Maturing school–community partnerships: Developing learning communities in rural Australia

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Abstract
This paper reports findings from a project that examined the extent and nature of the contribution of rural schools to their communities’ development beyond traditional forms of education of young people. Case study communities in five Australian States participated in the project, funded by the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. Communities and schools that share the belief that education is the responsibility of the whole community and work together, drawing on skills and knowledge of the community as a whole, experience benefits that extend far beyond producing a well-educated group of young people. The level of maturity of the school–community partnership dictates how schools and communities go about developing and sustaining new linkages, or joint projects. Twelve characteristics central to the success of school–community partnerships were identified. The characteristics are largely sequential in that later characteristics build on earlier ones. Underscoring these characteristics is the importance of collective learning activities including teamwork and network building, which have been identified elsewhere as key social capital building activities. A generic model of the relationship between the indicators of effective school–community partnerships and the level of maturity of those partnerships is forwarded.

Background
Rural communities must deal with the rapid pace of change in terms of globalisation of the economy and changing world markets, which have brought about a decline in traditional industries such as agriculture, mining and manufacturing, closure of institutions such as banks and post offices, and attendant problems of unemployment, declining population, and a drain of youth to the city. In order to survive this rapid change, and ensure community sustainability, it has been suggested that rural communities need to focus on internal rather than external ‘solutions’, based on strengthening linkages within their communities (Lane & Dorfman, 1997). The study on which this paper is based, More than an education: leadership for rural school-community partnerships, funded by the Australian Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, explores the role of rural schools, which are one of the major organisational/government services remaining in rural areas, in building and sustaining strong school–community partnerships (Kilpatrick, Johns, Mulford, Falk & Prescott, 2002).

Educational institutions can play a role that extends beyond the provision of education and training for young people and other students in the community (Falk, 2000). They act as a focus for community activity, provide expertise and are a component of community capacity or ability to choose to pursue a course of action. OECD (2001) notes that the social instructional structures (such as schools) and relations present in localities are key determinants of the capacity of localities to respond to the pressures of the new competitive environment. The role of schools as stakeholders in community development is increasingly recognised (Kilpatrick, Bell & Kilpatrick, 2001). For example, the role of schools in partnership with rural and remote communities has been considered as part of a strategic plan to develop models of effective vocational education and training (VET) and general education delivery (e.g. MCEETYA, 2001a, 2001b; Schwab & Sutherland,
We increasingly live in a knowledge society, which is based on creativity and ingenuity resulting from both individual and collective intelligence. Such intelligence, or learning, first requires the building of strong communities (Mulford, 2003). Rural schools are well placed to stimulate their communities to develop as learning communities, which “explicitly use learning as a way of promoting social cohesion, regeneration and economic development which involves all parts of the community” (Yarnit, 2000, p. 11).

The type of leadership required for successful community collaborations encourages participation and interaction across a range of key stakeholder groups (Peirce & Johnson, 1997). This type of leadership is termed 'situated enabling' leadership by Falk and Mulford (2001) because, firstly, it is situated in a particular community with its particular needs, and secondly, because such leadership must enable the participation and interaction of the diversity of stakeholders.

Research into effective educational leadership supports the need to foster collective leadership processes in order to bring about and support sustainable change within educational settings (e.g. Mulford, 2003; Lambert, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1994). Leithwood (1994) and Silins & Mulford (2002) argue that transformational leadership facilitates effective school reform. Transformational leadership practices of school leaders include the development of a widely shared school vision and collaborative culture, fostering the commitment and capacity of staff, distributing responsibility for leadership, and supporting collaboration with appropriate resourcing. These notions of leadership are supported in the community development literature (e.g. Henton, Melville & Walesh, 1997; Langone & Rohs, 1995; Chrislip & Larson, 1994).

