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# Is the school fence the biggest border for educators to cross?

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“School problems are not just schools’ problems... the challenges our schools face everyday are actually challenges facing our families, our communities and our country.” Joy Dryfoos & Sue Maguire, *Inside Full Service Community Schools*

## Abstract

This article is derived from a larger study of the Family Learning Network (FLN) which evaluated the effectiveness of school and community agency partnerships in enhancing student engagement. In particular it describes how photo elicitation methodology was used with 8 year old primary school children in three schools to discuss their views of the schooling experience. Focus groups of students were asked to respond to photographs of their schools and the local community, and discuss what these represented with respect to the learning environment and connections with school. The importance of feeling safe and the need to have safe physical spaces both at school and in the local community emerged as a central theme articulated by the students. Developing safe and supportive school communities which support student learning remains a challenge in complex school sites but one that is highly valued by students. After listening to students, the need for more community service partnerships which deliver programs in schools that address the needs identified by them and their families while preserving their safety is recommended.

## Introduction

New approaches are needed to enhance engagement with school for families struggling to overcome chronic disadvantage. A study conducted in Adelaide’s northern suburbs, *Families at Risk* (Slee, 2006, p. v) drew attention to the strengths and challenges for parents of children aged 0 to 7 years who are living in situations of chronic and multiple disadvantage “Life for the majority of these parents and young children is under-resourced, stressful and isolated, and interventions are required that open up pathways out of disadvantaged life situations.” In the Executive Summary, Slee stated that, “In order to achieve improved outcomes for families at risk, a paradigm shift is required so that unequal outcomes for families and children are seen as social injustices, rather than as products of individual dysfunction or deficit. To effectively redress inequalities, service responses should: be universal and comprehensive, be holistic by responding to the barriers and opportunities to health and well-being, focus on prevention, early intervention and social connection, build capacity in the most disadvantaged localities and populations, and entail continuous and coordinated commitment in all sectors and at all levels”(2006. p.v).

In response to Slee’s 2006 report, the Northern Area Community Youth Service (NACYS) and three South Australian state primary schools initiated a partnership in 2006 called the Family Learning Network (FLN). The schools are classified by the Department of Education and Children’s Services (DECS) as having significant levels of social and economic disadvantage. There are high numbers of Indigenous students and increasing numbers of students from diverse cultural groups and non- English

speaking backgrounds attending these schools. Many families live in government housing and the level of transience is high as is the level of absence from school. The evaluation study (Peppard, *et al.* 2008) found that absence from school increases as students get older with a sharp rise in absence in the Year 7 cohort across all schools. The Family Learning Network was formed as a strategy to address these issues, particularly disengagement of students and their families from the schooling experience.

The three schools are continuing to explore ways to improve family connection to school and willing to look outside of the school fence, into their communities for assistance to achieve this. Thus, a community development approach was used to better understand the complex interactions that occur between school and home. Community development has been described as a ‘grass-roots’ process, enabling intervention which seeks through participatory processes to redress inequality and exclusion (Henry & Lane, 1993; Ife, 1995). Much of this type of work is done within marginalized groups, viewed as socio-economically, culturally, or politically disadvantaged (Lane & Henry, 2001, p. 212). The FLN partners want to establish what benefits are occurring from working collaboratively to address some of the issues raised in Slee’s (2006) study. The question that they wanted further assistance to answer is: *Can enhanced student engagement with school improve personal, social and educational pathways?* Schools in this project want to know whether school engagement can be improved through better school, family and community connection. The FLN project is looking at factors other than those located within the individual, which may be affecting student engagement. These factors include the level of parent involvement in the school, the relationship of students with their teachers and the physical environment of the school along with relevant and engaging pedagogy and curriculum that is student-centred are all areas of interest.

