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SOCIAL
INCLUSION

contents

Editorial:

The Politics of Social Inclusion

JOHN GRAHAM

TWELVE YEARS OF the Howard Federal Government significantly, and deliberately, affected the social climate in Australia. The Howard miasma — a culture of 1950s mono-cultural nationalism, neo-liberal economic "reform", the diminution of the public in favour of the private and society in favour of the individual — increased social divisions and lessened government concern about those experiencing social disadvantage.

In education, the Howard Government implemented policies which had a negative impact on socially disadvantaged groups. Their policy objective was to expand the private sector's role and market share. Funding was transferred from the public system to private alternatives, which were further encouraged through legislative and regulatory changes. The message from the Federal Government was about public system failure and private institutional success. The favoured image of the public sector was as a safety net for those unable to afford anything better.

The fact that public schooling systems included a far greater proportion of students from circumstances linked to educational disadvantage — low socio-economic status (SES), low levels of parental education, Indigenous background, intellectual disability, rural location — and therefore significantly higher costs per student, meant that a

shift of funding away from the public sector became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Public systems were pilloried for failing their low-achieving students (and bringing down the country's international test performance!) thereby increasing the flight of higher SES families into the private sector and justifying the redistribution of funds away from public schools.

The election of Kevin Rudd had only a low impact on the entrenched policy settings and related social values of the Howard era. Rudd was the change you could have (to get rid of a tired government and prime minister) without really having a change. The Labor Government came into office with a policy platform which marginally widened the policy parameters set by Howard. In education (and training) there was no recommitment to the unique value and importance of the public sector. The Prime Minister and his Education Minister, Julia Gillard, made it abundantly clear that they favoured a market-based view of education provision. Social disadvantage would be recognised and addressed but this would happen without upsetting the market which had been nurtured and flourished over the previous 12 years. It would be clip-on policy in the short term, some very minor re-balancing of public-private resource relativities in the medium term and the vague possibility of more significant change in the middle to long term after a season of reviews (and another election).

As part of its approach to social disadvantage, the Rudd Government embraced the notions of "social inclusion" and social exclusion. They are useful concepts. Social exclusion provides a definitional organising principle for the different aspects of social disadvantage — inadequate social participation, a lack of social integration, a lack of power, a lack of social recognition, poverty and low levels of social capital. There was a growing recognition from the 1980s that any attempt to address the complex factors contributing to social exclusion required a multi-layered "joined-up" approach which recognised the inter-relationship of the different components. This approach was developed under the banner of social inclusion. It covers areas such as homelessness, housing, neighbourhood support, transport, health, unemployment, youth offending, child welfare, general social support and education — and stresses their inter-connectedness.

The greatest influence on the adoption of a social inclusion approach by Australian Labor governments was the Blair Labour Government in the UK. When it came to power in 1997 it set up a co-ordinating and policy body in the Cabinet Office, the Social Exclusion Unit, which provided a high-level focus on social disadvantage. In South Australia, the Labor Government established its own Social Inclusion Board and Social Inclusion Commissioner in 2002. In 2005, the Bracks Government in Victoria launched its framework for addressing disadvantage (*A Fairer Victoria*) based on a similar approach to social inclusion. The Rudd Government joined its state Labor counterparts in 2008 when it launched its own Social Inclusion Board, with the Deputy Prime Minister Gillard nominated as the Minister for Social Inclusion. The role of the federal board was defined as "rethinking how policy and programs across portfolios and levels of government can work together to combat economic and social disadvantage".

The concept of social inclusion/social exclusion encompasses the role and outcomes of education as a part of a larger whole. Education in theory plays a central role in providing both the opportunity and the capability for effective participation in mainstream society. Its outcomes, however, are mediated through the inter-relationship between the social background of students and their participation and performance in educational institutions. Research continues to indicate that social disadvantage impacts significantly on educational outcomes. Similarly, there is an established link between the outcomes of educational institutions such as schools and the socio-economic characteristics of their student population. It has been estimated that up to 75% of school variation in attainment is due to student-intake factors. Improvements in variables such as teaching quality can make some difference to a school's overall performance but their impact is contained within these broader parameters.

The evidence is that sustained improvements in educational outcomes for low-SES students are very difficult to achieve. Victoria provides a good case study of this. In a press release in 2008 the Premier announced that "Victoria leads the way on social inclusion" and the Federal Government is "looking to Victoria as a leader in this field". The Victorian Government's social inclusion initiatives in education have largely focused on the early years. The 2009 Victorian Auditor General's report into literacy and numeracy achievement pointed to both the advantages and the limitations of this approach. The report, covering the 10 years to 2007, identified significant gains made in P-2 literacy over this period but concluded that there was no evidence that these gains were sustained as students progressed through school. Of particular concern was the report's conclusion that the achievement gap between students from high and low SES schools represented 15 months of learning at Year 9. This gap had not narrowed over the period of the audit for either literacy or numeracy. The regional analysis reflected the same outcome. Eastern Metropolitan was the only departmental region that performed above the expected level for both literacy and numeracy and the gap between it and the other regions was substantial. Eastern was also the only region with a high SES, based on the average SES of the schools in the area it covers.

The Victorian Auditor General's report also had implications for the success of a number of Federal Government policies. The social inclusion target of a 90% retention rate to the end of Year 12 (or its equivalent) by 2015 will only be met if the literacy and numeracy outcomes of low SES students can be significantly improved. The same can be said for the ambitious low SES student targets for higher education proposed in the Bradley Report. The Auditor General's findings have further implications for the national school "transparency" agenda. The planned publication of national testing results for all Australian schools on a publicly accessible website will lead, almost inevitably, to media lists of school rankings. The Auditor General's report makes it clear that these rankings will largely mirror the social background of the students who attend them. Schools in lower SES communities, and by implication their students, will be named and shamed. The public system, because of the composition of its student population, will also come under fire.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

The irony of the federal Minister for Social Inclusion brow-beating the states into co-operating with this policy, which has the potential to exacerbate social exclusion, will not be lost on teachers in low-ranking schools. The problem the Federal Government seems unwilling to face is the contradiction between its commitment to improving educational outcomes for socially disadvantaged groups and its locked-in support for an education market which works to undermine this goal. An effective social inclusion policy in education must incorporate structural reforms to resource allocation, needs-based funding, a recognition that class size does matter, teacher quality policies that make sense within the profession and a recommitment to the value of public education provision.

The writers in this edition of *Professional Voice* offer a range of research-based insights into the operation of social inclusion principles in education, including recommendations about effective policies and strategies to address social disadvantage. The articles cover social inclusion/social exclusion issues in schools, early childhood and post-school vocational education and training. They have something to say about what's happening now to strengthen social inclusion and much more about the way forward from here. As Tony Vinson writes:

> *… if our society is to become truly equitable we must move beyond periodic, welcomed concessional adjustments, to an education system based firmly on inclusive policies and funding that meets the needs of all of our children. And, after all, giving strong voice to that message is an indispensable part of an inclusive society.*

Inclusive Education

What does it mean for students, teachers, leaders and schools?

JILL BLACKMORE

WE HEAR A lot about failing (public) schools in media, political and policy discourses. What is rarely recognised is that schools, teachers and leaders now confront greater complexity than ever before — student personalised learning, multi-literacies and multi-modal ways of teaching and learning, the internationalisation and nationalisation of curriculum, the integration of learning technologies, developing metacognitive competencies for knowledge-based globalised economies, and inter-cultural awareness. Schools in democratic societies are also expected in this period of intensified movement of people as students, refugees, workers, teachers and travellers to produce social cohesion and global citizens as we live in more culturally diverse communities.

We also know that there are ongoing if not institutionalised patterns of exclu-sion with evidence of a widening not lessening of disparity in educational outcomes between rich and poor schools, students, families and communities in most Western societies (Lamb et al, 2004).

If schools are to develop as inclusive communities, then equality and diversity need to be acknowledged as twin principles. Models of research and leadership based on the recognition of diversity which fail to acknowledge structural inequalities are likely to explain inequitable outcomes by locating the problem in minority communities or by explaining them in terms of cultural misunderstandings.

(Osler, 2006, p136)

Due to recent school funding policies in Australia and elsewhere, schooling is increasingly becoming the means by which individual and familial social advantage is maintained and enhanced as those who have the economic capacity and cultural resources mobilise a rights-based discourse of educational choice.

Indeed, it is the capacity of schools to select their students and thereby exclude those that "do not fit" either academically or socially that best explains (selection often being a proxy for family background) the differentials between academic outcomes between schools (Lamb et al, 2004). Furthermore, evidence in Australia, the US, UK, NZ and Canada points to a geographical concentration of inadequate community infrastructure, poor health and wellbeing and unemployment arising from de-industrialisation and policies of choice that often, but not necessarily, coincide with educational underachievement (Lamb et al, 2004, Vinson 2002, 2007).

Exclusion from social resources occurs because of the unequal distribution of collective assets such as transport, health facilities or assistance for students with disabilities; as a consequence of living in damaging environments where there is industrial pollution or family violence; and cultural marginalisation as individuals or groups experience racism or sexism. School policies (fees, disciplinary, uniform, curriculum etc) that exclude tend to result in communities of sameness because people tend to choose to be with people like themselves. But by default, the choices of a few can reduce the choices of many as there is a shift in resources. Education markets thus, ironically, devalue diversity and difference and value sameness and uniformity in terms of what counts as a "good" school or student.

Current policy solutions to address student disengagement can unintentionally produce exclusion because of their normalising tendencies due to their focus on finer calibrations of measurement of outcomes, rankings, national curriculum, standardised assessment, narrow measures of literacy and numeracy, pedagogical orthodoxies and a focus on "at risk" students. Such policies do not address the "real" issues of why students feel or are "excluded" from schooling. Dropping out of school is a process that occurs over time. Students lose connectedness with education not due to lack of ability or educational underachievement, but because of poor social relationships with their peers and teachers or a sense of exclusion. Getting any job is better than being at school. Many gain a sense of identity and agency outside school with peers or in work. The cultural baggage students bring to school is often ignored in curriculum and pedagogy.

