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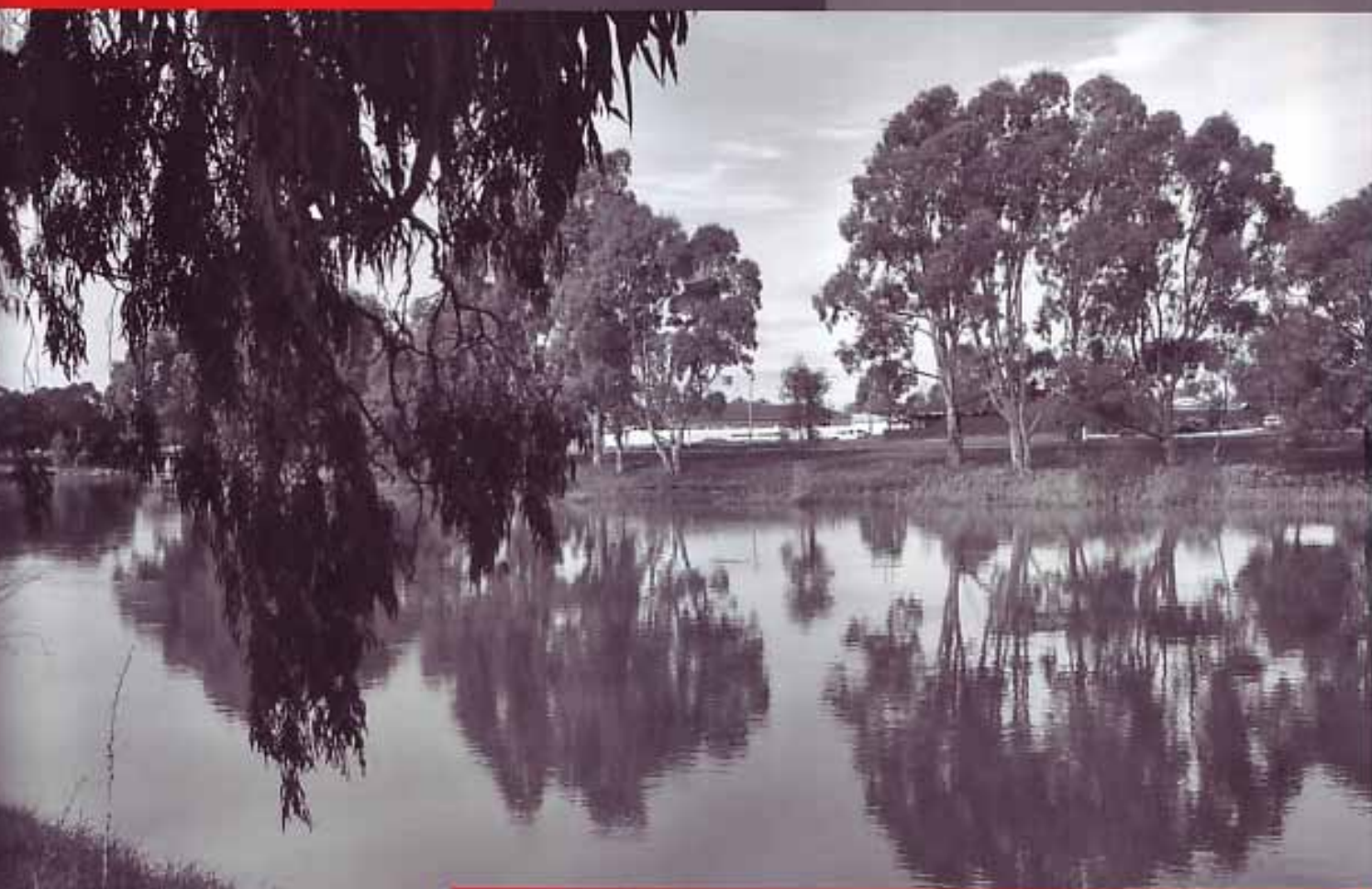
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Making a Difference: Positive Parenting Pupil Participation

By Julie Neeson, Dr Kaye Scholfield and Melissa Collits

A partnership between Southern Grampians Adult Education, RMIT and a local primary school attempts to address social and economic disadvantage in a rural Victorian town. We will hopefully follow the progress of this project in 2011.