Flinders University was approached to evaluate the current initiatives of the FLN and it was agreed that this should include feedback from teachers, parent and students. I chose to focus on what student’s experienced as participants in the project. The opportunity to listen to students reflect on their schooling experience and later translate this knowledge to enhance the FLN outcomes is closely aligned to the whole school approach to curriculum which is also described as the Health Promoting Schools Model (Stewart, Parker & Gillespie, 2000; Nader, 2000; St Leger & Nutbeam, 2000). This model is promoted within the teaching of health education at Flinders University. A recent Statement for health, education and development: a call for action (Tang et al, 2008) developed by representatives of the World Health Organisation (WHO), United Nations, other international organisations and experts identified five key challenges for schools to achieve improvement in health, education and development. It also described effective approaches and strategies that could be adopted by schools to achieve improvement in these areas. The FLN project aims to address several of the challenges identified by alleviating social and economic disadvantage in access to and successful completion of school education, and the continuing challenge to improve partnerships among different sectors and organisations. The statement notes the importance of the relationship between quality education and the health of future generations. Understanding the effects of, ‘intractable, socio-economically determined differences in vulnerability, risk and health status between and within populations’ (Tang et al, 2008, p. 71) by educators and the wider community is important in advancing partnership approaches.

## **Photo elicitation**

My principle task was to collect information from students about their classrooms, schools and local area. Allowing students to discuss the impact these environments have on their learning and engagement with school will inform future initiatives to enhance student wellbeing and connection to school. After receiving ethics approval from both Flinders University and the Department of Education and Children's Services, I collected data from eight year old students in each of the three Family Learning Network primary schools between July and October 2007 using photo-elicitation methodology in combination with semi-structured interviews. I met with groups of older students and discussed with them what I needed the photographs for. They then took me around their school environment and used a digital camera to photograph places in the school that they identified. The subjects included learning spaces, play spaces, and time out areas. I asked about places in the local area that had significance for the students and included those in the locations which were recorded. All locations were then photographed professionally on a later visit to each of the sites.

A meeting was held with all of the eight year old students in each of the schools to discuss the research project. In each class an explanation of both the project along with a description of what I was trying to find out and how I proposed to do this was provided. The students were invited to participate in the research. Details about the need to get a parent or caregiver to sign a form which would be sent home the following Monday were provided. Most were keen to help me with my investigation. Two children in different schools asked me whether it would cost them any money to participate! When the students had been given consent to participate in the research I returned to the schools and worked with focus groups comprising up to 8 students.

After introducing myself again and explaining the process, I placed the photographs on the table around which we were seated. The students chose one or more photographs that they wanted to tell me about, something that was important in relation to their experiences at school. I encouraged them to think about the safe and unsafe places in and around the school, where they felt happy at school and in the local area, where they learnt important things, where they go with their friends, what they liked about school and their community and the things they liked to learn about in their classrooms.

Engaging the students in discussion about the school, the classroom experience and their local neighbourhood, using photographs as a stimulus, provided a rich amount of data which will inform the future work of the FLN. This approach gives voice to, and positions students as active participants in shaping their schooling experience, not just passive recipients. Through this we may better understand the students' experiences of school life and gain an understanding of how the community can empower students to become more active participants in enhancing their schooling and community experience, both now and into the future.

Their responses were followed up through questioning as part of a semi-structured interview. I also invited the students to talk about any other places in the school or community that were not in the photographs, if they wanted to discuss these.

The groups of students in the study were small in number – no more than 8 in any of

the groups. 'Children are as much the users of research and part of the field as are the professionals who work with them and their families' (Edwards, 2004, p.65). Researchers using student voice as a source of data work on 'action-oriented projects' and the results of this project will inform future work. Theilssen (2006, p.354) states that, 'these projects are taking a stand on the kinds of experiences students should have in the classrooms and schools, joining with research participants to recognise the knowledge of students in ways that extend and deepen their engagement and honour their voices.

### **What the students said... about play spaces**

Spaces in and around the school, in the local community and in the classrooms were a focus of much discussion in each of the three groups. The oval areas at all of the sites are extensive and making the play areas safe was a concern that students raised and one that is a challenge for schools. The students described the enjoyment they had in having the wide spaces to run in and saw the link between this and their learning, in particular to their fitness and wellbeing. Being able to get away from other people was also seen as a benefit along with having trees and a sandpit. On the less desirable side effects of this vast space was the issue of access by the wider community as a short cut to the local shops or other parts of the neighbourhood. Students from local high schools were mentioned as having access to the grounds and their presence caused fear among the younger students.