In a culturally diverse society, we would expect schools to recognise diversity

as a positive aspect of education and that they would seek to create communities of practice that recognise and respect difference. Social inclusion in and through schooling requires recognition by governments that some schools need additional support because of the diverse needs of their students. Diversity and difference are to be valued and not to be seen as a disadvantage. "Inclusion is people wanting to participate as valued, appreciated equals in the social, economic, politics and cultural life of the community (in valued social situations) and to be involved in mutually trusting, appreciative and respectful interpersonal relationship at the family, peer and community levels" (Babacan et al,, 2007, p14). Inclusion has many educational dimensions. There is increasing evidence, for example, of strong links between student health, a sense of wellbeing (such as freedom from racism or sexism) and educational achievement (Tett, 2003). A "pupil's educational achievement cannot easily be separated from their personal, social, emotional and physical development and well being" (Campbell & Whitty, 2002, p99).

Schools need to be places where students (and teachers) feel they belong, where they get a sense of achievement in some aspect of their lives, where they are recognised and feel connected. Schools often provide a "restorative environment", one where students can feel safe to take risks and process events that challenge their experience with security, privacy and control, authentic pedagogies that provide scope for agency and a sense of capacity to change one's self and one's future. But a focus on the social should not be to the detriment of the academic. An inclusive school is one that combines individualised learning plans with high academic expectations as well as focusing on basic skills/essential learning within a framework of developing generic meta-cognitive and social capacities. When treating student knowledge as a cultural resource, there is a focus on authentic pedagogies and assessment, through problem-solving tasks that dissolve academic/vocational binaries (Lingard et al, 2003).

Inclusive schools provide opportunities for students to be co-producers of knowledge. In one secondary school, while the Lebanese students felt marginalised after 9/11 from the wider community, they felt particularly marginalised from the school system as they did not have the same resources. They also desired what other schools had — a depth and breadth of curriculum that facilitated choice, multi-modalities of learning, performances of success as well as extracurricular activities around drama, outdoor education and sport, activities requiring organisational and temporal flexibility by the school leaders. But foremost was their desire for teachers who listened to, and cared for, them.

In a study of "resilient" students and schools we found that students in schools and/or families facing challenging circumstances — poverty, poor health and wellbeing, lack of resources — but who did well educationally had developed strategies of resilience. These resilient students mobilised social, school and familial networks; used available resources (school and teacher knowledge etc); and were able to identify and make choices. Relationships based on a sense of reciprocity and mutual engagement with other students were central. Schools also often acted as links in

SOCIAL INCLUSION

social networks into employment and further education or training where the social networks of families or communities had fragmented. Such schools also had clear policies agreed upon by all staff that worked against sexism and racism. Inclusivity is premised upon both recognition of respect for difference and what different perspectives, values and experiences bring to education through policies and everyday practices. An inclusive school is one that provides multiple programs to meet both the academic and personal needs of all students, that focuses on student identity and self efficacy, develops a strong pastoral care system and is a restorative place of caring and sharing (Alton-Lee, 2003).

Inclusive schools also tend to be more democratic in their decision making. Inclusion has a symbolic dimension. Schools need to offer symbolic and practical reconciliation in the form of deliberative processes that integrate community and families and not just superficial activities around cultural displays, sport and the arts. This requires deliberative processes that seek to involve all stakeholders in decision making beyond the token representative. Community representatives do not feel included if their opinions are marginalised or ignored in discussions or do not inform decisions. Inclusive schools therefore develop strategies to welcome families, such as parent visits to learn about the school philosophy and setting up discussion circles. Respect requires schools to listen to different community stakeholders, and to create processes and conditions of trust that make parents and students feel not only that they can speak out but also influence decisions.

Inclusive schools also need to be inclusive for teachers. Teachers' sense of belonging and professional efficacy are equally important in terms of improving student learning. That is, the same principles of respect, professional autonomy and efficacy, recognition of achievement, and valuing of different perspectives are key principles of collegial cultures. Inclusive schools also require teachers to work with difference as a cultural resource to be mobilised in the curriculum and pedagogies and to develop a wide pedagogical repertoire to address individual difference. In order to develop programs that link to community, teachers also have to learn to engage with different paradigms and ways of thinking as they make links with external partners and agencies such as universities, TAFE, industry and community organisations.

In a community of difference there are often moments of discomfort because of different ways of doing and seeing (Trifonas, 2003). Teachers need to be reflective of how they are positioned within communities of difference in terms of their gendered, racialised and cultural identities. Likewise school leaders have to become culturally astute, capable of cross-cultural border crossings and develop a capacity to build communities of difference based on respect, responsibility, embracing diverse perspectives, valuing multiple languages, providing authentic pedagogy and assessment that is relevant (Shields, 2002). While there is considerable agreement about what constitutes inclusion in pedagogy and for students, there is less attention paid to inclusive leadership. Leaders in schools still tend to be white and male … and this offers a message to community, students and minority group teachers about inclusion. Teachers and leaders need to recognise their own positionality, often that

premised upon their whiteness and/or masculinity, and how privilege accrues from that (Blackmore, 2009). Greater diversity in leadership is a key aspect of inclusion. Currently there is teacher disengagement with leadership, in part because many women and minority groups feel they are excluded. This makes it even more critical that teaching and indeed the principalship become a diverse workforce, representative of the diversity of the student and wider community, so that teachers as well as students and parents feel they belong.

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SOCIAL INCLUSION

Public Education and Social Inclusion

A commentary on the National Public Education Forum, March 2009

TONY VINSON

THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT has adopted an approach, unusual by Australian standards, of identifying an overarching theme which links and informs its social reform agenda. It has declared its commitment to building a more inclusive Australian society by using a combination of special measures and by ensuring that many of our day-to-day institutions operate in a more socially inclusive way.

What is meant by social inclusion? A socially inclusive society is one where all individuals — irrespective of their background — have the opportunity and capability to participate in key activities in their community. This means to:

- **Learn** — participate in education and training and be encouraged to fulfil their potential
- **Work** — participate in employment, unpaid or voluntary work including the provision of family and carer responsibilities
- **Engage** — connect with people, use local services and participate in local cultural, civic and recreational activities, and
- **Have a voice** — influence decisions that affect them.

Social inclusion requires the right resources (skills and assets) and opportunities to be available, at the right time in people's lives, to allow them to build the capabilities

that they need to participate in their community.

There is an advantage in having multiple perspectives to gain insight into the different aspects of school education and social inclusion. The range of papers presented at the National Public Education Forum held in Canberra in March 2009 provided this. It wasn't that any single perspective revealed the ultimate truth of the matter; they each shed light on important factors that need to be understood in planning an improved education system. Jim McMorrow's paper focused on the *resources/opportunities* component of the social inclusion schema. The paper conceptualised school education in *system* terms, with the cultivation of enhanced capabilities being either assisted or blocked by the available quality and quantity of the resources necessary for effective school education.

On the financial side McMorrow tells us two important things: first that in 2006 schools within the independent system had at their disposal an average of $13,460 per student to cover the resources needed to educate those students. Second, that Australian governments are funding the equivalent of the costs of teaching staff in all our schools. The first item of information immediately gives rise to the question of how adequate the funding can be that is available within the government and Catholic sectors when it is two-thirds the amount available per independent school student. As long as we remain focused on prices and not costs we will remain uncertain about the amount needed to cover necessary educational resources.

In my visits to 200 New South Wales public schools I met many students who had definite views on this matter. They described their school as "povo" on the basis of comparisons with independent schools and their judgement that the available funds failed to match the needs of their school. I should also add that I witnessed creative teaching of a value beyond financial calculation.

An education system has to be built on more than the exceptional talents and motivation of individuals, if that system is to help develop the abilities of *all* of our children and young people. And that takes us to the heart of the problem, beyond the rivalry of different sectors, to a more just and secure system that is consistent with a first principle of inclusive societies, namely that *all individuals — irrespective of their background — have the opportunity and capability to participate in key activities in their community*. In the present context that means funding that matches agreed national educational goals and objectives, the educational components incorporated within the landmark MCEETYA exercise a few years ago. It was a solid piece of work and had attractive policy features. First, it was grounded in clearly articulated principles and standards so that the resource requirements were measured against the performance required of students. Second, the intended distribution of resources was not organised on the basis of sectors and relative needs but on the absolute needs of schools to enable their students to achieve standard outcomes. The report's substantive findings and general approach should be the starting point of any review of the school funding regime.

Adam Rorris' paper focused on the material condition of schools as one of the resources influencing the educational outcomes of our children. This is an important

factor. The physical infrastructure of our schools contributes positively (or negatively) to social inclusion: materially by supporting the teaching and learning opportunities; symbolically by affecting the confidence, motivation and self-image of students and staff. Believing that they could run a sub-four minute mile, supported by encouraging expectations that they could do so, had a major bearing on Roger Bannister and John Landy's attainment of that goal. In visiting schools I have been struck by the drag or "wind resistance" caused in many instances by physically inadequate, ill-maintained and simply down-at-the-heels schools.

Rorris shows how far we lag behind the UK and US in the investment in capital improvements per student in public schools. He also provides data showing the merging of the scale of Australian private schools' investment in capital improvements with that of the UK state maintained and US public schools. For example, in 2006 average student expenditure on capital improvements (Australian dollars, nominal prices) was $659 for Australian public schools, $1,678 for Australian private schools, $1,693 for UK state maintained schools and $1,525 for US public schools. This is the objective reality behind some public school students' perception of their "povo" status.

