presented the findings in chambers to the local council. Underpinning this task was Schrage's (1995) theme of the use of others to gain insight. The council in turn investigated, and through further community consultation developed a plan to seek funding. The council has since received funding and preparations

are underway for the development of a manmade lake that will cater to a variety of water activities.

### *Police Citizens Youth Club*

Group C attended a town meeting on ‘What makes a community great for youth?’ The students participated in an open space forum where they were heard and their ideas valued and respected. The meeting participants identified the lack of activities for young people, a common theme in rural communities. The students formed a group from the meeting to seek out information to develop a Police Citizens Youth Club. The students are currently publicising the group at local schools and will chair a forth-coming meeting in an effort to seek funding for a Police Citizens Youth Club.

### *Communities of inquiry*

These three examples of collaborative learning demonstrate the development of communities of inquiry to support and engage the learner through the creation of meaningful learning activities. The focus of our program shifted during this time when the team observed that technology based pedagogy was insufficient without the engagement of community-based collaborative learning and the development of a sense of belonging. According to the Cognition and Technology Group, ‘cooperative learning and cooperative problem-solving groups enhance opportunities for generative learning ... students have the opportunity to form communities of inquiry that allow them to discuss and explain, and hence learn, with understanding’ (cited in Oliver, 2000, p. 9). Monique, a student commenting on her involvement in the PCYC community meeting stated that ‘this course teaches us to be more open with people and stand up for what we believe in’. The students feel they are heard and their opinions count. Another student, Amy said, ‘the Party Safe film brought the class together on common ground. It was a real life situation that made learning fun’. The student, school or community use the majority of the program’s project based assessments and this in turn contributes to the student’s sense of belonging to the community and social institutions. Group project based assessments facilitate the growth of communities of inquiry and are central to the engagement of students in a BDD environment.

The new learning technologies enable educators to step into the students’ space and situate the learning within the context of their cultural mores.

Henderson (1996) asserts, 'Cultural context is the very stuff, the scaffolding, of instructional design if users are to be positioned as active participants who are given and take responsibility in the learning-teaching paradigm' (p. 85). However, without the incorporation of technology based pedagogy with collaborative learning opportunities and supportive learning opportunities, engagement is not achieved.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the pedagogical parameters of a BDD model and proposed a number of issues for consideration. The findings of the action research illustrate that responding to the learners' needs and creating active participation requires more than technology-based pedagogy. It requires a connection on a personal level within a holistic approach. The engagement of students in project-based assessments, collaborative learning communities and meaningful learning opportunities within a non-judgmental and safe learning environment fosters a sense of belonging and supports learners in accomplishing their educational goals. The use of the new learning technologies enables and encourages people and communities to work together through the sharing of interpretations, understandings, life experiences and skills, and builds on knowledge for not only the learner, but also the teacher. The paper demonstrates that the use of the pedagogical parameters in BDD is not enough to engage Gen Y without establishing a connectiveness with them.

Bonk and Reynolds (1997) refer to the WWW as a shared or common space that 'is prime real estate for cultivating knowledge negotiation and the gradual building of inter-subjectivity among participants' (p. 174). Our goal was to create a shared space in an environment that would nurture, stimulate and motivate whilst introducing the students to community work studies. The program was developed to be more than just a way of delivering education to geographically diverse communities; it was to engage and support. The learner, access to technology, the collaboration of other agencies to facilitate and support BDD, online needs and level of interaction are issues to be considered in the development of a BDD program. But, primarily the focus of the program became about providing a shared space of mutual respect and inquiry. This study found that in order to engage Gen Y in BDD the student's voice had to be heard. The team

listened to that voice and created learning opportunities to engage and connect students to learning, each other and their community. The pedagogical parameters of BDD underline the need for a supportive learning community and to situate the learning from the student's point of view. Educators must engage, support and cooperate with Gen Y in order for learning to occur. This very wired, social generation want more than to be told how something works. They want participation, real life encounters, support and respect. Gen Y wants to be engaged.

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## ‘The theories make you pay more attention to how things happen’: The impact of theory on the practice of pre-service teachers in their role as student mentors

**Lesley Scanlon**

### Introduction

An avalanche of government reports in Australia in recent years claim that pre-service programs are ‘too theoretical’ with ‘insufficient emphasis on real situations’ (Vick, 2006, p. 181). The relative balance of theory and practice in teacher education forms part of a global debate which after three decades Orland-Barak and Yinon, (2007, p. 957) argue has made major contributions to teacher education. Segall (2001, p. 225) argues, however, that ‘the role and degree that theory and practice ought to play in teacher education classrooms . . . continues to be contested and unresolved’. Korthagen, Loughran and Russell (2006, p. 1036) agree that little progress has been made. Increased government intervention in teacher education has resulted in pre-service education institutions increasingly responding in behaviourist ways (Cochran-Smith, 2006) evidenced, for example, by a return to the discourse of ‘teacher training’ (Smith, 1992, p. 396). Embedded in notions of ‘teacher training’ are a too narrow focus on curriculum issues, classroom survival strategies and ‘correct’ responses to government policy. Teacher training, according to ten Dam and Blom (2006, p. 657), focuses on producing ‘skilled’ practitioners rather than on building professional theory. One response to the debate has seen pre-service education moving to a school-based model even though Beyer and Zeichner (1982, p. 18) argue research indicates that field-based teacher education tends to result in the development of ‘utilitarian’ models of teaching.

This paper examines a way in which ‘the rich possibilities’ (Korthagen et al., 2006, p. 1029) for teaching practice within a university-based teacher educa-

tion program provides students with increased practice as well as with what Korthagen and Kessels (1999, p. 4) call 'a broader view on education'. The first section of the paper examines the structure and rationale of the program in which the research was situated and this is followed by a discussion of the research methodology. The second section of the paper examines the research findings beginning with a brief overview of the general impact of theory on the research participations. This is followed by a discussion of the impact of phenomenology and risk sociology, two theoretical perspectives that students argued had the greatest impact on their practice.

## The Program

*Mentoring in Education Contexts (Mentoring)* is a third year education elective unit of study available to all pre-service teachers at the University of Sydney. The unit has three principal objectives, first, it provides academic support to pre-service student mentors engaged in mentoring first year students in the transition to university (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007; Rowling, Weber, & Scanlon, 2006; Scanlon, 2004). Second, it offers 'classroom-like' practical experience to the student mentors. Third, it affords a way of integrating theoretical and practical knowledge. These objectives are achieved through the program structure in which practical classroom experience is gained through workshop facilitation which students perceived as an authentic field experience within the supportive environment of the university. This encourages the development of what Shulman (1987) calls professional content knowledge, which Smith and Levi-Ari (2005, p. 271) argue can only be developed through active teaching. The theoretical components are addressed in lectures and seminars and the integration of theory and practice results from extensive reflective activity.

Reflection as 'intentional activity' (Brockbank & Gill, 2006, p. 27) from the 1980s became fundamental to teacher education as a way of encouraging students to take a broad view of teacher education as they engage with issues wider than classroom strategies and government policy and make the connection between theory and practice (Orland-Barak & Yinoi, 2007). If experience is to be the starting point for learning then it must be accompanied by reflection (Smith & Levi-Ari, 2005). Therefore, pre-service teachers, Bullough and Gitlin (1994, p. 79) argue, need to be involved in ongoing reflection about self and about the contexts in which they work. They argue the proper aim

of pre-service education is to assist beginners confront, and in some ways to reconstruct, themselves and the contexts in which they work.

This approach ensures a focus on what ten Dam and Blom (2006, p. 648) call the 'tasks of teachers', and it was these tasks that were fundamental to student mentors' classroom-like experiences. The mentors work as a team to identify appropriate pedagogical strategies for each workshop while each mentor develops a detailed lesson plan. There is a two step reflective process following the workshop. Firstly, the mentors review these plans evaluating what worked well, what did not and why and what they would do in the future. Secondly, the mentors reflect on their experiences through the lens of relevant sociological theories presented in lectures and seminars. In this way student mentors gain classroom-like experience and reflect on these experiences using theoretical constructs which place their experiences not only within the classroom but within a wider social context.

The program structure aims to balance and blur the distinction between theory and practice. A dichotomy challenged, for example, by Carr (1986, pp. 177–178) who argues that ideas about the nature of educational theory are always ideas about the nature of educational practice and always incorporate a latent conceptualisation of how, in practice, theory should be used. All educational theories are theories of theory and practice. To engage in educational activity always presupposes a theoretical scheme. Moreover, as Reagan (in Yost, Sentner, & Forenza-Bailey, 2000, p. 40) argues, it is programs in social foundations and philosophy of education which are critical to higher order thinking.

The sociological theories examined in the unit are conceptualised as a series of frameworks within which experience might be viewed. These theories have the potential to provide student mentors with tools to interrogate critical issues in education, such as the purpose and functioning of educational institutions, the construction of roles within these institutions, the place of knowledge, the identification of prominent discourses as well as being a way of framing professional practice and understanding students. The theories are a way of understanding the impact of contemporary society on everyday life. It is a way of engaging what C. Wright Mills (1970) called the 'sociological imagination', when individuals connect their experiences with wider social issues.

## Methodology

The data on which the discussion in this paper is based represents only a part of the results of a qualitative research project. There were 30 research participants all of whom completed anonymous program entry and exit surveys and eight took part in two 120 minute interviews. Of the students who completed the surveys only one was male and all of the students who participated in the interviews were female. All were in the third or fourth year of a pre-service teacher degree.

In the entry surveys and interviews, the participants responded to a broad range of questions, including, their reasons for mentoring, their conceptualisation of mentoring and the individual characteristics critical to the performance of the mentor role. The exit surveys and interviews examined how the experience changed students' earlier conceptualisations of mentoring. (These issues are examined in Scanlon [forthcoming]). This current paper is concerned only with student responses to the role of theory in their professional development. The richest data source was from the semi-structured component of the interviews which encouraged students to reflect on those aspects of *Mentoring* which were most relevant to their professional development.

The interviews were transcribed and from the transcriptions 'meaningful chunks' (Seidman, 1998) were identified. These chunks were classified as major emerging themes. The first theme was the general application of theory to practice and in this category students referred to theory providing them with a better understanding of themselves and an understanding of others, in particular other students they encounter in their roles as mentors and teachers. The second was the application of specific theoretical constructs to individual practice. Overwhelmingly students selected phenomenology and risk sociology as the principal theoretical constructions which provided them with a better understanding of their professional practice. Before examining these specific theories, students' general responses to the theoretical component are examined below.

## Integrating Theory and Practice

Overall students responded positively to the way integrating theory and practice contributed to their development as teachers. They found theory

useful in understanding contemporary issues, in encouraging reflection and exploring issues of practice and as a way of understanding classroom behaviour. For example, Cathy said there had previously been a focus on ‘the history of education and how we got here’, whereas *Mentoring* ‘is about looking at how we are now’. This contemporary focus made theory relevant because Cathy could relate theory to the current demands of classroom teaching because it encouraged an analysis of teaching situations, ‘I can find myself applying these theories to practice, questioning why a particular thing occurs in the way that it does’. Cathy explained that the bridge between theory and practice was provided by weekly mentor workshops and academic seminars which ‘gave me a practical application for the ideas’. The concurrent integration of theory and practice was critical for Cathy, as were the seminars which facilitated her understanding of practice through theory as ‘the subject lets you see the links between theory and practice’.

Gloria responded to the integrative approach of *Mentoring* because it was different from what she called the ‘the text-book’ approach to teacher education, an approach she described as ‘simple and logical ... about things you already know’.

It [*Mentoring*] gives you something to explore ... I’m learning different things and I am quite involved ... I’ve actually done something that I can use to guide me in the back of my mind when I’m teaching.

The integrative nature of the program enabled Gloria to engage with the theoretical content, investigate its relevance to practice and, even more importantly, is something that she will retain and reference as a teacher. Similarly, Narelle commented in the integrated approach – ‘the stuff I’ve discovered in this program has made me think like a teacher’.

Una also found the theoretical component of the program valuable ‘as a person, just to know these things and to think about them’. Nonetheless, as a pre-service teacher, theory made her realise ‘you’re not always going to be going in just that one direction’. What theory does is to open possibilities. Hannah made a similar comment when she said *Mentoring* had not changed her as a teacher but had had an impact on her as a person because it connected her ‘to various points in society’. Olivia found

theory helped her to understand people and specifically ‘the behaviour of students’. These pre-service teachers found the theoretical component of the course valuable to their professional development as teachers or as individuals. There were, however, students who had a different response.

Amy’s expectation of *Mentoring* was that there would be a direct correlation between program content and classroom application, it ‘would have something about mentoring programs for kids, about how you could break through to them’. While this was not the case, she found made it ‘an effort to link theory and examples’. Alice commented that while she found specific theoretical constructs interesting, nonetheless ‘It was so separate from what we were doing in mentoring’. She explained that this may have resulted from the fact that she had not previously ‘approached anything in quite that way before ... I never really thought about it in terms of things that could relate to teaching’. One of research participants categorised students who did not relate to the theory as ‘those who didn’t get it’. These students, she argued, focused on classroom strategies and had what she called the ‘show me your lesson plan’ approach to teacher education, which she felt was ‘missing the point’.

## Reflection on Specific Theoretical Perspectives

As well as general comments regarding the integration of theory and practice, students also made reference to the way they used specific theories to understand their practice as mentors and future teachers. In the following discussion, each of the theories is first briefly introduced before examining students’ interaction with this theory in their work as student mentors. The theoretical components examined here are those overwhelmingly selected by students.

### *Phenomenology*

The phenomenological approach adopted in the program was based on the work of Schutz (1964, 1970), Schutz and Luckmann (1973) and Berger and Luckmann (1966). Phenomenology was presented as a framework through which individual experience could be examined using key concepts, such as, ‘life-world’, ‘definition of the situation’, ‘ideal types’ and ‘stocks of knowledge’. Introducing students to notions of phenomenology was risky because it is not a popular way to approach pre-service

teacher education and was unfamiliar to all students. Moreover, the unfamiliar discourse of phenomenology was potentially confronting. Not all students were comfortable with this framework and some found the readings particularly challenging. Nonetheless, many others adopted the framework as a way of understanding their own experiences in facilitating mentor workshops and the experiences of the first year students they mentored. Nonetheless, integrating theory and practice from this perspective was initially difficult for some students, as Alice explained.

I couldn't put phenomenology in a practical context for the longest time. You know, I thought that the mentoring was over here, and phenomenology was over there. I thought it was just a theory, but now, I can refer to things like the definition of a situation easily.

Over the course of the semester, however, Alice found specific concepts useful in understanding her own practice and phenomenology became 'a frame that I'm viewing my mentoring in'. Alice moved from viewing practice and theory as separate to considering phenomenology as a valuable frame of reference for her practice and as a possible reflective frame for teaching. Gloria was unlike Alice in that she found phenomenology immediately relevant because she said it was like 'you already know that kind of stuff, but you do need to be reminded'.

Phenomenology, I love it, because I got it. It was an eye-opener letting you know where things are coming from. When I'm talking to my friends in the program, we can actually just bring it up in normal conversation. It does actually lend itself to very normal conversation.

Phenomenology had a broad appeal for Gloria because of its 'ordinariness', its 'normalcy' and hence its ready application to practice and its inclusion in 'normal conversation'. Moreover, it also alerted Gloria to the fact that individuals define situations subjectively based on their whole 'stock of knowledge'. It was also a relevant way of framing classroom experiences because of its focus on the particularity of experience.

Phenomenology is about thinking really closely about little things that most people really do miss. Most people don't fully know what they're bringing to a situation. It's, you know, your

whole historiography of yourself ... what you bring to that day really depends on what has happened to you until that moment.

Not only does phenomenology focus on biographically determined situations, for Gloria it directly relates to professional practice through its ability to sensitise – ‘it just makes you aware of the things that are going on in the class’. What she found particularly valuable was the notion of ideal types because she recognised the variety of students she would teach and said, ‘I don’t want to just make them these ideal types. I really want to be able to treat them like individuals’. Cathy considered phenomenology as a lens through which teachers can see the unexpected.

Teachers always make generalisations about where the class is from ... making those assumptions is so damaging, because you have this view where you don’t really see the kids who are different from your ideas, because you don’t really expect to see them.

Teachers who are only ‘whole-class oriented’ risk adopting a collectivist perception which acts as a camouflage, preventing teachers seeing the unexpected in their students.

Hannah’s response to phenomenology was to find ‘the ideas exciting’. Not only that but ‘Schutz has helped me a lot in that I can say, “I can see why this is happening”’. Again, there is an emphasis on the phenomenological focus on situational analysis which was perceived as assisting individual educational practice.

I will refer to phenomenology later on, maybe sometimes just in my own thinking more than anything else. I know now that I can think, ‘Oh, that’s what Schutz refers to’, rather than, ‘Am I the only one who thinks this way ... only one who thinks about these things?’

Theory, specifically Schutzian phenomenology, provided Hannah with the reassurance that she was not alone in her thinking. From her experience, Hannah provided an example of how phenomenology gave her a way of understanding classroom experiences when she realised that she expected Year 7 students to be shy because this was her own experience of school. However, she said when she went on prac, ‘I thought, this isn’t the classroom that I pictured it to be’. She said:



Schutz's interested in exactly what happens and why, and I think that's going to be useful to me as a teacher. It's seeing the workings of the situation. Schutz is so interested in the fine details.

Amy commented that 'every teacher should learn about phenomenology' because it encourages thinking about individual biases. She explained 'a lot of people have this one perception of everything ... you don't just have one way that everything works all the time'. Phenomenology, she argued, has the capacity to provide access to multiple world perspectives and so enhance professional practice.

Una found phenomenology difficult to grasp, 'I didn't really get it until so late on in the program.' What made phenomenology difficult was the esoteric discourse. Nonetheless, Una did find the 'definition of a situation' a relevant way to understanding professional practice. For example, she explained that in the classroom this might mean different teachers defining something with the same group quite differently, and how those different definitions will seem 'okay' to different people. Una used the example of the conflicting definitions of the mentoring situation made by her companion mentors and the impact of this on the mentor workshops. Una shared the workshop with two other mentors, at 9am on Monday mornings, 'an energising sort of time where you are gearing up for the week ... a new beginning'. However, 'the other two mentors saw it as a drag'.

### *Risk*

'Risk sociology', as conceptualised in the work of Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), was another theoretical lens suggested as a means of examining practice. Beck argues that since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century humans have been exposed to risk on an unprecedented scale. As a result, he contends modern societies are no longer 'class societies' concerned with the distribution of socially produced wealth and related conflicts, but have evolved into 'risk societies' – societies concerned with the distribution, prevention and minimalisation of risk. Giddens takes a somewhat different stance, arguing that it is not that there are greater risks but that it is thought that there are greater risks. The 'youth studies' literature focuses on young people and risk where it is argued, for example, that young people have to negotiate previously unknown risks (Furlong & Cartmel, 1997).

Amy used notions of risk to understand herself in the sense of being the first in the family to attend university and one of only 22% of students from her high school who completed senior school. University was more risky for her because her 'subjective reality' was significantly different from her friends who were not first in the family and who had attended schools where retention was 100%. Cathy, like Amy, appreciated the different perspective that the conceptualisation of risk gave her and which encouraged her to reflect on her practice as a teacher. Theories 'make you pay more attention to how things happen and why high school students are taking the risks they're taking'. She also gained a better understanding of transition which she had previously seen as 'individual for everyone' but now saw as a 'risk' for everyone.

Coming to university is hard because you feel that there's nowhere to go back to. Regardless of whether you've been wanting to go to uni your entire life, when you get there, it's normally pretty different to what you think. You're at risk.

Alice found the concept of societal risk, that is, risk in its 'entirety', more useful than the more narrow 'youth at risk' concept. The notion of societal risk focused not only on the awareness of risk but also on 'ways to manage and cope with those risks'. Risk in the broader sense focused her attention on considerations of, 'what sort of risks you face as a mentor and what sort of risks mentees face as students'. Extrapolating from this and applying it to professional practice implied for her, 'You have to try to search for the sense behind everyone's behaviours'. Gloria applied the notion of risk to professional practice in both mentoring and teaching and argued that it is impossible to warn mentees or students of the specific risks they are likely to encounter, 'because risk is individualised'. Therefore teachers should 'teach students how to make better decisions, how to deal with risks'. The overall benefit for Gloria in studying 'risk' was that 'it just helps you to put each student into perspective, into the context of the world'.

There were some students who were concerned with the negative connotation of the word 'risk'. For example, Hannah saw risk as a problem of labelling: 'it's too rigid ... all you think of when you think of risk is just stopping, stopping, stopping it'. There was, however, also a positive

way of thinking about risk 'like, taking risks as being fine so you grow up to deal with it'. Risk can be viewed as opportunity, as part of the positive transition to adulthood. Alice was similarly concerned with the negative connotation of 'risk'.

We do have a huge desire to control risks ... one thing in the literature is that risk is always perceived as being negative. There are very few examples of risk as positive thing, as opportunity. It's always risk as threat, as harm, as danger, as heartbreak.

As well as integrating theory and practice, Hannah also reflected on the very use of the word and its unnecessarily negative connotations.