Introduction

The progress of children through their schooling is considerably enhanced when their parents and carers are fully supportive of their education. The Positive Parenting Pupil Participation (PPPP) project is a community learning partnership (CLP) bringing together three levels of education: adult community education (ACE), university research and a small rural primary school in Victoria.

The purpose of the CLP is two-fold: to address broadly recognised community needs and to provide the ACE organisation with the opportunity to bring learning opportunities to the community in new ways. In this project, the PPPP is working in partnership to increase the engagement of parents with their children's education and with their school, at the same time as re-engaging with their own learning.

In the new environment created by *Securing Jobs for Your Future—Skills for Victoria* and *A Stronger ACFE—Delivering Skills for Victoria*, CLPs facilitate ACE organisations to expand their reach into the community by supporting people and communities in acquiring the skills that are needed to prosper economically and socially. The PPPP partnership seeks to break the cycle of family marginalisation and educational disadvantage, by:

- creating a welcoming environment for parents at the school, and
- providing parents with adult education courses such as life skills, literacy and numeracy in the school setting to better equip them for employment opportunities.

The ultimate aim of this project is to re-engage the parents in formal education and training within a school setting, specifically to enhance their literacy and numeracy skills. Further, by developing a positive school culture where closer connections between the parents and the school will be created, it is hoped the learning

outcomes of the children will be improved. A learning community can develop where several educational and other organisations, staff and parents can come together for the benefit of children and their families.

The PPPP project is employing two main activities in support of its objectives:

- the delivery of targeted education programs to the school's parent community, and
- action research.

The CLP initiative provides opportunities for ACE organisations to extend their use of alternative learning approaches to address community needs in partnership with other stakeholders. CLPs are effectively the research arm of Adult Community and Further Education. The PPPP project employs both alternative learning approaches and research, enabling a wider perspective on an issue, hitherto seen as an in-school problem, as well as an opportunity to reflect on and refine the approach taken by project proponents as they navigate a complex local issue. The role of the research component of the project is to test assumptions about parental involvement in education and informing strategies for creating a more positive environment.

This paper describes the partnership's response to a particular critical local issue. There is a perception that a number of parents have disengaged early from their own education and that this affects their attitude and ability to engage in their children's school education, which is likely in turn to lead to the extension of generational poverty cycles. The project aims to trial new approaches to



addressing a complex problem that is difficult to measure, understand, report on and overcome.

The Partners

Southern Grampians Adult Education (SGAE) provides a range of accredited and pre accredited training programs in the area of adult literacy and numeracy, pre-study, returning to work, youth programs and more. SGAE's role in PPPP is to provide initial informal learning and social opportunities to encourage parents to come into the school, and to gain confidence with re-engaging with learning. SGAE will then provide targeted modules for this parent cohort.

RMIT University operates a regional research and learning centre in Hamilton. Much of the research focuses on real world issues in partnership with the local community. RMIT's role in the project is to undertake action research to assist with the implementation of PPPP and to reflect and help develop the partners' approaches.

The primary school partner is one of several state and independent primary schools serving the surrounding district. The school caters for a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. The school is providing the venue for adult learners who are parents at their school so that they can re-engage in learning opportunities.

Statistics regarding the year three and year five literacy and numeracy levels of this school, taken from the 2009 Government *School Annual Report to School Community*, show that the students are performing at levels below the median of Victorian government schools.

Background

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Socio Economic Index for Areas (SEIFA, 2006), the surrounding region is generally ranked at average and above. However, the neighbourhood in which this school is located is ranked as most disadvantaged. The school community has observed an overall decrease in the involvement of fathers in parenting, and this is perceived to impact on children's behaviour. There is also proportionally a high number of 'out of family' care children in this school. All of these factors have resulted in a disproportionate number of troubled and disruptive children in the school.

SGAE had similarly observed a parallel trend of young people disengaging from formal education and also some young people becoming parents at a younger age. Over

years of working in the region, the three PPPP partners had observed cycles of disadvantage.