I think the way forward is clear enough: the wherewithal to implement existing international design standards that support flexible, contemporary teaching practices that match student needs and prepare them for the challenges of present day society. State authorities are well acquainted with these standards but have rationed their use because of limited funds. The scale of the Commonwealth's planned investment in school infrastructure improvements is substantial. It will be important for parents and community representatives to mentor the implementation of best practice design standards, making sure that they are adapted to some extent to meet local circumstances.

VALUE EMPHASIS

There is a values perspective to the unsatisfactory nature of our school funding arrangements. Gerard Noonan's paper reminded me of Robert Merton's ascription of the acceptability of established social arrangements to the "normative force of the actual" or the legitimacy that accrues over time. A shared view of arrangements as "normal" is more likely to be sustained when people are ignorant of different arrangements that exist elsewhere. His point about Australians' unawareness of education funding arrangements in other comparable countries is true of a range of social expenditures. We seem to be in a time warp imagining ourselves as the social pioneers we once were.

This common emphasis on social values also marked the papers by Lyndsay Connors and Trevor Cobbold. Lyndsay's presentation rested squarely on our need to adhere to socially inclusive values and policies — "Our children are equal and equally entitled to the conditions in schools most likely to enable them to participate fully and to achieve their personal best." Equity and inclusion were cited as the guiding principles. Those principles certainly converge on the necessity of students' access to quality teaching.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

In Lyndsay's view, upholding the principles of social inclusion and social equity requires an adequate supply of high quality teachers, and their distribution in all schools "to implement the agreed curriculum for the particular students they serve". At this point her value emphasis seemed to articulate with Jim McMorrow's notion of "assessed components of school education and what is required to meet them". But to stay with the quality teacher theme, Lyndsay sees distortions in the equitable development and distribution of quality teachers — in teacher/student ratios where the respective challenges warrant a reversal in favour of the public system; in the privileged funding situation that enables the independent schools to lure demonstrably proficient teachers away from the public system; and the allocation of raw novices to the most challenging public schools. Behind these concerns is a fear that in the absence of explicit, supportive policy, it is likely that the supply of quality teaching will be diverted away from where it is most needed.

Trevor Cobbold's value emphasis focuses on the consequences of *negating* social inclusion and equity by granting ascendancy to the value of competition and the use of market-like mechanisms. First, he argues that on the available evidence you do not get the hoped-for benefit of a more evenly spread good educational performance. He summarises his position in this way: "Competition and choice do not lead to significant improvements in student achievement, but (to) greater social segregation and inequality. Quasi-markets in education are not succeeding."

Then we reach a point of subtle difference in the accounts of Lyndsay and Trevor — at least, a difference of emphasis with respect to the significance of intended ameliorative measures. Lyndsay notes with some approval measures such as the guarantee of early learning experiences in the year prior to formal schooling and related child care measures, and the National Education Agreement. That these measures are only ameliorative and not a fundamental solution does not deter many of us from welcoming them. But lest we become too accepting of their value, Trevor pulls us up sharply with the reminder that there is a basic tension between a market-based education system and improving equity in education: they involve incompatible policies and equity always loses out.

What then do people of conscience who are critical of reliance on market-like mechanisms do in these circumstances? I believe that they accept the "softening" measures as a pre-figuring of the more egalitarian, inclusive society they desire while remaining unrelenting in pressing the case for a more equitable system. They must tell governments that they are seeking inspiration from the wrong countries: since equity in education is a vital part, but only a part of wider socially inclusive arrangements, they would do better to look to the Nordic countries than to America or England.

Chris Bonnor's paper is a tug-of-war between value analysis and empiricism. Ideas about how society should organise itself should be, but seldom are, critically examined in the light of available evidence. This is precisely (and commendably) what Chris has attempted to do in relation to an alleged benefit of the free market, namely that "choice creates quality because consumers vote with their feet", thereby "placing pressure on low demand schools to improve and become more attractive".

The rural evidence that Chris has cited is consistent with the hypothesis that the absence of choice (as in remote areas) has *not* suppressed school performance, at least at the higher levels. Where choice is more readily available in large non-metropolitan centres, the "high" non-government schools have more high-achieving senior students than in the "high" government schools. Chris says that much evidence of superior school achievement really just reflects changing enrolment profiles. There is much general support for that contention but given the particular theme under consideration one is left hoping that another bit of evidence will be pursued. Remembering the criterion of *high* achievement used, one is obliged to ask: why was the achievement of the able students at the "high" government school less than half that of the "high" non-government school? I don't think we can simply suppose that those of talent had transferred to the "high" non-government schools: that can only be established by empirical investigation.

The socio-economic differentiation of schools and the concentration of academic achievers have made the problem of lifting the skills of lower achievers more difficult, with negative individual, economic and societal consequences. Decades of studying our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods have convinced me that staying the distance at school is the single most important route out of social disadvantage. For me, the message of the National Public Education Forum is that if our society is to become truly equitable we must move beyond periodic, welcomed concessional adjustments, to an education system based firmly on inclusive policies and funding that meet the needs of all of our children. And, after all, giving strong voice to that message is an indispensible part of an inclusive society.

ENDNOTE

The papers referred to in this article were presented to the National Public Education Forum held in Canberra on 27 and 28 March 2009. They can be found at **http://www.aeufederal.org.au/Publications/2009/NPEF/NPEFpapers.html**

SOCIAL INCLUSION

Effective Strategies for Improving School Completion

STEPHEN LAMB

WITH THE ANNOUNCEMENT by the Commonwealth Government of a national target of 90 per cent for the Year 12 or equivalent completion rate by 2020 comes a critical need to explore ways of improving student engagement and retention in schools. Achieving the goal will not be a simple task. An estimate from the 2006 *Census of Population and Housing* for 19-year-olds suggests that the national rate is currently at about 71 per cent, little higher than that recorded in the census five years earlier (Lamb & Mason, 2008). The rates vary markedly by race, gender and social background. Among Indigenous Australians it is as low as 35 per cent, while for males the rate is 10 points below that for females, and for children from poor backgrounds (taken as those in the lowest quartile of socio-economic status based on the student population) it is about 55 per cent (Lamb & Mason, 2008).

Failure to complete school or gain equivalent qualifications carries serious consequences for young people including poorer labour market outcomes and greater insecurity in building careers. Consistently, research in Australia and overseas shows that early leavers are more likely to become unemployed, stay unemployed for longer, have lower earnings, and over the course of their life accumulate less wealth (for example, see Rumberger & Lamb, 2003; OECD, 2001; Barro, 1997). They also more often experience poorer physical and mental health, higher rates of crime and

less often engage in active citizenship (Owens, 2004; Rumberger, 1987). There are also social costs associated with increased welfare needs (Owens, 2004). These outcomes are likely to be more severe given the recent economic downturn that is causing higher levels of unemployment, particularly among young people.

Addressing the problem of disengagement and early leaving presents a major test for schools and school systems. The key challenge to encouraging more young people to remain at school is to find ways to address the sometimes large and critical needs of the groups of young people at risk of early leaving. Young people who leave school before obtaining a qualification tend to come from disadvantaged social backgrounds, they tend more often to have become disengaged from school, are less motivated scholastically, and more often experience personal difficulties and behavioural issues that place them at risk (for example, see Lamb et al, 2004; Rumberger, 1987; Audas and Willms, 2001; European Commission, 2005). They also tend to have histories of school failure and low academic achievement during the compulsory years.

If the new completion goal is to be achieved, it is essential that schools develop, implement and enhance strategies that effectively address the factors that lead students to disengage from school and drop out. This will be far more difficult in some schools than in others. That is because early leaving and disadvantage are spread unevenly across geographical areas and schools. Some schools have very high concentrations of disadvantaged students. Addressing the problem of disengagement and early leaving will fall heavily on these schools, because families in disadvantaged settings are most dependent on the quality of schools to promote success for their children.

Responding to these challenges, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria commissioned the Centre for Post-compulsory Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of Melbourne to undertake research to identify effective strategies to increase school completion. An extensive review of the national and international literature on school completion and early leaving was conducted to identify strategies that address key risk factors and have been shown empirically to lift engagement and completion. In addition to the review, an intensive study was conducted in 25 government secondary schools in Victoria with better-than-expected completion rates, or that were recognised as working innovatively to engage students. Principals, members of the leadership group and welfare staff at the schools were interviewed to identify the strategies and factors staff saw as vital to improving engagement and completion.

The *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion Report* that resulted from this research outlines successful strategies used at a number of Victorian schools to engage students and encourage them to complete their secondary education. The results presented in the report show that effective schools are characterised by strong leadership, a clear focus on achievement, supportive and positive school culture or climate, including supportive relationships among students and teachers, good communications with parents, and targeted programs that address the needs of different

groups of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The programs, designed to raise levels of student engagement and retention, focus on improving student achievement and reducing achievement gaps, improving the quality of relationships between students and teachers, expanding alternatives, addressing welfare needs, and lifting student confidence and self-esteem.

It was clear from both the research literature and the field work in Victorian schools that schools are most effective in improving student engagement and retention when three areas are addressed:

1. Developing a strong *supportive school culture* with a commitment to improvement;
2. Implementing *school-wide strategies* addressing quality of provision; and
3. Adopting *student-focused strategies* targeting individual needs.

SUPPORTIVE SCHOOL CULTURE

A supportive school culture or climate is a key to raising levels of student engagement and completion. There are various factors linked to school culture that researchers and school systems point to when describing quality schools and identifying features in schools that have been important to promoting achievement and retention gains (see, for example, Zepeda, 2004; Brown, 2004; Fullan, 1991). Such features include:

• Commitment to success for all
• Flexibility and responsiveness to individual need
• High expectations
• Shared vision
• Focus on continuous improvement
• Climate of challenging and stimulating teaching
• Strong and fair disciplinary climate
• Encouraging student responsibility and autonomy.

Many of the schools visited in Victoria with higher-than-expected retention rates displayed these features, emphasising a culture of continuous improvement, with a school-wide vision and a commitment to the belief that all students can succeed. High expectations were evident, with a shared commitment to success for all students targeted through flexible and responsive program arrangements and responsiveness to student needs.