## Discussion

Fullan (in Segall, 2001, p. 225) argues that integrating theory and practice in teacher education is a 'desirable, if elusive goal'. It is a balance that Segall (2001, p. 225) argues is still contested and unresolved. The research findings examined in this paper contribute to the debate by arguing that there are 'rich possibilities' (Korthagen et al., 2006, p. 1029) for teaching practice within the university. These possibilities go some way to redressing the theory/practice balance in university-based teacher education. In the case of the current research project teaching practice was afforded to pre-service teachers in their role as mentors facilitating first year transition workshops. In this role students developed pedagogical strategies, became familiar with workshop content, devised lesson plans and evaluated and reflected on these plans through the lens of sociological theories. It was reflection which bridged the gap between theory and practice. Theory was a trigger to reflection and enabled students to convert naïve 'knowledge about' professional practice into contextualised 'knowledge of' practice. This integrative approach to theory and practice does not reduce teacher education to the acquisition of so-called recipe knowledge or what students in this research referred to as the 'show me your lesson plan' or 'text-book' approach. Reflection, as Schon argues (in Hatton & Smith, 1994, p. 35), is a way of distinguishing professional from non-professional practice.

The theories that students encountered in the unit of study were not specific to teacher education. Instead they were general sociological theories

intended to focus not only on individual professional practice but to locate that practice within the wider contemporary society. The research participants provided a snapshot of the kinds of theories they found useful to practice and how these theories were used by them to understand practice. Phenomenological sociology was used by students in a range of different ways. There were students for whom the theory was a frame of reference and helped 'explain the way things are'. It also 'opened possibilities' in the sense that it challenged pre-existing ideas and gave students 'something to explore'. It also induced a professional state of mind in that it encouraged students to 'think like a teacher' and it was something that will stay in the 'back of my mind'. It provided students with an educational discourse critical in the development of professional practice.

Phenomenology also focused students' attention on broad contemporary educational issues, encouraging them to reflect, for example, on the way individual biographies impact on practice. Because of the emphasis on the contextual nature of experience, phenomenology alerted students to the subjective nature of experience and the way subjective experience impacts on context as much as the context impacts on the individual. Within the context of the classroom phenomenology, because it focuses on the 'fine details' of situations, assisted the participants in understanding student behaviour. It was not useful for all students as some found the discourse confronting and this inhibited their 'getting it' as a useful theory.

Notions of risk sociology inclined students to reflect on their behaviour as students and pre-service teachers and from this to extrapolate the risks that their own students confront. Students who engaged with this theoretical perspective embraced the universality of risk which was in contrast to the particularistic 'at risk' approaches they had hitherto encountered. Because of the universality of risk, the participants felt encouraged to develop in their students ways to deal with risk on both an individual and societal level. This was significant because risks could not be foreseen, hence the need to focus on problem solving strategies to better deal with risk. Students also felt that notions of risk gave them a broader understanding of the world of young people and to make sense of what is behind risk. Understanding risk also provided the possibility of seeing some risks as opportunities.

The integration of theory and practice harnessed students' reflective capacity as they engaged in continued evaluation of their contextualised

practice, a practice Bullough and Gitlini (1994) suggest is critical for beginning teachers. Reflecting on their own practice through a specific theoretical lens engaged students in the critical task of ‘self-directed theory building’ (Korthagen et al., 2006). The integrative approach examined here provides pre-service teachers with classroom practice in a supportive environment which encourages reflection and the creation of professional knowledge based on experience.

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## ‘Caution Children Crossing Ahead’: Child protection education with pre-service teachers using a strengths approach

**Angela Fenton**

### Introduction

This paper discusses the early stages and findings of research that explores the use of the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) in child protection education with a cohort of pre-service teachers in Queensland.<sup>1</sup> Although widely used in social work, the Strengths Approach is relatively unknown within the education sector although cross sector possibilities with the approach have been identified (Scott & O’Neil, 2003, p. xv). The research arose from the author’s experience working in child protection and education as well as from literature questioning the knowledge and confidence of pre-service teachers working with children at risk, experiencing or recovering from child abuse (Briggs & Potter, 2004, pp. 339–355; Sachs & Mellor, 2005, pp. 125–140; Singh & McWilliam, 2005, pp. 115–134.). The research presented in this paper aims to explore the potential of the application of the Strengths Approach to child protection education.

The paper first briefly explores key terms and findings from the literature review that was conducted as part of the data collection to inform the whole research project on the current context of child protection education and previous research in this area. The next sections examine, in more detail, the literature pertinent to the Strengths Approach and how this was used to develop the Strengths Approach child protection module used for Phase 1 of the research. Strengths principles and the use of The

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<sup>1</sup> The term Strengths Approach can be used both as the name of the approach as developed by St. Lukes (McCashen, 2005) or as a descriptive term for related practices. Where I use it in the first sense, I use capitals, in the second sense, lower case.

Column Approach (McCashen, 2005, p. 48) are explored in these sections. A methodology section follows, explaining the particulars of the research data collection methods (including the literature review method) and shows how the Strengths Approach influenced the *way* the research was to be conducted as well as being the *subject* of the research. Finally the early data from Phase 1 is analysed in terms of the potential of the Strengths Approach to child protection education.

## Literature Review

### *Terms and approach*

Figure 1 shows the key terms used for the whole research literature review. The decreasing arrow sizes indicate the decreasing amount of literature available in the search circle categories. An early finding was that there was a mass of literature recording the instances and associated problems of child abuse, but less literature formally charting or reviewing successful child protection interventions and even less detailing Strengths Approaches (Higgins, Adams, Bromfield, Richardson & Aldana, 2005). There is no current, refereed information that focuses specifically on the junction of all three spheres, which provided the opportunity to explore this unique area as a research project. The Strengths Approach focus of the research has also influenced the development of the literature review process. This involved the researcher positively acknowledging and viewing the literature available as a resource (a strength) for the purpose of assisting change (enhancing child protection education). Although necessarily critical, the review also aimed to funnel all positive implications derived from the literature into the research. The goal of the review was to assist as well as inform the research.

### *Findings*

The significant quantity of data that was available in the area of child abuse confirmed not only the scope and effects of child abuse globally but also in Australia and specifically, for the context of this project, in Queensland (Kalichman, 1999, pp. 20–45; Keatsdale, 2003, pp. ix-4; ISPCAN, 2006, p. 1–5; Landgren, 2004). The United Nations (UN) *Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children* global study highlights that '150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 experienced forced sexual intercourse or

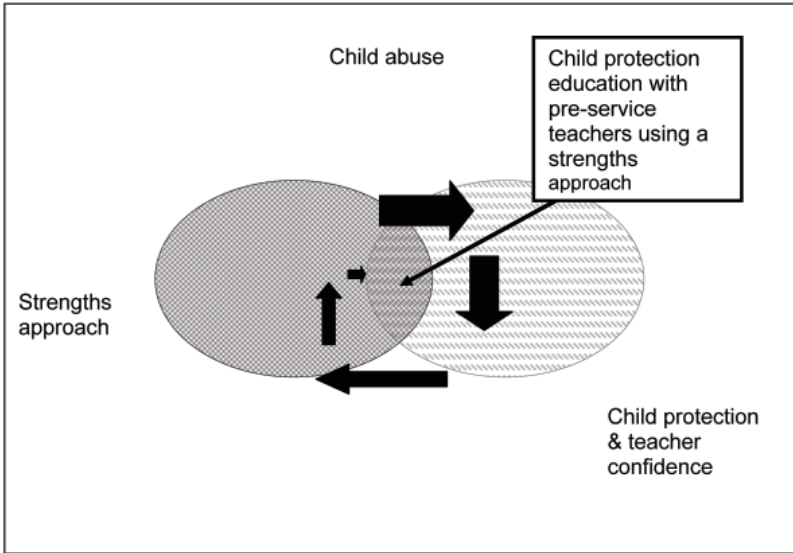


Figure 1. Literature review key search terms

other forms of sexual violence during 2002?. (Section II. B., pp. 9–10) The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) report from the 2005–2006 financial year indicates there were ‘266,745 child protection notifications in Australia’ (2007, p. 1) during this period and specifically for Queensland ‘notifications numbered 33,612’. (2007, p. 2) Child abuse is recognised as the single most important factor in the success or failure of children to ‘thrive’ (McIntosh & Phillips, 2002, p. 1) and in response child protection reforms have been initiated worldwide (Hopper, 2006, pp. 1–55; Education Queensland, 2004, p. 1). Aimed at improving safety for children they have consequently, however, raised debates regarding the preparation of teachers and prospective teachers for dealing with the impact of child abuse (McWilliam & Jones, 2005, pp. 109–120; Walsh, Schweitzer, Bridgestock & Farrell, 2005, pp. 1–94). Lindsay (1999, p. 3) noted that ‘fear, retribution and even repression’ can be ‘undesirable consequences in a professional community’ of ‘well intentioned legal reform’. Even though initial teacher training programs are expected to prepare

pre-service teachers for this area of the curriculum (Kesner & Robinson, 2002, pp. 222–231) research by MacBlain (2006, p. 187) confirms that ‘while teachers took their responsibility towards the protection of children in schools seriously, few felt informed and prepared to deal with a child abuse and neglect issue’.

Teachers in Queensland have a number of roles in regard to child protection. They are required to report to their principal any reasonable suspicion of abuse of students by employees or other students at the school (sexual abuse allegations or allegations involving a principal must be made directly in writing to the Executive Director of Education). If teachers suspect abuse outside of the school environment, they are to keep records and report to the principal any concerns. Teachers must obtain a positive suitability notice from the Commission for Children and Young People and immediately notify them of any criminal charge against them and ‘undertake training in student protection procedures’ (Education Queensland, 2006; Queensland Catholic Education Commission, 2006). The type and length of required training is not specified, however service training within schools is regularly offered and varies from online/DVD resources to ‘face to face’ one day workshops run by Education Queensland trainers. Generalised statements are made within Education policy documents as to the role of teachers in ‘providing a safe and supportive learning environment, and preventing and responding to harm or risk of harm for all students’ (Education Queensland, 2006) and ‘working to develop proactive approaches to student protection’ (Queensland Catholic Education Commission, 2006).

Research by Watts and Laskey (1997, pp. 171–176) more than a decade ago found that Australian teacher preparation in child protection was ‘minimal’ and Whiteside (2001, p. 31) more recently found that child protection programs were still ‘spasmodic and selective’. In the United Kingdom, over three quarters of degree programs gave less than 3 hours of child protection training (Baginsky & Macpherson, 2005, p. 318) and the situation is similar in Australia (Laskey, 2004, p. 2). Most degree programs offer a child safety lecture as part of an education subject or separate workshops on the topic (often by an external child protection training provider). McCallum (2001, pp. 1–17; 2002) found that even after such mandatory reporting, training pre-service teachers were still ill-prepared

to fulfil their teaching responsibilities. Hodgkinson and Baginsky (2000, pp. 269–279) conclude that the lack of time apportioned to the subject of child protection results in teacher preparation being limited to a superficial coverage of the topic. Baginsky's further research (2003) calls for child protection to be integrated throughout initial teacher training rather than as an adjunct, 'one off' workshop arguing that the approach used in child protection is crucial for affecting the self assurance of prospective teachers. MacIntyre and Carr (2000, pp. 183–199) formally reviewed over thirty (mainly American) programs and while they concluded overwhelmingly that 'child abuse prevention programmes can lead to significant gains in children's, parents' and teachers' safety knowledge and skills', the time required to fully explore these programs was beyond the scope of the average workshop timeframe. McCallum (2003, pp. 1–13) received positive participant feedback in a trial using 'mentored learning' for child protection. Scenarios featuring children, teachers and families were explored by pre-service teachers with guidance provided by a professional. Baginsky, (2003) surveyed newly qualified teachers in regard to their needs in child protection training and confirmed that 'case studies which emphasised... good practice' were viewed as very useful along with general abuse information and reporting mechanisms. In social services, the Strengths Approach (McCashen, 2005) uses a similar 'one on one' approach to work with actual child protection cases with the additional emphasis, however, on using the skills of *all* involved to find solutions. McCashen (2005, p. 186) claims the approach can be successfully applied to a variety of situations in child protection and promotes the time saving and empowering use of the existing strengths of the group (resources, processes and skills) as opposed to the 'expert' prescribing new ones be learnt. McCashen promotes, therefore, the 'value adding' action of assisting people to build upon methods, processes skills and resources that have been previously successful (perhaps in other contexts). In conjunction with this, however, he acknowledges the need to build upon existing and develop new strengths, but is specific that articulation of foundational strengths is a priority in progressing through the Strengths Approach. Scott and O'Neil (2003, p. xv) have found success in using the approach across a whole child protection organisation and indicate that a Strengths Approach may have a wider application and be valuable for cross sector practice. While

the adaptation of the Strengths Approach may appear possible for education, a translation of the approach into child protection educational theory or practice is yet to be formally researched or fully explored. This research seeks to explore the potential transfer of the Strengths Approach to child protection education with pre-service teachers.

## The Strengths Approach

The Strengths Approach has gained prominence over the last decade in social services. However, the approach is relatively unknown in education perhaps because rather than being a new Child protection program, specific published resource or even a new theory, the Strengths Approach has developed from the social service sector as a new *way* of addressing issues using existing programs, resources and theory. As a development in individual and organisational practice, it largely emanates from a positive psychology background and refers to the approaches labelled as ‘strength’ or ‘strengths-based’ practice, models or frameworks (Beilharz, 2002, pp. 1–10) now common within the field of social work and therapeutic intervention work. Connected to and influenced by a wide variety of pre-existing social service approaches, strengths approaches are particularly aligned to narrative and family therapy as well as solution focussed and community capacity building approaches (McCashen, 2005, pp. 2–4; Hodges & Clifton, 2006, pp. 361–376).

The Strengths Approach has arisen in reaction to ‘deficit models’ of practice, explains Seligman (1996). Scott and O’Neil (2003, pp. 22–41) highlight the danger of lingering in a deficit mentality that focuses solely on the ‘problems’ of social issues such as domestic violence, drug and child abuse and concentrates attention and efforts on what is wrong with children and families. A deficit approach, they claim, risks disengaging practitioners and families from solution focussed outcomes. Children experiencing child abuse for example are frequently portrayed as victims, sufferers and patronisingly responded to as ‘poor things’ in need of rescuing by experts. This not only places the social worker in a place of power as the rescuer but it also simultaneously disempowers and denigrates the child to being portrayed as a long term victim and sufferer, helpless and hopeless in the public vision (Scott & O’Neil, 2003, pp. 22–41). Within the limited time available for child protection education in degree programs,

content is often limited to a deficits model where teachers are given the negative facts, figures and symptoms of child abuse and expected to follow the rescuer role. There may be little exploration of the teacher's role beyond mandatory reporting.

Wayne McCashen (2005) defines the Strengths Approach as an alternative 'approach to people that is primarily dependent upon positive attitudes about people's dignity, capacities, rights, uniqueness and commonalities'. (p. v) In the social service setting, the client rather than the social worker is responsible for the process of change (McCashen, 2005, p. 9). This would transcribe into an education context by viewing the child as being able to action change for themselves with the teacher available as a human resource (a Strength in the process) for facilitating this change process as opposed to making the changes *for* the child. The approach is characterised by social justice principles of 'power with' (rather than over), respect and 'ownership' (McCashen, 2005, p. 19–29). Critics of the Strengths Approach (Clabaugh, 2005, pp. 166–170; Saleeby, 1992, p. 302) note that in the 'evangelical' enthusiasm of the Strengths Based approaches, practitioners should not forget the approach still expects them to be responsible for facilitating the process of change and that this still constitutes a power dynamic that the approach claims to be trying to avoid. Clabaugh claims this can make the Strengths Approach difficult to implement and that it often lacks clear instructions. He concludes, however, 'Does that mean it isn't worth a try? No, the obstacles noted above stand in the way of all meaningful improvements. So let's investigate and learn more about the limits and possibilities of strengths-based education. But we should also remember the importance of doing no harm as we experiment' (2005, p. 170).

The Strengths Approach explains the principle of 'power with' as utilising power for positive progression together on an issue. 'Power with' actions and interactions therefore require transparency on the part of the practitioner, self-determination for those experiencing the issue (i.e. abuse) and the sharing of resources, skills and knowledge of all involved to focus on solutions (McCashen, 2005, pp. 31–42). In child protection education using a Strengths Approach, the pre-service teacher then would learn to be able to identify and enable their own and children's strengths and resources as a way of addressing child protection issues. This may involve sourcing information on the type of abuse involved and appropriate reporting procedures but would dedicate more time to exploring the feelings of the

children, considering how to build resilience and self-esteem as well as using the approach to collaboratively design practical strategies to prevent or address child protection situations. The sense of fear and lack of knowledge of pre-service teachers regarding child protection (McBlain, 2006, p. 187; Watts & Laskey, 1997, pp. 171–176) may be escalated by the use of a deficits approach (focussing on the statistics of child abuse) and lessened when concentrating on practical child protection strategies studied within an education subject.

Table 1. ‘Capacity Building from a Strengths Approach’\*

<b>Deficit/Pathology (Structuralist) Models</b>	<b>Strengths (Post Structuralist) Models</b>
The focus is on problems and causes	The focus is on solutions, possibilities and alternative stories
The client is viewed as someone who is damaged or broken by the problem	The client is viewed as someone who is using their strengths and resources to struggle against the problem
The worker (professional) is the expert	Both the worker and client bring expertise
The process is driven by the worker	The process is driven/directed by the client
The goal is to reduce the symptoms or problem	The goal is to increase the client’s sense of empowerment and connection to the people and resources around them
The focus is on insight/awareness	The focus is on the ‘first step’ to change
The resources for change are primarily available through the worker	The resources for change are the strengths and capacities of the client and their environment

\* © David Lees, 2004, Lighthouse Resources, Brisbane. Qld.



David Lees (2004, p. 3) presents a useful table (see Table 1) showing the comparison between strengths based and deficits models which also help to more finely describe the Strengths Approach. The Structuralist and Poststructuralist (Barry, 2002) labels are perhaps an unnecessary binary, due to the format, but do serve to date the theoretical emergence of the approach nevertheless. To assist in the translation of the approach to education the substitution of the word 'child' for that of 'client' and 'teacher' for that of 'worker' when reading the table is suggested.

With the alternative terms substituted, the potential for using the approach in education starts to become tangible almost immediately. Lees' table shows the Strengths Approach as a model of practice that is grounded in a specific way of viewing the world and valuing the child as opposed to espousing a specific knowledge base to be taught (2004, p. 3). The Strengths Approach is therefore presented as a standpoint on how to address issues and while recognising that this in itself constitutes a specific knowledge base, the practical application of the approach is wide so that individuals with differing philosophical or political persuasions could adopt it as a practice without conflict. The Strengths Approach builds on a value base and directs to a specific way of working that complements to many philosophical beliefs. The exploration and actualisation of strengths by teachers and children together in order to find solutions to issues is therefore recommended, rather than the exposing of the problem and weaknesses by the expert teacher conducting their own needs analysis. Collaborative recognition of issues and negotiated plans rather than authoritarian determined changes and imposed outcomes are in essence the practical differences between the Strengths and 'deficits' or 'pathological' approaches (Lees, 2004, p. 3).

McCashen (2005, p. 48) suggests progressing to solutions by the use of 'The Column Approach'. Five steps are presented in a table format which the worker (or in this case teacher) can fill in as they progress through working on an issue. The steps act as a guide for using the Strengths Approach to an issue. McCashen (2005, p. 91) points out that variations to the names and number of headings are encouraged so that the general principles and process of the approach are clear to all involved and the process personalised. While remaining flexible therefore, the process should still include:

1. Outlining the issues (or stories) from the perspectives of all involved, i.e. the child, family, teacher/school and protection agency

2. Creating a picture of the future or visioning what would be a good outcome to the issue
3. Recognising the strengths (skills, resources, personal characteristics) of the people involved in the issues and times when the issue has been resolved or the situation improved
4. The availability of other resources to assist
5. Planning and designing steps and strategies to reach the solution or goals.

A range of resources will be important to assist with the implementation of The Column Approach. Picture prompt cards, journaling tools, children's story books and adult reference books are practical tools with flexible ideas for use with adults and children. For example, *Bear cards* (St. Lukes & Veeken, 1997) and *Strengths cards* (St. Lukes & Veeken, 1999) may be used to help children identify their own feelings and emotions as well as skills and resources (strengths) through guided interaction with these resources. Children are encouraged to explore pictures of bears with a variety of expressions of pictures depicting strengths such as kindness or curiosity for example. The aim of identifying strengths is to positively raise self-awareness, self esteem and resilience to assist in problem solving, including assertive protective behaviours. The resources, that are user friendly with open ended use, underline the Strengths Approach belief that tools for change should be accessible to all literacy levels and respect and value input from adults and children on issues. Behind the seemingly simplistic resources is the assertion that it is crucial to hear and value the perspectives of children and that child appropriate resources therefore are vital in providing the means to explore, record and use the strengths of the child in addressing child protection issues. More than just a set of stickers and cards, such resources are important prompts that promote engagement with an approach that is inclusive and personalised.

