One public school: Building community at breakfast

TEACH[R]

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Abstract

School-family and school-community partnerships have been shown to underpin school success. These relationships where parents and community organisations share responsibility for helping children succeed in school have been called 'partnership schools' and 'complementary learning'.

An example of a 'partnership school' was reported in a case study by Miller (2005; 2009) where support being provided by church-based community volunteers at Whitewood Public School[1] on the Central Coast of New South Wales was cited. That study investigated the use of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2001) with a national school breakfast program in Australia called the Good Start Breakfast Club.

This paper reports from two perspectives, the contribution to 'complementary learning' of those volunteers from the Christ Centered Community Church[2] serving in the school breakfast program at Whitewood: first the reflections by a group of parents, grandparents and carers of children attending the school; and second, the reflections of the church pastor. Relationships significant to students' lives and learning emerge in these narratives.

Introduction

In the advertising material for its 2014 National Symposium, The Family, School and Community Partnerships Bureau claimed, "More than 40 years of research shows that when families, schools and the community partner effectively, children and young people's life and learning outcomes improve." The Harvard Family Research Project (2005) calls the concept of these deeply interconnected support system processes 'complementary learning' suggesting two essential principles should guide our thinking about developing this support. First, "both school and nonschool contexts are critical to children's learning and achievement" and second, "learning opportunities and contexts should complement one another" (pp. 2-3).

Jensen and Sonnermann (2014) in the Grattan Institute publication *Turning Around Schools: It Can be Done*, include engagement of parents and community as one of five common steps to school turnaround. Further, and Social Ventures Australia (SVA) (2013) have identified school-community partnerships as one of the organisation's key evidence-based areas of focus in their publication *Insights and Actions: Great Teaching in Tough Schools*. In the context of a high-performing education system preparing students for the world of work, particularly in areas of disadvantage "We need to empower schools, non-profit organisations, businesses, philanthropists, and the community to develop partnerships which bring new resources and opportunities to students and families" (SVA, 2013, p. 3).

Similarly Weiss and Stephen (2009, p. 4) claim "an array of community learning and support services need to partner with families and schools in order to insure school success, especially for economically and otherwise disadvantaged children." Furthermore, Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, and Davies (2007) speak of 'partnership schools' where parents and community organisations share responsibility for helping children succeed in school.

This paper expands discussion of *complementary learning*, an outcome emerging

> *"an array of community learning and support services need to partner with families and schools … to insure school success, especially for economically and otherwise disad-vantaged children"*

[1] A pseudonym has been used for the school involved in this research

[2] A pseudonym has been used for the church involved in this research

from a research project that investigated the use of empowerment evaluation (Fetterman, 2001) with a national school breakfast program in Australia, the Good Start Breakfast Club (GSBC). Two key aspects comprised that project. First, the empowerment evaluation approach was used as the framework to develop a 'practical' methodology desired by the program managers (Australian Red Cross) and a major sponsor (Sanitarium Health Food Company at the time of the study) to evaluate their program. Second, the impact that empowerment evaluation had on the delivery of the breakfast club program was reported. Program personnel identified key program activities for investigation; gathered baseline data about the strengths and weaknesses of the activities; suggested goals and strategies to monitor and improve the activities identified; and developed evaluation tools designed to provide evidence of success. Two 'stories', sourced from unique views, allow specific voices to confirm both the individual and shared mutual development that demonstrated the nature and processes of complementary learning within a broad community.

> *"formerly hungry children were now able to concentrate on school work, resulting in a flow-on benefit to teachers and other students"*

A partnership story – the researcher

Toward the end of fieldwork an invitation was received to attend a morning tea function at Whitewood Public School, one of the schools involved in the investigation. At the end of the function, which was initiated to recognise the contribution community volunteers had made to the school during the past year, an impromptu conversation was convened. The Community Liaison Officer (CLO) who had been largely responsible for getting the breakfast club program operating, invited anyone willing to talk about the club to be involved in the conversation. Although the status of participants was not verified, the group that assembled appeared to be made up of parents/carers and grandparents of children who attend the breakfast club, and a number of interested others. However, at one point in the conversation someone revealed "… this is sort of the P&C [Parents and Citizens Association]…a subset of the P&C" (Miller, 2009, p. 173). The context and data gathering opportunity provided at this time and place enabled voices significant to the lives of children at Whitewood to be heard.

