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"There's a real mix… it's not all doom and gloom around here!": Parents' views on raising children in a community experiencing high levels of disadvantage

Judith Peppard
Flinders University

Abstract

In 2006 three primary schools and a community youth service 'crossed borders' by forming a network to improve student educational achievement in a community experiencing high levels of disadvantage. Recognising that they lacked the capacity and resources required to counteract the numerous barriers to learning experienced by many of their students, the network set out to bring families and community together in a common goal; to improve education outcomes for students over the long term through a combination of community capacity-building and coordinating services for families in crisis.

This paper reports on the outcome of parent focus groups conducted in 2007 as part of a broader research project to establish baseline data for the network's evaluation. The purpose of the focus groups was to elicit parents' views about raising children in the area, what they felt was required to maintain and enhance positive aspects of community life, address the issues they raised as concerns and the potential of the newly formed network to make a difference to them and their children.

Five focus groups were conducted at the three network primary schools between July and October 2007. Twenty-eight parents participated across the three schools. This paper will present the findings of those focus groups, giving attention to the social construction of space and place in parents' responses, dissonances in the way parents discussed their community and the importance of lay knowledge in conceptualizing issues and developing responses to them. The way the ideas expressed by the parents have been taken up by the network in its forward planning will also be examined.

Introduction

In 2006 three primary schools and a community youth service collapsed borders by forming a network to improve students' academic achievement in a community experiencing high levels of disadvantage. The network is located in an area designated by the ABS Index of Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage (IRSD) as one of the most disadvantaged in Australia in relation to income, housing, access to services, school retention and participation, self-reported health status, life expectancy, and child abuse (Hetzel, Page, Glover &Tennant, 2004). Network schools routinely report high numbers of students with learning difficulties, poor attendance rates and low academic achievement (Peppard, Lewis, McMillan, Palmer, Lawson & Slee, 2008). Recognising that they lacked the capacity and resources to counteract the numerous barriers to learning experienced by many of their students, the network set out to bring families and community together in a common goal; to improve education outcomes for students over the long term through community capacity-building and improving coordination of services for families in crisis.

The establishment of the network was influenced by the findings of research conducted at Flinders University, which studied five hundred families with children aged zero to seven living in the lowest socio-economic status Census collection districts of Metropolitan Adelaide (Slee, 2006). This research found that life for the majority of the parents and young children interviewed was "under resourced, stressful and isolated, and interventions are required that open up pathways out of disadvantaged life." (Slee, 2006, p. v). The need to open such pathways provided the impetus for the establishment of the network, its aims and modus operandi. As a result, the School of Education

at Flinders University was approached to conduct an evaluation. Funding through the Flinders Collaborative Research Scheme enabled the commencement of the first phase of the evaluation in 2007, the collection of baseline data.

Commitments to social justice (McInerney, 2006) and recognition of the importance of community voice within the research process, led the research team to adopt critical inquiry methodology (Crotty, 1998) and to seek the views of parents, students and teachers as part of the research process. In addition, given that improving student academic achievement was the overall aim of the network, school data on student attendance, behaviour and academic achievement were analysed (Peppard et al, 2008). This paper reports specifically on the outcome of focus groups with parents conducted between July and October 2007. Parents' views about raising children in the community, the action they believed was required to maintain positive aspects of family and community life and address concerns, and the potential of the newly-formed network to make a difference to their lives and that of their children, were sought. In doing so borders between the school and the community and professional and lay (non-professional) knowledge were collapsed, and parents revealed that concepts of space and place are never static and the borders between wellbeing and its negative, are often blurred and difficult to define.

Structure and composition of focus groups

The views of parents involved in the schools and in the network in a variety of capacities were sought. The number of participants and composition of the focus groups varied as follows: parents involved in the network (4 participants); parents who were members of the school council or had leadership responsibilities in the school (10 participants); parents drawn from across the general school parent population (10 participants); and Aboriginal parents and/or parents with Aboriginal children (4 participants). A focus group with Aboriginal parents was conducted because the area has a high proportion of Aboriginal families compared to other areas of Adelaide and it was considered important to highlight issues that might not emerge through the other focus groups. In fact there was very little difference in the views expressed across the focus groups and much concurrence about what was needed to improve community life.