## A Strengths Approach Child Protection Education Module

The resources, Column Approach and principles of the Strengths Approach were foundational to the development of the Strengths Approach Child Protection Module for the research. This module is the 'site' for

the research. The child protection education module was designed with findings from the literature review in mind. A thirteen week module was integrated throughout an existing Early Childhood Education subject and taught 'face to face' over a semester. The Strengths Approach, as a theoretical framework for teaching and addressing moral and ethical issues such as child abuse, was explained gradually over the course of the module. *The Strengths Approach* by Wayne McCashen (2005) was used as the recommended text for the subject. The module included exploration and practice using the Column Approach with education based scenarios.

The module included a mixture of whole group formal lecture presentations, small group and individual tutorials and workshop sessions supported with texts, readings, a subject web site and discussion board. Students kept a portfolio of subject materials which included a personal journal entry each week as part of the formal subject requirements. Additional discussion board entries were encouraged (although not compulsory) and were organised into topics of discussion including child protection and the Strengths Approach. Formal presentations firstly outlined child abuse statistics, types of abuse, indicators and signs of abuse, mandatory reporting and policy requirements (a common feature of most adjunct child protection training formats). Smaller group sessions explored the pre-service teachers own perspectives and understandings of child abuse and protection. Child abuse and child protection literature was discussed, real life scenarios were used and presentation content was debriefed. The cohort was encouraged to use the online discussion board or place a journal entry in their subject portfolio regarding their own information, stories and perspectives on the issue of child protection to add to the formal subject materials. Pre-service teachers examined this information as part of the first step of the column approach, that of exploring the issue of child protection.

To assist with visioning and planning for positive outcomes (step two of the Column Approach) students were introduced to the Strengths Approach resources which included journaling tools and *The scaling kit* (St.Lukes, 2007) that can be used to record progression in an issue or to set goals and aims. In addressing the scenarios presented, pre-service teachers were encouraged to use the Column Approach to start to vision how child protection situations might be different if issues were resolved. The cohort was encouraged to do this verbally in discussion as well in written responses to a set scenario and finally by online discussion once issues had been discussed.

In week seven of the module the pre-service teachers used the *Bear and Strengths cards* and stickers (St.Lukes, 1997; 1999) to identify their own strengths verbally and in a poster format. This aligned with column three of the Column Approach (identification of strengths). They discussed their strengths with a partner and subsequently entered a summary of these into the column template when addressing written scenarios. The process was debriefed with emphasis on learning how to use the resources with children to help them to identify their own strengths and to raise self-awareness, self esteem and resilience.

Regulatory information from the Queensland Commission of Children and Young People and Education Queensland (2004) as well as sources of additional child protection, resources and strategies from organisations such as the Abused Child Trust (2003), National Association for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (2005) were presented to the pre-service teachers. Students explored available resources such as story books, computer programs and a variety of personal safety programs being used in schools and were encouraged to share with each other resources they had accessed and found useful. This links directly to the fourth column of The Column Approach (other resources).

A main point of difference with the Strengths Approach Child Protection Module and the more traditional, adjunct workshop was the inclusion of suggested child protection strategies for working with children (column 5 of the Column Approach). Strategies to help raise resilience and self-esteem by the identification and use of teacher and child strengths were introduced. The use of stories, music, art and drama were demonstrated in the module as ways of encouraging children to express emotions and feelings (a child protection strategy to help with the identification of issues). Pre-service teachers listened to a range of stories written for use with children explaining the topic of child abuse and discussed their use in the classroom. Dolls, puppets and picture prompt cards were used in demonstrations to model practice in identifying expressions, role-play situations and examining personal strengths with children.

## Methodology

The primary aim of the research was to document and analyse pre-service teacher responses to the implementation of the module outlined above,

with a focus on the use and potential of the Strengths Approach for child protection education. Additionally, a Strengths Approach research methodology was explored. The research consists of three phases. The phases were designed to gather feedback during the module implementation after a school practicum and approximately twelve months after implementation. Data was collected by recorded, 'face to face' individual interviews, focus groups and by the use of an electronic discussion board that allows anonymous postings.

### *Participants and researcher*

The cohort for the research was a small group of nineteen pre-service teachers who agreed to be research participants. All pre-service teachers completing the subject agreed to be participants in the research. All have participated in the Strengths Approach Child Protection Education module within an Early Childhood Education, semester long, subject. The researcher (author) developed and taught the module and also planned and conducted the research. The combined role of the researcher and teacher has particular ethical and methodological implications, particularly as students are being assessed during the subject. As part of the ethical clearance for the research a suitably qualified assessment moderator (separate from the research project) was available to participants. This was to allow a review of student assessment to take place should any participant feel disadvantaged in the subject assessment by participating and commenting (or not) in the research project. The moderator was not used by any participants in the project.

### *Data collection*

The aim of matching research methodology with the research topic was challenging given the absence of a visible Strengths Approach to research (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006, pp. 1–11). It presented the opportunity, however, to develop and adapt research techniques with a Strengths Approach to data collection and analysis.

An 'Open View' rather than 'interview' method was developed to collect 'face to face' responses from individual participants. A semi-structured interview, using a conversational style, was adapted to increase the opportunity for collaboration between researcher and participants (crucial in a

Strengths Approach). The ‘Open View’ uses the Strengths resources such as picture and word prompt cards and scaling sheets to initiate and record responses. Participants are included as ‘co-searchers’ and they make decisions as to the method of recording, setting and structure of the ‘Open View’ as well as choosing the Strengths tools they wish to use.

The focus groups lasted approximately thirty minutes with six to eight participants and the researcher as facilitator and were very similar in style to traditional focus groups. As with the ‘Open Views’, however, the groups were also collaboratively organised, (one group chose to meet at a local café, another wished to utilise a tutorial time) and strengths tools were available if needed by the group. One focus group chose to use the scaling sheets, for example, to demonstrate their growing knowledge of the Strengths Approach when it arose in the group discussion. The sessions were introduced as informal conversations (facilitated by the researcher) around the central themes of ‘child abuse’, ‘child protection’, ‘teaching’ and ‘The Strengths Approach’. This contrasts to the more traditional focus group using predetermined and ordered questions set and asked by the researcher. The issues discussed in the focus groups ranged from a group that discussed a case of a local teacher aide dismissed for child pornography allegations and how the teachers had to address the issue with children and parents. Another group debriefed the ‘identifying your own strengths’ session from the child protection module and talked about how this felt and if this could be adapted for use with children.

### *Data analysis*

The Column Approach is used as an interpretive framework allowing the researcher to organise preliminary data and articulate connections in the data to the Strengths Approach. The column headings provide the categories for analysis i.e. responses that explored the issue, responses that visioned solutions, responses that explored strengths, responses that referred to other resources and responses that referred to strategies. The broad column categories guide the collating of data into manageable sections and allow the researcher to draw upon their own strengths (practitioner knowledge, experience and critical reflection and interpretation) in relation to each section when analysing the research participants responses to the electronic discussion board entries, focus groups discussions or

'Open Views'. It allows the researcher to chart participants' engagement with and views of the various stages of the Strengths Approach. The researcher therefore is role modelling the use of The Column Approach as a Strengths Approach practitioner, using it as a tool to address an issue of concern to them personally. In this case The Column Approach is not used to address a child protection issue but rather to find a solution to analysing research data authentically.

Responses are analysed to note the extent that participants used particular sections of The Column Approach. Sub-groupings also emerge within the sections (column headings) in respect to common interests or concerns expressed, i.e. responses to particular resources or responses relating to the same 'story'. The reasons, implications and significance of the use of particular sections and subgroupings will be explored further in subsequent phases of the research by both the researcher and participants.

The preliminary findings from and discussion of Phase 1 data is the focus of the following section of this paper. Phase 2 will record and analyse discussion board and interview responses from the cohort following a school practicum and will focus on the application of the module into a practical situation. Phase 3 will also gather responses from the cohort a year after the module implementation and aim to record any changes or additions to the earlier data collected after this period of time.

## Findings: Pre-Service Teachers' Engagement in Child Protection Education

The Phase 1 findings and discussion reported here are limited to data collected from the research participants' electronic discussion board and focus groups. Although all of the participants have chosen to identify themselves in their postings, their quotes and excerpts have been numbered rather than named in this document. Columns 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 refer to The Column Approach (McCashen, 2005, p. 48) as outlined previously.

### *Exploring the issue (Column 1)*

For pre-service teachers who are working, or about to work, in Queensland schools and early childhood settings, the contemplation of encountering children who have experienced child abuse appears to be daunting

to an extent that it discourages action or engagement with the issue in the classroom. Participants explained in initial discussion board entries (after learning of abuse figures):

I do not feel confident in teaching ‘child protection’. I have taught my own children, probably frightened the daylight out of them, but not sure how I would approach this issue in a classroom. (Participant 1, discussion board)

I don’t really feel comfortable with teaching and addressing child protection. I guess that for a lot of people it would be a very sensitive issue and sometimes easier to just ‘not go there’. (Participant 8)

I don’t know how to handle that situation either. Are we at some stage thoroughly trained and taught how to handle the situation? I think my hair would stand on end having to think of what to say and then do. Where do we as pre-service teachers (and eventually teachers) learn to deal with these matters? (Participant 15)

All participants expressed concerns with the issue of child protection and most also expressed a sense of being ‘overwhelmed’ (Participant 6, focus group) by the child abuse statistics. Baginsky and Macpherson (2005, pp. 317–330) received similar feedback from pre-service teachers before completing various types of ‘traditional’ (non-Strengths based) child protection training. Confidence was shown to have increased after training and again after teaching practice but ‘there was (*still*) a significant number of respondents expressing some anxiety and confusion, even among those who had indicated that they were confident’ (p. 320). An opportunity exists in this research to add to Baginsky and Macpherson’s work (2005, pp. 317–330) by recording and comparing responses from participants in this project before and after teaching practicum and additionally charting the effects of using a particular type of child protection training (Strengths Approach) and the relationship of this to teacher confidence. Gathering data from the use of a new model of child protection development may add weight to and, importantly, add possible solutions to the hypothesis put forward by McCallum (2002, p.15) that ‘current (*traditional*) models of teacher professional development ... are ineffective in the preparation of teachers to implement the conditions set down by the Rights of the Child’.



Participants responded to abuse statistics and information (United Nations, 2006, Section II. B, pp. 9–10; AIHW, 2007, pp. 1–2) presented in the module. Responses to informal information from philanthropic, church and charity groups' publications (The Abused Child Trust, 2003) were more detailed than those in respect to the more formal reports detailing global and national statistics. Participants often made connections between the informal information and their own experiences whereas responses to the larger statistics were limited to comments such as 'Oh that's a lot isn't it?' (Participant 10, focus group). In particular, pre-service teachers commented on case studies featured on web sites which translated statistics into a more immediate format. Focused information and recommendations specifically related to education were far more successful at engendering interest and a willingness to engage in discussion about child protection. For example, the Abused Child Trust (2003) presents information that 'a child is abused every fifteen minutes' and that investigations translate 'as approximately 1 child in every 2 classrooms'. Participants commented emotively on these figures – Participant 14 for instance turned to another student in a focus group and commented 'wow and that's just the investigations too, not everyone gets investigated, just do the maths!' – which initiated a detailed discussion of the investigation procedure. Initial analysis suggests that the large scale figures of child abuse may be difficult to relate to on a personal level and may be a factor in the disengagement expressed earlier by participants. Workshops limited to only outlining abuse figures and reporting procedures may therefore risk disengaging pre-service teachers from action in child protection. Preliminary analysis also confirms 'teacher vulnerability' (McWilliam & Jones, 2005, pp. 109–120) towards child abuse statistics as presented in the child protection module and highlights the need for continued research to examine the critical factors influencing teachers actions (and inaction) in relation to child abuse (Walsh, Schweitzer, Bridgestock & Farrell, 2005, pp. 1–94). Specifically, it appears that, unlike the broader statistics, informal case studies which translate statistics into more immediate timeframes and personalised contexts need to be used in training as they enable engagement with the prevalence of abuse for pre-service teachers on a personal level and connect the figures with the prospective role of a teacher more successfully.

The group discussion prompted some participants to describe on the electronic discussion board their own experiences, perspectives and knowl-

edge in relation to child abuse and teaching. There were six responses in this section and considering that the pre-service teachers are yet to complete their final practicum and their formal teaching time is limited, this was a larger than expected number. All the responses reflected a sense of distress at the situations described, wanting (or feeling obliged) to assist but unsure as how to proceed.

A couple of years ago, I had to work one on one with a year two girl. The teacher told me that the girl's dad had abused her and to watch and listen if she says or does anything different. I must say I felt extremely uncomfortable being alone with that child. I kept thinking 'oh the poor thing', and wanted to tell her she would be okay, that there was help for her. But as far as I know no allegation of abuse was substantiated with evidence. I wish the teacher had not put me in that position. (Participant 7, discussion board)

On my last prac however, there were a number of students who suffer from neglect. In particular, many students had come from broken families, terrible living conditions and horrifying home lives. (Participant 12, discussion board)

While I was on one prac the teacher told me that a child in the class had recently stated to her mother that she had been sexually abused by a family member. As I reflect upon the situation, I realise that I tried to deny that this child had been abused. It was not a case of not believing the child, but I just did not know how to react to this child anymore. Also, I did not want to think of the horrible experience and the negative impact it would have, and had already had, on that child's life. (Participant 7, discussion board)

These unexpected number of experiences mirrored findings by Baginsky and Davies (2000) who also found a 'small but significant number of them [pre-service teachers] experience direct involvement with a child protection case while on placement in school'. An implication arising from these findings may be that child protection training should be included early in the degree program before major practicum blocks.

These entries as well as the case studies prompted many of the pre-service teachers to explore their own feelings in depth in relation to the case stud-

ies and to identify and examine personal child protection issues of their own. Some entries, however, were limited (particularly in early weeks of the module) to comments such as feeling ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘fearful’ with examining child protection issues (Participant 8, discussion board). The findings confirmed previous research findings of teachers feeling inadequately prepared to deal with child protection issues (Whiteside, 2001, p. 32) and additionally elaborated that although the *feelings* were common among the group the *reasons* for these feelings differed for each individual and depended largely on their experiences of child abuse or protection. The complexity of issues expressed relating to child protection for teachers validated the need to explore child protection over a period of time longer than a one-off workshop. This aligns with work by Laskey (2004, p. 2) that criticises initial training of two hours as ‘manifestly inadequate, considering the complexity and emotional impact of child maltreatment’ and that teachers’ personal needs should be recognised in any child protection training design. The cumulative sharing of individual experiences and listening to others each week allowed the pre-service teachers in this project to more fully explore the issue of child protection (column 1 of The Column approach) rather than limiting discussion to the number of abuse cases. Personal experiences and case study information seem to make it harder for pre-service teachers to ignore the likelihood of encountering children in situations of abuse in their careers or to have thoughts of ignoring the issue as irrelevant for their practice. The project may eventually be able to add weight to the findings of McIntyre and Carr (2000, pp. 183–199) that longer programs are more successful in changing teachers’ behaviour and be able to test claims by Laskey (2004, p. 18) that what is required for child protection education is a ‘program extending over one semester in pre-service teacher education’.

Participants further responded in focus groups to general child protection issues and responses were both personal experiences and responses to cases reported in the media. All participants made at least one comment during the focus group sessions as opposed to only one or two student responses to the large group session examining child abuse statistics (a common feature of adjunct child protection workshops). The three responses below are examples of comments that initiated extended conversations within focus groups.

One of my male cousins was accused of ‘molesting’ his four year old daughter. (Participant 11, focus group)

He was taken (adopted brother) into the custody of family services and placed for adoption at a few months of age. He was neglected when my parents were asked if they would care for him, however his mother had 12 months to get him back if she showed a change of ways or then my parents could adopt him. Even though I was quite young (2) the day we picked him up, I can still remember the mass of rashes he had, and how sick he was. (Participant 2, focus group)

I read that the boy had a broken arm and nose and had 271 bruises, some quite old. (Participant 9, focus group)

Responses tended to focus on the negative effects of child abuse, particularly in respect to cases reported in the media. Although participants expressed a common sense of despair in respect to cases, this did not seem to be to the extent that Sachs and Mellor (2005, pp. 125–140) describe as ‘child panic and the media’. Nevertheless, the extended participant conversations indicated that Sachs and Mellor are correct when they conclude that in respect to child protection issues and teachers ‘low morale affects teaching practice’ (p. 36), or at least the preparation for it.

### *Visioning solutions (Column 2)*

Some discussion board entries appeared to be operating within column two of The Column Approach where participants describe a goal or start to vision what a good outcome to an issue may be. These entries occurred after the extended discussion of child protection issues, module activities on goal setting and during weeks six and seven of the module.

... (I am) passionate about helping children who have endured such cruel experiences, however, now perhaps (after researching the issue further for my negotiated learning project) I am more concerned and aware of how I will help them. (Participant 2)

As adults, and especially parents and teachers, it is our responsibility to ensure the safety of those children in our care. These children look to the adults in their lives for nurturance, guidance, support, protection and most of all love. (Participant 9)

I think it is such an important issue that it cannot be ignored and that no matter how uncomfortable and fearful I may be about addressing it in the future (in my classroom), it would be negligent not to. At the same time, I think that it's important to get all the facts right before jumping to conclusions. (Participant 13)

After extended discussion many pre-service teachers were able to express their hopes for child protection even when some of their initial responses had expressed disengagement with child protection issues. These later responses reflected a personal connection and an acknowledgement by all the participants of their responsibility to protect children despite concerns or negative experiences expressed in earlier responses. The responses add to findings by Webb and Vulliamy (2001, p.73) that despite the difficulties of child protection issues, practising teachers believe it is their responsibility to address these issues as they 'are concerned about the well-being of the whole child'. From initial findings in this research it seems that pre-service teachers also share this view.

Participants demonstrated extended exploration of child protection issues and practiced goal setting in their entries (column 2 of the Column Approach). They showed the positive psychology attributes of 'goal directed determination, and pathways, or planning ways to meet goals' (Hodges & Clifton, 2006, p. 15) which appeared to work well in moving participants beyond exploring the issue of child abuse and into planning solutions. The use of goal setting in this educational setting mirrors success using the strategy in social work settings of The Strengths Approach (Hodges & Clifton, 2006, pp. 361–376; McCashen, 2005; Scott & O'Neil, 2003; Beilharz, 2002). The inclusion of personal goal setting in child protection education training, which appears to be missing in most traditional adjunct workshops, would seem therefore to be an important factor in moving pre-service teachers towards a solution focussed outlook on child protection.

### *Exploring strengths (Column 3)*

While many responses described the negative issue of child abuse, noted by all was the concern for the children and adults associated with abuse incidences. This could be considered as a Strength (column three of The Column Approach) in dealing with the issue of child protection. The ac-

knowledge by pre-service teachers that child protection is an issue they need to be aware of, and their expressed caution with child abuse cases, could also be taken as positive strengths.

More explicitly responses about strengths were also recorded following the module session on identifying and enabling personal strengths. Participant 3 in a discussion board entry notes 'my strengths are that I am a kind and caring person, I am a good listener, I have a positive outlook on life and always try to find a funny side to lighten the moment'. All students have been able to identify personal strengths in the session although some of the group expressed that this was slightly uncomfortable or that they 'are not the kind of person who likes to talk about myself a lot so sometimes I find it a little difficult'. (Participant 3) The need to define and clarify the whole Strengths Approach was also a recurring theme in Phase 1 for participants. Comments, early in the module, such as 'I know you've mentioned it a few times, but I'm still not sure exactly what it means' (Participant 4, focus group) articulated the need to continue to explain and explore the Strengths Approach and its application throughout the later weeks of the module. In addition to understanding generic key definitional terms and the underlying theoretical principles of the Strengths Approach, the Column method may be applied as a particular way of thinking and working through issues. As solutions can vary immensely in the Strengths Approach depending on the issue and people involved as well as the complexity of issues, strengths and perspectives of those involved practitioners must be accounted for in addressing situations. Additionally the range of Strengths Approach resources and strategies must be introduced carefully so that they are used, as intended, as additional tools rather than as constituting the only way to implement the approach in practice (McCashen, 2005). The depth of the Strengths Approach required it to be explained to participants in the project in multiple layers over a period of time. The module progressed from brief definitions of the approach and role modelling the approach to real examples of Strengths Practice, identifying individual strengths and resources before attempting to address scenarios using the Strengths Approach. For the successful implementation of a Strengths Approach to child protection training in the future an extended period of time for teaching and learning would seem necessary and would help to address the criticism that the approach often lacks clear instructions (Clabaugh, 2005, pp. 166–170).

### *Resources and strategies (Columns 4 and 5)*

Some participant responses outline particular resources and strategies for working with child protection issues in a teaching context including the human resources of children's families and other teachers.

I believe that it is for this reason that teachers need to know the students in their classrooms and the families that they come from in order to attend to children's needs. By developing relationships with both families and students, teachers can gain insights into backgrounds of the families to find out what they value and the way the family works. If children's needs in the home are not being met, the teacher needs to know this to ensure that the students time in school is one that is safe, supportive and protected. (Participant 14, discussion board)

Similar to many responses to the St. Lukes resources (and strategies involved in using them), Participant 5 comments 'I like the cards and the book (The Strengths Approach) it is easy to understand and I could actually see myself using the cards a lot with kids'.