Schools which were most successful in raising student retention had an integrated approach, underpinned first, by a well-articulated philosophy that drove all aspects of provision and, second, by a culture of continuous improvement. Principals and staff at these schools stressed that all students were able to achieve, that if students were not engaged then the school needed to change what it did, and that while successes were celebrated, every initiative was there to be built upon. In the most successful schools there was school-wide ownership of student engagement and achievement.

SCHOOL-WIDE STRATEGIES

Schools effective at improving levels of student engagement and raising school

SOCIAL INCLUSION

completion rates often implemented a range of school-wide initiatives, that is, specific strategies or initiatives that are adopted across the school for all students, rather than just targeting students with specific needs. These sorts of strategies include for example familial-based forms of organisation such as mini-schools; team-based approaches to teaching, learning and pastoral care; early intervention to support literacy and numeracy skills growth; initiatives to improve connections with parents; high expectations of attendance and behaviour; and strong vocational education and training (VET) options, accompanied by intensive career planning and early development of vocational pathways.

The research found that schools with the greatest success in improving student retention combine a range of these strategies, and constantly refine approaches as the needs of students and parents change. School-wide strategies included:

- Broad curriculum provision in the senior years
- Offering quality VET options
- Providing programs that are challenging and stimulating
- Early intervention to support literacy and numeracy skill growth
- Programs to counter low achievement
- Pathways planning and quality careers guidance and counselling
- Strategic use of teachers and teaching resources
- Smaller class sizes
- Mini-school or school-within-a-school organisation
- Team-based approaches to teaching, learning and pastoral care
- Priority professional development
- Community service
- Cross-sectoral initiatives
- Attendance policies and programs
- Initiatives to improve connections with parents
- Conflict resolution, mediation or problem-solving programs.

Examples of approaches involving the different strategies are provided in the report. For example, for *Pathways planning and quality careers guidance and counselling* some of the successful Victorian schools organised their careers education around pathways planning through the Managed Individual Pathways (MIPS) initiative, but began pathways planning and support much earlier than at the program-designed age of 15, operating the program as early as Year 7, particularly for students at risk. For *Attendance policies and programs*, several schools serving large numbers of disadvantaged students had successfully reduced their school-wide absenteeism rates to well below state averages by implementing attendance requirement initiatives with opportunities for students to attend make-up classes.

STUDENT-FOCUSED STRATEGIES

While school-wide reforms of programs and curricula are important in increasing student completion, different groups of at-risk students often struggle with a variety of social and personal issues that affect their engagement and the quality of learning.

Individual-level strategies are needed to address these problems. The provision of strategic, targeted welfare and skill programs can have a substantial impact on the capacity of at-risk students to remain in education.

The research undertaken for the study found that the most effective programs worked by reducing students' social isolation and by strengthening the relationships between students, parents, staff and the broader community. Effective programs gave students a sense of autonomy and responsibility, demonstrating trust in them. Successful programs also gave students tasks with immediate, tangible benefits, such as project-based learning and vocationally oriented coursework. They catered to diverse student needs through school programs and curricula. They also addressed poor achievement through remediation programs and professional development for teachers, and by placing strong teachers with low achievers. Student attendance and personal obstacles to school retention were addressed through welfare support, case management, attendance programs and financial assistance. The main student-focused strategies were:

- Student case management
- Mentoring
- Welfare support
- Targeted assistance for skill development among low achievers
- Tutoring and peer tutoring
- Supplementary or out-of-school-time programs
- Pathways planning for at-risk students
- Targeted financial support
- Project-based learning for disengaged students.

COMMON ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES AND EFFECTIVE SCHOOLS

The study of effective Victorian schools and the review of successful overseas initiatives found that there were several common strands running through the most effective programs and strategies. The most effective programs appear to do the following:

- Foster connectedness between students, parents, the school and the community
- Increase the trust placed in students
- Provide tasks for students with immediate, tangible benefits
- Make spaces within schools and curricula for diverse student needs
- Address poor achievement, and
- Address students' personal obstacles to staying at school.

In addition, the schools most successful at increasing school completion adopt the following principles, which are also supported by findings reported in the international literature:

- **Early intervention is best:** Schools that had increased student engagement and retention identified student problems such as weak achievement or welfare needs at an early stage, and were proactive in addressing them
- **Schools need to ensure interventions are sustained:** Schools that provided program continuity and long-term supports for students were most successful

in addressing achievement and engagement issues. Research participants stressed the importance of allowing time and funding for initiatives to be embedded within the school culture

- **Schools need to adopt multifaceted approaches:** It is usually the case that no single strategy works alone to increase student engagement and retention. Rather, successful schools used a range of strategies to address a variety of student needs
- **Context sensitivity is essential:** Numerous research participants noted the importance of selecting and adjusting strategies according to the needs of the local students and parents.

SUPPORTING SCHOOLS TO IMPROVE

The report provides a number of recommendations to help support implementation of effective strategies across government secondary schools. The recommendations are directed more at a system level than at individual schools. The main issue is how schools can be supported in their efforts to identify appropriate strategies and then to implement them, given their geographic location, size, student population and community context.

In addition to the report, a guide has been developed to assist schools in their own efforts. The document, *Guide to Help Schools Increase School Completion*, complements the report. The guide outlines how a school can assess current strategies, and provides practical information on how to implement the successful ones. Topics in the guide include developing a supportive school culture, implementing change; and evaluating the impact of change. Links to references, resources and external agencies that can assist with strategies to increase school completion are provided.

ENDNOTE

This article is based on the report *Effective Strategies to Increase School Completion,* compiled by Stephen Lamb and Suzanne Rice for the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. The report and guide are available on the DEECD website at: **tinyurl.com/o7qbaz**.

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SOCIAL INCLUSION

Teach for Australia!

Classmates as a model of teacher preparation

TANIA FERFOLJA

AUSTRALIA, LIKE MANY other countries throughout the world, is currently experiencing a growing teacher shortage. This problem is most severe in challenging schools where students are often from socially disadvantaged backgrounds that have felt the impacts of poverty, low literacy and education levels, and/or recent immigration. Frequently, these schools serve communities with high welfare needs. Parents and teachers may be in conflict over community/school values and understandings, particularly in relation to issues such as discipline management and educational expectations.

Recruiting teachers to these schools may be difficult. Retaining teachers is equally problematic, resulting in high teacher turnover, either because teachers transfer to more middle-class schools where greener pastures call or because they decide to leave teaching altogether. Problems with retention are amplified by the retirement of an aging teaching population, leaving more vacancies to be filled.

The Australian Government, in an endeavour to address the growing teacher shortage, is seeking new ways of preparing teachers — using *Teach for America* and the United Kingdom's *Teach First* as models. These schemes involve the recruitment of bright, talented graduates from liberal arts backgrounds, who undertake an intensive

five-week summer training program in teaching. The recruits are required to teach for two years, generally in disadvantaged areas, after which time they are free to leave.

Like any scheme that claims to solve social problems, such an approach has its supporters and detractors. It may provide short-term relief for teacher vacancies, employ in the short term talented graduates, and provide valuable experiences and skills for these graduates to take elsewhere once they leave the teaching service, to the benefit of other vocational fields. However, the transitory nature of such schemes potentially contributes to the staffing problems already faced by many disadvantaged schools — including staff instability and high turnover. One evaluation found that half of Teach for America recruited teachers left their school after two years to fill positions in higher achieving schools (Raymond, Fletcher & Luque, 2001). This suggests that such a scheme only really provides short-term staffing solutions to problems of retention. There is ample research to suggest that in challenging contexts, high turnover rates coupled with high concentrations of beginning teachers has a negative impact on teaching quality, mentoring, the building of professional knowledge, staff morale and/or faculty and school stability (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Glennie, Coble & Allen, 2004; Rockoff, 2003). By way of contrast, there is a positive relationship between *well-qualified*, *experienced* and *committed* teachers and student achievement.

An underlying assumption of these schemes is that because a young graduate is bright or talented in a particular field, he/she will make a good teacher. A parallel may be drawn to the medical profession: just because one excels at the sciences does not mean that one possesses the interpersonal, communication or perhaps even diagnostic skills vital to produce an effective general practitioner. The years of training required could never be condensed into a number of weeks; this would result in a public outcry if it were directed at other professions or even trades, particularly in terms of the negative impact on the quality of service. Yet it seems that for our disadvantaged and marginalised children and youth, this is "good enough" for their education.

There needs to be a focus on finding an equitable solution that meets the needs of disadvantaged students and communities while providing medium to long-term solutions to the problem of building the teaching profession and retaining employees. The question remains: how can people be encouraged to teach in challenging environments, be well-prepared for these contexts prior to full-time employment, and potentially remain in such contexts for the medium to long term?

There is some research to suggest that early career teachers remain in more challenging schools if their teacher-preparation is matched to the complex environments that they enter, if they possess the knowledge and skills to help all students learn, and if they have access to mentors and support (Glennie, Coble & Allen, 2004). Other studies have found that alternative practicum experiences that provide challenging teaching opportunities outside of the traditional model may also be useful in preparing preservice teachers for more difficult environments (Brooker & Service, 1999; Vickers, 2006).

The University of Western Sydney and the NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) South Western Sydney region in 2006 began piloting a new "boutique"

preservice teacher education initiative called *Classmates* which ran for three years. *Classmates* targeted mathematics, English and science preservice teachers who were enrolled in the Masters of Teaching (Secondary) program. These preservice teachers undertook essentially the same degree as the "mainstream" teacher-education cohort, but experienced a different mode of delivery.

