It takes a village

The notion of the “typical” Australian community is fast becoming an outdated concept. According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 40 per cent of school students in Australia were either born overseas, have parents who were born overseas, or are Aboriginal.
from different backgrounds, and involvement in activities that engage the broader community can build a greater sense of purpose and belonging.

The importance of the early years to educational success has been highlighted in a number of recent studies. A longitudinal study undertaken in the US, Canada and Great Britain by Duncan et al. concluded that pre-literacy skills such as letter recognition, vocabulary and identification of initial and ending sounds were reliable predictors of future academic success (Duncan, et al., 2007). Before any formal schooling is undertaken, children usually acquire knowledge of and interest in these skills from their parents. New research suggests that students who are disadvantaged in this area at age two and three tend to start school behind and the gap between them and their peers is maintained at least through the early years of primary school.

The significance of home influences was clearly demonstrated in the Stronger Families in Australia: the impact of Communities for Children Study (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2011), which found that offering services and programs to support parents to improve the quality of the home learning environment for children before they reach school had positive results. For example, children of mothers without much education registered a statistically significant increase in their receptive vocabulary and verbal ability score as against comparable families who did not have such support.

Establishing links with families and the wider community can be especially important for students from non-English speaking backgrounds. One school that is working hard to engage and nurture its students is Sacred Heart Primary School. Located in the inner-Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy, 95 per cent of Sacred Heart's students have a language background other than English and 96 per cent live in a nearby public high-rise housing estate. The students represent around 15 different language groups with the majority coming from Vietnamese, Chinese or African backgrounds. There are also a high number of refugees. “Forty-five per cent of the African students' families are from a refugee background and the majority are from South Sudan,” explains principal, Mary Lawrey.

The lack of English language skills at home is compounded by the fact that many parents were not literate in their own language when they arrived, and were grappling with differences in cultural expectations and procedures that take time to adjust to. The school recognised that they needed to offer support to the parents in order to help the children make a successful transition to Australian schools, but they had to think carefully about the best approach.

“It was difficult to engage parents with their older children's learning, as literacy and comprehension were difficult for them, and some of them had little experience of formal schooling,” Lawrey says. “We decided that an approach targeting early learning would be the most beneficial, where we would work alongside the parents and model engaging children in activities, which would lay strong foundations for future learning. We felt that the benefits of this engagement would flow through to older children, and that the younger pre-school children would be better prepared for school.”

Lawrey collaborated with Berry Street to introduce parents to the Early Learning is Fun program, which teaches parents to sing, talk, read and play with their children to lay the foundation for later learning. With Berry Street’s support, the school’s Family School Partnership Convenor and Kids Own Publishing ran workshops incorporating hands-on activities that modelled ways to interact with children. Each week, the parents made books to read with their child or took home art and craft work to share and discuss. Together, the parents developed The Book of Sudanese Cows, incorporating pictures of their children and themselves, which was then published. “If English was a barrier, they had a connection with the book and would still be able to talk about the pictures with their child,” Lawrey observes. The book’s text has also been translated into Dinka and Nuer.

Sacred Heart’s approach neatly blends the key elements of school, family and community in involving parents and students in school life in a positive way. The success of the initiative saw further workshops being offered in Term 4 of 2011. “Attendance at these workshops increased to 10 to 12 parents plus children each week, and by working alongside these parents, we are able to model and engage them in issues of parenting, approaches to learning, and different ways of engaging and interacting with their child. We plan to continue these workshops in 2012,” promises Lawrey.

Located little more than seven km from Sacred Heart is St Monica’s Primary School in Footscray. St Monica’s has a long history of catering to new arrivals in Australia, from Irish Catholic migrants through to Greeks and Italians, and more recently Vietnamese. Principal Karen Colla characterises the school community as very supportive. “The parents value education highly and will respect the work that is done,” she explains. As a result, students are generally very compliant, an attribute that is in many ways desirable for educators. With compliance, however, can come a lack of confidence to take risks, and the staff at St Monica’s saw an opportunity to develop their students not only in important areas such as literacy, but also in social and life skills that would help them move away from a “led and fed” experience of learning at school.