Some responses explored strategies implicitly whilst expressing child protection concerns.

I understand it is important to watch for signs of abuse and diligently report any concerns. But on the other hand it is important not to spread 'gossip' about something that has not been proven. (Participant 7, discussion board)

I had to be careful how I handled situations which involved these students, especially with the manner in which I spoke to them or how they were disciplined. I believe that it will always be a challenge to teach students who have been abused or neglected as each student is different and their circumstances are always different. (Participant 17, discussion board)

These type of responses were often at the end of discussion board 'conversations' with other pre-service teachers exploring issues and appeared to take into account other participants responses. The module would seem to allow the pre-service teachers the opportunity and time to explore not only different perspectives on child protection but to also 'think out' and adapt their own plans of dealing with child protection issues. Whiteside

(2001, p. 35) puts forward the need to include training ‘that will help adults deal with disclosures ... as well as discussions about mandatory notification’ which has also been confirmed as useful in this project. In addition, however, the findings appear to point out the value of using case studies and scenarios to enhance pre-services exploration of perspectives, strategies and resources with these issues and highlights the call from Laskey (2004, p. 18) that these should be ‘core components’ of child protection training and from Whiteside (2001, p. 36) that ‘training needs to include practical, hands on activities ... as well as strategies that will enable them to feel confident in dealing with disclosures’.

## Conclusion

The translation of the Strengths Approach from a social service context to child protection education has been the main focus of phase one of this research. A new Strengths Approach child protection module was designed and implemented by the researcher and research participants’ responses were recorded and analysed. Initial findings of the research have included the need to continue to clarify the theoretical underpinnings of the Strengths Approach both in respect to pedagogy and research methodology throughout the subject. The Column Approach (McCashen, 2005, p. 48) was used both in the child protection teaching module and in the analysis of pre-service teacher responses.

Although some participants found the identification of strengths a little uncomfortable and the definitions of the approach needed elaboration throughout the module, participants explored the issue of child protection in depth and responded to child abuse case studies and fellow pre-service teachers’ experiences. Participants were able to set goals for child protection and responded positively to the Strengths resources used in the module, as well as being able to develop strategies for dealing with child protection situations. Initially, the participant responses to child abuse and protection mirrored those found in the literature in this field such as ‘heightened anxiety’ and ‘fear’ (Singh & McWilliam, 2005, pp. 115–134; Watts, 1997; McCallum, 2001, pp. 1–17). After completing more of the module, however, participant responses appear to indicate that the opportunity to vision, explore strengths, resources and strategies in child protection (missing from more traditional, adjunct child protection workshops)



is valuable for increasing pre-service teacher awareness and confidence in child protection education.

Phases 2 and 3 of the research (following teaching practice) are still to be completed but early findings would indicate that the claim by Hodges and Clifton (2006, pp. 361–376) that using a Strengths-Based framework has potential beyond the social service sector that is just beginning to be realised seems to be correct. The Strengths Approach may indeed be an encouraging new way to increase confidence for teachers especially in fulfilling their child protection role in schools. Encouragingly, the Strengths Approach appears to be helpful, at the very least, to pre-service teachers in the much needed area of child protection education. Participant 19 (discussion board) explains:

I think that the strengths based approach offers a way of thinking about how we react to certain situations and how these situations make us feel ... The thing that I like the most about what I have learnt so far is the idea of changing the frame. Through changing the frame, it gives us a whole different way of thinking about who we are and what is possible for us.

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## Examining teacher responses to a professional learning program addressing learning disabilities<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Under the 'blueprint for government schools', Victorian state educational policy requires schools to identify and provide effectively for the wide array of individual needs and abilities of all students (Department of Education and Training, 2003). Despite this policy commitment, the needs and educational potential of many students are frequently overlooked or inadequately met. Students with learning disabilities, which have an estimated population prevalence rate of approximately 10%, are a particularly neglected group (Prior, 1996).

Teachers regularly encounter students who experience difficulties in learning and school engagement. Leaving aside issues of school educational provision and environment, the reasons for this are often readily apparent. A student may have a lower general cognitive ability, an identified or diagnosed disability, or major social and emotional stressors. However, teachers also frequently encounter students of at least average apparent ability whose learning performance is unexpectedly low or at best markedly uneven. It is likely that many of these students have learning disabilities. These students may also show avoidance, discouragement or reduced engagement in at least some areas of learning.

While teachers have expertise in supporting students over a range of ability levels, they often lack adequate knowledge about learning disabilities and their implications for classroom practice. The underlying problems of

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students with learning disabilities can be hard to identify, and so responses are frequently delayed and/or ineffective. Unless they have knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by students with learning disabilities, teachers will continue to lack the necessary expertise to accommodate their individual learning needs. Addressing the needs of students with learning disabilities is further intensified by issues of definition and knowledge dissemination. This commonly occurring situation reflects a lack of systematic education about learning disabilities both during pre-service teacher training and in on-going professional learning.

## Definition and Terminology

The definition of learning disabilities has been a source of controversy and considerable debate among researchers and professionals since the term 'learning disabilities' was first introduced in the United States by Samuel Kirk in 1962 (Hammill, 1990; Kavale & Forness, 2000). The debate ranges from what diagnostic criteria should be employed to identify students with learning disabilities (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2002) to whether or not learning disabilities even exist (Ysseldyke, Algozzine, & Epps, 1983; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Shinn, & McGue, 1982).

Despite more than 30 years of debate over its validity, there has been a reluctance to alter the conceptual definition of learning disabilities. While there have been some minor changes, the most widely cited definition of learning disabilities is the United States Office of Education (USOE) 1977 definition, which remains the definition used by the United States federal government. The USOE defined 'specific learning disability' as:

... a disorder in one or more of the psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning disabilities which are primarily the result of visual, hearing or motor handicaps, or mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage (USOE, 1977, p. 65083).

Hammill (1990) asserts that the USOE definition was developed for the limited purpose of determining eligibility for special education funds and was not intended to be a comprehensive conceptual definition of learning disabilities. As such, Hammill argues that the definition developed by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) best describes the nature of learning disabilities. The NJCLD defined learning disabilities as:

... a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition of and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviours, social perception, and social interaction may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance) or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences (NJCLD, 1988, p. 1).

Taken together, both the 1977 USOE and the 1988 NJCLD definitions affirm the notion that learning disabilities describe underachievement in one or more academic areas which are the consequence of some intrinsic neurological problem and not the result of other physical conditions or environmental influences (Kavale & Forness, 2000).

Adding to the confusion surrounding the use of terminology is the frequent use of the terms 'learning disability' and 'dyslexia' interchangeably. While learning disabilities is predominantly used in the United States, dyslexia is the more commonly used term in the United Kingdom (Cook, 2004). Dyslexia is the most common type of learning disability and refers to specific deficits in reading, writing and spelling. More specifically, the International Dyslexia Association (2002, p. 1) has proposed the following definition of dyslexia:

... a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterised by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

In Australia, definitional issues are further compounded by a tendency to use the term 'learning difficulties' instead of 'learning disabilities'. While these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably to refer to the same group of individuals, they have also been applied to different groups of individuals (Chan & Dally, 2000). This situation creates further confusion about which group of individuals is under consideration. Chan and Dally suggest that this misunderstanding can be attributed both to a lack of consensus about the meaning of learning disabilities and to the multiple explanations of the causes of the learning problems.

The inconsistencies in terminology have implications for attempts to integrate the research as well as for determining the prevalence of learning disabilities in particular areas or schools. In 1990, a statement on learning difficulties in children and adolescents produced by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) differentiated learning difficulties from learning disabilities. 'Learning difficulties' was described as a generic term referring to children and adolescents with developmental and academic problems that are the result of one or more factors including intellectual disability, physical and sensory impairments, emotional disturbance, inadequate environmental experiences and a lack of appropriate educational opportunities. In contrast, the term 'learning disabilities' was reserved to describe children and adolescents who exhibit developmental and academic problems which are significantly below expectation for their age and general abilities. As such, learning disabilities are suggested to be intrinsic in nature and are not the secondary result of intellectual disability, physical and sensory impairment, or emotional disturbance (NHMRC, 1990).



For the purpose of the current paper, learning disabilities are defined as unexpected underachievement in one or more areas of academic achievement such as reading, spelling, writing or mathematics which is assumed to be associated with specific cognitive impairments such as poor phonological processing, working memory problems, or visual processing problems (Prior, 1996). Furthermore, learning disabilities are distinguished from learning difficulties in that underachievement is attributed to some intrinsic characteristic that is neurological in origin and not the result of below average cognitive ability, sensory deficits, cultural and environmental influences, or inappropriate teaching.

## Risk and Protective Factors

When learning disabilities are not recognised or effectively addressed during school years, individuals can face significant and usually lifelong disadvantages including unemployment, juvenile delinquency, criminal conviction and mental health problems (Goldberg, Higgins, Raskind, & Herman, 2003; Raskind, Golberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999; Smart, Prior, Sanson, & Oberklaid, 2001; Wong & Donahue, 2002). This disadvantage occurs despite the fact that many people with learning disabilities possess areas of high-level ability. Although certain individuals with learning disabilities achieve well and may overcome their disadvantages, the majority endure frustration and underachievement, often leading to diminished life quality and unexpressed potential. For example, a longitudinal study in the USA of individuals with learning disabilities found that 41% were unemployed at the time of the 20-year follow-up study (Raskind et al., 1999). This study also reported an extremely high incidence of problems at school experienced by this group.

The effects of the life-long nature and resistance to intervention of learning disabilities are less well recognised in Australia than other countries such as the USA, where the phenomenon is acknowledged in law. In the USA many students who have learning disabilities successfully complete high school and pursue higher education (Cook, 2004; Reiff, Ginsberg, & Gerber, 1995). In Australia, however, while specific learning disabilities are generally not assessed nor well understood, it is well known that early school leavers frequently have low literacy and numeracy achievement and become disconnected from the school environment (DEET, 2000; Mc-

Millan & Marks, 2003). Prior (1996) suggested that many of these early school leavers are also likely to have a learning disability.

In contrast to the risks faced by many people with learning disabilities, key protective factors that have been identified in the literature as critical for academic success for all students, and particularly for students with learning disabilities, are school connection and sense of control (Raskind & Golberg, 2002; Skinner & Wellborn, 1997). Teaching practices that increase these success attributes may positively change retention rates for students who have learning disabilities. For many such students, school connection and sense of control are the very characteristics for which they are currently at risk (Prior, 1996; Wong & Donahue, 2002). Where learning disabilities are unrecognised and unaddressed it is difficult for students to acquire the self-awareness to take control of their circumstances. Furthermore, a longitudinal study of successful adults who have learning disabilities (Raskind et al., 1999) concluded that personal characteristics including self-awareness, proactivity, perseverance, emotional stability and the use of effective support systems could lead to successful outcomes. Goldberg et al. (2003) suggest that another important element of success was the ability of a person with learning disabilities to compartmentalise the disability as only one facet of their life, rather than seeing it as an all-pervasive aspect of their identity.

## The Current Study

Given the significant incidence of learning disabilities, it is likely that most teachers regularly encounter one or more students with learning disabilities in their classes. An important opportunity thus exists for schools and teachers to identify and build strengths in students with learning disabilities as a counter to the substantial risks they may otherwise face. In order to fully engage and assist students with learning disabilities, all schools and teachers need to acquire the skills and knowledge to understand and identify learning disabilities, utilise research-informed teaching strategies, and participate in, and contribute to, a culture of on-going professional learning.

The aim of this paper is to examine the interim responses of teachers to a professional learning program developed by the authors to strengthen the skills and knowledge needed to more effectively support students with learning disabilities in mainstream classrooms. We propose that the pro-

gram, 'Engaging and Empowering Students with Learning Disabilities/Dyslexia' (Cunningham, Firth, Skues, Munyard, & Sullivan, 2006), addresses a gap in the existing capacity of many schools to fully provide for students with learning disabilities as part of their professional obligation towards all students.

### *Participants*

Two outer urban state education school clusters<sup>2</sup> in Melbourne, Victoria, participated in the study. One cluster was selected for the study because the research team was approached by that cluster's educator/convener, who perceived the need for building the capacity of the cluster's teachers to address the needs of students with learning disabilities in that particular group of schools. The other cluster was identified by its supervising region because it was likely to benefit from the program and because very few students from the schools in this cluster came from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Both clusters were in low socio-economic areas, one in an older suburb, the other in a new suburban growth area. Because some of the schools had already finalised their professional learning programs for 2006, the schools in each of the clusters were divided into two groups as agreed to by school principals. Hence, one group from each cluster completed the professional learning program in 2006 and the remaining two groups in 2007.

Each school was invited to send a team of three to six staff to participate in the professional learning program at the agreed times. Whilst the program was targeted primarily at classroom teachers of Years 5–9, participants also included school leadership and specialist staff such as principals, psychologists and special education teachers. This reflected our intention to support a coordinated whole school approach rather than a selective or specialist approach to assisting students with learning disabilities. The majority of attendees were classroom teachers. Members of leadership and specialist teams attended where possible within their obligations.

A total of 93 school-based personnel were involved in the professional development program, which consisted of four sequential sessions over

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'cluster' is used by the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development to describe a geographical grouping of one or two secondary schools and four or five primary schools in the government system.

a period of two weeks. Twelve of the participants (e.g. school principals, student teachers) attended irregularly and did not complete evaluation forms. A small number of school-based personnel also missed single sessions (e.g. due to illness) and did not complete evaluation forms on some days<sup>3</sup>. Of the remaining 81 participants that took part in the majority of sessions, the number of evaluation forms completed following any one of the four professional learning sessions in both clusters ranged from a low of 47 to a high of 75. From an overall maximum of 324 possible evaluation forms (from 81 participants across four sessions), 244 were completed and returned (75%). This included 65 that also provided structured feedback at the end of the final session. Given that numbers attending specific sessions did vary slightly, this percentage (i.e. 75%) will likely be an underestimation of the true response rate.

### *Materials*

The professional learning program was a revised and refined version of a previous program (see Firth & Cunningham, 2004, for a description of the original program). The program, comprising six modules, was intended to increase the capacity of mainstream teachers to better meet the needs of students with learning disabilities. Table 1 provides details of the content of each module together with a brief rationale for its inclusion. Modules were designed to use a variety of teaching and learning approaches including direct teaching, collaborative learning, video presentations, role plays, interactive discussions, sharing of expertise, and demonstrations of inclusive technologies. A feature of the professional learning program was that presenters of the program modelled effective classroom teaching practices for students with learning disabilities throughout the delivery of the program modules. The program also provided opportunities for discussion and review of participants' in-school application of program learning and resources.

### *Procedure*

We delivered the professional development program, which consisted of four sessions over a six-week period, to the four different groups at different times during 2006 and 2007. The timing of delivery of the program

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<sup>3</sup> No record of specific absences was taken.

was determined by school principals and was dependent on the schools' other professional learning commitments. Two of the presenters have over 20 years of teaching experience in English or Mathematics across primary and secondary schools. The other two presenters, one of whom is a clinical psychologist, had a background in psychology studies. At any given session, the number of presenters ranged from two to four and always comprised a mixture of those with primarily an educational and a psychological background.

Participants attended four sessions for a total of 15 hours. The initial full day of six hours covered the first three modules of the program (see Table 1). Three half-day sessions, each of approximately three hours duration, followed the initial day and sequentially covered the remaining three modules listed in Table 1. Numbers attending each session ranged from 15 to 25. Following the initial day, the half-day sessions were spaced at approximately fortnightly intervals. It was expected that teachers would trial newly-acquired strategies from the program between each of the sessions so that these skills would be gradually incorporated into classroom teaching practice. Each new session began with participants sharing what they had trialed and how it had worked. The fortnightly scheduling also provided opportunities for mutual consultation and sharing of perspectives and expertise between participants and presenters. In this way, on-going partnerships between the researchers and the participants of the research might be established.

Structured feedback was obtained through evaluation sheets distributed at the end of the first and last sessions. Using a five-point rating scale, participants were asked to rate four specific dimensions of program performance, namely (1) program content; (2) presentation style; (3) presentation pace; and (4) quality of activities. They were also asked to evaluate that day's session overall. The ordinal rating scale was as follows: (1) = very poor; (2) = poor; (3) = average; (4) = good; and (5) = excellent. In the final session, participants were asked to evaluate the entire six-week program on each of the four dimensions and at an overall level.

Participants were also invited to write comments on each of the dimensions and on the overall program for that day in terms of what worked well and desired changes or suggested improvements. For sessions two and three, participants were only invited to provide comments on aspects of the program that

worked well and areas that could be improved. This meant that structured feedback was not obtained for these sessions. On every occasion, participants were given the opportunity to provide this feedback anonymously. Obtaining anecdotal feedback through discussion and interaction with the participants was also a planned component of data collection. (A copy of the structured evaluation sheet is included in an appendix.)

Table 1. Overview of modules: engaging and empowering students with learning disabilities

Module	Rationale
<p>1: <i>Definition of learning disabilities (LD)</i>            Definition of LD: permanent, neurologically based, varied individual manifestations</p>	<p>Teacher knowledge is currently limited; potential for adverse consequences for students with learning disabilities</p>
<p>2: <i>Identification and assessment</i>            Informal and formal classroom screening and assessment tools can be used</p>	<p>Needs of all students need to be known in order to be met within mainstream classroom practice            LD not always immediately obvious – students often use their strengths to disguise disability            Identification has implications for student engagement</p>
<p>3: <i>The experience of having learning disabilities</i>            Video and personal presentations by people identified as having LD            Characteristics of successful adults with LD</p>	<p>Builds direct empathic understanding of LD            Role models for students in meeting the challenges of LD and achieving their potential</p>

<b>Module</b>	<b>Rationale</b>
<p>4: <i>Building a sense of belonging and a sense of control</i></p> <p>Importance of inclusive classrooms and relationship building</p> <p>Student empowerment – LD is only one aspect of them as a person</p>	<p>Optimum learning occurs when there is a strong relationship between teacher and student and when there are positive teacher beliefs</p> <p>Schools’ obligation to value diversity, and foster student capacity for independent engagement in learning</p>
<p>5: <i>Instructional strategies and curriculum differentiation</i></p> <p>Effective teaching styles, incorporating appropriate accommodations into classroom</p> <p>Teacher practice in adjusting classroom tasks to include those with LD</p>	<p>Demonstrates how accommodations can be routinely incorporated to benefit all students, rather than being a separate task for teachers</p> <p>Builds knowledge and skills about LD for teachers</p>
<p>6: <i>Technology and creating change</i></p> <p>Demonstration of inclusive technologies</p> <p>Creation of individual school Action Plans</p>	<p>Empowers student capacity to work independently and broaden options</p> <p>Minimises previous obstacles to effective learning</p> <p>Operationalisation at school level of knowledge gained through the program</p>

## *Results*

The total number of evaluations received across the four sessions was 244. The quantitative results reported here are based only on the structured evaluation forms completed at the end of the professional learning program and hence relate to overall evaluations of the 15-hour program. When reporting on the qualitative results, all participant evaluations were included.

The number of participants completing evaluations at the end of the final sessions was 65, which represents a response rate of 80%. The results for the evaluations of each of the four program dimensions at the conclusion of the program are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Percentages of ratings for program dimensions (n = 65)

<b>Program Dimension</b>	<b>Very poor</b>	<b>Poor</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Good</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
	%	%	%	%	%
Content	0	0	6	32	62
Style	0	0	9	34	57
Pace	0	2	11	34	54
Activities	0	2	15	32	51

For the first dimension, namely *Program content*, 94% of participants rated the content as either good or excellent, with the remaining 6% rating it as average. Some comments about the content were:

This has made me think about my teaching style and evaluate whether I am catering for possible learning disabled students in my grade.

All useful to my own teaching and to how I am going to create change at my school.

Improved as it went along – making sense of previous theoretical background.

The second and third dimensions, namely *Presentation style* and *Presentation pace*, were rated similarly by the participants. Presentation style was rated as either good or excellent by 91% of participants while a further 9% rated this dimensions as average. Presentation pace was rated as either good or excellent by 88% and as average by 11%. Only 2% reported that the presentation style and pace were poor.

While the majority of participants expressed satisfaction with the presentation style and pace of the program, some indicated a desire for more interaction and discussion. Example comments included:

Very presenter focused.

Discussion/sharing really helped.

Typical positive comments for *Presentation pace* were:



Easy to follow and listen to.

Fast paced but necessary.

These were countered by remarks such as:

Bit slow.

Hard to get so much information into such a short space of time.

The last dimension, namely *Program activities*, attracted the most criticism. Despite 83% of participants rating the activities as either good or excellent, 15% rated the activities as average and a further 2% rated this dimension as poor. Several participants suggested improvements including:

Weren't many (activities). Some more sharing of ideas from others and ideas from presenters would be good. Ones we had were good though.

A little mundane in terms of most activities were reading tasks. Videos weren't too bad. One was hard to hear.

More commonly, comments were positive, for example:

Great demonstration on reading and writing program online.