Classmates preservice teachers were placed in one of a range of volunteering host schools (which were considered disadvantaged). The aim was for these schools to support a critical mass of *Classmates* preservice teachers, promoting the development of a strong peer support network and high visibility in the school. The preservice teachers undertook their first two professional experience placements in the one host school, working with the same supervisor/s over a continuous period of about four months at about three days per week. The third practicum was a community-based experience, located in a disadvantaged school but not necessarily the preservice teacher's host school.

While undertaking their practicum, the *Classmates* preservice teachers undertook formal academic work as a group which aimed to build collegiality. The curriculum reflected the mainstream teacher-education degree but was delivered differently, involving intensive workshops, and day, evening and some weekend classes. This encouraged explicit linking between theory and practice as the preservice teachers were immersed in teaching and the life of a school from early in the school year while studying. Additionally, both English as a Second Language teaching perspectives and quality teaching were mandatory components of the initiative and were aimed at meeting the diverse needs of students in the south west and western regions of Sydney. To develop a greater understanding of regional needs, the preservice teachers were required to attend select professional development in-services for beginning teachers — most of them presented by their host schools. This enhanced understandings of the region and school community and promoted professional relationships with qualified peers. Furthermore, *Classmates* was closely supported by an academic co-ordinator and a DET consultant, who liaised with both the preservice and supervising teachers to ensure that all worked smoothly.

The evaluation of the first year of *Classmates* demonstrated that the program essentially provided students with confidence and a solid understanding of not only teaching, but working in challenging environments. Virtually all of the graduates over the three years felt like "real teachers" well before they had completed the professional experience components of the degree. As the report states:

> *It was apparent that the extended time in schools provided continuity to the experience that influenced every other dimension of the Classmates' participation in the program … the immersion and integration of* Classmates *students into the school, not just classrooms, but into the whole routine of the school, was extremely influential. … A large part of the success … revolved around the ability of* Classmates *students to feel they were becoming "real teachers". This included their ability to plan for, teach and*

SOCIAL INCLUSION

> *handle students in a variety of classes, learn and apply theory to everyday experiences, master the intricacies of classroom management, scaffolding and demonstrating lessons, have "golden moments" where they made a real difference to students … [and being] aware of how being in the program made changes in themselves, both personally and professionally.*

(McCarthy, 2007)

Graduates from the *Classmates* initiative demonstrated not only the ability to work in disadvantaged contexts, but overwhelmingly expressed the *desire* to do so. The continuous supported practicum provided the preservice teachers with a solid understanding about what teaching in a challenging school required (see Ferfolja, 2008a). Although further research is required, there has been some evidence from the research into the *Classmates* pilot project to also suggest that such a practicum, combined with initial employment in the same practicum school promotes the development of confident new scheme teachers, enhances faculty support for the new teacher, and moreover may reduce the stress on busy school departments through the provision of beginning teachers who know the context and routine of their new job, and clearly understand the demands at a particular site (see Ferfolja 2008b). Teachers whose demographic is largely white and middle class may find their personal values and philosophies about life and education conflict with those of the students they teach. Thus, developing understandings of the schooling community and learning how to work within the context may ease beginning teachers' transition into more difficult work environments.

Classmates was demanding of the preservice teachers involved; but being a high school teacher *is* a demanding occupation. The program endeavoured to produce graduates who were "match fit" and prepared for the rigours of teaching. Yet the load for some, particularly those supporting families and/or themselves, was real. Federal government investment in significant scholarships that operate for nine months to reduce financial pressure on students while studying, tied to placement in a disadvantaged school (preferably one associated with the program), would undoubtedly result in significant competition among university students for places in such an initiative. Screening of potential candidates would ensure that those with the most enthusiasm, interest, dedication and aptitude were selected to participate, with the outcome being the targeted recruitment of well-trained individuals who are already familiar with teaching in disadvantaged schools and who have a commitment to public education. Graduates who enjoy and succeed at their practicum experience, who are less stressed in their first years of teaching, and who possess a strong collegial support network, are surely more likely to stay in the profession. Additionally, the security of guaranteed employment upon graduation would increase competition for placement in such an initiative. Unfortunately, neither of these options was available for the *Classmates* graduates during the pilot project, but experience from the initiative highlights that such financial support and explicit future employment opportunity would secure the success of such an initiative.

Short-term, quick-fix approaches may not be the solution to teacher retention. Rather, a focus on alternative training approaches, such as *Classmates*, which marry theory and supported practice in disadvantaged environments, combined with the recruitment of individuals who are passionate and have a desire to teach, as well as the provision of greater financial supports while studying and guaranteed employment upon graduation, may contribute to changing the face of teacher retention and quality in the medium to long term. Surely this is what we should be aiming for?

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SOCIAL INCLUSION

They have been thrown into the ocean and they don't know how to swim

ROBYN RAMSDEN & JUDE QUINN

FAMILIES MAKE A difference to the academic and social lives of children. Parents and families have the first and most enduring impact upon children's learning and development, health, safety and wellbeing (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2008). Initiatives that focus on building respectful and trusting relationships among school staff, families and communities create sustained connections that support student learning (Allen J, 2009).

Few initiatives or approaches are available to support schools to engage parents in their child's learning beyond the parent-teacher interviews or general information nights. One school-based program entitled *Creating Conversations* was developed to engage families in discussion about drug issues (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2002).[1] *Creating Conversations* has been implemented in many schools across Victoria and more broadly. A small pilot study with Somali families in two school communities explored the usefulness of the model in helping to build connections with their children's teachers. These events enabled Somali parents to express their hopes for their children's education and to articulate the range of issues that concerned them as migrant parents living in Australia.

THE HOPE OF EDUCATION

Migrant parents commonly hold favourable attitudes towards formal education because it is one way for disempowered immigrant parents to regain a sense of control over the family's fate (Alitolppa-Niitamo, 2000) and help establish themselves in the new land (Zhou and Bankston, 2000).

The disintegration of the education system in Somalia as a result of long-term civil war heightened parents' sense of the importance of education in Australia. Nhur, a Somali mother, explained: "We came here for a better education for our children and that's what we hope for. From here until we die, parents are going to talk about the importance of education." Somali refugees' resilience is derived in part from hope that education holds the key to a better life and their children's future success in Australia (Dove, 1996).

THE *CREATING CONVERSATIONS* MODEL

The Creating Conversation model involves secondary school students hosting events with their parents using interactive drug education activities. Models that utilise students to facilitate activities with parents build the skills and knowledge of students, while also engaging parents in discussion about issues (Johnson G, Bellhouse R, Deed C, 2003). Students are tutored in the activities by a small team of people which can include teachers, student welfare staff in schools and representatives from local community agencies.

The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) arranged for *Creating Conversations* to be translated into seven other languages (available on the drug education website *www.education.vic.gov.au/drugeducation*). In this article, we briefly examine the findings of a study conducted in two Melbourne secondary colleges with Somali families to determine if the model would be appropriate to engage families from this cultural group. It is essential when involving parents from diverse cultural backgrounds in their children's education that cultural differences are acknowledged and inform practice, because culture impacts differently on the educational experiences of children and families (Catalano et al, 1993; Kumpfer et al, 2002). *Creating Conversations* activities were conducted in Somali by students with the assistance of a bilingual facilitator. Moving the focus away from exploration of specific drug issues, which is the focus of the *Creating Conversations* program, Somali parents used the events and the research process as a vehicle for exploring connections with the school and to ask questions about how the education system operated in Australia. We present the views of parents about education in Australia and their overwhelming desire for a better future for their children.

FINDINGS

Above all, parents talked of feeling overwhelmed by a complex education system about which they had been given little or no information in their own language. Many Somali parents did not fully understand the consequences of their history of dislocation on their children's learning in Victorian schools. Ayan, a key informant, noted:

"It's like they [the students] have been thrown into the ocean and they don't know how to swim." Somali parents returned to fond pre-war memories of an education system that offered them peace of mind and extensive support for cultural practices and beliefs. They attributed their children's difficulties at school to a less rigorous education system than that in Somalia and noted differences in schools' expectations of parents, teacher roles, academic standards, approaches to learning and behaviour management.

Academic standards: Some Somali parents felt that the education system in Somalia offered higher academic standards because the entry process for the limited number of places was competitive and required success at each level to progress to the next. Further, some parents observed that on arrival in Australia, after a short time in a language centre, and despite limited English skills and disrupted schooling, their children were placed in an age appropriate classroom and quickly fell behind. Somali parents believed that their children should be placed at the year level appropriate to their educational background and skills, not with age appropriate peers where they were unable to cope with study requirements.

Learning style: Somalia's rote learning approach to education with strict discipline provided by teachers was seen as superior to that adopted by the Australian education system. In Australia, Somali parents observed their children moving around classrooms, working in groups, on their own at a computer, discussing ideas with the teacher and visiting the library. Many parents described this experiential, self-motivated approach to learning as "play".

Assisting with learning: Somali families quickly learnt that the Australian education system encourages parental support, including the provision of materials, payment of levies, involvement in school activities, an active interest in homework and visits to the school to talk about their children's progress. Parents also commented that in Somalia the teacher was highly regarded and it was considered a sign of disrespect to approach them to discuss their child's progress.

Behaviour and discipline: In Somalia, parents felt reassured by the fact that teachers provided the discipline to ensure their children behaved at school and completed their homework. Teachers had the authority to deal with discipline issues without involving the family. For many Somali parents, contact with schools in Australia was largely crisis focused, often around discipline issues when problems are at their worst, such as their child being suspended. The requirement that parents be involved in their children's education in Australia suggested to many parents that Australian teachers are "too soft". They were confused by the fact that trained teachers, whom they hold in high regard, should require their involvement in managing discipline issues. Some parents attributed their children's rebellious behaviour at home to an overly flexible teaching model at school.

