



Australian and International Journal of Rural Education

Building a sense of community belonging: Making mobile families welcome in a rural Australian school

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Abstract

Seasonal farm workers play an important economic role through their contributions to annual harvests and the fact that they spend income in the community where they sojourn. However, research shows that farm workers and other temporary residents are often socially marginalised in rural communities and feel as though they are outsiders who do not belong. This paper reports research that focused on a primary school in a rural community in Australia, where seasonal mobile farm workers arrived for the annual harvest. Using a single case study design, the research demonstrated that the school made a deliberate attempt to welcome newly-arrived students and their families into the school community. Using a whole school strategy, the school staff aimed to meet families' and students' social needs, thereby building a sound foundation for the academic work of schooling. However, the data and data analysis also suggested that the school's strategy was helping to work against the deficit discourses that operated in the broader community, thus demonstrating the school's role as a hub for the community's socio-educational development.

Keywords: mobility, rural schooling, literacy education, transition, belonging

Introduction

In many rural locations in Australia, seasonal farm workers play an important economic role. Their labour contributions to harvests, along with the money that they spend in the communities where they reside temporarily, enable farming communities to function economically for at least part of the year. This is particularly the case in communities where “rural poverty” (Alston, 2000, p. 29) is an issue, because an annual economic boost to a community can be instrumental in helping to prevent community collapse, loss of infrastructure, the loss of jobs and the outward drift of families (Alston, 2000, 2004; Davis & Bartlett, 2008)—what Alston (2000) referred to as “community decline that is slowly reducing many rural towns to ghost towns” (p. 31).

However, research shows that mobile farm workers and other temporary residents, along with culturally and/or linguistically diverse groups who have settled in rural areas, are often marginalised and sometimes feel as though they are outsiders who do not belong (Davis & Bartlett, 2008; Henderson, 2005; Henderson & Gouwens, 2013; Kenny & Binchy, 2009; Remy Leder, 2009). As Maclellan and Mares (2006) suggested, for some mobile groups the lure of “the three Es: education, employment and enjoyment” can end up being “the three Ds—jobs that are dirty, difficult and dangerous” (p. 137).

While such tensions sometimes lead to negative experiences for mobile farm workers, the research reported here relates to families with children and focuses on the ways that mainstream schooling is able to cater for the children of mobile workers. The research set out deliberately to examine a school that had developed a reputation for positive action in relation to mobile families and was reportedly making mobile families and their children feel welcome. The article begins by locating the current research in the context of previous research and its findings. It

then describes the single case study that is the focus of this article and presents data and data analysis from that case study. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications for schooling more broadly.

Contextualising research on family mobility

Historically, many people with mobile or itinerant lifestyles have been ostracised and in some cases persecuted; yet there is also evidence that some mobile groups have been represented as exotic (Danaher, Moriarty, & Danaher, 2009; Henderson, 2005). With the increasing population mobility that is apparent today, reactions and responses to mobility can range from an appreciation of the apparent glamour of those who are able to ‘jet set’ across the world to a reproach of refugees and the homeless (Danaher et al., 2009). In light of such “unresolved uncertainties” about mobility (Henderson & Danaher, 2012, p. 360) and evidence that many families with school-aged children move locations in many parts of the world—including England (e.g., Bhopal & Myers, 2009), Spain (e.g., Souto-Otero, 2009), Ireland (e.g., Kenny & Binchy, 2009), the US (e.g., Henderson & Gouwens, 2013) and Australia (e.g., Bampton, Daniel, Dempster, & Simons, 2008)—it seems timely to consider what happens with regards to schooling for children from mobile families.