Participants were overwhelmingly positive in their rating responses for the program overall. Ninety-two percent of respondents rated the overall program good or excellent and a further 8% rated the overall program as average. Not a single respondent rated the program as poor or very poor. Selected overall feedback comments include:

Very practical ideas ... inspiring for the future. I have seen many kids in middle/senior school just lost and disengaged.

Helped me to understand why some students appear to have grasped concepts but do not perform well when tested formally. Understanding the frustration and sense of hopelessness that these students experience.

More practical stuff that could be used in the classroom.

Practical ideas for informal assessments are most welcomed. At last I feel as though there is something I can do to identify those students with learning disabilities.

Enlightening – providing a very different way of looking at children in my grade.

Just more practical would have been perfect.

I'm a student teacher about to start. This session proved invaluable.

Good to reflect on how students with learning disabilities may feel.

I have already changed my teaching to accommodate some of the strategies you have informed me about.

While written comments were provided by participants in response to each of the four dimensions and the overall rating there was overlap in many of the themes discussed under these headings. Hence, we explored recurring patterns for common themes. Overwhelmingly the themes analysis identified aspects of the program that were perceived to be particularly positive. One recurring theme was that the information provided was relevant because it offered new knowledge about learning disabilities that directly informed teaching practice (that is, it was practical). As one participant described, 'practical ideas for informal assessments are most welcomed. At last I feel as though there is something I can do to identify LD students'. In addition, the program manual was seen to be a resource that could be taken back to the classroom and consulted in future.

Another recurring theme suggested that the variety of presentation styles and formats was a positive characteristic of the program. In particular, participants described positive responses to the range of different presenters (including a guest speaker with LD) and the variety of teaching modes, including power-point presentations, videos, group discussions and activities. As one participant observed: 'it was great to have different presenters and modes of presentation', whilst another commented that 'I enjoyed the variety that was presented; power-point discussion, group work and guest speaker'. The interactive nature of these activities was also seen to be particularly positive in that 'we could frequently ask questions and presenters would come back to them'. Taken together, these characteristics appeared to provide participants with greater insight into the nature of LD as suggested by 'the guest speaker as well as the other afternoon activities gave an idea of how it feels to be a person with LD'

and a sense of empowerment to assist students with learning disabilities, 'at last I feel as though there is something I can do'.

However, not all themes indicated positive characteristics, and some recurring comments suggested areas for potential improvement. In particular, some participants suggested that the sessions progressed too fast, whilst others stated that there was too much information to process properly. These themes potentially suggest areas for improvement in the current program and for future professional development programs.

In addition to the structured evaluation responses, the interactive nature of the program generated intensive discussion and professional sharing about the issue of learning disabilities. During initial sessions, participants confirmed that the area of learning disabilities was generally not well understood in their schools and that professional training and resources were largely lacking. In particular, participants frequently commented on how an understanding of the permanent nature of the neurological processing problems of students with learning disabilities changed their perceptions and their approaches in working with students in their classrooms. They expressed great interest in the information and materials provided and most participants were strongly engaged in the program's activities and opportunities for collegiate discussion and sharing. As the sessions progressed, participants frequently reported that they now had the skills to identify students experiencing learning disabilities and also reported changes to their teaching practice.

## Discussion

Ongoing professional development is an important factor for facilitating the implementation of evidence-based teaching practices in schools (Klinger, 2004). The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which schools and teachers would actively engage in a professional learning program designed to support the needs of students with learning disabilities. Based on the largely positive evaluation responses across the four dimensions of program content, activities, presentation style and presentation pace, as well as responses to ratings of the overall program, the results of the study confirm that the program was very well received by teachers and other school-based personnel across both the primary and secondary sectors.

Participants also provided qualitative comments about these same dimensions, which were examined for recurring patterns. These patterns included themes integral to notions of professional learning, namely gaining new knowledge and associated practical skills, as well as reflection on one's own teaching practice. This is consistent with previous research that has found that teachers are interested in professional development programs and associated learning experiences that are directly applicable to their own teaching practices (Hardy, 2004). Similarly, Englert and Tarrant (1995) emphasised the importance of teachers making connections between abstract theoretical concepts and practical applications. It could be that the current program managed to achieve close to an optimal balance between theory, practice and reflection. The fortnightly timing of the sessions may have further supported time for reflection and time for the adoption of gradual changes in classroom practice.

The qualitative analysis also indicated that group discussions and interactions with the presenters were seen as particularly valuable aspects of the program. One reason why these characteristics might be particularly important is that they provide the opportunities to share information, which can lead to teachers adjusting their teaching practice. For instance, Scott and Spencer (2006) suggest that teachers who believe that students may not benefit from adapting the curriculum may gain insight from the presentation of research findings and the opportunity to discuss this issue with their colleagues. Similarly, providing opportunities for reflection and sharing ideas with colleagues about how to meet the needs of students may result in improved teaching practice (Weiner, 2003).

A related explanation of participant engagement throughout the program was that the program addressed students whom participants readily identified but around whom little, if any, clarity existed. Once they became aware of the permanent nature of the neurological processing problems associated with learning disabilities, participants readily acknowledged that ignorance, confusion, and lack of appropriate provision had generally prevailed, adversely affecting their sense of empowerment to assist students with learning disabilities. In fact it seems that this new knowledge gave rise to teacher need, or even 'hunger', for information and strategies to identify and assist students with learning disabilities. In other words, the knowledge acquired in the initial stage of the program seemed to pre-

pare participants to engage in acquiring the necessary skills and expertise that formed much of the content of the remainder of the program. Once definitional clarity around learning disabilities was established, participants seemed eager to trial the suggested screening tools for learning disabilities and make accommodations and changes to their classroom practice.

While the results of this study provide preliminary support for the need for professional learning relating to learning disabilities, the study had a number of limitations. The fact that the authors of the program were also evaluating the participant responses creates the potential for bias. Given that school teams were invited to participate on the understanding that these teams would then deliver the program in their own schools, future examinations of participant evaluations conducted independently of the authors are warranted. A related problem is that the results reported here were based on author-generated feedback sheets, rather than a previously known and validated questionnaire. In addition, given that sample selection at the cluster level was not random and that selection of participants was left to individual schools, the extent to which the sample is representative of teachers is unknown. Hence the findings reported here require cautious interpretation.

The major limitation of the study was that the findings reported in this study relied entirely on comments and observations made during the sessions or on participants completing feedback sheets immediately at the end of a session. Program evaluations are frequently positive post program, yet do not provide any empirical evidence that the professional learning gained during such sessions actually translates into meaningful and sustained changes in the classroom. While some evidence of changed practices was apparent, based on shared feedback at the beginning of each of the sessions, the extent to which teaching practice may have been influenced and sustained in the longer term was not determined. Longitudinal studies, including a control group and using a variety of teacher and student data collection methods, are needed. Such studies could monitor specific changes in classroom practice whilst simultaneously monitoring changes in outcomes for students who may have learning disabilities. Furthermore, unlike the current study which was unable to make group comparisons because of participant anonymity coupled with the limited nature of the feedback sheets, future studies might compare differences in

the effectiveness of the program across different subgroups (e.g. school sectors, gender).

The professional learning program reported here required schools to release participants for 15 hours on four regular school days. As such, involvement in the program meant a significant commitment of resources for the participating schools and also had the potential for disrupting the day-to-day learning of students due to frequent absences of their mainstream classroom teachers. Many schools simply do not have sufficient resources for such a program. One alternative would be to ensure professional learning programs focusing on students with learning disabilities were mandatory in teacher training courses. In the interim, however, future research needs to determine which program elements are essential for all educators, and how that knowledge is best acquired. For example, it is possible that clarity of definition of learning disabilities was the critical turning point for participants in the current study. Hence an equally efficacious program might consist of the primary content areas relating specifically to learning disabilities, namely definitional clarity, screening tools and matching accommodations and technologies. Using the newly-acquired knowledge, teachers could develop their own approaches based on their knowledge of student needs and utilising principles underlying effective teaching. In addition, if these content areas required approximately six hours of participant involvement, then the optimal timing for such learning (e.g. a single day or three two-hour sessions at fortnightly intervals) should also be explored.

Despite the limitations of this study, the study does have implications for educational systems. While Victorian government policies such as the 'blueprint for government schools' call for high levels of teacher knowledge and professional capacity to support all students' engagement and success in learning (DE&T, 2003), the educational experience of many students with learning disabilities has remained far less than optimal. Under this Victorian state education policy, schools also have a proactive obligation to identify and provide effectively for the diverse needs and abilities of all students. The professional learning program outlined in this study is one example of how policy aims can be directly translated into practice for a group of students with unmet or inadequately met needs. Teacher responses to the professional learning program outlined in this

study confirm that the program potentially addresses an important gap in the existing capacity of many schools to provide effectively for students with learning disabilities.

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## Appendix

### Program evaluation (used at the end of each session)

Date.....

Name: (optional).....

Please circle your response on the scale: **1 to 5** (1 = *very poor*; 5 = *excellent*)

#### (a) Program content

1        2        3        4        5

Comment:.....

#### (b) Presentation style

1        2        3        4        5

Comment:.....

#### (c) Presentation pace

1        2        3        4        5

Comment:.....

#### (d) Activities

1        2        3        4        5

Comment:.....

1. What worked well for you in the program?

2. What changes would you like to see made to the program?

#### Overall rating

1        2        3        4        5

Comments:.....

# **Research collaboration for change**



## Making interpretive knowledge focal: developing an inter-disciplinary dialogue on research into integrated early childhood services

**Sue Nichols and Lana Zannettino**

### Introduction

This paper presents a close look at the early stages of collaboration between two members of an inter-disciplinary research team formed to develop a proposal for research on integrated early childhood services. It lingers on processes often treated briefly in research reports, and describes strategies of reflexive exploration and dialogue that may prove useful to other researchers and professionals wishing to engage in interdisciplinary research and evaluation.

Interdisciplinary research has emerged as the preferred model for investigating collaborative service delivery for the same reasons that inter-agency 'joined-up' programs have been advocated. Complex social phenomena, such as the socialisation of children, and persistent social problems, such as inequities in their life chances, cannot be understood or managed from a single perspective, be it medical, psychological or sociological (Bronstein, 2002; Haddad, 2001; Wright, 2005). Fox-Wasylyshyn and colleagues articulate a hope expressed by many agencies and institutions regarding the promise of bringing together expertise from across disciplines: 'Interdisciplinary teams can develop a collective mass of common knowledge, broaden the scope of research, and produce more clinically relevant outcomes that are sensitive to the realities of practice' (2005 p. 34).

Interdisciplinarity is often distinguished from a multi-disciplinary approach, a distinction which is applied as much to interprofessional relationships in multi-agency settings as to research collaboration in the academy. Malin and Morrow (2007) have analysed activities in one integrated

service setting using Orelove and Sobsey's (1991) definitions. Multidisciplinarity is defined as cooperation which maintains divisions between expertise and lines of accountability whereas interdisciplinarity is described in terms of shared information and decision making. A third category, transdisciplinarity, is defined as a form of 'role convergence' in which knowledge transfer occurs (Malin & Morrow, 2007 p. 452). In this paper, we will not distinguish between inter- and trans-disciplinarity; the majority of the literature referred to uses the term 'interdisciplinary' and our experience of research collaboration described here does not support such a distinction, although it may be useful in a service setting.

A further distinction has been made between disciplines and 'fields of study'. Ivanic (1997) argued for the latter term in her study of students' socialisation into academic writing since academic 'discourse communities' may have greater specificity than the broad construction of the discipline may allow for.

A further objection to the term 'discipline', specifically when referring to the field of education, has been stated by Leonardo (2004) based on the notion that, along with the characteristic object of study, methodology is at the heart of the construct of the discipline. Since the field of education 'is a borrower discipline for its appropriate methodologies', (p. 4) from this perspective it does not qualify to be termed a discipline. This point about the interdisciplinary nature of some fields of study is relevant to our discussion, and applies equally to social work, the other field of study in focus here. However, we will continue to use the term 'discipline' for the reason that it is the inter-relationship between the two which is expressed in the term 'interdisciplinarity'.

## Interpretive Knowledge in Interdisciplinary Research

Perhaps one of the most useful discussions of interdisciplinary research was offered over thirty years ago by educational researcher Hugh Petrie. In this paper, Petrie (1976) discusses the epistemological issues involved in bringing together researchers from different disciplines in order to develop and carry out a research project. He refers to the 'cognitive maps' which disciplines make available to researchers, defining these in terms of

'the whole paradigmatic and perceptual apparatus used by any given discipline' (p. 11). He focuses on the disciplinary 'categories of observation', an aspect of the cognitive map particularly relevant to a research area like education, in which observation of events in natural settings such as classrooms, rather than experimentation, is a key source of evidence. Likewise, social work research, which is practice-based and reflexive in orientation, relies on observations of practice as well as narrative discussions about practice, in the production of data.

Petrie argues that researchers in interdisciplinary teams need to 'learn the observational categories' of disciplines other than their own and that to do this each team member must be willing to 'make this interpretive knowledge focal' (1976, p. 12). This does suggest that the researcher is fully aware of the way her or his cognitive map operates to frame interpretations and can then explicitly teach this to colleagues from other fields. Similarly, in relation to interprofessional collaboration in service settings, Wilmot advises that team members 'need to be clear about their own professional values, and communicate these honestly ... Likewise they need to know the values of the other group' (1995, p. 259). Yet Wilmot goes on to acknowledge the difficulty of consciously knowing values that have been internalised, stating that 'the process whereby people articulate and draw out individual values will be crucial' (p. 264). This suggests that reflexivity is necessary in order to articulate one's interpretive categories or values to others.

Agee's (2002) discussion of multiple lenses for interpreting social settings is helpful for considering the challenge of making interpretive knowledge focal. She points out that '[r]esearchers who enter familiar settings ... begin their work with layers of assumptions' (p. 571). This is perhaps particularly pertinent to researchers working in disciplines with strong links to practice, such as social work and education, in which many researchers have followed a trajectory from working in the practice setting through postgraduate study and into the academy. A crucial task for the researcher is 'to discover and situate his or her own perspectives on a setting' (p. 572). This task is surely even more complex for an interdisciplinary research team investigating a multi-agency setting where each member of the team is simultaneously an insider and an outsider.

Some insights into accomplishing this kind of collaborative interpretive work across disciplinary boundaries are available. One report of interdis-

ciplinary research on an integrated education/health service compares the collaborative processes undertaken by the researchers on the one hand, and the service providers on the other. In the former case, dialogue about interpretive knowledge was a feature of the research process, particularly in the early stages where ‘interdisciplinary and personal communication, philosophical models, and boundaries were issues’ debated in team meetings (Hinojosa et al., 2001, p. 210). This was in contrast to the service setting where meetings consisted of ‘separate professionals report[ing] on their findings or goals with limited discussion’ (p. 214).

Two members of a research collaboration evaluating an arts program co-authored a paper to explore why research conversations in the group so often seemed to run parallel rather than being genuinely dialogic (Gurstl-Pepin & Gunzenhauser, 2002). Although members of the team came from different fields within education (for example, special education, educational leadership, arts), it did not appear that interpretive knowledge was ever made focal. Rather, each researcher came to team meetings prepared to speak to a summary of his or her observations in a site. The authors report that the ability to appreciate an alternative perspective came about, not so much through conversation at team meetings but through moments of encounter with another’s data. It could be that encountering unfamiliar data created the impetus for the researcher to draw on her or his interpretive resources whereas listening to a report did not. This paper also suggests that the possibility of acknowledging and exploring different perspectives through collaborative writing is a fruitful strategy.

Edelsky and Boyd (1993) used collaborative writing as a means of exploring their own research collaboration. While disciplinary differences were not involved in this case, the participants had different roles in the research, one as a practitioner-researcher and the other as an academic researcher. They note:

Collaborative research ... may be a phenomenon with a too-smooth exterior that masks internal contradictions and tensions. ... Because collaborative research is neither simple nor unambiguously satisfying, it is a phenomenon that is best viewed from more than one perspective (p. 5).

For this reason, they chose to write both in personal voices, as ‘Carol’ and ‘Chris’ and as a collective ‘we’. This writing approach is unusual in the literature on interdisciplinary collaboration, which, despite its subject,



is almost uniformly written in a consensus singular voice. Although we have not chosen to write in individual first-person voices for this paper, we do write about each of ourselves as individual contributors to the collaborative process. In this way we hope to more explicitly foreground the interpretive resources that each of us brings to the task of imagining and beginning to carry out research on integrated early childhood services.

## Our Collaboration

The authors are members of a larger inter-disciplinary research team that formed to develop a proposal for research into integrated early childhood and family services (currently under review). Prior to this initiative we had not worked together but, in the process of writing the proposal, we found ourselves to be the two members who spent the most time collaborating, possibly because we were on the same campus and were members of the same research institute. With the other members of the research team we shared a commitment to improving families' access to educational and social services and opportunities. Our collaboration began because of our shared interest in families. Lana has worked with families in both a clinical and research capacity and much of her work, both as practitioner and researcher, has focused on domestic and family violence and child protection and welfare as well as on improving the quality of service responses to families and children affected by violence and abuse (Chung & Zanettino, 2006). Sue's research with families has encompassed families' literacy practices, parents' beliefs about learning and families' interactions with early childhood services (Nichols, 2000; Nichols & Read, 2002).

As Lana is a social work researcher and Sue an education researcher, we saw the *Communities and Change Conference*, with its explicit agenda of promoting inter-disciplinary dialogue between these two fields, as an ideal opportunity to collaborate. We decided to use this opportunity to work in a more exploratory way than is possible when writing a national competitive grant application. We hoped this dialogue could test out some strategies for research collaboration which we could then take to the larger group, should our application be successful.

Our work towards this paper was conducted in the context of very busy lives both in and out of the academy. We developed a method of working in hour long sessions which began with conversation to generate ideas. From a more

open-ended conversation we would then develop particular lines of exploration. We concluded each section by formulating specific structured tasks to achieve before next we met. After the first session, we had always completed writing which then became the focus and springboard for discussion. This writing took the form of short pieces which each of us wrote in an attempt to explicate our perspectives to the other. We collaboratively analysed these texts and then constructed synthesis or summary texts. Examples of both kinds of texts are included in this paper.

### *Structuring our exploration*

To assist us to focus on the research process rather than to generalise about disciplinary knowledge, we developed a set of categories to structure our exploration of the role of disciplinary perspectives in collaborative research. At the time, we were not aware of Petrie's (1976) list of elements of disciplines' 'cognitive maps': 'basic concepts, modes of inquiry, problem definition, observational categories, representation techniques, standards of proof, types of explanation, and general ideas of what constitutes a discipline' (p. 11). Our categories align reasonably closely with Petrie's list (in brackets):

- Body of knowledge (basic concepts and types of explanation)
- Research questions (problem definition)
- Boundaries of attention/framing (observational categories)
- Researcher's positioning in social relations
- Methods (modes of inquiry)
- Sense of audience for research.

We emphasised social relationships more than Petrie, whose primary interests were epistemological.

We also discovered shared orientations towards work which related to our background in professional practice, rather than to our positions in the academy. At one point we realised that this very method of working, even as we were discussing disciplinary differences, foregrounded some shared assumptions about professional interaction. Our working sessions had strong framing through the time limit and the expectation of an outcome, but with space always made for exploration. A client consultation

and a lesson are similar in this regard. On the other hand, there are important ways in which our disciplines and histories of practice have formed each of us, and impacted on how we undertake and produce knowledge through research.

### *Body of knowledge*

Summarising our statements in relation to body of knowledge, Lana located social work within the broad field of social sciences and humanities within which she also includes education. What made the discipline of social work distinctive in her view was its concern with social work practice and with generating knowledge from this practice base. Sue, on the other hand, located herself within the discipline of education rather than locating education within a larger formation. She characterised this field in a way that suggested that it was less homogenous than social work. She distinguished psychological theories from sociocultural theories and aligned herself with the latter. Our discussions relating to possible research questions and boundaries of attention are described below.

Having explored these categories we felt the need to participate in a collaborative research practice similar to what might occur in the proposed project so each of us could see the other engaged in interpretive work. As one of us had recently undertaken a pilot study in an integrated early childhood centre, and much of the data had not yet been analysed, we decided to separately read and respond to some fieldnotes and then to discuss our different interpretations.

While Petric implies a situation where each member of a inter-disciplinary team represents and speaks for his or her discipline, our experience was not so straightforward. Through our discussions, each of us has recognised ourselves as operating both within and against our disciplines (Lather 1991). This means our inter-disciplinary collaboration could never be a situation in which each of us represented and spoke for a singular unitary discipline. In both fields there is a recurring debate about the relative value of theoretical, or academic, knowledge and professional or practical knowledge. In our discussions, we shared examples of instances of the policing of boundaries between the academic and practical domains of our fields.

### *Identifying research questions*

When researchers identify possible research questions, their cognitive maps provide theoretical resources which direct attention to certain issues and provide the language which constitutes these issues as noteworthy or problematic. As part of our exploratory process, each of us identified possible research questions that could direct a study on integrated early childhood centres. This was despite the fact that the team had already developed a proposal which had been submitted for funding. We aimed to prompt discussion about the ways in which our fields of practice and theoretical resources made certain issues related to integrated early childhood centres salient for research. We did not aim to construct a comprehensive list of all possible questions. The combined list is presented in Table 1.