The conversation (Miller, 2009, pp. 178-185) provided opportunity for this group of parents and extended family members of children who participate in the program to talk about the contribution the breakfast club was making to their school. Eight people were involved in the conversation, a smaller number were significant contributors, with one member being particularly dominant. At no time, however, was there a sense that this order of things had a negative effect on the comfort of any member of the group or their willingness to participate.

The first comments were general statements about the benefits to children and teachers of breakfast club attendance such as asserting formerly hungry children were now able to concentrate on school work, resulting in a flow-on benefit to teachers and other students.

Dispelling perceptions of stigma

Stigma associated with the breakfast club occupied the discussion for quite some time. It was revealed that considerable time and effort was required, during the period of two years it took for the P&C to endorse the program, for some members of the wider community to be convinced the service wasn't tainted by stigma.

> *If you go back two years ago, with the P&C, with getting it started…there was this thing that there was a stigma attached. That people would think you don't look after your child properly or that they might just sleep in so that by the time they get up there's no time to have breakfast. So it took a while to get that mind-set out of people, yes, and now it doesn't… .*
> *(Community member (CM) 2, Lines 28–33)*

Events surrounding the launch of the program were attributed with aspects helping to dispel any stigma associated with the service. Reflections on the launch by four members of the group show how the occasion helped to do this. The open invitation for parents and carers to attend the opening with their children, and to do so whenever they liked, was thought to have dispelled the taint of stigma.

> *(CM 2) I think the way it was launched too that really… [helped reduce the stigma]*
> *(CM 4) Oh yea*
> *(CM 2) That made a difference as to how people felt. Like there was a big launch and it was…*
> *(CM 4) Oh yes*
> *(CM 3) There was a line up too*
> *(CM 2) And you got parents who probably normally wouldn't get to come and see or get involved in it were here. And they did and it was a big launch and (everyone) had fun…and had breakfast.*
> *CM 3) And we all had breakfast. We all had breakfast together…*
> *(Community members 2-4, Lines 156-165*

A social and socialising impact

The breakfast club as a social and socialising medium received considerable attention during the conversation. For members of the community the social aspect was reported to be a key component.

(CM 2) It's like, it comes down to social…It's a big social activity basically. Breakfast club is like a social activity, everyone knows everything
(Community member 2, Lines 35–36)
(CM 1) Breakfast was a time when parent would come with their kids…even if they just walk them in and don't have breakfast with them…
(CM 2) Same thing when you go to work or you see someone down at the shops, the kids yell out a mile from down the road, 'Hello Mrs…!'
(CM 4) And then you get to know their parents…
(CM 2) Yes, that's right
(CM 1) And then they say, 'Oh you're the (name) in the canteen…' or 'You're the (name) that does reading' or something…or 'You're (name)'s Mum!'
(Community members 1, 2 & 4, Lines 166–176)
(CM 3) …people intermingle. More people understand…People are willing to help out. More parents are involved…parents wouldn't necessarily have the chance to meet…
(CM 1) And you get the hello in the shopping centre as well…
(Community members 1 & 3, Lines 405–410)

For the children who participate in the program it was reported as having a strong socialising effect.

But it brings the shy ones out though. You know that the ones that are shy, and new kids that come, they're totally accepted. It brings them out, they're no longer shy, they're no longer afraid or anything…That's how we want them to be. That's how we're bringing them up to be…It's that social activity. Yes because when you're going out into the world you're going to come across people with intellectual...With physical…And you have to be prepared to accept them for who they are. So I think the breakfast club…giving them energy and making them…is a social thing. So that there isn't a great divide.
(Community member 1, Lines 42–45; 61–65)

Using a personal example, this member of the group showed how her own daughter had transitioned from needing her mother to accompany her to breakfast club to having the confidence to attend on her own even to the point of asking her mother to stay away.