Over many years, my research has investigated the (English) literacy learning of mobile farm workers’ children in Australia (Henderson, 2001, 2004, 2005, 2009; Henderson & Woods, 2012), thus considering the nexus of school literacy education with student mobility in rural contexts. This research has indicated that deficit discourses about mobile farm workers and their families are often the dominant discourses that circulate in rural schools and communities. Yet research has also indicated that the rural itself is “often associated with negative qualities—with lack and lag, with ‘backwardness,’ ‘inefficiency,’ ‘lack of progress’” (Donehower, Hogg, & Schell, 2012, p. 4). Such findings indicate the complexities and “complicated histories” of rural locations (Donehower et al., 2012, p. 5; see also Downes & Roberts, 2015; Roberts & Downes, 2016).

From an educational point of view, the prevalence of deficit discourses is troubling. This is because the implication of these discourses appears to be that mobile families are identified as a “problem” for schools and “the solution” is often seen as a compensatory approach that tries “to make up for what they lack” (Gale & Densmore, 2002, p. 14; Henderson, 2009). In other words, the social and discursive constructions of mobile people impact on the perceptions of those working in schools and ultimately these perceptions can influence teachers’ pedagogical approaches.

Research on student diversity, however, has demonstrated that students’ strengths are sometimes invisible in school contexts (Henderson & Woods, 2012; Malin, 1990; Thomson, 2002). As González, Moll and Amanti (2005b) emphasised, it is important that it be recognised that “people are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (pp. ix–x). From this perspective, it becomes evident that the actions, characteristics and literacies of families and their children are not necessarily the same as the ones valued in school contexts.

According to Purcell-Gates (2007), students bring “different languages, cultural experiences, and literacy practices with them to the classroom” (p. 11). St John, Griffith and Allen-Haynes (1997) argued that if teachers take the time to listen to students and parents and to reflect on what they say, then it is possible to start thinking about “building community within schools” (p. 19) and to begin constructing “new possibilities” for schools (p. 22). Such practices are aimed at avoiding the exclusion that can sometimes occur. As Youngblood Jackson’s (2010) research identified, schooling can act as “a structure of exclusion,” even when a school’s practices might

seem “safe, caring, and family-like” (p. 90). Knowing about “funds of knowledge” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005a, p. 5; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzales, 1992) and using that information to foster learning that is relevant to students’ lives provide a potential key for engaging students in school learning (González, 2005; Kersten, 2007; Purcell-Gates, 2007).

Furthermore, Gee’s (1996) notion of capital D Discourses acknowledges that joining a new social group requires learning the “ways of being in the world” (p. viii) that are accepted and taken-for-granted by that group. In other words, the “ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing” of a group mark people as either insiders or outsiders (p. viii; see also Henderson & Gouwens, 2013). As Gee pointed out, Discourses can help us to understand why some students arrive at school with a range of knowledges and strengths, yet they do not necessarily experience success in the school context.

Gee’s (1996) ideas about insiders and outsiders also raise the issue of belonging, which is generally regarded as essential to people’s sense of well-being (Gustafson, 2009). Belonging, however, has been viewed in different ways. It has been seen as having connections to time, place and space (Gustafson, 2009; Lovell, 1998), but it has also been identified as a visceral experience, incorporating embodied, relational and affective elements (de Jong, 2015). In this study, with its focus on mobile families, belonging was considered in relation to the building of social bonds in the location where the families resided temporarily.

Additionally, research has indicated that collaboration between families and schools can play a significant role in the schooling of children. As highlighted by Butera and Humphreys Costello (2010), parental involvement in schools can impact positively on children’s academic outcomes. These concepts then—funds of knowledge, Discourses, belonging and collaboration—are useful for thinking about particular social groups, such as mobile families, and their experiences at a new school.

The study

This article reports on research that was conducted in a primary school located in a rural community in the north of Queensland. The school seemed to have a reputation for being skilled at catering for mobile students. Historically, all four schools in the area experienced an influx of students during the harvesting season, when mobile farm workers and their families arrived in the town. However, over recent years, the number of mobile farm workers’ children enrolling at the school had decreased, most likely due to the growing mechanisation of harvesting and the skyrocketing prices of fuel and other travel costs. Nevertheless, the student population at the school always seemed to be in flux. Families and students were on the move for a range of different reasons, including relocating for occupational reasons, finding affordable housing, or exercising parental choice about where children should attend school. In addition, approximately 17% of the school’s students were Indigenous and the principal identified those students as being highly mobile.