Here the influence of our different disciplinary and practice perspectives is clear. The family-centred and child-centred approaches are key frameworks for working with families and children from the social work perspective as articulated by Lana. The family-centred model seeks to understand and help individuals in the context of their families and uses an ecological systems model of practice that places the family at the centre of concern. Child-centred practice focuses on keeping the interests and wellbeing of children central to the process of working with families experiencing ongoing or entrenched conflict such as may be experienced by families and children affected by separation and divorce. Under this umbrella, Lana names specific practices including mediation, advocacy and counselling as focal for research.

Learning is the central concept from an educational perspective as articulated by Sue and is characterised in terms of relationships, content, practices and curriculum structures. This is not to suggest that family-centred practice is not a concept within education but rather to reflect the particular education focus brought to bear by this researcher.

The terms used for the human subjects of these proposed inquiries are also different. Lana names families, children, agencies and services. These terms differentiate the services from those who are served and maintain the focus on the social work practice which connects the two. Sue uses the general term 'participants'; within this category, she indicates that different positions might be made available depending on pedagogic/curricular structures i.e. learner, teacher, expert, apprentice.

Table 1. Research questions from social work and education perspectives

<b>Social work questions</b>	<b>Education questions</b>
<p>How can a family-centred approach be conceptualised, developed and evaluated in a ‘double partnerships’ approach?</p> <p>How can a child-centred approach be conceptualised, developed and evaluated in a ‘double partnerships’ approach?</p> <p>What are the tensions between these two approaches in working with families and children in a ‘double partnerships’ approach?</p>	<p>What forms of pedagogy are enacted here?</p> <p>What is being taught/learned?</p> <p>How are participants positioned in relation to learning? Are only some people teachers? Learners? Experts? Apprentices? For instance, do practitioners from the different services have opportunities to learn from each other?</p>
<p>What is the role of family mediation and advocacy in the provision of services in a ‘double partnerships’ approach?</p>	<p>What kinds of official and unofficial curriculum structure practice at this site? How are these curricula negotiated?</p>
<p>What is the role of family counselling/therapy in a ‘double partnerships’ approach?</p>	<p>(How) do the social relations and social practices of this site enable participants to construct meaning and engage in authentic learning?</p>
<p>What is the role and significance of anti-oppressive practice approaches with families and children at risk?</p>	
<p>What is the nature and extent of existing cooperation/coordination/collaboration/integration between agencies charged with the role of providing services to children and their families?</p>	

We can read into these questions assumptions about good and conversely problematic practice. From this social work perspective, an evaluative approach is explicitly foregrounded; good practice is family-centred and actively works against oppression. From this education perspective, good pedagogic practice aims to achieve 'authentic learning'. It is implied that a fluid situation in which participants move between learner and teacher identities is ideal.

### *Boundaries of attention*

Integrated early childhood services are sites of practice involving multiple participants, interactions, activities and structuring forces (Knapp 1995). A researcher entering such a site, whether as a participant or a more distanced observer, faces choices of where to focus attention. These decisions, whether undertaken consciously or not, construct boundaries of attention, making some aspects of the site and its happenings more likely to be noticed. Therefore, we decided to reflect on how our disciplinary perspectives might impact on how each of us would frame our observations of integrated early childhood services. Connected with this, we also considered how our professional identities could impact on our interactions with participants at sites, enabling some relationships more than others. This also could impact on what it was possible to know and how knowledge sources might be prioritised.

Sue identified herself as an experienced educator (including early childhood, school and university settings) and explained that if identifiably educational activities were in progress, this could position her in a pedagogic relationship to some participants and a collegial relationship with others. She identified health workers as professionals with whom she might have less shared knowledge and language. She also characterised herself in terms of a longstanding commitment to building knowledge of the complexity of family life.

Lana referred to her experience working with children and families in clinical as well as research settings, and her conducting of projects in the areas of domestic violence and child protection. She identified a reflexive approach that fosters ethical relationships with families as central to her positioning as a researcher. She did not identify any particular relationships which might be more difficult in the field. In addressing boundaries of attention, Lana reflected on the contribution of the social work

research literature to knowledge about interagency collaboration, making the following points:

- Research about inter-agency collaboration in social work has stemmed primarily from the domestic violence literature in Australia, the United States (the 'Duluth' model) and the United Kingdom in particular
- This research has tended to be evaluative in orientation (that is, evaluating the effectiveness of models of interagency collaboration against a number of criteria)
- There is a dearth of research that addresses potential partnerships between families and agencies, meaning that social work research has, even in the area of domestic and family violence, focused on a 'single partnership' (that is, collaborations between agencies and service providers) rather than on a 'double partnership' approach which seeks to develop partnerships between agencies and families as well as between agencies.

From this it appears that social work has well developed frames for observing and assessing inter-agency collaboration. An example offered by Lana was a typology of sources of conflict in inter-organisational collaboration at five levels: inter-organisational; intra-organisational; inter-professional; inter-personal; and intra-personal (Scott, 2005).

Sue did not refer to educational literature on interagency collaboration but adopted a broader frame which emphasised the relationship between practice and discourse. This is consistent with Leonardo's discussion of education's contribution to interdisciplinary research: 'Inquiry into education is informed by the principal of practice' (2004, p. 4). Her notes included the following points:

- Focus on *practice*. That is, what is being (not) done, (not) said in the immediate present in time and space
- Connecting with broader discourses; for example, of family, childhood, risk, professionalism
- Socio-economic status enters only in as much as it is enacted in practice or available in discourse, that is, is not an *a priori* category of analysis.

One possible way to understand differences in researcher orientation, as expressed through this discussion of boundaries of attention, is in terms of the movement between four phases in qualitative field work research: observation – description – interpretation – judgment. When an evaluation using pre-determined criteria is undertaken, the distance between the first and last points (observation and judgment) is often reduced. Sue's less explicitly evaluative approach may extend this distance, keeping her in the descriptive and interpretive phases beyond the time that Lana might have moved to judgment.

Discussing our respective orientations, we came to the tentative position that social work might be a more homogenous research field with stronger framing than education. Lana spoke of the widespread adoption of feminist conceptualisations of gender and power in her field, particularly in terms of theorising domestic and family violence, and the difficulty she had experienced in attempting to introduce divergent conceptualisations, such as brain research, to understand the cumulative and developmental effects of abuse and violence. Sue explained that while there were constant moves to regulate educational discourse and practice, particularly through the specification of outcomes, the diverse nature of the field made hegemony impossible to effect. For example, different levels of education (such as early childhood or the middle years) are constituted as separate sub-fields with different conceptual influences.

## Encounters with Data

In order to further explore the impact of our disciplinary perspectives on our orientations to research, we decided to each look at some examples of data taken from an integrated early childhood site. This was possible because one of us has been undertaking a research project which involves case studies of two such sites (Nichols, McInnes & Jurvansuu, 2006). The data we looked at consisted of field notes recorded at two separate events:

- A TAFE Certificate 2 in Child Care class attended by a mixture of school students and older women. Most of the group were mothers whose children were in the crèche at the integrated service. The group included several individuals for whom English was a second language including some recent migrants and refugees.



- A course on infant care attended by mothers and their babies and facilitated by a community nurse. This group all had English as a first language and were similarly aged though were from diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

These activities, with their focus on parents and young children, and on the guidance of trained personnel from health and educational services, are representative of the kinds of opportunities offered to community members by integrated early childhood services. In both cases, Sue was the observer and so she had the advantage of additional contextual information about the environment within which these events took place. Her field notes include written transcripts of talk which for the most part are verbatim, though abbreviated (... indicates missing talk). The handwritten notes were typed up by a research assistant.

For a more detailed discussion of our interpretive practices, we here focus on our responses to the first event, a session from the TAFE certificate 2 course 'Communication for child care professionals'. The topic for this class was 'Conflict' and the activities included discussion, a drawing exercise, role play in pairs using the script 'I feel ... because ...', and time to work on a written assignment. Some members of this group intended to train as child care professionals but others had been referred by community nurses because the course could develop knowledge of children. About half of the participants did not arrive on time and newcomers were still coming even after the class had been going for an hour.

The course took place in one of the multi-purpose rooms in the integrated centre. The group spilled out into the large central space for activities like role-plays. The crèche was at the back of this central space and during the break, mothers in the class took their children out and gave them lunch.

Two excerpts from the field notes will give a flavour of the interactions in the class. The TAFE teacher is referred to as Annie (not her real name) and the participants by initials.

### Excerpt 1

Annie introduces conflict: What do you think causes conflict?

V: Different opinions.

B: What is 'conflict'?

Annie: When you don't agree.

V: Agree.

Annie: Not agree.

Annie: What else causes conflict?

V: Different style.

Annie: Style?

V: Style. Some people loud, some people quiet.

Annie: So differences with communication styles?

J: Frustration.

Annie: What about differences in values?

While we are drawing conflict pictures, Annie has knelt down to explain the task to B. – she uses example of 'a fight with your husband'.

### Excerpt 2

Annie puts people into pairs to work on conflict role-play – feeling statements – and asks me to help. Everyone finds it hard to use the feeling word but they are fluent at the justifying part of the statement.

A community representative has come to support B. She is very happy to meet a fellow and speak Arabic. Both have a child born in Australia.

M. is helping J. and other African woman to understand the scenario; that is, why it is wrong for someone to borrow a car and not put petrol in.

During work time M. wants to talk to me (on tape). Then one of the African women asks for help (not J.) with writing about verb/non-verb communication.

I wander out to central space to start talking to V. and T. V. says the feeling statement task is 'hard for us Asian people' as even using 'you' sounds accusative. She would rather describe a situation or try and find out more.

In responding to this data, each of us used a different method and adopted a different interpretive language, though there were also similarities in some of the instances which we both found noteworthy.

### *Frames and scripts: the education perspective*

Sue segmented the data into chunks, and wrote an interpretive comment on each chunk. Recurring terms in her comments were ‘frame’, ‘task’ and ‘script’. She used ‘frame’ to refer to the structure of the event in terms of time, roles of participants and interaction patterns. She attributed the framing of this event to the institutionalised nature of curriculum – in this case the curriculum of the course ‘Communication for child care practitioners’ in the program Child Care Certificate 1. She assumed that what she was observing was part of a curricular sequence in which an area of content had been divided into sub-topics, each associated with particular objectives and intended outcomes.

Comments from this perspective attended both to the ways in which this framing operated to constrain participants’ interactions and also the ways in which the frame was put under pressure by other forces within the context. Moves to reinforce the frame were often made by Annie and included starting the session although many of the participants had not yet arrived, making sure latecomers were informed where the session was up to, and using eliciting questions to focus participants on content (What are the causes of conflict?). This active framing is particularly evident when Annie builds on participants’ contributions. For instance:

Annie: What else causes conflict?

V.: Different style.

Annie: Style?

V.: Style. Some people loud, some people quiet.

Annie: So differences with communication styles?

Annie’s question establishes that the task is to complete the sentence ‘Conflict is caused by ...’ and by working with what V. provides, she is able to provide the completion: ‘Conflict is caused by difference with communication styles’.

Sue sees evidence that this curriculum is framing the subject 'conflict' in a particular way and that this operates to include and exclude certain perspectives on conflict. Conflict is framed as an interpersonal issue which can be managed by doing work on the self. Participants' experiences of domestic conflict are included in this frame as evidenced by this sequence of talk:

D: The best way when you're really frustrated with partner, kids, whatever – go for a walk.

V: I'll probably do some hard work, cleaning up.

B: I go to our bedroom and of course crying and I make myself busy.

What this view excludes is an understanding of conflict as operating in the broader societal or community domain. Given that some of the participants in this event are refugees, it may be that a significant aspect of their understanding of conflict is not able to be drawn on here.

The second way in which conflict is framed is through a distinction between the personal, as in domestic, realm and the professional realm. The sequencing of the session is read by Sue as evidence that the latter is the main point. That is, participants move through the domestic realm in order to arrive at an appropriate understanding of the practitioner's professional role in managing conflict. This is evident when Annie states: 'When we're a professional, conflict can sometimes be a positive thing. It's quite *different* from a person conflict'. This is followed by a task which frames the appropriate response to conflict in terms of the formula 'I feel ... because ...'.

This script was not readily taken up. Sue notes that, as the previous discussion had elicited a lot of emotional expression, the problem may not be participants' lack of language for expressing feelings. Rather, the problem may be in the structure and sequencing of this formula – first the feeling and then the cause identification. This is counter to the sequence related in participants' anecdotes regarding domestic conflict where the cause was either unstated or came before the response; for example, 'The best way when you're really frustrated with partner, kids, whatever – go for a walk'.

The culturally loaded nature of the script is also evidently a barrier to some. The conversation between T. and V. reveals the westernised nature

of the assumption of the right to address another in this pointed manner. Annie herself is aware of the participants' concerns; however given the strong curricular framing, her ability to negotiate knowledge with students may well be limited.

*Safety and sensitivity: the social work perspective*

Lana reviewed the fieldnotes under three headings: Group discussion around conflict; conflict role-play and feeling statements; and cultural relevance and sensitivity. Under each heading, she described an instance of practice and then gave a comment. The instances were selected on the basis that they raised questions about the participants' comfort, safety or inclusion. The first instance Lana addressed was one where Annie had defined conflict as 'a fight with your husband' in a one-to-one exchange with B., a participant who had earlier asked 'what is conflict?'

Lana expressed concern that this may be an inappropriate example to use in this type of group because it had the potential to tap into personal issues that B. may not be able or willing to discuss in front of other group members, even if they were engaged in doing other things at the time such as drawing the conflict pictures. Depending on B.'s cultural background, she may also experience some discomfort in being asked to elaborate on her personal relationship with her husband as a source of conflict.

The second instance chosen for comment was the role-play task using the formula 'I feel ... because ...'. Like Sue, Lana found the participants' difficulty with this task noteworthy. She attributed this to the potentially confronting nature of talking about personal feelings for both the performer and the recipient, even though both persons in each pair knew it was only a role-play. She suggested that the activity may be culturally difficult and/or inappropriate for some group members because it required the discussion of feelings in relation to personal conflict. Noting Annie's comment about having talked with participants about the cultural difficulties raised by the role-play task, Lana wrote these questions: 'How did Annie respond to V.? What did she learn from her discussion with V. that she could use to set tasks that are more culturally appropriate/sensitive/inclusive?'

The apparent lack of instruction about the safety issues involved in this exercise was also noted by Lana. Such instruction should cover the need

to express feelings in a constructive way, to feel safe in doing so and being able to withdraw if feeling distressed or uncomfortable. Furthermore, there did not appear to be a period after the role-play in which participants could debrief about any residual feelings the role-play may have evoked.

### *Interpretive repertoires*

The notion of an interpretive repertoire assisted us to understand our different takes on the events recorded in the observation notes. The term 'interpretive repertoire' is taken from conversation analysis and refers to a version of reality which finds acceptance in particular discourse communities and which is constructed through modes of representation, principally language (Wetherell & Potter, 1988). The important point about a repertoire is that it may be added to; one is not required to give up a learned way of doing or seeing in order to take up another way, although some practices or interpretations may be in conflict with each other and indeed in some cases the conflict may be irresolvable.

We can see evidence of our interpretive repertoires in the different ways we have encountered and made sense of this data. Our meaning making is clearly influenced both by our disciplinary knowledge and our histories of practice in educational and social work contexts. This is evident in the different discourses we use to describe what is happening in the TAFE session. Sue uses the language of curriculum frames, scripts and tasks; she sees Annie as constrained with her students. Lana uses the language of safety and sensitivity; she sees Annie as responsible for the participants. Much of our language does not cross over, though the impact of dominant culture is an area of shared understanding.

Perhaps even more revealing of interpretive repertoires is the way each of us 'sees' something that is not actually there in the fieldnotes. Sue constructs a larger curriculum context within which she understands this event as a module in a sequence. Without having sighted any curriculum documents, she nevertheless sees traces of its structures in the documented interactions. Lana also 'sees' an absence. Around the instance of role-play, she constructs the full counselling sequence including preparation and de-brief even though only one part of this sequence is actually carried out in the event.

## Conclusion

Interdisciplinary research is increasingly being recognised as an important strategy for bringing diverse perspectives to bear on complex social issues. Integrated early childhood services can benefit from an interdisciplinary research approach for two reasons. First, such services are a complex phenomenon which cannot be understood from a single disciplinary perspective. Second, practitioners working in such services, and indeed clients of such services, can generate valuable new knowledge for practice by participating in collaborative inquiry.

As all research is located in knowledge-producing communities, all research is, to a greater or lesser degree, social practice. We argue further that the nature of interdisciplinary collaborative research, by way of its methods and practices, takes the form of an ‘explicit’ social practice; an activity that not only acknowledges researchers as historically positioned, contextualised, politicised and embodied actors, but which also demands that they actively and reflexively engage with communities of practice in order to produce knowledge about (and with) these communities. In other words, research about collaborative service delivery demands that research processes and practices carry with them an implicit pedagogy about ‘how to do’ collaboration in practice settings where complex issues require multiple perspectives and interventions. In this view, the researcher needs to actively engage in practicing and modelling collaboration as much as she/he observes and records those practices and models of collaboration occurring at the various sites of research. We hope that what we have provided here is a useful starting point for researchers wanting to engage in the social practice of interdisciplinary collaborative research.

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## Beyond the sandstone: research partnerships between the community welfare sector and universities

**Margot Rawsthorne**

### Introduction

Working collaboratively, whether in the form of coalitions, partnerships or networks, has become one of the 'most defining approaches' to solving social problems over the ten years (Chavis, 2001, p. 309). New forms of working, such as partnerships, have been demanded by the complexity and interrelatedness of individual, community and environmental problems (Bright, 2001, p. 1). Furthermore, a willingness to work collaboratively has become the 'essential requirement' for funding support from both governments and philanthropic organisations (Chavis, 2001, p. 309).

Research collaborations or partnerships between universities and the community welfare sector in Australia are relatively new. Whilst historically ad hoc partnerships have occurred, more recently a significant research capacity and interest in the community welfare sector has emerged. Local, state and national community welfare organisations are now investing substantial resources into their research capacities. This emerging capacity creates opportunities for increased collaboration with academia. Although only in its infancy in Australia the research relationship between the community welfare sector and universities is proving to be more challenging than many would have hoped or expected. Many of these challenges are similar to those identified in literature relating to service delivery collaboration (Rawsthorne & Eardley, 2004). Collaboration can be impaired by conflict at a number of levels, including inter-agency, intra-agency, inter-professional, inter-personal and intra-personal (Scott, 2005, p. 134). This paper explores how these levels of potential conflict

impact on research partnerships between the community welfare sector and universities. Despite these challenges, this paper argues for the value of research collaboration between the community welfare sector and universities as well as making some suggestions about building productive research relationships.

## Background

The focus on collaboration and partnerships in policy and program development over the last decade has been mirrored by an expanding research interest. This paper draws on the lessons from a number of distinct research projects undertaken over the past decade that have enabled consideration of this whole notion of collaboration and partnership. In 1996 the NSW State Government announced it would seek a 'compact' or partnership with the non-government sector. Western Sydney Community Forum became a key contributor and critic of this process, resulting in an action-oriented research study (Rawsthorne & Christian, 2004; Rawsthorne, 2005a). In 2003, the Federal Government was also considering its relationship with the non-government sector, resulting in research on potential partnerships models (Rawsthorne & Shaver, 2008). At the same time it was also concerned about the ability of the service system to respond to the needs of young people with complex needs, resulting in a review of successful international collaborative policy and programs (Rawsthorne & Eardley, 2004). The insights provided by these various studies inform a critical perspective on community welfare sector and academic partnerships. This learning has also shaped the understandings and strategies used in building productive research partnerships discussed below.

### *Why collaborate?*

There are a number of potential benefits from research collaboration between the community welfare sector and universities. Some of these are immediate and practical whilst others are long term with the potential to change fundamental relations.

Through community welfare sector collaboration, academics are able to stay abreast with current developments in the field and to gauge what is important in terms of research. The community welfare sector is very dynamic and constantly changing, rendering it difficult to keep up-to-date

about developments. Community welfare sector partners provide academics with up to date information and insights. They also provide access to networks and assist in identifying the key people to include in research projects. At a more pragmatic level, community welfare sector organisations can provide access to client data or other service based information as well as research ‘sites’. One positive aspect of increased government performance monitoring and reporting is the extensive information organisations collect and hold on community issues. Community welfare sector partners also make an important contribution to teaching and learning in universities. They provide perspectives from practice, particularly teasing out the complexities of theory/practice nexus. Community welfare sector workers can provide a sounding board for research projects – what is the best way to contact a specific population group? Importantly, practitioners ‘ground’ the research efforts of academics interested in contributing to social change.