…she's an only child in kindy…And when the breakfast club came about it was like, 'Well Mummy, you have to come with me to have breakfast'…and then it's like 'Mum give me a kiss at the gate' because it's time for me to go…'You don't need to come in now Mum. It's OK'.
(Community member 1, Lines 70–76)

Later in the conversation the social skills being demonstrated in the breakfast club, that complemented the socialising aspects of club attendance, were raised as significant benefits.

…the procedures like of them washing their hands and… Especially the kindy children who are just learning. The other kids are so patient and they'll go like…I can do this. I'm a big person…they're really aware of all that… the manners…and (name) also has rapport with some of the children like she knows them…People like looking at the ends of the boxes you know the names on the edge of the cartons. She keeps them aside for them to come up and get them and sit down and you know she'll have a pen in her pocket and she'll just…So he can finish doing…And for me that little guy must just love coming in. And I know he's there frequently and he just loves to have the communication with that… .
(Community member 1, Lines 202–212)

Service and community mindedness

Supporting the assertion made elsewhere, that the work done by breakfast club volunteers helps to develop a spirit of service and community mindedness in students, two members of the group commented about this apparent influence of the volunteers.

(CM 2) They teach our kids a certain sense of community in helping out.
(CM 3) They do.
(Community members 2 & 3, Lines 213, 214)

> *"the work done by breakfast club volunteers helps to develop a spirit of service and community mindedness in students"*

Justification for providing breakfast at school was touched on a number of times throughout the conversation. While some of the more sensational justifications associated with dysfunctional home situations were mentioned, lesser reasons were also considered ample justification for providing the service. This comment which first refers to the concerns people were expressing about providing breakfast at school, goes on to list other justifications three members of the group put forward such as sleeping in, being out of cereal and in need of payday to restock.

(CM 2) A lot of people…it was the parents…'Well I don't care if so and so wants to go and spend all their money on like alcohol and they don't have food and things', but it wasn't [it's not] always the case…Sometimes they would just…They could just sleep in…
(CM 1) That's it. Or you just don't have time
(CM 2) Or you're [not] going to have breakfast cereal… nothing in the cupboard
(CM 1) Or payday!
(CM 3) They have breakfast…[at school]
(Community members 1, 2 & 3, Lines 111–120)

Providing opportunity for children to eat at home and again at the breakfast club, or to 'double up' as one member of the group described it, was mentioned somewhat positively as being associated with the social attractiveness of the site. This three-way interchange mentions the prevalence of the practice.

(CM 1) My daughter was doubling up. She's having breakfast at home then coming in…
(CM 3) Yes. Mine was a bit the same way
(CM 2) Yes most kids are…
(CM 1) It's a social thing…
(Community members 1, 2 & 3, Lines 121–126)

Community member 1 mentioned that her son, while not being attracted to the feeding potential of the site, attended nevertheless and engaged in what could be described as social eating.

…even my boy. He doesn't really like going to breakfast club. But I find that when he goes in, a couple of boys go in, and they're all just sitting around…their chairs… stuff like that. He'll usually have like one triangle of toast…ate at home but he doesn't want me to sit with him…
(Community member 1, Lines 139–142).

"Nutritional benefits derived from breakfast club attendance were also mentioned, some in the context of what the 'cool' kids in attendance might be eating"

Behavioural and academic impacts

A number of typical justifications for the program were made later in the conversation with reference being made to behavioural improvements having been evident in students and that academic improvements had followed.

(CM 1) …To have it available…I know that the school always commented…Like they were referring families to have a piece of toast before they went to school. So to me I know that the main [effect]…That the breakfast has…I know that behavioural-wise you can see the children at assembly time. They're all… much more calmer and yea…Because they [Teachers] come back and they tell you. And I know that's when you see… They all do whatever in the classroom. They're all able to concentrate.
(CM 2) Exactly.
(Community members 1 & 2, Lines 337–349)

Comments on volunteer contributions

With the morning tea having been convened to recognise the contribution of volunteers, it was understood that members involved in the conversation were contributing to the school in some way in a volunteer capacity. Having established that no breakfast club volunteers were in the group they were asked to talk about the volunteers who operated the club on school mornings. The invitation resulted in statements of praise from all four main contributors for the work done by volunteers and particularly for the head volunteer.