Parents were invited to participate either by the school principal or the school counselor. Aboriginal parents and parents with Aboriginal children were contacted by the Aboriginal Education Officer, who also co-facilitated their focus group. Participation in a focus group was voluntary, so the views expressed are those of parents engaged enough with the school and/or the network to offer their time. It is not suggested that their views reflect those of all parents with children at network schools, however there was a consistency in the responses across the five focus groups which suggests that the good things reported and the concerns identified may be relevant for many parents living in the area. All of the participants were women. It may be the case, as suggested by one group of participants, that the school-home relationship is seen as the responsibility of mothers or women care-givers, as is typical of most Australian communities, however it is also possible that a different strategy is required to elicit the views of fathers, for example focus groups held in the evening, after working hours (Peppard et al, 2008, p. 17). This will be further explored in the second phase of the project.

There were three components of the focus group process. In order to open discussion parents were asked 'What is it like raising children in this community?' They did this through a Photolanguage activity, which is outlined below. Then they brainstormed and prioritised ideas about actions that could be taken to enhance the positive aspects of community life they had identified and address the issues they raised. Finally the objectives of the network were presented and parents responded to a question about the potential of such a network to make a difference to the lives of families and the academic success of their children (Peppard et al, 2008, 17).

This paper focuses on the results of the Photolanguage activity, in which parents were invited to select a photograph that represented their response to the question, 'What is it like raising children in this community?' In doing so attention is given to how space and place were constructed in parents' responses, the dissonances in the way parents represented their community and, the importance of lay or non-professional knowledge in conceptualizing issues and responding to them.

Photolanguage method

Photolanguage is a relatively new tool in qualitative research and in the field of evaluation (Bessell, Deese & Medina, 2007). Historically the idea has its origins in the use of photographs by the influential Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire from the 1960s onward (see for example Singhal, Harter, Chitnas & Sharma, 2007), and the group work of humanist psychologist Carl Rogers (Rogers, 1986). French psychologists and psychotherapists utilized Photolanguage in their work with young people in the 1970s and 1980s and were instrumental in the development and publication of *Photolanguage Australia* in 1986 (Burton & Cooney, 1986, p. 6). This resource was used in the research reported in this paper.

Photolanguage Australia contains 130 black and white photographs 9.5 by 6.5 inches in size, chosen for "their aesthetic qualities, their capacity to stimulate the imagination, the memory and the emotions, and their ability to challenge the viewer to thoughtful reflection" (Burton & Cooney, 1986, p. 2). Those photographs range from scenes of country, including desert, ocean and mountains with and without people, to rural and urban areas. The photos that include people show them in a variety of settings and engaging in a range of activities. As Ann Bessell and her colleagues describe, the photographs are "of a sufficiently general nature that personal prohibitions may be transcended as respondents distance themselves from their comments, and ascribe their responses to the images they are viewing" (Bessel et al, 2007, p. 559). They further point out that "the flexibility of Photolanguage appears to facilitate its use with diverse populations in a variety of venues and cultural settings" (Bessel et al, 2007, p. 568). For these reasons the Photolanguage method was seen as a good way to begin the focus groups with parents; a way of opening dialogue with people who did not know each other well and beginning discussion on the focus question. Bessell et al (2007, p. 559) distinguish between Photolanguage and Photovoice. They note that the Photovoice method gives cameras to people to record their experiences and observations and, while there are similarities in the intention of the two methods to promote critical knowledge, the process is different.

Faced with one hundred and thirty photographs, the researcher and research assistant who would conduct the focus groups took sixty-five photos each and selected photos showing children and families, cultural diversity, and a range of settings, activities and moods. They then applied the focus question and decided that there were not enough photos showing positive aspects of community life. They added several photos reflecting more positive themes, removed others, and applied the focus question again, with a better result. Finally the research assistant looked through all the photos in *Photolanguage Australia* one more time. Several were added resulting in forty-three photos which were used for the first focus group. The photos fit roughly into four categories: adults together (17); children alone and in families (11) adults alone (6); abstract/ scenery (9). After the first focus group three more photos from *Photolanguage Australia* were included; two more to represent cultural diversity; and one with an adult alone. An additional photo was added for the focus group with Aboriginal parents/parents of children of Aboriginal descent to increase the number of photos of Aboriginal peoples.

Responses to the Photolanguage activity were audio-recorded with parents' permission and transcribed. The transcripts were coded using an open coding process to capture the content and key

ideas contained in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This process yielded twenty-four codes. Following the approach of Bessell et al (2007), the codes were cross checked against the data by a second researcher involved in the project. This resulted in the addition of six more codes, making thirty altogether. Four overarching themes were derived from the codes: family life (positive and a source of happiness); difficulties for families (primarily due to external forces such as lack of adequate public transport/service availability); positivity (community pride, good friends, care about the community's children); and negative media representations of the community. The way these themes were expressed through the Photolanguage activity is now presented in greater detail.