The research was focused on an overarching question that asked: What was the school doing in relation to mobile students and families? This question was deliberately open-ended, in order to gain a holistic picture of the school’s actions to encourage mobile students and their families and to enhance the students’ learning. With university ethical clearance and permission from the education system to conduct research in the school, the study used a case study design. This offered the potential for deep understandings through detailed and rich data (Flyvbjerg, 2011).

The school was of particular interest, because it had a reputation for working well with mobile students and their families. Indeed, over just a few years, the school’s student population had

doubled in size to approximately 400 students. Although this was partly due to a new housing area near the school, the school's reputation seemed to attract mobile families as well as students from other schools in the district. An exploration of the school's practices offered the opportunity to find a "wealth of information" (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 308) about the school's aims and actions in catering for mobile students and working with families new to the rural community.

Data were collected at the school through a range of ethnographic methods over a period of several weeks. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the principal, deputy principal and classroom teachers (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). I observed teachers working with students, including mobile students, in classrooms, and I also observed interactions between school staff and students in the school grounds. I also engaged in informal discussions with teachers and other school staff before school, in break times and after school. I kept anecdotal records of my observations and conversations. In addition, I collected a range of school artefacts, including the school's annual report. Although I did not set out to collect classroom artefacts, in many cases teachers shared artefacts with me.

It became apparent during data collection that the principal and deputy principal wanted the school to make a concerted effort to invite parents—those permanently settled in the community as well as those residing there temporarily—into the school. They wanted to make the school a welcoming place for the many mobile families who continued to arrive in the town. This paper, then, answers two more specific questions that arose from the original research question and the data collection that occurred:

- How did the teachers in the school translate the overall aims of the principal and deputy principal into their classroom practice?
- And did these strategies, at both whole school and classroom levels, seem to be effective in building school-community relationships?

I theorised the study and analysed data using Fairclough's (2001) text-interaction-context model, as is shown in Figure 1. This model was useful, because it enabled a mapping of contextual factors, including the broader community, the school and the education system, along with the interactions that occurred in the school, such as the interactions between students and teachers in classrooms and the research conversations that resulted. The text aspect of the model comprised the research texts that were produced (i.e., the interviews and their transcripts; anecdotal records of classroom observations) and some school artefacts, such as the school's annual report.

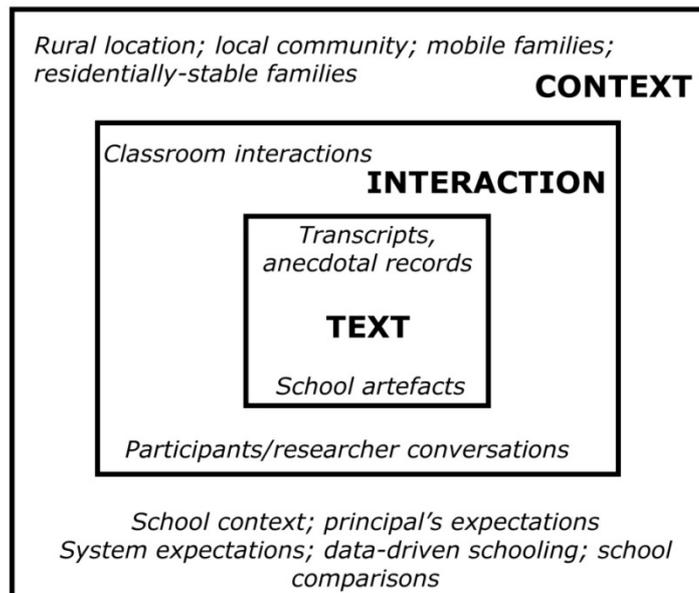


Figure 1: Using Fairclough's (2001) text-interaction-context model to frame the study