The playground was discussed and comments about the hardness of the asphalt and the pain from accidents on play equipment were recounted. A number of comments described the emotional pain felt in the playground from the experience of being bullied, which emitted empathy from others who had witnessed this. Often during the discussions, students tried to find a solution to the problems described by other students. A solution to bullying was more teachers on yard duty to monitor the situation. Discussion about the policies and practices to address bullying and harassment in the schoolyard occurred and these were widely understood. There were a range of views regarding the success of the strategies and again solutions were offered to enhance the current practices. The aim of these practices were seen as about keeping people safe. It was apparent however that these practices were not successful in keeping all students safe from bullying.

Schools are challenged by the need for surveillance of the school environment. The risk of removal from school by a parent who does not have access to their child or of other adults being in close proximity to students is a constant worry for school leaders as they try to reduce risk of harm to students. Allowing access for the wider community to pass through the oval area and the school grounds is a way of building relationships with the community, but this can be a problem for the students and their families and their perceptions of safety at school. Fostering greater responsibility and autonomy for personal behaviour amongst the students to enhance their feelings of safety is important in schools but students cannot be expected to manage complex interactions with adults and older students without support. Developing greater understanding from the wider community about the importance of the school being a safe place for all students is required. Having an understanding that this will mean they need to respect the fences and travel around the school when students are on site would be a good start. This may damage relationships if not done sensitively. Communicating to the local community that the students feel unsafe when people they

do not know are on the school-grounds could assist in greater compliance with the student's wishes. This approach supports the work of Kenkel, 2006 (p.481), who proposes that, good community development practice that seeks social transformation is participatory and collaborative, valuing not just the knowledge and wisdom of the experts, but that of the community, which is the site of practice. The contribution this research makes, by voicing the strategies for action, suggested and informed by the knowledge and experiences of students, positions students as active participants in the community development process. Kenkel, 2006 (p.482), says, 'We argue that the opening up of space for, and the privileging of children's voices requires an examination of how the community development process might acknowledge, incorporate and give legitimacy to the experiences and knowledges of marginalized groups.'

Students who participated in the research offered solutions to the problems identified by others in the group and problem-solved throughout the discussion. They were able to articulate what the safety problems were and brought their considerable experience of living in this community to offer solutions based on their knowledge of the existing resources. Teachers were often seen as the solution. More and better surveillance in both the school yard and within the buildings to prevent behaviour that threatened the safety of students was suggested. Keeping students safe from bullying and harassment was described as an important strategy which needed greater support from teachers. Further development of empowerment programs which offer the students a greater range of strategies to assist with these problems as part of the health education curriculum may be useful in the future to minimize the dependency that could develop if more surveillance by teachers or other authority figures is seen as the only solution to social problems.

### **What the students said about .... Buildings and work spaces for learning**

Focussing the discussion onto, 'How do you feel about coming to school?' the feelings generated were generally positive about the schooling experience. One student said, 'I think it's a good place because you get to learn and take little breaks.'

Coming into the buildings, the photographs which provoked responses were primarily safety related. The stairs which are a feature of all of the sites were discussed in detail and again students wanted to solve the problems that existed or describe the causes of the problems. Again teachers were nominated as the agents who needed to monitor and police the behaviour of students in this area. All were aware of the desired behaviour on the stairs but described examples of students, who didn't abide by these. This was seen as threatening the wellbeing of others in the class. Examples of good practice were recounted where monitors observed students to ensure that they did not play on the steps and hurt themselves.

The diverse range of curriculum was discussed with understandable differences in opinion about which parts were most enjoyable and least appealing. When students were asked to discuss their learning in the classroom and in particular what they enjoyed or didn't enjoy about their schoolwork, an expected diversity of responses were given. One student spoke about the work being sometimes easy and sometimes hard. In response to this another said, 'I think it depends what sort of worksheets you get, if it's hard you can get help from the teacher.' A child then said, 'It's easy, but it's

also boring.' Some students had difficulty with the schoolwork and the amount of work required each week. One student observed that whether the work was easy or hard was dependant on what it was, which is insightful; her favourite subject was literacy. Developing and delivering curriculum which is of high intellectual quality in disadvantaged school settings is a significant challenge for teachers but one which must be pursued. It is particularly important as a social justice issue to ensure equal educational opportunity.