Other elements or building blocks for effective school–community partnerships are summarised by Schorr (1997), who found that successful programs: are not mandated by policy but respond to community needs; rely on the community’s own resources and strengths; draw extensively on outside resources for funding, technical expertise and to influence policy; and are based on strong relationships based on mutual trust and respect which are sustained by institutional support. Schorr (1997) also noted that successful school–community partnerships have a long-term orientation and continue to evolve over time. Other factors identified in the literature as influencing the school–community partnership include size of the school and community and proximity of the school to the community, continuity of resources, and the importance of publicity and two-way communication (Carlsmith & Railsback, 2001; CRLRA, 2001; Miller, 1995; Combs & Bailey, 1992).

**Methodology**

The project employed a case study design and qualitative research methodologies based on ethnographic principles. Case studies allow in-depth investigation of inter-related factors and the processes that link and shape them (Burns, 2000). A purposive sampling strategy (Burns, 2000) was used for site and interviewee selection. Sites were selected on the basis of information from expert sources who identified effective rural school–community partnerships known to them. Over 100 schools and communities were nominated. Of these, five were selected. The criteria for selection were diversity in terms of: population size and background of community; degree of remoteness; industry base; school size, type and characteristics, and nature and stage of maturity of the school-community partnership. Interviewees were selected from four groups: students, school
staff including the Principal, parents and other community individuals, and representatives of industry and community groups. Interviewee selection was informed by key informants in the sites (usually the Principal in consultation with other school staff such as the VET Coordinator). Data were collected using three techniques: semi-structured interviews, observation, and documentation, and findings were verified during a return visit to each site.

Table 1: Characteristics of case study sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site/isolation</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>School details</th>
<th>School–community linkages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meander (Tas)</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>Meander Primary School, K–6 89 students</td>
<td>Online access centre\nEnvironment centre\nArts programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walla Walla (NSW)</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>St Paul’s College, Lutheran co-educational boarding school 240 students (80 boarders)</td>
<td>School farm\nEquine centre\nVET in schools\nYouth internship program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cowell (SA)</td>
<td>1241</td>
<td>Cowell Area School, R–12 192 students</td>
<td>School oyster lease\nSchool boarding hostel\nVET in schools\nArts and environment projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooktown (Qld)</td>
<td>3147</td>
<td>Cooktown State School, P–12 420 students (approx 30% Indigenous) Services 5 feeder primary schools</td>
<td>VET in schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret River (WA)</td>
<td>9953</td>
<td>Margaret River Senior High School, Years 8–12 600 students Services 7 primary schools (4 government, 3 private)</td>
<td>School farm, including vineyard\nStructured workplace learning\nSES cadets\nVolunteer reading program\nSchool recycling program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

Most of the school–community partnerships reviewed in this study relate to the planning and implementation of specific programs linking school to community, such as the development of a VET in schools program or a community online access centre or an environmental project. Such partnerships increased the capacity of individuals and communities to influence their own futures. This in no way suggests that ongoing school–community partnerships, such as the sharing of school facilities and resources, are of less importance. In fact, evidence from our case studies suggests strongly that schools which have a balance between specific program linkages and ongoing linkages are well positioned to make extensive contributions to their communities.

Taken together, the findings indicate that school–community partnerships deliver a variety of positive outcomes for youth, and the community. Business and industry benefited from training initiatives for adults as well as youth, for example in agriculture in Walla Walla and through the online access centre in Meander. In Cowell, the school is a major source of skilled young workers in the growing aquaculture industry, while in Margaret River the school and community match business skill needs with school-based training. Improved school retention is a notable outcome in Cooktown, and increased retention of youth in their rural communities is evident in several sites, most notably in Cowell. There are many examples of positive physical and environmental outcomes for communities, such as the outcomes of Meander’s Landcare work, Cowell’s community arts program and mangrove boardwalk, and Margaret River’s recycling program. All the
communities identified cultural and recreational benefits from sharing of physical and human (teacher and student expertise) school resources, and most described economic benefits in terms of the school as a key employer and consumer of local goods and services. These are all examples of the extensive benefits to communities from linkages with schools reported in other studies, such as an enhanced capacity to manage change as a community evolves as a learning community (e.g. Kilpatrick, Bell & Kilpatrick, 2001; Lane & Dorfman 1997; Miller, 1995).