That photo "kind of speaks to me"

Before a focus group began, the photos were laid out in the room in which the group would be conducted. Once participants were welcomed and registered, the Photolanguage activity was explained. Parents were asked to look at the photos quietly and select one to three photos that said something to them about raising children in the area. Parents were then asked to pick up the photos they had selected and advised that, if someone else had the same photo, they could also use it. Each parent, when they felt ready, was invited to show the photos they'd chosen and explain why they had chosen them and what they represented for them about family life in their community.

Across the five focus groups twenty-three, or around half of the photos presented, were selected at least once to represent aspects of raising children in the community. Eight photos were selected three or more times, but the meaning attributed to the photo by different parents varied. The five photos chosen most often, spoke first and foremost to the good times parents experienced and the positives of family life. However sometimes the same photo was chosen to reveal its negative; that is, those things that weren't present but should be, to show difficulties they encountered in maintaining the good aspects of family life and accessing services when they needed them. Thus the positives were intermingled with problems, as the following discussion illustrates.

A photo of two men playing Aussie Rules football (photo 17) was chosen in four of the five focus groups to represent good times in the community, accompanied by statements like: "I picked the football one because the boys play football and they do barrack for their local area football team…"; "my kids all play sport which gives them a sense of community, get out there and meet lots of people get and have fun"; "we always used to go and play with the footy at the park so growing up and with my son as well". However one parent added this caveat,

> This one reminds me of my kids always out playing sport, you know doing something fun,
>
> then at the same time there are times when I feel I can't let them out…so I wish there was a
>
> bit more freedom at their age but sometimes I just don't feel that I can because of yes, other
>
> people.

Others noted problems transporting children to sporting events. "(Better public transport) might help a lot of other single mums and the kids have something to look forward to."

> The buses run hourly on weekends and on a Sunday morning, as I just found out, they don't
>
> start til 9:00 o'clock and if you have to be at a sporting event that starts at 8:30, you can't
>
> get there.

A photo of a mother and toddler laughing (photo 19) was chosen in several focus groups to represent happy children and good family life: "It reminds me of family and laughter and having good times"; "It reflects the way I feel with my daughter. I feel good when she's happy"; "being together with your family and sharing time-the most important thing." However in the following quotation, one of the participants noted that, while this is what parents strive for, there are times when families need support.

> The majority of what we aim for is to have very happy relationships with our children and
>
> others in the community. That kind of speaks to me, in a way, of what I see a lot, and it also
>
> reminds me that there are times when things aren't quite so happy and we all need to get
>
> help and access better services.

Similarly the photo of a child sleeping peacefully in her bed (photo 21) represented a positive aspect of life: "best part of the day…when they are peaceful and quiet" (laughter); "It's nice to know that when she goes to bed she's at peace." However there was also a suggestion that, for many children, this was not a reality: "a little girl sleeping peaceful in a bed …that is what we aim for, for our children at night…unfortunately around here it doesn't happen all that often". This last quotation suggests that some children are not safe; that many do not sleep peacefully.

A photo of a group of teenagers watching television together in a lounge room (photo 104) was selected to represent the importance of connection and relationships: "It's good for your kids to have their own little network because they might have their own problems they might not want to speak to an adult about", but it also represented the limitations of life in their community: "I find that children nowadays do spend a lot of time in front of the TV and their video games instead of actually going out and being able to socialize a bit more"; " I agreed with what she said but I think it's also because it's not safe to let them out on the streets, so it's better for them to be home doing something where you know where they are."

For some parents a photo of a sign saying 'Gone fishing' (photo 63) represented fun and the positive relationship between fathers and sons, "I could not have gone past this one (laughter). The boys and their father go fishing a lot and me…sitting at home; so that's a big part of their life too" but for another it represented the exit of services from the area and difficulties getting help when needed, "I picked 'Gone fishing' because so many services are getting closed and it is hard for us to access services."