The behaviour of other students in the class was seen as being a factor which impacted on access to some curriculum options. The Music Room was not available very often, 'because the kids in our class are naughty' – 'Yeah,' said another student, 'and in the class they call out. And harass each other. And they mess up everything, and they like use different instruments that they aren't supposed to be using in there. It makes us feel sad because, because we can't go in there much.' The students are aware that they are missing important learning about music because the behaviour of some students is not appropriate. This raises a number of questions about the role of the teachers and their level of confidence in teaching with inclusive and engaging pedagogy in all curriculum areas. Teacher skills for managing challenging behaviour in curriculum areas such as music and PE may be areas which need greater development. The need for greater opportunities for fitness and sport as part of the curriculum were specifically mentioned. The fitness activities offered were not highly regarded by one student. 'It's not good for fitness when you play fitness around here, because all you have to do for fitness around here is throw the ball and you have to hit the mural, and that's not exercise or anything.' Another said, 'And I think there should be more sports. So like there can be, like, more sports so then like people get more fit, and all that, like on the oval.' These responses demonstrate a sound understanding of the factors required for students to become fitter and healthier. They appear to have ideas about how these curriculum areas could be improved. The use of the school oval areas for more sporting initiatives could provide a vehicle to enhance greater community engagement. Travelling to sporting clubs can be a barrier to participation in lower socio-economic areas such as this, so the idea of having community sporting clubs delivering sporting activities at the school oval would be something to pursue.

Areas set up around the school for the use of computers and other technology such as robotics were described positively and seen as places which assisted with learning and were fun. Providing access to these experiences and using technology to assist with making learning experiences relevant and exciting is supported by the Productive Pedagogies work described by Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard (2006). The students were confident in their ability to use the computers and keen to learn. Making these facilities available to the parents of students and possibly others in the community after school hours may be a strategy that could be considered to engender connection to the physical location and build vital technology and communication skills. Student led learning with some adult supervision from community volunteers with expertise in adult learning may be a project which could be developed by the Family Learning Network to continue to build the capacity of the parent group, and enhance the skills and confidence of the students.

### **Student engagement with and in their community**

Each of the groups interviewed mentioned issues about safety in the wider community. These were in relation to coming to and going from school, along with

descriptions of issues they saw in relation to access to the school yard by members of the wider community. These have been discussed earlier. The students who participated in this study were clear about the need to develop social behaviours that keep people safe. Their ability to cooperate with others was a concern for one student who said, 'And last year there was this kid called X and we were trying to look after him and showing him around the school and once we got back to the line I was trying to tell him something, but he turned around and punched me right in the nose.' This child was quite philosophical and appeared sadly accepting about the event he had described. Other children discussed child X and his unsafe behaviour at the local shops. Increased social learning about the ways to keep safe both at school and in the local community could be part of the FLN programs in the future, supported by other local non-government organisations. A community approach will offer connections to other responsible adults in the local area and enhance safety for all. This includes shop owners, sporting club officials and volunteers.

Other comments related to photographs taken of the nearby shopping centre and local parks. The local parks were seen as places where the children felt safe if they were with friends or family members such as brothers. The shops were seen by one group of students as being a safe place and one where a good selection of services were available, especially takeaway foods. At another site, the local shopping centre was described as a place where a number of violent incidents had occurred and they did not feel safe there. A student said, 'The shop ain't safe because I had someone chase me with pocket knife just around there.' Another child described being chased and some people having weapons such as *shankers* at the shops. Another student recalled a whole bunch of people beat him up at the shop. Developing a safe neighbourhood is a critical factor for families if they are to engage in and participate in community development. Building networks such as School and Neighbourhood Watch or similar types of community support groups with the ability to link with the local police could be a strategy to engage with agencies that are not generally trusted or valued by the residents in these areas.