With many students starting school with poor English skills – My School data for 2010 records 97 per cent of students with a language
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background other than English – literacy, and particularly oral language skills, has been the priority at St Monica’s for many years. Colla believes that developing spoken and written English is a social justice issue as it allows students to learn on an equal footing. Her passion is shared by school librarian Maggie Catterall. In 2009 after winning a competition, Catterall initiated the development of a school production based around family treasures, especially those that had been brought from overseas. She has since been awarded an Order of Australia medal for service to education as a teacher-librarian, particularly through the development of educational programs and partnerships with schools in Asia.

In 2011, Catterall used Glenda Millard’s book Plum Puddings and Paper Moons, which incorporates themes such as peace and how food draws people together, as the inspiration for a new production. With the author’s permission, she created a simplified version of the book that was sent home with younger students. All the teachers read the story to identify what they could take from it to engage their students and each class then selected a theme. The Prep to Year 4 students worked with word artist Bernie Janssen to create poems and chants and analyse pieces of the text for audience appeal. Teacher and musician Michael Travers was brought in to help the Year 5 and 6 students overcome their nervousness about performing in front of an audience. Students sang in front of the school regularly, and their involvement in music groups at the school such as the band and the choir allowed them to conquer their shyness.

A key strategy of the project was linking learning and activities to a literacy context. Formal, focused literacy lessons were maintained throughout the process to ensure that students continued to get a solid grounding in oral and written English skills. Student voice was also crucial not only to the project’s success, but also in helping students to become more confident in expressing their ideas. Providing an authentic audience outside the classroom was a strong motivator for students to contribute to the shape and content of the final production. The initiative was paired with the school’s social-emotional program, which centres on assisting children to feel more comfortable to interact with the aid of scaffolded support for appropriate responses. Social scripts were used to encourage students to gradually move from making eye contact to being able to reciprocate a morning greeting, which laid the foundations for more meaningful interactions in an educational setting and beyond.

Community engagement was also seen as very important. While supportive of education, parents tended to keep a respectful distance and the school looked to offer opportunities for them to be more actively involved with the school. As in Plum Puddings and Paper Moons, food provided a non-threatening way for shyer parents to make a contribution. Parents got to know each other through activities such as cooking and icing cakes or making banners, and some played guitar or helped to write the songs for the production. Principal Karen Colla says this helped parents “to understand what students have been doing and what good learning looks like, feels like and sounds like.” Students also took the initiative in engaging with the outside world in response to their studies. For example, the Year 2 and 3 students wrote to the Prime Minister and local member Nicola Roxon, both of whom replied, and the local council, to advise them that they wanted to work for peace. This resulted in a visit from the mayor, further extending the students’ knowledge of and involvement with the broader community.

‘The experience culminated in an outdoor performance of the students’ own production based on Plum Puddings and Paper Moons titled I Sing on the Cake. Prior to the concert, the whole community gathered at the school and was led by a parent playing the flute down to a local amphitheatre to watch the students perform. The end result was a testament to the vision and passion of Maggie Catterall and the dedication and support of the other staff.

Undertaking a major project can be daunting for any school, but possibly even more so when language is a potential barrier. In Colla’s experience, you need a person with energy and drive to get an initiative off the ground, backed by a core group of teachers who are on board with the goals and direction of the plan. Most teachers want the best for their students, and it is a fear of not achieving this that can hold some back.

“You need to provide a parachute and a lesson in parachuting,” offers Colla. She also suggests that the school leadership team needs to give permission for a risk to be taken, and then make changes to support what is happening. This might be as simple as ensuring that reports are not due at a critical time in the project or as complex as providing release for professional development or for the team to meet and catch up. Of course, adequate funding helps too.

As our society becomes more disconnected with long work hours and a reliance on technology for communication, schools that are embracing a sense of community can make a real difference to the lives of students and their families. Sacred Heart and St Monica’s are excellent examples of how this approach has helped engage groups that could potentially be cut-off from their children’s education and while the methods were very different, the outcomes show how educators who take the time to consider the unique needs of their schools in context can achieve amazing results that will ultimately benefit our society as a whole.

References