The photos discussed thus far were chosen by parents to represent the positive aspects of community life and also the absence of, or difficulties in, achieving the positive situations the photos represented. The three other photos selected most frequently pointed overtly to problems. A photo of a child crying (photo 40) was used in several focus groups to represent children in distress. Parents were greatly concerned about child safety, not only the safety of their own children, but also that of other children in the community, as illustrated by comments like, "It just gets me thinking society is going downhill with no resources to help these kids" and "I'm thinking along similar lines. I'm thinking of the contrast between safe and attentive type families and the other extreme because you get a lot of that in this area…"

A photo of an Asian mother with three young children behind a wire fence (photo 52) was included by the researchers, to show the cultural diversity of Australian families and their varied experiences. However, parents chose the photo to represent the restrictions they and their children felt in their

community. One parent stated, "This is how I feel now (compared to a previous living place-a country town), how my kids feel like they're prisoners", while another stated

> I saw the fence, and that to me is restrictions. I try to set good values and so forth for my
>
> kids and I just feel that the area and the majority of the people that are in it, there is just not
>
> a lot of good values going around, which restricts where my kids could go you know later
>
> on in life…

Similarly a photo of a woman sitting alone with a thoughtful expression (photo 78) represented worry about children and feeling alone, isolated.

> I chose that one for two reasons; one because you're worried about your children being out
>
> there growing up safe, and also because I find nowadays people seem to stick on their own a
>
> lot more so you can feel a lot more lonely if you don't have the social extension of family
>
> you used to have.

"Why, is this like the Bronx of Adelaide? No way! but that's the conception."

In contrast, while parents recognized that there were real concerns about the safety of children in their community, they also felt the community was unfairly represented in the media. As one parent commented, "Why, is this like the Bronx of Adelaide? No way! but that's the conception."; and, "It seems to be news and everything else focuses on (our community) when they mention the bad things that happen."; "We do have successes but they're not known about." This issue was discussed in several focus groups.

> I picked the gentleman in the wheelchair…because we are disadvantaged because of where
>
> we live. I read somewhere (that) if you send in a letter from (our) region, it goes right in the
>
> bin regardless of your willingness to work…our application doesn't even get read.

> I've lived here all my life and I'm not going to move away because of someone else's
>
> opinion. On one hand it sort of, it gets my back up and I think, 'Who do they think they are?
>
> Judging me because I live in…,' but then on the flip side I turn on the telly. And something
>
> has happened. It's here. Read the newspapers. Something has happened. It's here. I really
>
> think it's the media focusing on (this suburb). There's good and bad in every suburb.

While concerns about child safety were expressed in all focus groups, there was still a strong sense of community loyalty and connection. "We have a lot of gathering of friends. That's where you talk a lot of your problems through… 'Have you tried this? Have you tried that?', so it is a good

community between your friends". They talked about the value of "communities working together to manage it" and making "use of, build on what is already in the community."

> I think we have a lot of pride in our community. I choose to live here. There's a real mix…I mean, it's not all doom and gloom around here. It's a pretty good school. It's a school community. (We) look out for other people's kids in the school.

> I feel more at home here…because I can just walk up to …'s house and say look I have a problem, can you help and she will just embrace me with open arms and help me as best she can. If she can't help me she puts me onto, we say 'No we can't go that road, we'll go this road'.

At the same time there was a view that the community, or parts thereof, was not safe for children and that many families did not receive the support they needed. This was related to the lack of specific services for children and families and also the absence of basic general services such as good public transport. Popay, Thomas, Williams, Bennett, Gatrell & Bostock (2003, p. 69) have noted a similar phenomena; that is,

> people's ability to (re) construct a positive identity for themselves in particular places despite poor environments. Their ability to do so seems to be linked to the relationships between their personal biographies and the places they are living in.…This speaks to the urgent need for public policies to develop ways of maintaining people in places as the places themselves are improved, since these wider attachments between people and places provide the foundation for any worthwhile social interventions.

The relationship between people and places

Since the 1990s researchers working across disciplines in health and education have called for attention to the relationship between space and place and population patterns of health and wellbeing (Tempalski & McQuie 2009; Hemingway, 2008; Cummins, Curtis, Diez-Roux and Macintyre, 2007; Popay et al, 2003; Mcintyre, Ellaway & Cummins, 2002; Macintyre and Ellaway, 1999). Cummins and colleagues argue that the development of "effective 'contextually sensitive' policy interventions" requires recognition that place is relevant for health variation because "it *constitutes* as well as *contains* social relationships." (Cummins 2007, p. 1826). In Australia social health mapping has drawn attention to inequities in health across and within communities (Glover, Hetzel, Tennant & Page, 2006; Glover, Harris, and Tennant, 1999). Such mapping offers information about patterns of inequity that persist over time and sharpens thinking about the kinds of policies required to address complex health issues. The concerns expressed in parent focus groups about the need for services for families and children are consistent with social health data for the community. Glover et al (2006, p. 322) have documented higher than average client ratios

for adult and children's mental health services in the area and "very strong correlations between high rates of community mental health service clients and socioeconomic disadvantage". What the parents add to the social health data is a more nuanced view of how disadvantage plays out in day to day life. Yet there is still a gap between the knowledge available to policy-makers via a growing body of research and the introduction of the sustained policies required to address inequity (Commission on the Social Determinants of Health, 2008).