The school is fortunate to have a group of supportive parents who involve themselves in the life of the school. The school council is extremely dedicated, working tirelessly for the school despite a general lack of involvement of the larger parent body. They are prepared to be strong ambassadors for the school and give generously of their time as volunteers in a range of capacities. Strategies emerging from this project will assist the council to develop innovative approaches to involving currently disengaged parents in the school and re-energising the parent body.

The school on its own lacks the capacity to deal with the accumulating problems associated with the range of detrimental socio-economic factors. The PPPP partners observe that morale has been low amongst staff, school council and the general parent body. This is exacerbated when families (particularly engaged families) leave the school, which further decreases student numbers and increases concerns and stresses.

Any response to the increasingly complex array of difficulties, including concerns for families, and educational responsibilities, challenge the resources of those involved. The first basic question though, was: how can we make things better for this school? The problem is not unique to this school, nor is it new (Plowden Report, 1967, UK in Fidler 2010), which suggests that there are no simple solutions.

A one year project cannot hope to achieve much in this environment. The research process will help to establish a basis for an ongoing strategy which will include a whole of community approach as originally envisaged by the school principal.

The project so far

A project officer has been appointed to work closely and practically with the principal and teachers of the school and facilitate operations between the project partners. The role is to engage parents in activities including informal and formal learning opportunities, as well as to work with the school body to become familiar with the character of the school. This two-way familiarisation is important for the development of the project. Without the CLP funding there is little capacity in the existing staff profile to instigate engagement opportunities for 'hard to reach' parents.

Members of the project team meet regularly providing a forum for airing ideas and learning which has informed the development of the PPPP—part of the action research cycle. The project officer also consults regularly with the school council and members of the teaching staff to develop strategies. Activities so far have included book covering classes, cooking demonstrations, literacy and numeracy classes. A calendar of events has been developed to inform parents of upcoming activities.

The first meeting of the project members with staff was organised for early February to take place at morning tea break at the school. The project members gave a very brief presentation to staff to outline the project's aims and concerns. The reaction of staff was somewhat disappointing. They neither indicated any awareness of the project (even though the principal informed staff of the winning of the grant to fund the project) or little interest in the presentation as it was being given.

Meetings with the principal and staff have helped to develop an understanding of perceptions of the parent body. It was understood that these views would have to be treated with a degree of caution but it provided an important starting point regarding perceptions of the parent body. The principal had indicated that aside from those parents who were members of the school council, and a few others, the parents are largely disengaged; the principal had not even met a number of parents.

The project officer joined school council as a community member and has been attending meetings since February. Council members, presumably the most engaged of the parent body, were both helpful and positive from the beginning and recognised the need for the project, seeing it in the main as a way of improving school morale.

Having decided on the need to gauge parents' interest it was agreed by the project partners that a personal approach was likely to be more successful than sending home forms for completion. The project officer therefore took the opportunity to talk with parents at a number of school events and then sought to ring as many parents as possible. Generally the parents spoken to were quite positive but it was clear that none had heard of the project (despite considerable publicity through the school newsletter). The activities proposed included cookery demonstrations, a basic computer course, craft activities and activities involving the children.

From talking to the parents it became clearer that a number would be more interested in participating in activities that were directly of benefit to their children and the school, for example book covering. This, coupled with research of similar projects overseas, led to the decision to hold two book covering sessions as our first activity. Research also led to further refinement of what type of engagement we were aspiring to make. The literature tended to emphasise that it is engagement of a particular kind that impacts positively on student outcomes—namely that the parents need to be actively involved in their children's learning, not simply being at the school. However, given the positive response to suggestions of activities such as cookery demonstrations and introductory computer lessons it was decided to still offer a range of opportunities and test which was most successful. Parents of prep to year two students were invited to attend book covering sessions. Invitations were sent home and then followed up by phone calls. Approximately forty percent of the invited families attended, which was an encouraging start.

