

Overcoming the barriers to engagement and equity for all students

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Keynote address

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A quality school education is associated with a raft of positive personal outcomes which include what Alan Reid has poetically described as “a passport to future security (and) the ladder for social mobility” (2009, p.3). Higher levels of school education are associated with higher earnings and greater financial security: an Australian who completes Year 12 can expect to earn approximately \$500,000 more in the course of their working life than an early school leaver who does not go on to further education or training. They are also associated with better mental and physical health: Victorians who do not complete secondary school are almost four times more likely to report poor health than those who do (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2005).

If anything, these relationships are growing stronger with time. There is an escalating competition for high status schooling opportunities that are perceived to give young people a greater chance of competing for social and economic benefits (Bentley et al 2004). It has now become commonplace for parents to make extraordinary financial sacrifices to send their children to the schools that are believed to provide these private positional benefits. It has become commonplace for the housing value of entire suburbs to be assessed on the basis of their proximity to such schools.

At the same time, the discourse of schooling has become more strongly focused than ever on individual achievement: what it looks like, how to measure it and how to make schools more accountable in their attempts to promote it. This is true across OECD nations and Australia is no exception. The dialogue about the collective or community aspects of schooling is weakening to the point of invisibility.

Yet the collective or community aspects of schooling are inescapable. Schooling embodies a number of public purposes that include improving social inclusion by building the social capital of local communities. As Peter McInerney points out, “the fates of individual schools and their communities are inextricably linked” (2007, p.266).

This linkage shows itself in a number of ways.

On the one hand, communities need schools.

Schools represent a significant resource for their communities.

They also have a strong role in increasing the capacity of their communities to support better educational outcomes for young people. This is a chicken and egg relationship: the greater the community’s capacity, the more likely that schools will succeed in providing positive educational outcomes for young people, even where high levels of poverty pertain (Putnam 2004, Vinson 2004).

This is what has been called “the educational task of building community through schooling” (Brennan & Caro 2000, p.16). It takes place in both tangible and intangible ways.

On a tangible level, schools can provide educational opportunities for their community. They can provide important physical facilities like libraries and sporting facilities. They can serve as points of delivery for integrated education and community services.

On a less tangible level, they can serve as a “symbolic focal point of the community” (Johns et al 2000, p.3). They can develop social networks by bringing people together for common purposes. They can foster community belonging and community strength.

On the other hand, schools need communities. Providing a quality school education for all young people is a task that schools can’t do alone, especially where disadvantage is present.

It seems that we’ve been talking for decades about the relationship between socioeconomic disadvantage and the educational engagement and achievement of young people. This is because it is not going away. If anything, it is becoming stronger and more entrenched.

The Foundation for Young Australians or FYA has recently released its 2009 *How Young People are Faring* report. Once again this year, the data reinforces the findings of our own previous research and research undertaken by Brotherhood of St Laurence. It shows that young Australians from low socioeconomic backgrounds are still more likely to underperform and underachieve at school, more likely to become disengaged and to leave school early, less likely to go on to further education and

training, less likely to be engaged in the workforce and, if they do make it in to work, more likely to be the first group affected by economic downturns such as the one we are living through right now (Bond 2009; Robinson & Lamb 2009).

This situation is exacerbated by the structures of Australian schooling. The complexity of these structures is detailed in another recent report created by Jack Keating for FYA (Keating 2009). One of their most observable effects is that low SES young Australians are increasingly clustered in schools with poor educational outcomes located in economically depressed areas with low educational profiles (Keating & Lamb 2004).

These schools face multiple barriers to their efforts to meet the educational and wellbeing needs of their students (Black 2007). Typically, they have large numbers of students who require support in multiple ways (Bishop 2004). They cannot provide this support without the help of expert community organisations but limited resources means that they may find it too difficult to create or maintain the necessary connections with these organisations (Mulford et al 2007b). This is what one school principal told me:

“There are organisations that support student welfare. It would be really great if I could have better access to these. We do get funding for a trained student welfare officer from amongst the staff, but that’s my assistant principal. When she is wearing her welfare hat, I lose her support in running the school” (in Black 2007).

This problem may have less to do with individual schools than with a systemic lack of consensus about who is responsible for young people’s wellbeing. The *Report Card on the Wellbeing of Young Australians* released last year by the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth makes it clear that education is one measure of a broader wellbeing, yet Australian school systems still largely operate as though it were an isolated activity. As Carolyn Atkins has noted:

“We know that a child’s or young person’s learning does not occur in isolation from the other parts of his or her life. However the traditional school structure and approach is to respond as if this is the case” (in Black 2008).

Collectively, the community sector provides a range of services for young people that naturally bring its work into the sphere of schools. New thinking within the sector clearly sees schools as key partners in meeting its social inclusion agenda. Yet partnership between schools and community organisations are hampered by a number of factors.

One of these is the cultural gap. Community organisations have told us that the training received by teachers is so different to that of community sector professionals that they can struggle to understand one another’s basic priorities, let alone agree on how to work together.

Working cooperatively with other agencies is not a simple task: it requires skill and assumes capacity. Both of these can be in short supply when a school is operating in challenging circumstances and struggling to meet complex student needs. Research shows that the most successful relationships between schools and the community are built on a shared or distributed leadership that draws on the knowledge and expertise of both sectors and builds collective responsibility for all young people in the area.

This kind of leadership first requires a cultural shift away from the idea that schools are the only point of leverage for efforts to improve young people's outcomes (Levin 2006). Too many school-community partnerships fail because of the cultural tendency of schools to see themselves as the only expert (Kilpatrick, Johns & Mulford 2003).

One of the most important elements of any strategy to improve young people's outcomes is what Pat Thomson has called 'thisness'. By this she means the place-based qualities of schools and their communities that are specific to their location and particular context (2002). Schools understand the importance of thisness. This is what one school principal said at an FYA forum:

"The challenge is to make the future better for the young people we are working with in the particular context we operate in" (in Black 2008).

The community sector has a huge bank of knowledge about effective place-based practice. Community organisations are experts in the creation of the right approach to the specific local needs of young people. This knowledge needs to be better harnessed as part of a deeper collaboration between community organisations and schools.

Perhaps the final and most important point to make about partnerships between schools and community organisations is that they cannot be left to chance. They cannot be dependent on the capacity and commitment of individual schools and organisations. Ad hoc partnerships serve a vital role for specific cohorts of students, but they don't alter the intrinsic operation, structure or culture of schooling. Because of this, they can't tackle the larger social forces that shape the educational outcomes of young people in disadvantage (Mulford et al 2007a).

The only thing that will really tackle these forces is systemic collaboration underpinned by a social contract or mandate. The Melbourne Declaration is a step towards such a mandate, but more is needed.

We need a schooling system that sees school-community partnership not as an add-on but as an intrinsic factor in the successful operation of schools. We need a system which measures school performance by the degree to which they work effectively with other agencies, the extent to which they engage their local community and the value that they add to student achievement in the face of disadvantage.

We need a system that builds the capacity for collaboration so that working together doesn't exhaust the already scarce resources of schools and community organisations. We need a system that can reduce the complexity, overlap, replication and gaps in the services that are currently provided for young people while strengthening and coordinating initiatives that meet the specific needs of local communities. We need a system that reflects our highest aspirations for young people and creates an authorising environment to which all sectors can sign up to realise these aspirations.

It doesn't seem too much to ask.

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