Doreen Massey (1994, p. 1) points out that, "The terms space and place have long histories, and bear with them a multiplicity of meanings and connotations which reverberate with other debates and many aspects of life." Massey (1994, p. 5) suggests that,

> if the spatial is thought of in the context of space-time and as formed out of social
>
> interrelations at all scales, then one view of a place is as a particular articulation of those
>
> relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings.…

Through the focus groups, parents offered an account of such a moment. They spoke of a place of positive social relationships where people "all band together without asking…when bad things happen…we all band together and help make it better for everyone." Such statements reveal a sense of connection, continuity and pride. At the same time they refer to changes that have rendered the place they live less safe, causing people to feel isolated. Sometimes parents engaged with negative discourses about their community; at others, they resisted those discourses. At times they located the source of their problems with 'other' people, who make the community unsafe; more often they indicated that problems they experience originate within broader social, political and economic relationships. Implicit in many of their comments is the view that the issues they identified could be alleviated by better public policy, in particular through programs for children, access to services and better public transport and housing policies.

Popay & Williams (1996) have argued that, to better understand inequity in health, researchers need to broaden their epistemological base and engage in multi-disciplinary, egalitarian and participative research processes, valuing the contribution lay knowledge can make in addressing public health concerns. They describe lay knowledge in the following way; "a more or less systematic process whereby experience is checked against life events, circumstances and history, lay people acquire an 'expert' body of knowledge, different but equal to that of professionals" (Popay & Williams, 1996, p. 760). They identify three dimensions/contributions lay expert knowledge has made in public health: lay knowledge has enhanced understanding of the relationship between social circumstances and individual behaviour; lay theories of causation have revealed the links between ill-health and environmental problems such as toxic waste; and lay knowledge has had predictive power in identifying future health experience (Popay & Williams, 1996, p. 761-762).

Inequity has also been a concern for researchers working in the field of education (McInerney, 2004; Thomson & Comber, 2003). The importance of parents' knowledge and insights has been highlighted by Hanafin & Lynch (2002). The parents who participated in their study, conducted in low socio-economic areas in the Republic of Ireland, were seldom consulted on education matters, but "wanted to be involved in their children's schooling, they are capable of being involved and they have a contribution to make to schools and school personnel" (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002, p. 46). Popay, Williams, Thomas & Gatrell, 1998, p. 621) add to this, pointing out that lay knowledge has much to offer to the development of public policy responses to entrenched concerns. They state that lay knowledge, which grows out of

the places that people spend their lives, has theoretical significance for our understanding of

health inequalities. The second, essentially political, argument is that lay knowledge

presents a 'privileged' form of expertise about inequalities in health which may pose a

challenge to those who claim the status of either research or policy expert in this field.

The privileged knowledge and expertise parents offered through the focus groups has enabled the network to finely tune its forward planning. In particular the network is seeking to strengthen its relationships with local government and not-for-profit community agencies to develop new programs for parents, support for parent education and for after hours school sports programs. At State government level the network is developing its relationship with the Department of Housing, working on the creation of healthy housing policy, and with the Department of Health to investigate better/improved service provision. Discussions with the South Australia Police are also planned to explore the possibility of a neighbourhood policing program. And finally, the network is considering its own structure, investigating further avenues for parent and student involvement in bringing about the changes required to promote community wellbeing and student academic achievement.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on the outcome of parent focus groups conducted in 2007 as part of a broader research project, and the use of Photolanguage as a vehicle for opening a dialogue with parents about raising children in their community. Parents talked about a place where a strong sense of history and connection jostle with changes from outside and within which are causing concern about safety and limiting their possibilities and those of their children. At the same time parents spoke of pride in their community, strong friendship ties, empathy for others, and an ethos of care. They pointed to policy issues that need to be addressed and, in doing so, demonstrated the importance of lay knowledge in understanding issues and developing policy responses. They saw the school as a positive component of community life. This speaks well of the spirit of a school that engages with its parents in creating a vision for the future and reaches beyond its borders to work toward health-enhancing community change. It also speaks well of a community youth service, which values partnerships with schools and collaborative work to build community capacity. This paper has discussed parent responses to the focus groups. A paper comparing the student and parent (lay) responses with teachers (professional) responses, is planned. Future research will seek fathers' views about raising children in the community, to add another dimension of lay knowledge to the research process.

Acknowledgements

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