Key issues

These first sessions drew attention to a number of issues which will affect the ongoing development of the project:

- a non-homogenous parent body
- the attitude of teachers to the project
- interactions between parents and staff
- relevance of program activities to pupils

The first major issue, not taken into account explicitly by the project team and which has not been discussed in the research literature reviewed to date, is that the school does not have a homogenous parent body. The personal dynamics of each session highlighted this. Whilst this is clearly not unique to this school, the situation is compounded at this school because the school population itself is so small. Questions are raised regarding whether some parents might be discouraged from attending school activities because, for example, of the awkwardness arising from significant differences in socio-economic backgrounds.

A perception is that some parents feel intimidated by the other apparently more confident group who tend to dominate the school council, fund raising committees and so on. But it also seemed evident, for example at the book covering sessions that parents from different socio-economic groups can be uncomfortable with each other. Breaking down the barriers between different

parent groups, not just between parents and the school may become an important, if previously unconsidered, part of the project.

The second issue that has been highlighted was foreshadowed to a degree at the introductory staff morning tea, namely the attitude of some of the teachers to the project itself. Whether it is a case of the teachers feeling so overwhelmed by the challenges they face on a daily basis, whether they (probably quite justifiably) feel somewhat cynical and jaded about the prospect of another project proposing to provide solutions to the school's problems, or whether they felt the project had been foisted upon them without proper consultation, there has been an initial lack of commitment to, or engagement with, the project. However, for the project to succeed it is felt that the teachers must be seen to support it and encourage parents to become involved.

A further issue concerns the interaction of parents and staff—particularly staff attitude and ability to interact with parents. Managing a range of parental attitudes from non-engaged, sometimes hostile, or shy and awkward, to highly confident and assertive—not to mention a range of challenging social issues associated—is evidently a challenge for teachers.

It had been assumed that the key challenge was to engage the parents, which by necessity includes the staff welcoming and engaging with the parents. It was now clear that an impediment to parental engagement is the quality of staff and parent interactions. It reinforces the importance of the 'softly softly' approach being taken. It is critical that staff are not antagonised by 'outsiders' coming to the school and telling them what to do. A further challenge therefore is to encourage and support staff to create an inclusive welcoming environment at the school, part of which is to positively endorse the project if 'hard to reach' parents are to become involved in the school and in learning.

A further observation by the project officer was the amount of care parents took with the preparation of the covers. The interest shown was markedly high, suggesting that for at least some of the marginally engaged parents, activities that show a clear benefit to their children may provide a way forward.

Key Learnings

The learnings from the project so far underline the difficulties this school, and probably others, face, including

the lack of response to requests for information, and apparently contradictory results to opinion surveys. For example, results from a survey to establish how well the school communicated with parents were generally positive which were at odds with the survey results from the previous year compiled by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development which were very negative. Further research will be gathered through surveys and focus groups to test these results and map any changes.

The troubled state of the school in terms of generally low morale and child misbehaviour has been recently confirmed by the allocation of an education worker to the school. The education worker is currently working with the school to develop strategies for dealing with the inappropriate behaviour of the students. Her reaction on hearing of this project was very positive.

A noticeable increase in the level of enthusiasm and commitment to the project by council members has been discernible. For example, they were very interested to hear of development of a logo for the project and one parent member arranged a donation of a sign from the local sign-making company. Council also continues to make a valuable contribution as a forum for discussion of ideas and solutions. It has become even more critical that council is on side, in a school where morale is generally so low.

The most recent organised activity was a cookery demonstration, a most enjoyable and positive experience. Numbers were limited and the parents that attended were those who would probably be described as already engaged but they were so positive about the experience and so appreciative of it that it seems to be an unexpected side benefit—something constructive and encouraging for these parents in a school more usually characterised by low morale and poor student behaviour. It is becoming apparent that another possible unexpected benefit of the project is that it is providing a more positive experience of the school for those who are already engaged with the school and their children's education. Their attendance at the cookery demonstration appears to have improved their feelings about the school and what the school community can offer.

Yet there are some parents who are not engaged with the school in any way, some being rarely, if ever, sighted. For the next activity—a numeracy session for prep to year four parents; parents will be rung individually and invited, in addition to an invitation being sent home. It is acknowledged that it is success in reaching this sector



that will still take quite some time as efforts to ring them on previous occasions have been unsuccessful. It is these parents in particular that PPPP wishes to reach: to first get them into the school, and then to engage them in useful learning and skill development. However, the project partners are beginning to discern three strands to the parent cohort:

- those that are engaged and are happy to attend events if circumstances allow
- those that have little or no connection with the school
- those that are tentative about attending (shy, feel intimidated, lacking confidence) but with some encouragement we are hopeful we can succeed in attracting them to activities, particularly if it is of benefit to their child.