Maintaining cultural values and beliefs: For parents, positive memories of education in Somalia were influenced by the fact that schools played a significant role in helping to perpetuate the cultural beliefs and values of a collective society. They wished for support from schools in Australia to help them maintain cultural practices

SOCIAL INCLUSION

and beliefs. While many parents emphasised that the learning of broader skills and social competencies was important in helping their children become economically secure, they simultaneously worried that their children would assume too many Western values which can change family dynamics, for example, children questioning adults, acting independently of the family and making their own decisions from an early age. These concerns reaffirmed the belief held by many parents that there is little recognition within broader Australian culture of the significance of cultural maintenance to the wellbeing and happiness of family members.

CONCLUSION

The approach implemented with Somali parents showed some promise for building trust and social connections between parents, teachers, children and others. Participants came together to discuss issues and challenge cultural norms using a process that utilised opportunities to talk in first language, modelled good communication, provided information and skills to guide and support discussion, and encouraged respect for the diversity of opinions. Conducting the event in the parents' first language not only facilitated their involvement, but was also seen by both parents and students as a sign that the school valued their traditional language and culture.

The *Creating Conversations* events provided participants with a structure that promoted open discussion and guided it in a safe way, enabling parents and teachers to increase dialogue with students. The program also countered parents' sense of isolation by bringing them together to informally share their challenges and successes, thereby promoting informal learning from one another as well as increasing dialogue with the school. Additionally, the format of the events promoted active partnership between the different stakeholders, rather than championing one or another group as the "experts", and encouraged issues to be discussed in a hypothetical and non-accusatory manner, which promoted more active discussion than if they were brought up only in the context of a child's breaking of particular rules or codes. While the *Creating Conversations* program was successful in bringing Somali parents to the school, it was clear that they were open to any opportunities to connect with the school in a positive way.

When parents are supported to help their children, there are potentially significant flow-on effects to the children and the school. Building connections with their child's teachers contributed to the process of resettlement by providing an opportunity for Somali parents to articulate the range of issues that concerned them as migrant parents living in Australia. By putting social relationships in the foreground, teachers and parents not only provide mutual support for the education needs of children, they provide the resources parents need to manage their lives in a new environment. Therefore, social action is an important strategy for improving the mental health and wellbeing of students and their families.

Schools can assume a vital role in enhancing the parent–school relationship. We suggest that a coherent approach to working in partnership with parents of culturally diverse backgrounds is critical because of the disadvantage their children may experi-

ence as an outcome of disrupted schooling. Changes to policy to make the parent–school partnership a core component of education, and the provision of resources to assist schools to undertake this work in a systemic way, will encourage good practice and help parents to understand the education system in Australia.

The stories told by Somali parents in this research are of strength and hope, not of trauma and despair, and they highlight the importance of social action to bring about change. While we acknowledge that Somali families' sense of loss is great, strengthening relationships appears to be critical for parents' understanding of the way the education system works in Australia and for building their capacity to support their children. Further opportunities need to be created for schools to explore approaches that would address the particular needs and circumstances of different cultural groups and for parents to be actively involved in solutions to the issues they face in resettlement.

ENDNOTES

1. The bilingual facilitators had a range of skills beyond those of an interpreter or translator. They were experienced in conducting general drug information sessions for families. The first author provided training in the *Creating Conversations* model for the purpose of this research.

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SOCIAL INCLUSION

Enfranchising Our Future Citizens:

Social inclusion and emotional development strategies for school readiness and play-based curriculum

CLAIRE JENNINGS

"Do you know who Peter Rabbit is?

"Do you know what happened to him?

"And who is Mr. McGregor?"

SOME CHILDREN SITTING on the mat on the first day of kindergarten or primary school would be bewildered by questions such as the above, while other children would leap off the mat calling out responses with knowledge and great enthusiasm.

Scenes like this are all too common for teachers in the early years of education. Children who recognise books in the reading corner belong to what we call "the literacy set". They are fortunate enough to have been read to continuously in the five or six years before commencing school. They know who *Peter Rabbit* is, they know *Where The Wild Things Are* and they can tell you *Who Sank The Boat*.

These children have a deep sense of belonging, in a classroom, in the education system, in their families and in the community. They are well read, they know the stories that belong to that great treasury that has been passed down through the

generations, and they know the modern classics such as *Possum Magic* and *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*.

They have confidence, extensive vocabularies, and a good command of the English language by the time they commence school. Through stories like *Peter Rabbit,* they internalise concepts such as power versus powerlessness, and crime and punishment. When they ruminate on classics such as *Wind in The Willows* they come to know about the value of true friendship and sincerity, Rat's industriousness versus Toad's laziness, Mole's contentment and appreciation for the simple things in life, and the untrustworthiness of the stoats and weasels. Children with this reading history are among those with the highest comprehension levels by age eight. But most importantly, they have enriched inner lives where their imagination has blossomed through these great stories; stories that have also planted the seeds of empathy, compassion and a set of moral values and ethics which will help them to become humane citizens.

But what of the children sitting on the mat on the first day of kindergarten or school who don't recognise any books the teacher decides to read? Theirs is the feeling of exclusion. They don't belong to "the literacy set". And they usually don't have reading and learning readiness by school age. What they do have is a set of social, emotional and developmental problems which collectively will hinder their capacity to learn, to have life choices including employment and owning their own home, and to become resilient citizens. Communities with low levels of literacy and education experience the all-too-familiar signs of social unease including significant early school drop-out rates, adolescent crime, generational cycles of unemployment and welfare dependency, imprisonment and high incidences of teenage pregnancies.

After many years teaching in primary schools and training student teachers to be literacy educators, I realised that the most important work in education was with vulnerable families, and most importantly, preparing "children at risk" for their education. And so began the journey in developing SIEDS, Social Inclusion and Emotional Developments Strategies and programs at Community Connections (Vic) Ltd in South West Victoria, a not-for-profit community agency whose mission is to strengthen the social and cultural capital of such families.

SIEDS began with the *Reading Discovery* program, a pre-school, home-based family literacy program for families who are case-managed under Family Support Services and Foster Care and have children with language delays and attention problems. Trained Reading Discovery practitioners with previous experience teaching in preschool and primary school programs visit referred families for one hour per week. Goals are set with the parents and carers to work towards developing the skills underpinning all learning, such as focused listening, sustained concentration and curiosity.

The practitioners model a range of strategies to strengthen these skills in young children, the most important being shared reading and story-play. Parents are shown how to select stories appropriate to the developmental milestones of their children from birth to age six, and practitioners model reading aloud skills and interactive dialogue while reading to children. Even though we know the importance of reading to children daily, some adults are not aware of how important it is to interact with children during the reading event. It is the type of questioning, and the pauses to listen

to children as they respond to the story and illustrations, which enrich this activity and increase the higher-order thinking skills of predicting, speculating, hypothesising, judging and reflecting.

We encounter many children in the program who are not used to being asked a question related to a story and so stare blankly when we do so. They have not worked out that a book tells a story, that something happens in the story and that there has to be a resolution for the story to be satisfactory. To know this, children need to have encountered the story patterns of problem-solving and cause-and-effect. They have an inability to recall what happened in the story or play scenario from the previous session. Such inadequacies have an impact on their engagement with reading and compound to result in negative impressions about reading and participating in related activities in the classroom. This lack of ease often marks the beginning of a life of social exclusion from not having access to pathways which lead to healthy autonomy and resilience.

Staff at Community Connections saw the program was having a positive impact on children's behaviour and began a research partnership with the Centre for Health through Action on Social Exclusion (CHASE) at Deakin University. The initial study (Stagnitti & Jennings, 2007) revealed outstanding results for the 20 families involved. Tests over six months for families who participated in *Reading Discovery* for one hour per week showed between nine and 20 months' growth in language and imaginative play skills, above the expected growth during that time frame. Parents gained knowledge about how their children learn language, and became familiar with the criteria for selecting books from birth to age six. The post home literacy questionnaire showed parents to have acquired a language to talk about their children as learners, which was evident in the increase in their visits to, and interactions with, maternal and child health staff, kindergarten teachers, family day care staff and playgroup attendance.

As a result of the program, the parents increased their activities outside the home. They attended more health care programs such as speech therapy and doctor's visits with their children as well as attending more parent-teacher interviews with their older children. Some parents began to address their own literacy issues for the first time since leaving school.

Such positive results led to a longitudinal study with Deakin University. The SIEDS programs have evolved to include a baby and toddler program, *Rainbow Rhyming*, which focuses on healthy attachment between parents, carers and babies through nursery rhymes and simple story-play, where cuddling, touching and stimulating language interactions are modelled. The 10-week program can then be followed by the *Beyond The Rainbow* story-play program which focuses on creating and extending play scenarios from stories read to children. Parents and carers play with children alongside the Reading Discovery practitioners. We often begin with farm animals and situate the story-play in a farm context. Many stories can happen in this context, especially if they are modelled on great book stories such as Rosie's Walk, Old MacDonald Had a Farm and Chicken Little. Our training program extends this theme to kings, queens, castles and dragons, underwater kingdoms inhabited by merfolk, the magical realm of unicorns and the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

Indigenous Reading Discovery grew from involvement with Indigenous play groups. After many months of *Rainbow Rhyming* and *Beyond The Rainbow* activities I became aware that there were very few, if any, books for babies and toddlers which reflected Australian Aboriginal stories and symbols. We knew that young babies respond to contrasting images in bright colours so we worked with a local Aboriginal artist, Debbie Austin, to produce the *Indigenous First Discovery Series*. "Animals" and "People and Places" are the first titles, and use traditional Aboriginal symbols to catch the attention of infants and toddlers and so increase their curiosity, attention span and knowledge about how a book works. We have found parents in these play groups to be as interested in the symbols as the children, as many parents of Aboriginal descent are rediscovering their heritage. We have extended the *Beyond The Rainbow* program to *Beyond The Rainbow and Into The Dreamtime* where we model story-play by going into the Dreamtime through Australian animals. Stories abound in these animal themes and lead on from the story-play around farm animals. Parents and children of Aboriginal descent value culture-specific books and activities in the early years, and non-Indigenous parents and teachers realise the importance of discovering our Indigenous heritage with their children.