**Effective leadership for school–community partnerships**
The findings from the study clearly illustrate the importance of widespread school and community involvement in the leadership process when implementing school–community partnerships. From each study site there are examples of leadership roles being distributed among people within and external to the schools, and among both formal and informal school and community leaders. Effective leadership of school–community partnerships is not the responsibility of one or several designated ‘leaders’, but is the collective responsibility of the school and community, and depends on the availability and willingness of a wide variety of school and community individuals to involve themselves in the leadership process.

Evidence from each of the study sites indicates that effective leadership for implementing school–community partnerships goes further than involving or consulting with all stakeholders during the decision making process. Rather, it is a collective process during which school and community go about developing and realising shared visions. The project’s findings re leadership have been reported extensively elsewhere (e.g. Johns, forthcoming; Johns, Kilpatrick, Mulford & Falk, 2001).

**Indicators of effective school–community partnerships**
Communities and schools that share the belief that education is the responsibility of the whole community and work together, drawing on skills and knowledge of the community as a whole, experience benefits that extend far beyond producing a well-educated group of young people. Twelve characteristics that are central to the success of school–community partnerships in each of the five study sites were identified. The characteristics, listed below, are largely sequential in that later indicators build on earlier ones.

1. School Principals are committed to fostering increased integration between school and community.
2. School has in-depth knowledge of the community and resources available.
3. School actively seeks opportunities to involve all sectors of the community, including boundary crossers, and those who would not normally have contact with the school.
4. School has a high level of awareness of the value and importance to school–community partnerships of good public relations.
5. School Principals display a transformational leadership style which empowers others within the school and community and facilitates collective visioning.
6. School and community have access to and utilise extensive internal and external networks.
7. School and community share a vision for the future, centred on their youth.
8. School and community are open to new ideas, willing to take risks and willing to mould opportunities to match their vision.

9. School and community together play an active, meaningful and purposeful role in school decision making.

10. School and community value the skills of all in contributing to the learning of all.

11. Leadership for school–community partnerships is seen as the collective responsibility of school and community.

12. School and community both view the school as a learning centre for the whole community, which brings together physical, human and social capital resources.

The project findings clearly show that the level of maturity of the school–community partnership dictates how schools and communities go about developing and sustaining new linkages. For example, key players in the leadership process tend to adopt a more directive and initiating role in developing school–community partnerships in communities which do not have a strong history of working together (that is, in communities at the early stage of developing school–community partnerships), compared with the more facilitative role adopted by key players in schools and communities with well-developed linkages. This indicates that there is no ‘one size fits all’ process for developing effective school–community partnerships. Rather, the leadership process is situational, as Falk and Smith (2003) propose, in that it must take into account issues such as the school’s and community’s history of working together, the availability, capacity and willingness of people to play a role in the leadership process, and the nature of the problem or opportunity that is driving the school–community linkage.