It is unclear how long this process may take, but even after six months it seems reasonable to say that there have been changes for the good—sufficient to encourage us to continue in aiming towards our ultimate goal of engaging these parents in both their children's education and their own.

Conclusion

Responses to the PPPP project in the community suggest there are many schools, parents and agencies interested in the outcomes of this project. Early findings from the project indicate there is much to consider, including how to deal with parents from widely differing socio-economic backgrounds in one school. This situation may arguably be more evident in rural communities where schools serve the entire community, rather than metropolitan suburbs where pockets of advantage and disadvantage are perhaps more likely to be defined by location or suburbs. Also to be investigated further is the possibility that parents are

more likely to undertake an involvement in the school if it directly benefits the children; thus learning programs for parents need to consider this in the planning and to develop their own learning development accordingly in the PPPP project.

Other considerations will arise as the project progresses. However, at this stage, project partners remain of the view that working with the parents is a valid place to begin, despite the challenges involved. 'Hard to reach' parents according to a new British report by Anthony Fieler, are "undoubtedly one of the most demanding issues facing schools."

The design of the research recognises what each of the partners brings to the table: local solutions to local problems. The project team, in conjunction with school council and the staff of the school, will continue to guide the inquiry and help refine the project.

Success is likely to be small increments—such as arresting further disengagement of what might be termed the 'middle band' of parents by providing activities that they can be involved in and stay in touch with the school. This leads to asking questions such as 'What *is* the problem?', 'What would success look like?' and questions about how will we know whether the project's strategies are working.

Here the advantage of having a dedicated project officer has meant the ability to reflect changes back quite quickly to the project team. Similarly the supportive response of the school council can be utilised in the project's implementation—the cycles of action learning. At the end of this project there will be direct benefits for children and their long term attitude to education, for their families, and for the school community:

- Parents will have learnt new skills and feel more comfortable about being involved in the school community and they will become part of the school community and proactive supporters of their children's schooling. They will gain life skills, improved literacy and numeracy, and connections, enhancing their employment prospects and life choices.
- The school will have a more cohesive and enthusiastic school community.
- The action research arising out of the project will help the school and its council to develop improved education leadership including practical long term engagement processes.

- A long term outcome is to break the cycle of family dysfunction and marginalisation by creating a welcoming environment for parents, and providing adult education in the school setting.

The problem of rural schools struggling with a relatively small number of families who are caught in a cycle of poverty, anti-social behaviour and low literacy levels is not confined to this school, as evidenced by other schools already expressing strong interest in the project. Such families can have a highly detrimental impact on the whole school and in the long term, on the community. The cycle can continue over generations, straining tolerance and educational and community resources, and most of all, impair the life opportunities of those involved.

The PPPP project has chosen one approach to address a part of a very complex problem and any successful outcomes are likely to be part of a complex set of solutions. However, the initiative has commenced with considerable goodwill and a strong partnership.

It is envisaged that the project team will present the next stage of this 'story' to the 2011 VALBEC Conference when it is hoped that some of the outcomes will have been realised and a difference made for some struggling families who have so far been unable to successfully benefit from the educational opportunities that exist in the community.

Julie Neeson is Executive Officer at Southern Grampians Adult Education. Julie has worked in adult education in South West Victoria for over twenty years. With a passion for literacy Julie has developed many programs with a life-skills literacy focus. The anecdotal generational impact of literacy has led to the development of this project.

Dr Kaye Scholfield manages RMIT's Hamilton campus. She has a long involvement in community and education, strongly supporting partnerships including local research and initiatives that develop community capacity. Kaye has a particular interest in rural education, including the need for access to appropriate education, training and employment for rural people.

Melissa Collits had worked for over twenty years in the publishing industry before moving to country Victoria approximately three years ago. Since moving to the region she has been pleased to use her project management and communications experience in the local education sector.

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