Conversely, academic partners have knowledge and resources that may be of benefit to community welfare sector organisations. This includes access to information about new writing, conferences and debates that occur within university settings that the community welfare sector would not normally have access to. Academics also provide access to literature, particularly through access to electronic journals. Up-to-date Australian and international literature can be quickly and inexpensively identified. Through their own research projects and access to larger databases, academics are able to provide access to data. The growing number of large longitudinal Australian studies can provide important information for the community welfare sector. One statistic used regularly by some community welfare organisations is that four out of five Australians support a woman’s right to choose whether she continues with a pregnancy or not, which comes from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (Wilson, Gibson, Meagher, Denmark, & Western, 2006). More obviously, another useful skill academics offer concerns program evaluation. The increasing importance of ‘evidenced-based practice’ has placed greater demands on this element of community welfare sector work. In some cases however workers and agencies do not have the training or resources to design research projects that will build this ‘evidence’. Academics can provide advice on research questions, data collection and occasionally analysis.

### *Describing research partnerships*

Whilst community welfare sector and academic partnerships are relatively new in Australia there is a longer tradition in both North America and the United Kingdom. Within the literature there are a range of frameworks, however one particularly useful approach to categorising collaborative research activities has been developed by Barker and colleagues (1999, p. 87). Writing of their experience in academic/practice/community research partnerships in North America, they developed a typology to describe three types of research being undertaken in universities, which would seem relevant to the Australian context as well.

Table 1. Typology of community welfare sector and university research partnerships

	<b>Model of interaction</b>	<b>Roles and relationships</b>
Type 1	Current proactive practice of academically driven research	Initiatives with a sole academic inquirer
Type 2	A more reactive practice for designing research in response to the needs and input of community agencies.	Community members have limited involvement but academics still define the methods of inquiry
Type 3	All aspects of the research practice are interactive	Academic researchers and the community are equal partners

(Adapted from Barker et al., 1999, p. 87)

Another useful broad distinction is made by the Canadian Centre for Research on Violence against Women and Children (cited in Clément et al., 1996) between:

1. A collaboration which involves cooperation between partners during one or more stages of the research (such as data collection or report writing)
2. A partnership which, alternatively, involves cooperation at every stage of research.

These descriptions are not categorical, with individual academic undertaking all three types of research at any one time. Within the Australian contexts these different types are supported by different funding streams, with Type 1 closely aligned to Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grants, Type 2 supported by commissioned or contracted research and Type 3 supported by ARC Industry Linkage Grants. In the context of discussing research partnerships, it is interesting to note that collaborative grants have a higher success rate. Success rates for ARC Linkage Applications, for example, in 2007 (Round 1) were 42.9% compared to 20.4% for Discovery Projects. In the full year of 2006, Discovery Project applications outnumbered Linkage applications by nearly 4:1 (Australian Research Council, 2006, pp. 4–14). This data suggests that there are good opportunities to fund substantial, useful, research between universities and the community welfare sector.

## Challenges to Research Partnerships

Scott (2005, pp. 132–34), in discussing service delivery collaboration in child protection, proposes a conceptual framework for analysing inter-agency collaboration. The framework identifies five levels at which conflict may impede collaboration: inter-organisational, intra-organisational, inter-professional, inter-personal and intra-personal. The framework seeks to provide practitioners with a tool to analyse the factors impeding collaboration and develop interventions that enable the fostering of productive partnerships. Whilst developed from practice-based experiences, the framework, by providing fresh insights into what appears to be intractable conflicts between agencies, may be useful in understanding the barriers to research partnerships between the community welfare sector and universities. Importantly, it also provides some possible interventions that mitigate against these conflicts.

### *Inter-organisational conflict*

Inter-organisational work is one of the most difficult forms of social organising (Chavis, 2001, p. 309–311). Structural differences between organisations, particularly in relation to power and resources, can be the source of conflict. In service delivery partnerships, the issue of power, particularly decision-making power, is often identified as a major barrier to effective partnerships (Raw-

sthorne & Eardley, 2004, p. 10; Rawsthorne & Christian, 2004, pp. 16–28). The service delivery partnership literature is replete with references to ‘real’ partnership based on equality and ‘genuineness’. Adams for example (cited in Clements et al., 1996, p. 2) argues partnerships require a group of ‘people working together and maintaining equal personal power’. Likewise, in consultations undertaken about the development of the Working Together for NSW partnership agreement between the State Government and the community welfare sector (Rawsthorne & Christian, 2004, pp. 29–33), many practitioners highlighted the nature of power that underpins partnership relations. Trust, respect, accessible language, ownership, clarity about decision making, genuine participation and transparency were all seen as key elements of successful partnerships (Rawsthorne, 2005b, p. 14).

Whilst laudable, such definitions create oftentimes unrealised expectations. In the research arena, universities are viewed as powerful and well-resourced institutions in stark contrast to many community welfare sector organisations. The challenge of creating ‘equal’ partnership in this context is considerable. Misunderstandings about decision-making power and control over the research process may be prevented if power differences are acknowledged and the adverse impact of these mitigated. It may be useful to consider partnership not as an objective fact but as a subjective process, embedded with power and emotions. Of central importance is the nature of the participation expected. For academics, epistemological and methodological questions may not be negotiable. Academics need to be careful not to describe a relationship as a partnership (Type 3) when they are seeking community input (Type 2) in a study in which methodological questions are already decided.

The community welfare sector and academia are very diverse ‘partners’, which creates both opportunities and challenges to potential research collaboration (Chavis, 2001, p. 309–312). This diversity (in interests, history and power) creates more complexity and conflict than any other form of social organisation (Chavis, 2001, p. 309). Examining one example, *time*, highlights the inter-organisational differences with the potential of creating conflict between the partners.

Australian universities’ calendars are shaped around semesters and teaching requirements, with intensive time for research really only available outside of semesters – usually November to February. It is this period, particularly De-



cember and January, which is 'slower' in the community welfare sector – many people take extended breaks (particularly those in management positions), fewer programs run during school holidays and typically management committees will not meet over this time. This period is not a good time in which to contact key decision makers in organisations or, often, clients.

There is also a difference in concepts of 'immediacy' between the potential partners. Academics work in an environment that has long lead times, where new courses, for example, take three to four years from conception to delivery. Universities are very large institutions with a correspondingly large bureaucracy. Community welfare sector organisations, conversely, often have quite direct access to decision making forums, such as management committees. A new program can move from conception to delivery in a matter of months.

Additionally, funding timeframes also create inter-organisational pressures between the community welfare sector and academia. The shift away from recurrent funding to contracting in the community welfare sector has undermined the development of long-term individual and organisational relationships that seem vital to collaborative work (Rawsthorne & Eardley, 2004, p. 10–12). Successful partnerships involve long-term commitment to working collaboratively, where organisations and individuals have the opportunity of engagement and debate over time (Rawsthorne & Eardley, 2004, p. 10–12). The increasing use of short-term non-recurrent funding of the community welfare sector impedes the development of long-term relationships. Partnerships of convenience (formed to secure funding or access to a client group) are unlikely to be sustainable. Furthermore, academic funding processes, such as those of the Australian Research Council, take so long as to be inappropriate for many current issues in the community welfare sector. Additionally, in some circumstances ARC Linkages research teams are very large and geographically diverse, making this dialogue and debate difficult.

### *Intra-organisational conflict*

The effects of new managerialism have been felt in both the community welfare sector and universities. Increasingly, research outputs (peer reviewed publications) are used to measure the value of individual academics. This contributes to an individualistic culture that focuses on the constant production

of sole-authored publications. Collaboration, whilst lauded by some funding processes in academia, is discouraged through work management processes. Acknowledging a partner or partner organisation, whilst ethically appropriate, in many cases reduces the 'points' awarded in work management processes for published work. Unless a partner is able to contribute financially to the research (which is valued by work management processes) working collaboratively can be seen as a distraction.

Conversely, many community welfare sector workers resent the imposition of reporting and data requirements by governments (Rawsthorne & Shaver, 2008, p. 56–58). This resentment compounds a pre-existing reluctance to engage with 'numbers'. In this way research, like processes, are seen as distractions from the 'real' work of working directly with people.

### *Inter-professional conflict*

Professional orientation is influential in enabling collaboration. Professional training privileges particular perspectives and approaches, creating a reluctance or inability to accept alternative perspectives or approaches. Community welfare sector and academic partnerships are vulnerable to inter-professional conflict. Academics trained to be rigorous and to some extent dispassionate can find the personal engagement of community workers 'unprofessional'. Conversely, community workers trained to be people-centred can find academic concerns with theory elitist and wasteful. Working collaboratively often requires staff to work differently from the way they have been trained or have operated in the past. Successful collaboration requires the right conditions as well as some luck but will not succeed without practitioners skilled at collaboration (Riccio, 2001, p. 341–342).

Collaborative skills are not necessarily those traditionally demanded of academics and whilst 'community engagement' is encouraged in many universities, few opportunities are provided to develop the skills necessary. These included partnership-fostering expertise, community involvement skills, change agents proficiencies and strategic and management capacities (Ansari, Phillips, & Zwi, 2002, p. 152). Academics may have skills gaps in effectively reaching target populations, working with community groups, community organising and being change agents (Ansari et al., 2002, p. 154). These skills gaps can lead to poor processes that adversely affect the partnership and lead to inter-professional conflict.

Conversely, academics may feel they have the professional skills and expertise to make methodological decisions. In this way key research decisions are not discussed but remain the domain of the academic. Community welfare workers skill set has not historically focused on or valued numerical skills, potentially making them less confident about challenging academic partners. This may contribute to a breakdown of professional relations.

### *Inter-personal conflict*

Individual relationships are at the core of any successful partnership. These relationships require not only time but also trust to flourish. The diverse histories and power of the partners can create inter-personal conflict. Academics, familiar with a level of community status, cannot assume that a community agency will 'trust' them because they are from a university. In fact, many community sector organisations and their clients have negative experiences with 'researchers'. This is particularly the case with disadvantaged communities such as Indigenous communities. For these concerns to be allayed requires deliberate strategies overtime that earn and built trust. Likewise, a haphazard email to individual academics seeking research collaboration may not generate trust. Efforts need to be made to match the research collaboration with the interests of the academic and to build in mutual benefits.

### *Intra-personal conflict*

Scott (2004, p. 138) suggests intra-personal conflict may emerge from an individual's emotional reactions or when individuals feel anxious, conflicted or defensive. Psychologically, individuals need to feel acknowledged and valued. If publications, for example, do not acknowledge the contribution of all parties (both institutions and individuals), this may create resentment and anxiety. This resentment can linger and hamper future research collaboration. Key people in the partnership can then delay or destroy research projects, through blocking access to data or not allocating the time necessary. Clearly neither academics nor community welfare sector workers are immune from such emotions. In some fields of academia, attending to the emotional aspects of research is quite foreign. Honesty, built on a foundation of trust, may protect research partnerships from such intra-personal conflict.

## Building Productive Research Partnerships

Building productive research partnerships between the community welfare sector and universities is in essence about relationships built on trust, respect and sharing power; it is about building the capacities of individuals and organisations as well as bridging social divides. Given this, community development theory and practice can be usefully employed in building productive research partnerships. Through working in partnership one 'is involved in a constant cycle of doing, learning and critical reflection' (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, p. 286). Working collaboratively does not just 'happen', rather it requires conscious commitment, time and resources. Fawcett and colleagues (1995, p. 695) likewise argue that adopting an empowerment approach is likely to improve partnerships.

Drawing on a case study, the following section explores the practice of working collaboratively to identify strategies that may build productive research partnerships. The case study is a research partnership that has evolved over the past five years between a medium-sized non-government organisation (hereafter called 'the Centre') and myself (an early career researcher). The Centre provides direct services in a disadvantaged area of Sydney. It has a long tradition of activism and innovation but, until recently, little research capacity. The case study is an attempt at a Type 3 research partnership, one which involves both academic researchers and the community as equal partners in all phases of the research project (Barker et al., 1999, p. 87).

This research partnership started with a phone call from the Centre's coordinator requesting my research advice and support. Like many non-government organisations the Centre was going through a process of trying to improve its data management and sought advice. I provided some assistance in the design of questionnaires to collect information from clients. At this preliminary stage only small amounts of assistance was sought by the Centre or provided by me, with minimal time implications. This stage, however, did begin to build trust and strengthen the relationship. I then approached the Management Committee of the Centre requesting their participation in a project I was interested in (Type 1 research). This project involved interviews, focus groups and observation. Prior to agreeing to be a 'site' for research, a formal partnership agreement was entered into between the parties, setting out agreements on confidentiality, consent

and authorship. Shortly afterwards, the Centre received funding for a time specific program and asked for my assistance in the development of an evaluation framework. It was this request that shifted the relationship towards a Type 3 (Barker et al., 1999, p. 87) research partnership.

The remainder of this section discusses some of the strategies used to minimise barriers and areas of potential conflict at the five 'levels' Scott (2005) identifies. These strategies were informed broadly by community development principles of addressing social disadvantage through participation and empowerment (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, pp. 262–68). This included a commitment to valuing local knowledge, culture, resources, skills and processes (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, pp. 267–272). My role was one of facilitation rather than an 'expert' enabling 'bottom up' solutions to issues identified by the Centre or local community.

Greater understanding of the *inter-organisational* differences was enabled by my prior work experience in the non-government sector. The organisation was known through previous community work and some management committee members and staff were known on a personal level. This knowledge as well as the reputation of the organisation assisted in the building of trust. A good knowledge of the working lives of each partner assisted in creating a more effective partnership. This was enhanced through ongoing dialogue to clarify the different roles and perspectives of partners. In any relationship, making assumptions about the other partner is attractive but can lead to serious misunderstandings. Whilst working collaboratively is attracting more attention from both the community welfare sector and academics, they remain in many ways 'diverse partner groups who traditionally did not communicate with each other' (Ansari et al., 2002, p. 156). It is possible, however, to find common ground, such as a desire for positive social change.

Another area for potential *inter-organisational* conflict flowing from perceived differences in power was that of resources. Higher education has not, however, been immune from the broader processes affecting resources and funding. Much of the collaborative work in this research partnership was done without any additional funds, through allocating time, providing access to software, through research expertise and a shared enthusiasm for the project. As Riccio (2001, p. 342) notes, the craftsmen of

collaboration often operate without adequate compensation and proper administrative resources and staffing. The issue of resources was revisited on a regular basis: did the collaboration need more funds? If so, how were these to be obtained? The partners acknowledged that a sense of shared responsibility is difficult to achieve in a competitive environment or between partners of unequal status or resources.

Managing *inter-organisational* and *intra-organisational* relationships proved difficult although strategies to ensure transparency and fair access to resources have counteracted this difficulty. One specific strategy has been to enter into a formal partnership agreement. Some writers such as Riccio (1998, p. 342–433) argue that concern about form or structure often delay and stifle collaboration, suggesting instead that ‘form should follow function’. In some circumstances, a lack of details may not be a problem if this trust and goodwill is built up over time and through experience.

The formal agreement was proved valuable in clarifying the rights and responsibilities of both parties. These included the circumstances under which access was provided to data or clients, the right of acknowledgement or joint authorship, approval processes, publication rights/veto and dispute processes. The agreement also endeavoured for some equality in decision-making and outcomes for both parties. From an academic perspective a formalised agreement placed the research partnership within a community engagement framework, enabling this work to be acknowledged.

In a situation in which prior personal relationships between individuals at the Centre and myself were concerned, *intra-organisational* conflict could have flowed from a perception that research resources were only available to some members of the organisation. It was important that the partnership was with the organisations, not specific people or friends, as symbolised through the formal agreement.

This research partnership has benefited from a crossover of skills and experience between the parties, minimising potential *inter-professional* conflict. Some key Centre staff have research skills and experience. This, together with pressures from funding bodies, has meant that the Centre has been interested in building the ‘evidence base’ of its work together with its research capacity. This openness has minimised the potential for *inter-professional* conflict. Ansari and colleagues (2002) in the South African

context found a disjuncture between academics and community practitioners' understandings of each other, particularly in relation to knowledge and skills. Academics were likely to devalue the knowledge and skills of community practitioners. They note that:

... there is a need to embrace lay knowledge and indigenous theory, but to take secular knowledge seriously implies a shift of the ownership and control away from the professional experts. (Ansari et al., 2002, p. 156)

Successful research partnerships rely on partners' 'receptive capacity' and the ability of partners to 'unlearn' old ways of working (Kekäle & Viitalia, 2003, p. 246). This has meant, for example, not assuming methodological expertise but being open to debate and dialogue about the best way forward. It has also meant valuing outcomes that may not be measurable within academic performance management processes.

The research partnership was nurtured by opportunities that expanded the knowledge of the Centre and enabled the sharing of skills, ideas and approaches. This included co-presenting at conferences, attending network meetings and writing for industry newsletters. Whilst research was the primary focus of the partnership, there are other important secondary outcomes. These include enhanced understanding of issues like research design and methodological choices that can be used in other settings, thereby indirectly building the research capacity of the community welfare sector. There would seem to be a need for greater professional development opportunities for academics and community welfare workers to share skills, ideas and approaches.

Professional orientations and skills are an important element of successful partnerships and minimising *inter-professional conflict*. Working collaboratively requires staff to work differently from the way they have been trained or have operated in the past. For many community welfare sector workers, for example, the collection of accurate client data has not traditionally been part of their job roles. However, building an evidence base to support the Centre programs required a different approach and perspective. As mentioned previously, collaborative skills are not necessarily those traditionally demanded of academics. The research partnership demanded greater understanding of diverse cultures, institutions (from

youth refuges to schools) and individuals. Language carries important symbolic meaning and can lead to potential conflict, with few community welfare sector workers viewing the people they work with as 'data', 'respondents' or even 'clients'. Building successful research partnerships required constant awareness and reflection on what was internalised ways of working.

As in all relationships, the partnership has required nurturing to minimise inter-personal conflict. One strategy I used to counter potential *inter-personal conflict* and create greater depth of understanding between the partners was to spend time informally at the Centre. I have attended informal lunches and social outings as well as formal events (unrelated to my role as 'researcher') in an effort to build personal connections with the various people at the Centre. Finding 'down time' is challenging when both community sector practitioners and academics experience time pressures in their work, often created by processes outside their control such as reporting deadlines and workload formulas. However, if we accept that partnership is fundamentally about relationship building within a community development framework, this is not only about time to do but also about time to think, to debate, to learn.

Different communication styles also have the potential to create *inter-personal conflict*. In general, the staff at the Centre preferred face-to-face meetings with an opportunity for dialogue to develop. Community welfare sector practitioners often have an acute understanding of the importance of process in facilitating communication. In this way the style of communication signals the nature of the partnership: are partners informed of decisions made or involved in the decision making process? Community welfare sector workers consulted in relation to Working Together for NSW were adamant they did not want to be involved in 'partnerships' in which they passively received information about decisions (Rawsthorne & Christian, 2004, pp. 16–18). Bearing this in mind we have included a commitment to ongoing evaluation and learning. Drawing on the lessons from the 'partnership veterans' in the United States, the research partnership was informed by incremental, opened ended planning processes that stressed continual learning (Rubin, 2000, p. 228).

The partnership involved individuals and as such was vulnerable to *intra-personal conflict*. One ongoing intra-personal challenge from an academic



perspective was balancing the time commitment to building relationships and academic management demands that affect career development. The process of truly collaborative research can be very time consuming and creates a tension with the university demands to produce. The right to publish free from perceived interference is central to academic researchers. It is important that partnerships relationships are not allowed to soften academic critical perspectives but this needs to be assessed in the context of the overall relationship.

This research partnership with the Centre was motivated by my desire to work differently. As an early career researcher with a long history in the community welfare sector, many opportunities were created through working collaboratively. Their strong criticism of academic engagement with the 'real world' created a desire to approach issues differently and a sense that existing research models were not effective for many issues affecting communities. The partnership was facilitated by an open, creative culture that encouraged risk-taking. Somewhat ironically, the social norm of 'getting along' embedded in many collaborative initiatives can serve to stifle creativity by not allowing members to address conflicts and inequalities (Chavis, 2001, p. 310). In this partnership, risk-taking was encouraged together with time to reflect on what worked well and what did not. Collaboration required the creative use of resources and did not always require new or additional resources. It required looking outside the square to draw on resources not always evident. Flexibility was required of the partners involved – both individuals and organisations (including the management committee).

Like all relationships the partnership continues to change and is not without challenges (to both parties). The developmental foundations of the partnership however remain solid. To date it has involved the joint development of an evaluation framework, with all possible approaches discussed and debated. In this way the 'pure' research questions became grounded in the needs of the organisation. This resulted in a more robust research strategy for the organisation (which has contributed to building evidence concerning the program) as well as an interesting and useful academic study. The study involved triangulated mixed methods, providing the opportunity to develop new technical skills for all involved (through pre- and post-testing). The evaluation has provided strong statistical evi-

dence of clear and important changes in knowledge, attitudes and behaviour as a result of completion of the program. The reporting phase of this research has begun, with an accessible report being developed for stakeholders, statistical findings used for lobbying purposes and papers written for academic journals, as well as conference papers. The relationship and trust in the partnership is such that assistance is being provided in other, unrelated, research projects.

In reflecting on this research partnership, its foundations included: allowing time, building knowledge of each other, the ability to use different types of knowledge, shared values or passion, effective and appropriate communication, having partnership-fostering skills and a desire to do things differently. A commitment to community development principles and practices continues to enable this productive research partnership to flourish.