(CM 4) Great
(CM 2) Great
(CM 3) Fantastic
(CM 2) They're headed by a really, a beautiful lady, who like the children just look forward to…
(CM 1) Yes, I know my little person just loves…when we go into the chemist we see her again and they have a conversation about school and you can see like the… the adult and the child having a conversation about something…and she says don't forget I'll be in on Tuesday and you'll come in and see me won't you, and it's like 'Yea, I'll be there'.
(CM 4) I think it's marvelous. It's as if a parent was there… .
(Community members 1, 2, 3 & 4, Lines 183–201)

Mention was made of the fact that the volunteers did not have children in the school, were not members of the local community, and came from 'outside'.

(CM 1) Because a lot of those people, they don't have children at this school yet they've come in and they're teaching them a sense of community that anyone can help.
(CM 3) They're people that come in from outside. Like they're not people that we know from…They're people from outside.
(Community members 1 & 3, Lines 215, 235, 238)

One volunteer was mentioned for enhancing self–esteem in children.

(CM 4) Also (name) gives the kids a sense of being important. Everyone is important.
(CM 1) Individually.
(CM 2) Yes that's it, yes.
(Community members 1, 2 & 4, Lines 219–221).

Nutritional gains, habits changed by peers

Nutritional benefits derived from breakfast club attendance were also mentioned, some in the context of what the 'cool' kids in attendance might be eating. Mention was also made of breakfast club attendance influencing the eating habits and food choices of participating children.

(CM 4) …fruit and I think that is just unbelievable…a taste for fruit…Again you get kids that normally won't eat healthy things like at home and they go 'I'm not touching that bit of fruit'…

(CM 1) They do.
(CM 4) …like the rules, they're teaching kids what you should have for breakfast. This is what you should eat. OK you might have something junky for lunch but at least you've got that…
(CM 2) Bowl of cereal
(CM 1) Bowl of cereal
(CM 2) The little guys are watching the older guys to see what they're eating…whoever could be at that time a cool person and they're just going to copy them…and try that…
(CM 1) And you go down to the shops, 'Oh Mum can we get some of this?' Because her brother had it at breakfast club.
(Community members 1, 2 & 4, Lines 262–276)

Influence of school personnel

Toward the end of the discussion some time was spent discussing the role of the Community Liason Officer and especially the key role she had played getting the breakfast club program started.

(CM 2) …no, it's more community oriented now than it was.
(CM 1) And (CLO) has had a big part to play
(CM 2) Big part to play
(CM 1) …made us more accepting of people with different situations. Spend 5 minutes with (CLO) and she'll have you doing everything!
(CM 2) It goes outside of school though. It doesn't just finish at 3 o'clock when the kids go home. Her commitment and her caring goes outside. If you need her or you want to talk to her, she's available…
(CM 1) Yes, a phone call.
(CM 2) A phone call away. And she knows…
(CM 1) If she hasn't heard from you she's worried and she'll ring you…
(CM 3) She knows all our phone numbers.
(CM 1) If she needs something, she knows we're all there…She got the breakfast club up and running. She saw a need and it affected every single one of us whether it be…socially or whatever, or if she…that child hadn't…and it would benefit others. She thought it was a need that was there and there were parents generally that just needed food…Every P & C meeting. Every couple of P & C meetings there was those brochures. We'd be going over…are we going?
(CM 2) Then here comes (CLO) and she'd have something on the agenda – breakfast club!
(CM 1) OK we get it (CLO)…obviously just to keep her quiet for a little while. I thought it would last longer, but it is now something else!
(CM 2) Even if it was to keep her quiet, it has succeeded. If the P & C just said yes, let's keep (CLO) quiet as one of their reasons…If we just gave in for that, that's great because the benefits the kids have received…I don't know, there's not much…you could say [against] it because if they need it for nutritional value or if it's the only meal they might have that day… .
(Community members 1, 2 & 3, Lines 440-477)

In summary learning was complementary

During the conversation, as a result of having a Good Start Breakfast Club (GSBC) at the school, three areas of focus emerged being: the issue of stigma, benefits to participating children, and benefits to the school and wider community. The *matter of stigma* had been raised elsewhere by a workshop group involved in the research project, which had resulted in a survey being prepared and piloted in a number of schools including Whitewood. This community group's reflections on the matter of stigma added to the responses of teachers at their school to questions about stigma on the survey.