While SIEDS programs are proving vital for vulnerable families in the preschool years, the programs are gaining momentum as transition-to-school programs and play-based curriculum in junior primary schools.

A mother and child taking part in the story-play program *Beyond the Rainbow and Into the Dreamtime*.

Many Reading Recovery teachers working in disadvantaged areas report an increase in the number of children not ready for Reading Recovery in Grade 1, having missed out on vital language, play and book familiarity skills. They lack prior knowledge in many of the topics which they would encounter in first reading materials, which inhibits their ability to predict words and sentences, attempt to make meaning or have basic familiarity with the sounds and patterns of the alphabet. We are always astonished at the number of children referred to us who cannot name many animals or know what type of adventures a pirate might have.

Junior primary teachers have play-based curricula on their mind as the Draft National Early Years Framework is developed, but they often question where to start. A good beginning is through story-play. We are working with schools using our programs as transition-to-school pilots. It is early days yet but we are confident of developing play-based integrated units for Prep and Grades 1 and 2 which align with curriculum outcomes, standards and benchmarks in all Australian states. Children become immersed in stories, characters and scenarios from books related to classroom topics across the curriculum. Teachers already using the *Beyond The Rainbow* format are astonished how quickly prep children become problem-solvers, or can speculate beyond the story and take it in new and imaginative directions.

Such play-based programs empower children to think sequentially and dynamically and increase their prediction skills and vocabulary, all of which are vital to reading and learning readiness. They learn the social skills of turn-taking and sharing and become empowered with higher thinking and comprehension competencies. They are ready for reading and learning.

We know that readers (and children who know stories) think differently to non-readers. They have:

- More vocabulary to think with
- A greater grasp of grammar and sentence structure which makes reading predictable
- Higher comprehension levels where they infer, hypothesise, speculate and ponder on and beyond what they read
- The ability to make connections and associations between their present and past reading experiences
- A wider knowledge of the world
- A better understanding of humanity (the good, the bad and the ugly)
- An ability for self-reflection when they identify with a character's dilemmas or political and social scenarios and are more inclined to write privately for themselves
- A greater ability to self-regulate because they can spend long periods of time in their own company, and organise their time
- Good attention skills necessary for listening and concentrating and engaging with the reading or learning event
- And they have encountered many examples of empathy and compassion in quality children's literature.

SOCIAL INCLUSION

47

When we pass over into how a knight thinks, how a slave feels, how a heroine behaves, and how an evildoer can regret or deny wrongdoing, we never come back quite the same; sometimes we're inspired, sometimes saddened, but we are always enriched. Through this exposure we learn both the commonality and the uniqueness of our own thoughts — that we are individuals, but not alone.

(Wolf, 2008)

Where would our children be if they didn't have a *Peter Rabbit* or *A Very Hungry Caterpillar* in their memory, or a Rat, Mole and Toad from *Wind in The Willows*? They wouldn't be part of "the literacy set", and they wouldn't have that sense of belonging on the story mat. They are more likely to be agitated, disruptive and bewildered young children who may well spend their entire lives on the margins of society.

SIEDS, through the *Reading Discovery*, *Rainbow Rhyming* and *Beyond The Rainbow* programs, addresses these important social, emotional and developmental issues and ultimately assists children in their early ventures towards independence and life long learning.

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VET and Australia's social inclusion agenda

FRAN FERRIER & SUE NORTH

THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT'S "social inclusion agenda" aims to reduce disadvantage in the community through integrated social and economic policies — recognising that problems such as poverty, lack of education and skills, unemployment, homelessness and poor health are linked and require "joined-up" solutions.

As a broad umbrella strategy, the agenda has the potential to have an impact on many different policy areas — including education and training. In this area, attention is likely to turn to two big issues: what contribution can systems and providers make to the Government's social inclusion goals? And how can systems and providers themselves become more socially inclusive?

The adoption of the social inclusion agenda follows similar initiatives in Europe and South Australia and especially the UK model, introduced after the election of the Blair Labour Government in 1997.

In the UK, the social inclusion agenda has shifted in focus following improvements against some social exclusion measures. Under the *National Action Plan on Social Inclusion, 2008-10*, attention has turned to the most disadvantaged and to raising skill levels — with skills seen as essential to both the achievement of long-term

national economic goals and to a more inclusive society. The UK Government has adopted new national goals for skills attainment and is seeking reforms of both the vocational training and higher education systems.

Australia is following a similar route. Social inclusion priorities (adopted by the National Social Inclusion Board) focus on improving economic wellbeing and social participation for highly disadvantaged individuals, families, community groups and places. They include:

- Addressing the incidence of homelessness
- Closing the gap for Indigenous Australians
- Employment for people living with a disability or mental illness
- Addressing the incidence and needs of jobless families with children
- Focusing on particular locations, neighbourhoods and communities to ensure programs and services are getting to the right places
- Delivering effective support to children at greatest risk of long term disadvantage.

Among a set of "social inclusion principles" developed to guide efforts to achieve social inclusion in these priority areas, one specifically looks to skills as a means to both economic and social well-being:

Helping everyone to get the skills and support they need so they can work and connect with community even during hard times.

Two others specifically mention education:

Making sure people in need benefit from access to education.

Working in parallel with specific initiatives to improve (Indigenous) health, education, housing and employment prospects.

New goals for skill attainment have also been embraced.

Following the Bradley Review, attention to disadvantage has already strengthened in the higher education system. Universities now face increased expectations about their recruitment and support of disadvantaged students. In particular, they are being asked to work harder to tackle entrenched disadvantage among Indigenous students, those from lower socio-economic status backgrounds and regional and remote areas and students with disabilities. New measures introduced in the recent budget provide additional financial incentives and support for this work.

The crumbling of the boundaries between the higher education and vocational education and training (VET) systems means that there is likely to be increased attention to pathways between programs and sectors and more cross-sectoral, cross-institutional efforts targeting particular disadvantaged groups. There will be a stronger focus on encouraging transfers to programs at higher skill and qualification levels.

Separately, the VET system is already under pressure to deliver increased skills and qualifications to meet government goals and employer needs. The social inclu-

sion agenda adds to this pressure by also requiring skills development to tackle disadvantage. For instance, the Australian Government recently announced funding for extra places for pre-vocational training and support for vulnerable job seekers aged 25 years and over who face barriers to employment.

If Australia continues to follow existing social inclusion models then a number of further developments are likely. Firstly VET providers may be expected to play a stronger role in case management approaches to individual disadvantage, combining personalised, tailored training plans with personal life and learning supports, career advice and assistance with finding sustainable employment. Such approaches are not generally favoured by governments — they are resource-intensive and because the number of individuals involved is usually small successes do not always show up in quantitative performance indicators. However, they do provide the "joined-up solutions to joined-up problems" that characterise social inclusion initiatives. In the UK such approaches are being used with highly disadvantaged individuals — including prisoners, those with mental health difficulties and the very long-term unemployed. A similar approach is also being used successfully in South Australia, to support young people to continue in education.

A second possible development is increased participation by VET providers in local and regional initiatives to address localised forms of social exclusion. Location-based approaches are a key element in social inclusion strategies and are used particularly in cities and regions where extreme disadvantage is concentrated. For instance, in the UK they are tackling long-term difficulties resulting from loss of industries and employment and entrenched high levels of poverty and low levels of educational aspiration and participation. Partnerships of local organisations, including education and training providers, form to identify local issues and to develop and carry out appropriately tailored strategies.

Many Australian VET providers already engage closely with their communities to identify and meet local skill and training needs. Some also work with local organisations (eg, local learning and employment networks) to counter locational disadvantage. Under the social inclusion agenda this work may increase. It might also require — and strengthen — ties with "third sector" community organisations, which often play a key role in social inclusion partnerships.

A third possible development is a strengthened student voice. Among the social inclusion principles for Australia is:

> Governments and other organisations giving people a say in what services they need and how they work.

Putting this into practice in VET may require some new consultation and feedback mechanisms in addition to the recently announced National VET Equity Advisory Council (NVEAC).

In the UK student representation and feedback mechanisms have been strengthened in the further education (FE) sector, where most vocational training occurs. All

SOCIAL INCLUSION

providers must now have a "learner involvement strategy" and at least two student governors. A National Learner Panel for FE has also been created to advise ministers and policy makers on the impacts of policy changes, and regional panels are being developed. Such arrangements give individual learners direct and local opportunities to pass on their views.

Possible further specific developments include:

- A strengthening of pastoral support offered to individual learners, especially those facing multiple problems who "do not succeed and thrive" in the system (including learners with learning difficulties and/or disabilities)
- Increased efforts to raise the number of staff with disabilities being recruited and progressing through the sector
- Development of an adult careers service
- Introduction of a unique learner number service that enables individual learners to be tracked across education sectors.

More broadly, the social inclusion agenda has the potential to reshape VET by fostering a greater attentiveness to the social goals of education and training, alongside rather than below economic goals. Its recognition that economic and social wellbeing are linked and that tackling disadvantage will help to achieve economic goals as well as social ones is a break from the past.

A recent study of inclusiveness in TAFE institutes by Clarke and Volkoff found that while a small minority of institutes were "highly innovative" in their approaches to social inclusion, some did not recognise the need for inclusiveness. They responded only to what is measured externally and tied to funding.

The social inclusion agenda validates, supports and encourages equity efforts in education and training in new (and welcome) ways. But if it also translates into funding and other incentives for VET providers to address disadvantage (such as the clustering of Indigenous students and students with disabilities in low level programs) and to become more inclusive then there may be a more significant shift in attitudes and practices.

Roger Goddard
Collective Efficacy

INTERVIEW BY JOHN GRAHAM

ROGER GODDARD IS Professor in the College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University and a leading researcher into teacher collective efficacy. The interview was conducted by email following his visit to Australia to talk on the subject at the invitation of the Victorian Educational Leadership Consortium and the Education Department.