## Conclusion

The increased research capacity and interest within the community welfare sector in Australia opens new potential for the forging of creative partnerships between the sector and universities. Gaining the greatest value from these partnerships holds both opportunities and challenges for the partners. A synergy of efforts between the community welfare sector and universities is likely to generate greater positive outcomes than the two sectors working independently. Historically, Australia has been very poor at investing in research and evaluation in the community welfare sector, particularly in comparison to the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada. This lack of investment has severely hamstrung the development of effective properly resourced programs. The more recent investments by both government and community welfare organisations are welcome indeed. There are real opportunities for academics and universities to ‘value-add’ to these investments through research partnerships and other forms of collaboration. For academics, these partnerships provide great opportunities to go ‘beyond the sandstone’ in order to engage with the everyday concerns of the Australian community.

Although academics and the community welfare sector may not be ‘traditional’ partners, they share common values and desires. Both view the understanding of the experience and cause of social disadvantage as fundamental to social change. Whilst conflict has the potential to impede

the development of productive research partnerships, this conflict need not be seen as negative but as an opportunity. If the partners are able to transform this conflict through collaboration, they provide a model for transforming broader community conflict and inequality, creating increased capacity for social change (Chavis, 2001, pp. 309–312).

Community development principles and practices can transform this conflict. An understanding and acknowledgment of the operations of power, at institutional, cultural and personal levels must be the starting point. Attention to how the operations of power shape research will facilitate more productive partnerships. Strong sustainable relationships can be created by ensuring time for dialogue, building trust and supporting the development of partners' capacities. Partnerships founded on a notion of empowerment will not be 'partnerships of convenience' but meaningful collaborative work to provide new knowledge and understandings about social disadvantage in Australia.

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## Research for practice in small human service organisations: doing and disseminating small-scale research

**Suzanne Egan**

Research is something that everyone can do, and everyone ought to do. It is simply collecting information and thinking systematically about it. The word 'research' carries overtones of abstruse statistics and complex methods, white coats and computers. Some social research is highly specialised but most is not; much of the best research is logically very straightforward. Useful research on many problems can be done with small resources, and should be a regular part of the life of any thoughtful person involved in social action (Connell, 1975, p. 1).

### Introduction

Over the last decade there has been an increasing focus on practice-based research in the social welfare sector and this period has seen the emergence of, and growth in, specialised research positions, particularly in the non-government sector. The focus of this paper is the practice-based research undertaken by one such service, Rosemount Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services, a small non-government service located in Marrickville, an inner western suburb of Sydney.

The paper begins with an exploration of the concept of practice-based research and situates the debates surrounding this concept in the context of significant changes that have occurred in human services delivery. It then moves specifically to an analysis of Rosemount's work, including an overview of research undertaken, discusses the nature of their impact and

analysis of both the strengths and challenges that arise from conducting research within a small human service organisation. Finally, suggestions are made for further research on issues arising from this analysis.

## Exploring the Concept of Practice-Based Research

Traditionally social welfare research has been seen as part of the mandate of academics and tertiary institutions (O'Neil, Cleak, Brown, & Goodman, 1999, p. 27; Poulter, 2006, p. 329). However, since the 1990s there has been an increasing focus on practice-based research (Barber, 2003; Crisp, 2000). This period has also seen the emergence of specialised field based research positions. For example, many of the large non-government organisations in NSW now include substantial research units, while a number of smaller organisations support at least one research position.

The term 'practice research' or 'practice-based research' is used in a variety of ways within the literature. Some commentators use the term to refer specifically to research conducted by practitioners (Fook & Gardner, 2007; O'Neil et al., 1999). Others differentiate between program evaluation and the concept of practice research (Gardner & Nunan, 2007, p. 337; O'Neil et al., 1999, p. 28; Wade & Neuman, 2001). There is a growing body of literature which confines practice research to the examination of the efficacy of specific social work interventions (Barber, 2003; Crisp, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Wade & Neuman, 2007). Epstein (2001, p. 17), exemplifying this view, defines practice research as '... the use of research – based concepts, theories, designs and data gathering instruments to structure practice so that hypotheses concerning cause-effect relationships between social work interventions and outcomes can be rigorously tested'.

Theorists such as Fook and Gardner (2007, p. 171) adopt a broader approach which conceptualises practice research as research activities which build on data available in the workplace, including the experiences of practitioners, and which uses methods that can be readily applied to immediate practice concerns. For the purposes of this paper practice-based research will be defined simply as research which arises from practice issues and which is conducted within social welfare agencies. The focus of the paper is research conducted by one such agency, an agency that supports a designated research position.

### *The rise of evidence based policy and practice*

The institutional and policy context of service delivery and professional practice have undergone significant changes (McDonald, 2003, p. 131). A series of aggressive micro economic reforms beginning in the 1980s and continuing to this day has resulted in a shift towards outcomes based funding within human services (Barber, 2003, p. 226). The Industry Commission in its 1995 report to the Commonwealth Government, *Charitable Organisations in Australia*, signalled the need for welfare agencies to be more accountable with public funds than had historically been required (Crisp, 2000, p. 189). Increasingly, funding is dependant on services being able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their programs and interventions (Crisp, 2000; Fook & Gardner, 2007; O'Neil et al., 1999). This has resulted in a focus within organisations on '... ensuring that organisational inputs such as social work interventions lead to demonstrable, desirable effects' (McDonald, 2003, p. 131). These changes in the context of service delivery have provided 'fertile ground' for the uptake of evidence-based discourses in the social welfare sector (Marston & Watts, 2003, p. 149).

Evidence-based policy and practice evolved from the concept of evidence-based medicine, the process of systematically finding, appraising and using research findings as the basis for clinical decisions. Central to evidence gathering in medicine is the use of randomised control trials to determine the most effective treatment (Marsten & Watts, 2003, pp. 146–147). In its current form in social work, proponents of evidence-based practice argue social work knowledge should be developed using positivist research methods and that social work decisions and interventions should be based on this research (McDonald, 2003, p. 124; Parton, 2000, p. 451). Policy makers in both the community and government sectors increasingly using the language of evidence-based policy, and there is evidence of its promotion across a range of social policy fields (Marston & Watts 2003, pp. 148–149). For example, in child protection, juvenile justice, and mental health, evidence-based practice is promoted as the best response to manage the risks associated with those populations (Powell 2001, cited in McDonald, 2003, p. 131).

### *Evidence-based discourses and the role of practice-based research*

As was discussed previously, there are a number of commentators who position practice research firmly within evidence-based discourses (Bar-

ber, 2003; Crisp, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Wade & Neuman, 2007). Barber (2003, p. 228), exemplifying this view, maintains the proper focus as ‘... finding out what specific interventions work for what specific problems’, a task for which he argues qualitative research is ‘most unsuited’.

As Fook and Gardner (2007, p. 163) note, it is not unreasonable to expect practitioners to ensure their interventions are informed by reference to relevant research. Moreover, there may be times when research conducted within an evidence-based framework can be effective in assisting social workers in making decisions (McDonald, 2003, p. 135). For example, research on the effectiveness of group versus individual anger management interventions would be important for an agency developing their own program. However, this framework limits the capacity of practitioners to draw on other equally important forms of knowledge such as knowledge developed by and with service users. For example, in the area of disabilities, social workers need to ‘know’ about the effects of specific impairment but they also need to know about the social and political experience of living in a disabling world (McDonald, 2003, p. 136).

Moreover, the framing of practice research in terms of establishing which interventions work to address what problems means that important questions about how social issues are constructed in both the welfare and broader political arena are neither acknowledged or addressed. Bacchi’s (1999) ‘what’s the problem’ approach to social policy, for instance, highlights the role interventions play in actively shaping, rather than merely addressing, particular problem formations.

### *Alternative concepts of the role of practice-based research*

Shaw (2007, p. 662) proposes practice research be framed as a *critique* of both research and practice, rather than an *application* of research to practice. This critique, he suggests, needs to include the development of strategies which allow practice to challenge research. Drawing on Fahl and Markand’s (1999, cited in Shaw, 2007, p. 662) work in psychology, he points out that difficulty bringing research and practice together in any professional discipline indicates that the discipline, as a whole, needs to be critiqued and developed. Such an approach bridges the traditional division between research and practice and in doing so allows practice an active role in knowledge formation. Similarly Fook’s (1996, p. xiii) reflective re-



search approach takes as its starting point the ideas and theories ground in people's practice experiences and then uses this to develop alternative theoretical paradigms. The strength of both these approaches is their ability to recognise, rather than dichotomise, the praxis that is the relationship between research and practice.

## Agency Background

Rosemount Good Shepherd Youth and Family Services was established in 1982 and is auspiced by the Good Shepherd Sisters. The service is located in Marrickville, an inner western suburb of Sydney, which is characterised by a culturally diverse population with varied socio-economic status. There are two main streams of service provision within Rosemount: education programs for young people whose needs have not been met through the mainstream system and two counselling services – a specialised sexual assault program and a more generalist adolescent and family counselling program.

Rosemount's target group is young people aged 12 to 24, although the majority of clients in recent years have been aged between 14 and 16 years. The young people who use Rosemount's services have generally experienced a range of intersecting disadvantages. A disproportionate number have been victims of child abuse and many are living in refuges or in foster care. A marked increased in numbers of young people affected by intergenerational mental health and/or drug and alcohol problems has been noted by the service in recent years (Rosemount Annual Report, 2005/2006).

The service employs staff from a variety of professional backgrounds including social work, psychology, education, administration, and youth work. Funding is received from the Department of Community Services, Department of Education, and the Good Shepherd Sisters. A three-day a week research position, funded by the Good Shepherd Sisters, was created in 2000 and the author has been in the role since mid-2006. Previously the research position included a fundraising component. This is now the responsibility of a designated fundraiser, also appointed to a part-time position in 2006.

### *Overview of Rosemount's research*

The research undertaken at Rosemount is practice-based; that is, it is undertaken in response to issues arising in the context of direct service provision. Although there is a focus on discrete research projects, the role also more generally involves linking people and information – whether this is legislative changes affecting young people or literature about specific issues such as self-harm. Listed below are the main research projects undertaken by Rosemount during the past seven years:

- Sexual assault prevalence studies. Analysing frameworks and findings (2007)
- Are we on the right track? Mapping the terrain of anger management (2007)
- Working out what works. Meeting the needs of young marginalised men (2007, undertaken with Youthblock Health and Resource Service)
- Adolescent violence towards parents (2004)
- Internet and adolescent socialisation (2004)
- Young people and infringement notices (2003)
- Drug and alcohol use among young people in Sydney's inner west (2002)
- Early school leaving in Sydney's inner west (2002).

### *Common themes underpinning the research*

A point of commonality within the research is the focus on issues which are only just emerging as problems needing to be addressed. This will often initially be recognised by changes in referral patterns within Rosemount programs. This was certainly the case with the issues of the adolescent violence toward parents and the anger management projects, where both the education and generalist counselling service had marked increases in referrals for these issues. Generally, however, the issues will also have been raised as concerns within the local interagency meetings, which Rosemount staff attend. For example, the research on infringement notices was undertaken as part of Rosemount's involvement with the Youth Justice Coalition (YJC), a network of practitioners, lawyers,

policy makers, and academics who work to promote the rights of young people. A number of services connected with the YJC were dealing with increasing numbers of young people issued with prohibitively high train fines. Consequently, a project was undertaken to establish the effects these fines were having on young people and their experiences more generally with transit officers and transit police. For example, because of fines, a significant percentage of young people said they did not have enough money for day-to-day living expenses (Bobic, 2003).

Another initial impetus for research is often an identified gap in service provision. For example, the research on anger management was initiated not only in response to increased referrals for the issue but also in response to requests by referrers for a targeted group work program and the lack of such a program in the local area. Similarly, *Working Out What Works* (2007) was undertaken in response to the concern that existing forms of service provision in the youth services sector were not adequately meeting the needs of young marginalised men; that is, young men not engaged in school or employment, and often isolated from family and other support structures. For some time local services had been concerned about low referral rates and the fact that even when referred these young men often did not return for follow up appointments. In response to these concerns, Rosemount and Youthblock Health and Resource Service secured funding for a research project. Both local service providers and young men were interviewed about their needs, barriers in current service provision and the types of interventions that would more successfully meet their needs.

Finally, the small-scale nature of the research has meant a focus, though by no means exclusive, on qualitative research methodologies. Most often, it has involved both primary and secondary research, although again there are exceptions. For example, the most recent research, *Sexual Assault Prevalence Studies* (2007), was undertaken to examine the discrepancies in the findings from existing studies and to highlight the unarticulated assumptions underpinning this body of research. With the exception of one project (*Working Out What Works*), the research has all been conducted by the research officer and without external funding. It is perhaps this last factor, as much as the small scale nature that distinguishes Rosemount's research from some larger organisations where it seems not uncommon

for consultants to be employed or academic researchers involved in projects (i.e. via linkage grants and other partnerships with universities).

### *Disseminating the research*

The research is disseminated through a number of channels both formal and informal. Given the focus on local issues, it is especially important that the findings are easily accessible to local workers. The anger management research, for example, was presented at a number of local youth inter agency meetings as well as to services where workers had participated in focus groups conducted as part of the research. Perhaps because of their informality, these forums have resulted in some of the liveliest, critical, and interesting discussions on the issue in general and the research findings in particular.

However, there is an obvious importance in making the research easily available to a broader audience. To that end, the research reports are made available on the Rosemount website. In addition, most research has been presented at conferences that target a wider and more diverse audience. For example, the work on young people and train fines was presented at the Australian and New Zealand Society of Criminology (ANZOC) conference Sydney 2002; the anger management research at both the Youth Advocacy Policy Association (YAPA) conference, Sydney 2007, and the National Youth Affairs conference, Melbourne 2007. In addition, two of the eight research reports have been written up as peer-reviewed publications. Though Rosemount is keen to increase publications in the future, there are a number of challenges involved in achieving this, which will be discussed in the latter part of the paper.

### *Impacts of the research*

To some extent, the impact of the research is particular to each project and the specific focus taken. However, some general effects can be discussed. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, it is used to inform the work of Rosemount staff. In some instances, this has been about providing literature on newly emerging practice issues. This was certainly the case with the issue of adolescent violence towards parents, where little information had previously been available to guide practitioner interventions. In other cases, it has resulted in the introduction of a new and specific program. For example, the

agency is currently examining the logistics, training, and resources required to implement a targeted anger management group work program.

Program development and implementation is undeniably an important research outcome. However, as established by theorists such as Fook (1996) and Shaw (2007), the role of the research in promoting critical reflection on both practice and research frameworks is of equal if not more importance. An interesting finding of the anger management research was the degree of criticism levelled by the practitioners interviewed at the assumptions underpinning standard anger management interventions, interventions which are supported by an impressive body of evaluative research. Of particular concern was the fact that anger management deals only with a very specific form of anger (externalised anger), generally targets marginalised or 'problem' populations such as young people and fails to recognise or address the social context in which anger difficulties are experienced. These points have prompted considerable discussion within the agency about how the 'problem' of anger management has been constructed and in particular, the types of interventions that would address the concerns raised in practitioner interviews.

As was implied earlier, the research also has an impact outside the direct confines of the agency. For example, *Young people and infringement notices* (Bobic, 2003) provided grounded knowledge about the adverse impacts of a specific policy on a particular group of people, in this case young people in the inner west of Sydney. The issues generated by the research then became part of the advocacy work undertaken by the Youth Justice Coalition ((Youth Justice Coalition, 2007). The research projects have often acted as a focal point for workers in the local area, bringing people together around issues of concern. For example, an outcome of the research on adolescent to parent violence was the organisation of a conference which both provided an avenue to present the research findings and created a much needed public space to discuss an issue which had been causing increasing concern (Cunningham, 2007).

Finally, it needs to be acknowledged that the research does not always have the effect that one would like. For example, *Drug and alcohol use among young people in Inner Western Sydney* (2003) was undertaken in response to the lack of a youth specific drug and alcohol service in the area. Despite the findings clearly confirming the need and despite considerable effort made to procure funding, there remains no youth specific drug and alcohol service in the inner west. As Connell (2007) points out, research, despite

what some may believe, is not a policy decision-making machine. Research illuminates possibilities, it does not and cannot make choices about patterns of action; such choices are the result of complex and deliberate social and political processes.

## Strengths of Research for Practice in a Small Organisation

One of the acknowledged strengths of small community-based organisations is the capacity to respond quickly to local issues as they arise, often using minimal resources. The fact that the service made the decision to support a research position has significantly enhanced this capacity, as has been illustrated in the previous discussion. Moreover, the extent of the research undertaken, given the part-time nature of the position, is further evidence of the ability of a small service to produce a substantial body of research using relatively few resources.

Secondly, the fact that the research position is co-located, rather than physically and organisationally remote as in some larger organisations, has proved an invaluable tool in keeping the research/practice (praxis) relationship both visible and tight. It means the researcher is able to observe the work of the agency on a daily basis and that there are many informal opportunities to feedback research progress. In addition, the more formal mechanisms in place ensure a high degree of collaboration and a sound feedback loop. For example, an issue of concern recently has been the ways in which some of the young people are using social networking sites such as Bebo and Myspace. In response to this, meetings have been organised between the researcher and each of the programs. In part, this has been to gather more specific information on the concerns, but also to ascertain the form in which practitioners would find it useful to have research/knowledge on the issue and in what ways they would anticipate using this knowledge in their practice. Consequently, the practice implications are being built in from the outset, before a specific research question has been formulated.

## Challenges in Undertaking Research in a Small Human Service

Despite the considerable strengths of undertaking research in a small human service, there are also a number of challenges. First are the constraints posed by the position being part-time as well as a lack of quite basic resources. For example, the service has been dependant on the research officer having a university library card. This gives the service access to a comprehensive range of databases and journal articles, which would otherwise incur a cost. A recent discussion revealed that there are other researchers also employed in other small organisations in similar positions.

In terms of time constraints, it is not so much completing the research projects within the designated periods that presents the challenge as it is having time to write them up for publication. Healy and Mulholland (2007, p. 31), based on their own experience, estimate that simply preparing a paper for an initial submission takes between 20 to 60 hours in addition to the time taken to conduct the research. Given the Rosemount position is part-time and entails a number of duties in addition to discreet projects, this means adding an additional four to five weeks onto any given piece of research.

Numerous social work academics (Healy & Mulholland, 2007; Rabbitts & Fook, 1996), noting the lack of practitioner representation in the professional literature, have highlighted the important role of publication in allowing field based social workers to contribute to the formal knowledge base of the profession. Whilst writing for publication is undoubtedly important, it is also an area that would benefit from critical discussion. In particular about what counts as 'formal knowledge' in the social work arena; in the same way that the what counts as 'evidence' in evidence-based practice has been subject to critique (Marston & Watts, 2003; McDonald, 2003). As Connell (1990) pointed out a number of years ago, dissemination of research in refereed journals tends to reach a limited and specialised audience. It is therefore not always the most effective method of communicating findings to those who will most often use it.

The second major challenge is being the sole researcher within the organisation. While colleagues are keen to discuss research content, they have less of an interest in methodology and design. Moreover, unlike the direct

service practitioners, the research sector has not fostered the professional development opportunities and support networks that mediate the difficulties faced by sole workers. However, it does need to be acknowledged that this situation has begun to change. For example, the NGO Research Network and the Social Policy Research Network (SPRN), Faculty of Education and Social Work University of Sydney are two meetings now available to NGO researchers in NSW. These networks have been proved very useful in facilitating connections with other field-based researchers, including others in sole worker positions.

Professional development, however, is an issue that to date has not been adequately addressed by either the field or the academy. The workshops available through the various training bodies with a social welfare orientation tend to focus on practice orientated issues such as conducting assessments, group work, or interventions with particular client groups. However, the National Association of Australian Social Workers (AASW) has recently established a Research Committee, though from available information it is unclear whether it will have a training and development focus (AASW National Bulletin, 2007). Similarly, while the author has accessed university-based research workshops, this has been by virtue of being a postgraduate student. Access to workshops such as these on a regular basis would be extremely beneficial to field based researchers. A fruitful discussion could be had on the most useful way to provide these workshops. Options could include opening up the existing university-based workshops or using professional/academic partnerships with the goal of developing workshops specifically for field based researchers.

There are a number of other initiatives that could be considered to support field-based researchers, especially sole workers or those in employed in small research units. For example a mentoring scheme, such as exists in universities, to link early career with experienced researchers or sole workers with researchers from large research units. Another strategy would be to adapt the group supervision model commonly used in clinical work for the purposes of researchers. While this model is generally used *within* organisations, it could be adapted to bring together researchers *across* organisations for discussing methodological and other issues arising from their respective projects.



## Conclusion

This paper has focused on the role of practice-based research in one small non-government organisation. To date there has been little analysis of the role of field-based research and researchers across the NSW social welfare services sector. A useful starting point would be a mapping exercise to establish research type and focus, the organisational location of positions and developmental history of these positions both within services and across the sector. Of further interest would be an exploration of the extent to which the changed context of human services delivery has shaped the emergence of and form taken by practice-based research in the social welfare sector.

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