The type of *benefits to participating children* mentioned by the group deriving from breakfast club attendance contributed to the investigation of key program activities identified in the research project by GSBC program managers and regional coordinators. The group said the breakfast club provided opportunity for younger and older children to interact in ways that appear unique to that environment; children interact with members of the community working as volunteers in the club and with parents who attend, which spilled over into wider social connections; behavioural and educational benefits had been witnessed and reported by teachers; and further, students observing the community service ethic in volunteers were in turn becoming more service oriented.

The *benefits to school and community* mentioned by the group contributed to other key activities that had been investigated in the research project. With respect to community effects, members of the group said the breakfast club had united the school's Parents & Citizens Association in a common cause; that it provides a meeting place for parents and provides a point of reference for interaction between members of the community away from the school.

> *"the breakfast club … united the school's P & C Association in a common cause; provide[d] a meeting place for parents and … a point of reference for interaction … away from the school"*

Through engagement in an impromptu conversation this 'subset of the P&C' clearly identified outcomes that are contributing to 'complementary learning' at Whitewood Public School and in its wider community.

The next section gives voice to the pastor of the church that undertook to support the program to provide breakfast for children attending Whitewood Public School.

A partnership story - the pastor

When Sanitarium initially approached the Christ Centred Community Church (CCCC) with the idea

of partnering with their company and the Australian Red Cross to run a GSBC at Whitewood Public School, the opportunity was met with immediate interest by the church. Whitewood was literally just down the road from the church and was seen by the church as part of its community. However, it was felt that further examination of the situation was needed in order to make sure involvement with the school would really benefit the school and the greater Wyong community.

As a result of consultation with both Sanitarium and the school, it was understood by the church that if the program was a success, it could well result in improved behavioural and learning ability for the students plus improved community awareness and involvement by parents, teachers and the wider community. There was also the possibility of the young people at the school having increased feelings of both individual and community worth along with a desire to be more involved in community activities.

> *"as far as possible we would only work **with** the community and not **for** the community"*

It was realised very early in the initial consultation that any perception of stigma could kill the success of the ministry. Whitewood was a school that had significant social needs amongst its students and parents. However, often a child and parent would prefer to go hungry rather than admit that they were disadvantaged in any way. What child wants fellow students or teachers to know that they might be poor or that the parents didn't have time to make breakfast?

There were two things that CCCC brought with them to the development of the GSBC that we believe led to the success of the club. First, they had been developing a philosophy of ministry to guide how the church would be involved in community activities. This philosophy asserts that as far as possible we would only work *with* the community and not *for* the community. As church members we would partner with the community, parents, teachers and students working alongside them rather that coming in and 'doing good' by ourselves. The church believes it is this philosophy that was the major reason for the overall success of the GSBC and this philosophy of ministry now permeates every ministry the church is involved in.

The launch of the GSBC was, as already pointed out key to its on-going success. Local dignitaries such as the mayor, major sponsor Sanitarium, Red Cross personnel, parents, teachers and students were involved in this party-like event. The ongoing running of the club however, needed to continue in the same way it was launched: with open inclusiveness. Parents and teachers continued to come for breakfast, but it was the fact that parents, teachers, students and church members were working together in teams to see that all the children, whether hungry or not, wanted to be there, that made the club a success and sustainable. The church came to be seen as an essential part of the school community and not just as a group of intrusive temporary interventionist 'do gooders'. The underlying philosophical assumption was that there is a big difference between doing things *for* the community and doing things *with* the community. Even with the best of intentions, when you just do things for the community you can be seen as aloof, separate and elitist. You can be seen as above, or thinking you are above the person you are helping. At worst, when you just do things for a community, you can contribute to the downward spiral of a community's existence. For example, a person who receives $200 and spends $180 on drugs may use the remaining $20 on food just to exist. Along comes a church or charity and gives the person food. Now the person can spend $200 on drugs because the food is provided. By trying to do good for a community you can actually be aiding them on their downward spiral.