“Connections between disadvantage and crime victimization are well documented. In low income urban communities such as public housing estates, fear of crime and the risk of being a victim are much higher than in other types of neighbourhoods. The problem is compounded by poverty; residents lacking the material resources to protect themselves”  
(Lane & Henry, 2001, p.214).

It is well understood that inequities in health exist across communities caused by social determinants (Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, 2007)). As education and health outcomes interact closely, the impact upon education and the opportunities for development in low socio-economic schools are necessarily impacted. Research into the effectiveness of practices in schools has demonstrated that combining traditional health education and more comprehensive whole school approaches that create supportive physical, social and learning environments and bring together the resources of parents, community organizations and local communities is recommended. The focus of an effective school program would be on, ‘policy, skills-based health education, and a supportive social and physical environment, community partnerships and health services’ (Tang et al, 2008, p. 71). In the FLN schools it is enlightening to hear how students have experienced the early



attempts made by their schools and communities to work collaboratively. This approach is not new and much has been written about Health Promoting Schools. More recently this approach has been called Community Schooling. The underlying idea in both concepts is that the school and its work must closely support the needs of its community, not just the students who are attending. 'The fates of urban schools and communities are linked, yet school reformers and community-builders typically act as if they are not' (Warren, 2005. p. 133). The school is a community resource, available to its community for educational and other programs for adults and children at a range of times and all days of the week if required.

This research has utilised a richer account of the student's experience of the schooling process. Using student narrative, where the voices and stories of students at school and in the classroom become the data, repositions students in educational research and reform (Cook-Sather, 2002). Cook-Sather,(2002, p. 359) says, ' young people have unique perspectives on learning, teaching and schooling, that their insights warrant not only our attention but the responses of adults, that they should be afforded opportunities to actively shape their education'. This is supported by Nagel's (2001) life narratives of vocational education students which describes how structures and traditions of schools can silence and marginalise students "headed for waged jobs". The challenge for schools in these communities is to reconsider how they engage, organise and work with these students and their families. Cook-Sather (2002) supports social action curriculum that emerges when opportunities are created for students to shape their own democratic education. This approach does not label the student or their family as the 'problem' which needs to be fixed. Thiessen (2006, p. 346) notes that these researchers highlight the importance of understanding the experiences and strengths of students and finding ways to engage them in their development and the improvement of the strategies and structures that shape the possibilities of schooling.

## **Conclusion**

My research has identified that there are many great learning environments and promising programs being offered in the 3 primary schools that belong to the FLN. The FLN program is an important part of life for some students and families. They provide opportunities for continued engagement with schooling. The students in this study were aware of many positive elements which existed in their schooling situation and provided insights into what might be improved. With closer links for parents and students to the resources available in the wider community, school programs can be enhanced and supported. Students in the northern suburbs of Adelaide are experiencing the effects of lack of engagement with school and these schools must remain connected to community support if their social, educational and economic outcomes are to be improved. Programs such as the FLN should be encouraged and supported financially to ensure that they are able to sustain and increase the programs they offer to these 'at risk' families. More opportunities need to be developed for the students and their families to positively engage with and interact in their local community. Development of skills to enable this, along with support for authentic opportunities to enact the social action they wish to take, will be challenges for the project in the future. The Health Promoting School approach discussed earlier provides a well established model that can be utilised. Growing interest in the Community Schools movement has also demonstrated enhanced student learning and other benefits from an integrated approach which builds community capacity. These northern area schools are struggling to find resources to provide this experience for

students and families in their care. They are actively crossing borders and engaging with the community to develop a learning culture for the whole community. They are striving for a transformation and using the school to educate children, while strengthening families and communities. This project has reinforced our understanding that to improve student outcomes in the short and longer term, takes more than “the school”.

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### **Acknowledgements:**

NACYS is a not- for –profit community agency based in the northern suburbs of Adelaide who provide support for young people and their families. Their vision is...individuals, families and communities realising positive growth opportunities...

- **Energy** ...for the community
- **Excellence** ...in services to the community
- **Engagement** ...with the community
- **Empowerment** ...of the community

<http://www.nacys.asn.au/mission.php>