JG: *One of your major research interests is collective efficacy, which I understand you see as central to educational improvement. Can you explain what you mean by collective efficacy?*

RG: Collective efficacy refers to the beliefs of group members regarding their abilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to accomplish the goals with which they are charged. In other words, collective efficacy refers to the confidence group members have in their collective capability to be successful. In schools, research has typically defined organisational success

in terms of student achievement. Collective efficacy is useful in this regard because it varies greatly among schools and is key to understanding the differences in success achieved by otherwise similar schools.

JG: Is there a difference between the idea of a group of effective teachers and collective efficacy?

RG: Yes. That said, it is unlikely that a group of highly self-efficacious teachers is characterised by a seriously depressed sense of collective efficacy. Still, it is not hard to imagine there are differences in the levels of individual and collective efficacy that teachers report. How one feels about one's individual capability can be different than how one feels about the capability of the group in which one holds membership.

In fact, teachers tend to answer somewhat more positively in response to questions that probe their beliefs about their individual capabilities as opposed to their beliefs about group or organisational capabilities. This is akin to a teacher thinking, "I'm doing fine but my colleagues up and down the hall could use a variety of forms of help." What is interesting is that even though the means are slightly higher for group aggregates of teacher efficacy than those for collective efficacy, it is the scores on the collective efficacy scale that predict differences among groups in goal attainment. Aggregated estimates of self-efficacy do not.

JG: Does another key difference have to do with variation in beliefs among schools?

RG: Yes. Measures of collective efficacy are associated with organisational membership two to three times more strongly than individual teacher efficacy measures. Given that one of the great challenges for those who study schools is to identify school characteristics that are associated with school membership and that predict achievement, it has been useful in my research to focus on collective efficacy as opposed to teacher efficacy.

None of this means one is more important than the other. It just depends on the types of questions you are interested in asking and the problems you want to solve. When you want to understand differences between individual teachers, a reasonable starting point is to examine the influence of teacher efficacy beliefs. Teacher efficacy beliefs influence the choices teachers make as they decide how to approach their work and the challenges it brings. If, however, you want to explain differences among schools in the outcomes they achieve, it is useful to consider the role of collective efficacy beliefs. As a key feature of social context, collective efficacy explains the resolve, determination and resilience with which group members plan work, overcome obstacles, and interact to achieve success.

JG: How are the collective efficacy levels in a school linked to school improvement?

RG: Across multiple studies, collective efficacy has been linked to important outcomes. The *American Education Research Journal*, the *Journal of Educational Psychology, Educational Policy* and *Educational and Psychological Measurement* have all published papers linking collective efficacy beliefs in schools to student achievement. For this reason, some recent approaches to school reform and improvement consider collective efficacy in their design.

The best way to understand the findings of the studies that support collective efficacy is to realise that they all go beyond simple demonstrations of a positive correlation between collective efficacy and student achievement. Such a correlation makes sense but the research is much stronger than that. What these studies show is that after accounting for the degree to which socio-economic status and prior achievement explain student achievement, collective efficacy makes a significant independent contribution to the explanation of student achievement differences among schools. In simple terms, the everyday explanations that we are prone to — that students in wealthy communities tend to perform better than those in poor communities, that students who have done well in the past tend to do well in the future — do not explain all of the differences we care about

in school performance. And, even after acknowledging and accounting for the influence of these typical explanatory variables, collective efficacy still matters to performance in ways that go beyond our traditional explanations.

JG: How does this relate to equity?

RG: This point is even more important if you consider the focus contemporary education policy brings to equity. Making the argument that poor and minority children who have not done well in the past are not likely to succeed in the future amounts to deficit thinking. It is a view that certain students bring a deficit to the educational system that we can't overcome. To believe the opposite — that we have what it takes as a staff to help all children learn no matter their background — is the antithesis of deficit thinking and the embodiment of a robust sense of collective efficacy. This sort of approach places responsibility for student learning squarely on the shoulders of the faculty and does not accept excuses for low performance.

Perhaps the most interesting part of your question concerns "how" collective efficacy is linked to school improvement. As with most generalised theories of group functioning, social cognitive theory explains the effects of collective efficacy in terms of general patterns of productive behaviour. For example, social cognitive theory explains that a robust sense of collective efficacy fosters resistance to setbacks, greater effort

SOCIAL INCLUSION

and sustained persistence in pursuit of organisational goals. This is because people's choices — their exercise of agency — are strongly influenced by their beliefs in their capabilities. The more a staff believe they have the capability to succeed with their students, the more likely are they to choose to put forth the effort required to achieve success even when they encounter serious difficulties. In contrast, a group with a comparably low level of collective efficacy is more likely to interpret initial setbacks and obstacles as confirmation that they do not have the capability to succeed. In such a case, social cognitive theory would predict that group members ultimately exhibit less sustained effort toward accomplishing group goals.

JG: *Are there certain approaches to teaching which enhance collective efficacy?*

RG: Research shows that schools where teachers are more likely to adapt their lessons to the needs, interests and abilities of students are also ones on average characterised by higher levels of collective efficacy. This is important because it suggests that there is more to the effects of collective efficacy than the general outcomes of increased effort and persistence. In other words, if collective efficacy is positively associated with student achievement, it makes sense that instruction somehow ought to be more effective in schools characterised by a strong sense of collective efficacy as opposed to

instruction in schools with lower levels of collective efficacy. My initial research into this area of inquiry draws on a representative sample of schools in an entire US state and suggests that there is a positive relationship between teachers' use of differentiated instruction and collective efficacy in schools. This is a critical finding because it moves in the direction of understanding how something such as collective efficacy is related to instruction.

JG: *What is the relationship between collective efficacy and the collaborative nature of teaching?*

RG: My work on collaboration and collective efficacy has looked specifically at the practice of school leaders directly involving staff in decisions that are important to their instructional practice. The main finding is that the more school leaders involve staff in decisions that influence their instructional practice, the greater the level of collective efficacy in schools. Indeed, this appears to be a way of broadly distributing leadership in the school. And, it implies that teachers would work together to make school decisions. In addition, recent work with colleagues indicates that the more staff collaborate on similar instructionally relevant issues, the greater the levels of achievement in mathematics and reading in their schools. The specific practices these studies have examined include staff working together to: 1) plan school improvement, 2) select instructional methods and activities, 3) evaluate

curriculum and programs, and 4) determine professional development needs and plan professional development activities.

JG: *What is the role of the school leadership in enhancing collective efficacy?*

RG: In several schools where I have done qualitative research, school leadership has emerged as a consistent theme in the descriptions that staff offer when explaining what makes their schools unique. One teacher in a school characterised by a relatively strong sense of collective efficacy said: "In general, I believe that how the principal feels the kids are going to do is how the teachers feel, because it rubs off. I mean, if the principal comes off as thinking, well this school has no hope, well then the teachers are like, 'Well, if they believe that why should I try?' But if a principal comes and they're positive and they're like, 'Well, listen, we're going to do great,' then the teachers will try more and I think that just goes everywhere and it goes down the line."

We also know that the more school leaders work with teachers on instructional improvement, the greater the level of differentiated instruction in schools, which in turn is positively associated with collective efficacy.

JG: *What are the implications for making improvements in low-performing disadvantaged schools where many students are from low socio-economic backgrounds?*

RG: An important finding from the research for these schools is that collective efficacy makes a contribution to students' academic success above and beyond that associated with socio-economic status. Indeed, my first study of collective efficacy in schools was set in one of the largest urban school districts in the US. The findings showed that even after accounting for student socio-economic status, minority status and prior achievement, collective efficacy was positively and significantly associated with student achievement differences among schools. More research suggests that a strong and collaborative focus on instructional improvement is one of the best ways to increase the confidence of staff in their collective capability to successfully educate all students.

JG: *Have you been involved with schools where initially staff morale was low, relationships were poor and student achievement was lower than expected and where, through improving their levels of collective efficacy, the school became a better place to be and a more effective learning institution?*

RG: There are some studies of effective schools in the US that have beaten the odds and they tend to involve qualitative stories of school leaders who would no longer accept traditional explanations for student failure and who built systematic approaches to school improvement that were district wide. I have just

engaged in a large-scale experimental study that will shed some light on ways in which collective efficacy might be improved in schools over time but we are several years from having results.

JG: *Can you provide an example of the steps taken by a school in this situation to transform itself?*

RG: There are a couple prominent of school improvement programs that attempt to improve performance for all students, in part by working with school leaders on ways that can increase collective efficacy levels in their schools. One of these is the Balanced Leadership program developed by McREL. I am currently directing an experimental study funded by the US Department of Education that is designed to determine the effects of McREL's Balanced Leadership program. At this point, most success stories are otherwise anecdotal. Even so, the collection of initial research on collective efficacy in schools suggests that there are several things school leaders can do to improve achievement and equity in their schools by enhancing collective efficacy. These include providing sustained professional development that enables teachers to work together by visiting other classrooms to view lessons where other teachers are experiencing success with similar students. In addition, school leaders should work to involve teachers directly in decisions about school improvement, curriculum, instruction and professional development. In particular, the more school leaders create an open and safe environment in which staff and leaders work together on instructional improvement, the more likely are their schools to have greater levels of differentiated instruction.

I believe we will know much more about this from the research in several more years, as a number of efforts are underway to examine and test these ideas. The field of research on collective efficacy is very promising but also relatively young.

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TAX INVOICE

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Professional Voice is published tri-annually and aims to stimulate debate within the Australian education community. Covering issues of curriculum, pedagogy, leadership, educational practices and related topics, *Professional Voice* is positioned to build awareness of innovation, best practice and reform within educational settings ranging from early childhood, primary and secondary schools, as well as TAFE, adult provision and disability centres. *Professional Voice* is funded by the Australian Education Union Victorian Branch and is available free to financial members.

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