Table 2, which follows, summarises the twelve key characteristics of effective school–community partnerships for each of the five study sites into ten observable indicators. The nature and extent of these indicators differ, according to the level of maturity of the school–community partnership. The table is intended to be read from left to right and from top to bottom, as it represents a continuum of development from early to mature partnerships. Figure 1, which follows Table 2, synthesises material contained in Table 2 and the list of key characteristics presented earlier. It collapses the levels of maturity of the school–community partnership into three broad levels (early, middle and late), and presents a generic model of the relationship between the indicators of effective school–community partnerships and the level of maturity of those partnerships.
Table 2: Indicators of effective school–community partnerships at different levels of maturity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WALLA WALLA</th>
<th>COOKTOWN</th>
<th>COWELL</th>
<th>MARGARET RIVER</th>
<th>MEANDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of maturity of partnership</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early</td>
<td>Early to mid</td>
<td>Mid to late</td>
<td>Late</td>
<td>Mature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initiation of partnership linkages</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All linkages initiated by school</td>
<td>Most linkages initiated by school</td>
<td>Most linkages initiated by community</td>
<td>Linkages initiated equally by school and community</td>
<td>All linkages initiated by community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extent of school’s knowledge and use of community resources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building a knowledge base; uses community resources</td>
<td>Building a knowledge base; uses community resources</td>
<td>Adding to a well established knowledge base; uses community resources</td>
<td>Extensive knowledge base within and outside community; extensive use of community resources</td>
<td>Extensive knowledge base within and outside community; extensive use of community resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Extent of school public relations</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on publicity and marketing external to the community</td>
<td>Focus on publicity, particularly external to community; early stage of developing good public relations within community</td>
<td>Focus on publicity and marketing external to community; developing good public relations within community</td>
<td>High level of publicity and marketing external to community; has developed and continues to build good public relations within community</td>
<td>High level of publicity and marketing external to community; school public relations are subsumed by community public relations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Decision making in school–community partnerships</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision making weighted towards the school</td>
<td>Shared decision making between school and community</td>
<td>Decision making sometimes shared between school and community and sometimes weighted towards community</td>
<td>Decision making sometimes shared between school and community and sometimes weighted towards community</td>
<td>Decision making weighted towards the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Match between level of community empowerment and leadership processes for school–community partnerships</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community used to direction from others; leadership processes for school–community partnerships mirror this</td>
<td>Community starting to take control for own future; leadership processes for school–community partnerships mirror and contribute to community empowerment by building community capacity</td>
<td>Community used to taking control of its own future; inclusive leadership processes for school–community partnerships mirror and contribute to level of community empowerment by developing capacity to establish and utilise</td>
<td>Community controls its own future; leadership processes for school–community partnerships mirror and contribute to level of community empowerment by further developing community capacity</td>
<td>Community controls its own future and is empowered to influence outside authorities; school is integrated into community leadership processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WALLA WALLA</td>
<td>COOKTOWN</td>
<td>COWELL</td>
<td>MARGARET RIVER</td>
<td>MEANDER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>---------</td>
<td>--------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Extent to which vision for school–community partnership is shared</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision still belongs to formal school leaders</td>
<td>Vision newly shared between school and community</td>
<td>Vision shared between school and community</td>
<td>Vision shared between school and community</td>
<td>School is part of the community's vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent to which school–community partnerships exhibit risk taking and ability to mould opportunities</td>
<td>Low level of risk taking and opportunity moulding</td>
<td>High level of risk taking and opportunity moulding</td>
<td>High level of risk taking and opportunity moulding</td>
<td>Medium level of risk taking and opportunity moulding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of community in formal school leadership</td>
<td>School Board representing church, parent and community interests appointed by the church; Appointed Board has total control</td>
<td>No school council so no formal community involvement in school leadership</td>
<td>Inclusive School Council represents interests of all community groups; community Council members elected by parent/community body</td>
<td>Inclusive School Council represents interests of most community groups; community Council members elected by parent/community body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent to which community resources are valued</td>
<td>No evidence at this stage</td>
<td>Some community members see themselves as valuable learning resources</td>
<td>Some community members see themselves as valuable learning resources</td>
<td>Community members see themselves as valuable learning resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extent to which community perceive school as a learning centre</td>
<td>No evidence at this stage</td>
<td>Limited evidence; indications of developing perceptions</td>
<td>Most groups within the community view the school as a learning centre</td>
<td>Certain groups (e.g. business), but not the whole community, view the school as a learning centre*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Most likely because this site has a number of other learning facilities, whereas smaller communities the school is the only learning facility
Some examples
In this section, examples of four of the indicators of effective school–community partnerships from sites exhibiting different stages of partnership maturity, are presented.

Initiation of partnership linkages
All the school–community linkages identified in the project started with the identification of a problem or opportunity for change that impacts on, or is likely to impact on, both school and community. Following this, informal processes come into play in order to mobilise school and community resources to address the problem or opportunity. In sites at the early stages of partnership maturity, all linkages were initiated by the school, with the community figuring more often as partnership maturity increased. In Cooktown (early to mid stage partnership), two teachers had the idea of starting a VET program, and the Principal mobilised school, systemic and community resources to initiate the linkage. In Margaret River (late stage partnership), a business leader and the Principal jointly had the
idea of starting a structured workplace learning program, and worked together to mobilise school and community resources. The opportunity to establish an online access centre in Meander (mature stage partnership) was identified by a parent School Council member who, while the Principal was on leave, prepared the community’s case for the centre to be established in the school.

