

Play Ground Partnerships:

Responding to the impact of life outside the school gate.

As classroom teachers, the reality is clear – if it happens at home, it comes to school with the kids: if its' affecting the local community it will be played out in the classroom and school yard. Schools in Victoria's bushfire affected communities will have seen the evidence of this in the wake of our recent catastrophic fire season.

How often as a teacher do you find yourself calming the frayed nerves and frustrated tears of students struggling to understand why a parent has left? Where do you turn when angry outbursts are disrupting your efforts to teach, or a student just seems impossible to engage in activities?

The best response at times is to look beyond the individual student, to look instead to the local community itself to gain an understanding of life outside the school gate and seek the support required to overcome challenges. We would like to offer two case studies to highlight the benefits that can be gained from forging "Playground Partnerships".

In a Primary school on the fringes of suburban Melbourne, a community partnership approach has been tried as a creative response to the trying circumstances experienced by some in the school.

In an area of rapid growth and hidden social disadvantage, some students come from fractured and re-blended families. These students bring with them the confusion, hurt and anger that goes hand in glove with family breakdown, projecting their frustrations into conflictual relationships with their peers and ongoing struggle to concentrate or perform academically. Out of step and overwhelmed, they may act out, disrupting the class and reinforcing their sense of alienation and injustice as they are once again sent to Time Out. When parent/s are called to school to discuss the issue, they too bring the emotional fragility and frustration of not knowing how or when things might change for the better.

Instead of continuing the cycle of misbehaviour and consequence, the Principal chose to support a proactive approach that acknowledged the difficulties confronting these families and to try and direct support towards building skills and ability to cope with the changing circumstances.

The school reached out to the local community, building a partnership with City of Whittlesea Youth Services and with Plenty Valley Family Care, two agencies with strong connection to the local area and a shared commitment to supporting the families to do their best in difficult circumstances. It is a measure of their commitment that both agencies contributed staff time and resources to the initiative as part of their core job duties, with no cost to the school.

Together a plan was developed to increase the collaborative supports available through the school to children and families. The focus was placed on the Gr 5/6 cohort, the point of transition where behaviours were most evident and risk of student disengagement was felt to be highest.

The planned response was threefold: providing staff professional development to enhance understanding and skills in the classroom teachers; directing social and educational support to students; and engaging families experiencing difficulty in parenting education and support services.

Whittlesea Youth Services staff undertook a regular program of classroom activities aimed at helping students in Gr 5/6 to understand the impact of family conflict and breakdown and to learn strategies to communicate the confusion of feelings that arose with this and other life stressors. They worked with students to improve peer relationships in class and in the playground, and helped those students most at risk to link into additional supports.

Plenty Valley Family Care provided parent education forums that were open to all families in the school community, while also pursuing efforts to engage the families of students seen to be most at risk. School leadership, with the SWC and SSSO (Social Worker), worked together with the agency staff, teachers and families to try and ensure that those most in need of support were encouraged to make use of the supports on offer.

Over a twelve month period, there have been some marked improvements evident in the behaviour of students and relationships between students, teachers and families. Feedback from teachers attributes the improvements to a number of factors:

1. The professional development undertaken and the increased discussion among teaching and community agency staff led to a greater awareness of the underlying causes contributing to the challenging behaviours.
2. This same inter-disciplinary exchange led to increased accord and consistency across the staff team in the strategies for communication and management of classroom behaviour.
3. The engagement of Youth Workers in classroom activities with students over an extended period served to build skills, esteem and confidence in students.

In a large inner suburban Melbourne Secondary School, with approximately 80 refugee students, staff noticed that a number of these students were not performing well academically and were attending school less regularly as they moved towards VCE. Some were overrepresented in discipline proceedings.

Many of the schools in the wider Metropolitan area of Melbourne have a number of refugee students in their population. As the Australian Government's Humanitarian Programme has evolved, we have seen different groups arriving in our schools. Some of these students have experienced various levels of trauma, even torture before coming to Australia. Typically, they may have missed out on large amounts of schooling and have moved unpredictably from various countries and areas of asylum to avoid conflict. When they arrive in Australia many of these students have acquired high levels of resilience and adaptability but may find it difficult adjusting to such structured settings as our schools. Classroom teachers may find that for some of these students their experiences can lead to behaviour that is volatile and oppositional.

For other refugees, adjusting to a new country may mean that they appear disengaged in the classroom, and an assessment needs to be made as to how much their behaviour is indicative of

their English language level, difficulty adjusting to a new culture or changed family dynamics, including familial responsibilities. It may also be an indication of post trauma disorder.

With the help of a community organisation supporting young people from the Horn of Africa, this School set up an after school Social group for all Horn of African young people. Supported by a grant from the State Government's 'Turning the Tide' initiative, members of the Community provided mentoring and academic support to the students. Parents of the students were welcomed to the sessions and formed a Steering Committee. As participation grew and school attendance improved they welcomed a Staff member from 'Women's Health in the North' who worked with the school nurse to provide information on reproductive health for the older girls. Staff members from a number of different Faculties joined the after school tutoring with some extra funding from the MIPS programme.

As relationships developed, staff members were in a better position to discuss behavioural concerns with students, to develop individual behaviour and learning plans. Parents who had attended support group spread the word that teachers wanted to work with them and would employ Interpreters. A library of books was set up by Library staff for the students to share. Literacy and Maths support staff developed catch-up programmes for younger siblings. Students confidently interacted with Wellbeing staff and were confident to ask for financial assistance for uniform etc.

Over the last 8 years the school has noticed a considerable difference in the attitude of these students to school. They felt that the School had developed sustainable structures that supported them and their families. Behaviour issues were dealt with sensitively and consistently. Attendance improved and the school started to see these students in Leadership positions.

There are tangible benefits to be gained in Primary and Secondary schools in seeking collaboration with the local community. For teaching and support staff, the growth of understanding about the complex issues confronting some students and the knowledge of partnership support helps to step away from reaction to behaviour, towards a considered response to an individual.

Biography

As D&R School Welfare Support, Deborah and Rob bring over 40 years experience in the delivery of education and support to young people and families. Rob has been working as a qualified social worker since 1984. Deborah has worked in Government Secondary schools in Victoria since 1975. For the last ten years they have been responsible for leading student support teams in Primary and Secondary schools in the Northern Metropolitan Region of Melbourne.