The second important element that CCCC brought with them to the Whitewood breakfast club that helped in its success, was in its leadership and team of assistants. The lady leading the ministry was a grandmother who had a genuine love for young people and that showed in every part of the breakfast club. She had what we used to call a 'hard soft heart'. By this we mean she loved everybody, regardless of social standing, she had a soft heart. However, she was also street smart. She modeled to the team, those from the church and those from the community who joined the initial team, how to involve the children in all aspects of the breakfast club. Besides being an organised person, she made all those who came to the breakfast club feel that they were part of her family. When she finally, for health reasons stepped down from leadership, the person taking over was a younger mother who had the same characteristics as the first leader.

In the parent interviews, mention was made of the impact individuals from the church had in the lives of the children and parents outside of school hours. One person mentioned actually chose a part-time job in the local pharmacy so she could be part of the community. Children and parents were constantly going to the pharmacy to talk to this person who they saw as part of their family. Team members were invited into the homes of the families from the school. School families were invited into the homes of the people from the church. The leaders and team were very conscious of the fact that it was a privilege to be involved

in the lives of others and it was never a case of us or them, it was always we are together in this community.

In Wyong, there are generations of families that have never seen anyone within their family employed. The grandparents did not work, the parents haven't worked and the children grow up not knowing what employment is and with little incentive to find employment. With government assistance, and charities, they can live their whole lives not feeling the need to find employment and contributing to society.

When CCCC teamed up with the school community and became one united community, changes already noted were observed. The breakfast club was not just something for them, put on by others doing good for them. The club was seen as theirs and students saw it was their responsibility to be part of the team running the club.

It would be interesting to do a long term study to see if the children who learnt to serve with and for others followed through with this in adult life. Would such programs like the GSBC help children who have never seen a relative in employment decide they want to work or serve? What we do know is that at CCCC where the philosophy of serving and working *with* others, not just *for* them has been instilled in children from pre-school age, there is a marked level of involvement in different levels of ministries at the church in their later teen years and adult lives. The children believe that serving is normal. Further, for the last three consecutive years, students from CCCC have been the school captains in their respective high schools. Could it be that the philosophy of serving and working with people, not just for them, has cumulative benefits?

CCCC became the first Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia to have a public school approach them and ask us to provide them with a school chaplain. When Whitewood personnel were discussing whether they wanted a chaplain or not, they decided if the chaplain came from CCCC they wanted one, but not from any other church. Why, because this church did things with them and not just for them.

For the church, working alongside students, parents and teachers with the breakfast club has been an incredible honour and privilege. Life term friendships have been made and enjoyed. Sure there have been people who have come to the church as a result of the breakfast club and the relationships formed there, and we are happy about that, but it is the understanding that when Whitewood decided on a chaplain that their first thought was the church, that is heart-warming. Why, because we are seen as a part of their lives as they are a part of ours.

A conclusion

This statement by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) about narrative inquiry resonates with the authors,

> *As researchers, we come to each new inquiry field living our stories. Our participants also enter the inquiry field in the midst of living their stories. Their lives do not begin the day we arrive nor do they end as we leave. Their lives continue. Furthermore, the places in which … [participants] live and work, their classrooms, their schools, and their communities are also in the midst when we researchers arrive. Their institutions and their communities, their landscapes in the broadest sense, are also in the midst of stories.*
> (pp. 63-64)

Commenting on the program a teacher at Whitewood said, "The breakfast club has been a bonus to our school. The general overall atmosphere is one of caring and sharing not just of each other but with the wider community" (Miller, 2009, p. 375). The pastor and the researcher count it a blessing and a privilege to have been invited into the midst of the Whitewood Public School story, an encounter of mutual community 'complementary learning'. TEACH

"Would such programs like the GSBC help children who have never seen a relative in employment decide they want to work or serve?"

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