Public relations
Formal leaders in each of the focal schools, supported by other school staff, display an awareness of the value of public relations as a tool for establishing and promoting school–community partnerships. As noted by Carlsmith and Railsback (2001) and Combs and Bailey (1992), the role of public relations in enhancing the school–community partnership is critical. In the early stage partnerships, public relations concentrated on positive publicity. For example, at Walla Walla (early stage partnership) there was a focus on submitting articles to local media outlets, and regularly participating in activities such as agricultural Field Days. In addition, the Principals in each of the focal schools, along with their staff and with community members (for example, the President of the Parents and Citizens association in Margaret River), valued two-way communication between school and community, and actively sought community input into all aspects of the school’s operation (for example, through School Councils and other school/community groups, and by conducting informal and more formal surveys of community needs and concerns). They targeted specific sectors of the community not usually involved with the school, and set about developing meaningful and purposeful partnerships with them. The targeting of retired citizens for the volunteer reading scheme in Margaret River is a good example of this.

The findings indicated that positive publicity of school–community partnerships builds community pride and identity, and generation of publicity provides further opportunities for school and community to work together, and progress the maturity of the partnership. National recognition was important in confirming the boldness of the initiatives and communities’ ability to determine their own futures, in Cooktown and Cowell (mid stage partnerships) especially. These two communities had not previously seen themselves as national leaders or communities with special skills.

Extent of school’s knowledge and use of community resources
Central to each study site was the view of the community as a resource available to the school. This view was shared by both the school and the community in partnerships at the mid and late stages of maturity. Formal school leaders and school staff in each of the communities had a broad knowledge of the wide range of community resources available, and valued those resources. In Walla Walla, the Principal was deliberately working to expand the school’s already substantial knowledge of community resources by attending meetings of community groups. In Meander, there was a long-standing practice and shared expectation that community members would run the school’s arts program.

Extent to which community resources are valued
Knowing their contributions were valued, acted as an incentive for community members to make further commitments (in terms of time or financial resources) to the school. A good example of this is the commitment made by retired citizens in Margaret River to the volunteer reading program. Formal school leaders and school staff also fostered the development of skills and abilities amongst community members. For example, in Walla
Walla, the Agriculture teacher was responsible for upskilling members of the school’s farm management committee by introducing new ideas and practices. In Cowell (mid to late stage partnership), by building the self-confidence of community members, particularly those from marginalised groups such as the unemployed, the Principal provided opportunities for their skills and talents to be recognised and utilised. Increased skills of community members equate to an increased community capacity to contribute to the school–community partnership, and enable the partnership to progress to higher stages of maturity.

**Conclusions**

Effective schools are those that have the capacity to learn and grow, and to assist in the development of a similar capacity in their communities so that they become learning communities (Yarnit, 2000). The last decade has seen a number of innovative ways in which schools have developed educational opportunities for youth using a whole-of-community approach. As well as giving rise to positive outcomes for youth, school–community partnerships also have the potential to make significant contributions to the economic and social well-being of communities, by building capacity in terms of human and, in particular, social capital. Given that we are facing major changes in trust relations in modern communities, both rural and urban, and given the public nature of schooling that places special responsibilities and obligations on its shoulders with respect to the development of citizens and a more participative democracy, the implications of these contributions for rural community sustainability are of particular importance.

The approach to school–community relationships, however, is crucial to its long-term chances of success. A tactical approach involving a series of tactics or quick fixes, or a strategic approach focusing only on particular areas of weakness and strategies to address these areas, are not as likely to be as successful as ongoing capacity building arising from a sense of shared school–community vision for the future. At the same time, it must be recognised that building of school–community partnerships occurs over time, and leadership processes must acknowledge and build on this. What we seek is a school and community that have a sense of agency; that is, an ability to act purposefully in pursuit of goals, to self-regulate, and to learn and change as and when they decide it is in their collective interests to do so.

**References**