The school's intentions

Interviews with the principal and the deputy principal highlighted their intentions for the school to engage with parents, regardless of whether they were from families who were residentially-stable in the community or whether the families' stay was temporary. The principal acknowledged the change in the school's size, from what was a relatively small school to one that was quite large. However, she stated proudly that:

I think that we're still a small school attitude with a bigger school setting. We seem to have the grounds that are welcoming and calm and enjoyable, and then I try and set that culture and tone by being welcoming and supportive and listening and having an open door policy.

In explaining school enrolment patterns and trends, the principal reported that approximately 160 new students had enrolled at the school over a two-year period. However, 87% of those students had left again within that timeframe. According to the principal, this "coming and going" had been instrumental in making the school staff reflect on their practices and how they could best cater for such a mobile population.

Making families welcome was prioritised in the principal's agenda for the school. She made it clear that the school must "acknowledge and value the role that families perform as the child's first teacher." She wanted the school to be "people friendly," because "I think that what they [parents] seek is for their child to be happy and go happily and willingly to school, and that's built on the relationships that the teachers build with the kids." In a separate interview, the deputy principal indicated his support for that agenda, because "that then flows on into the students – that they see a happy staff, they see a friendly staff, they feel welcome."

The principal emphasised, however, that the school's approach was about making sure that parents were welcome, felt comfortable in the school environment and thought that they were involved in the operations of the school. Nevertheless, she was adamant that the school did not simply do as parents wanted:

So those are all things that parents like. I do promise them that if they see me I will always follow up. It doesn't mean that I do what they want, but I will always follow up. I will always investigate. I will always listen to their concerns about children.

The deputy principal informed me that making children and their families welcome in the school was a deliberate plan to meet the academic requirements of schooling, not just the social. He talked about the children and the parents:

Because if you get them happy in that respect the academic bit will follow. Because if they're not happy here, then they're not going to achieve. If you can get them happy here, then you're half the way to getting them to achieve academically ... And the parents are the same. If a new family comes in, we're both out there welcoming them. We take them for a walk around the school. We show them around. We introduce them to the teacher. We show the kids where everything is and that's before they're even enrolled. So we make that effort at the start to make it known that, hey, we are the face of the school.

Enacting the intentions

My observations in the school indicated that the principal and the deputy principal 'walked the talk' that they had shared with me. Each day one of them was near the school gate before school, as students were arriving, and after school. This meant that they were communicating with parents face-to-face on a regular basis, talking with students and their families and ensuring that they felt welcome at the school.

When a new student arrived, either the principal or the deputy principal made sure that they personally provided a tour of the school, introducing the student and the family to the teacher and ensuring that the family was able to navigate the school environment. Additionally, as the deputy principal explained:

And usually if it's someone new, their mum or dad or whoever is looking after them will pick them up from just outside the (classroom) door on the first day. So I usually go out and sort of discuss with them how the day went and explain, you know, if there's anything with the homework, and I've got a note in there for you and a reader for them to read and sort of try to make that. Because I'm usually seeing them in the beginning of the day and I just like to touch base at the end of that first day.

It seemed that, at school level, the focus was on building social relationships with families, as a prior step to focusing on academic achievement. This practice was paralleled at classroom level, where the teachers used buddy arrangements as a way of ensuring that a new student learnt about the layout and routines of the school and made friends as quickly as possible. As one of the teachers explained:

I always buddy them up with somebody, always make sure they know where the toilets are and all of that and include them in conversations with anyone and make them feel good and then ease off so that they are not the new person.

Buddying, especially buddying a new student with one who was regarded as "a sensible, reliable, popular student" (teacher interview) seemed to be one of the first strategies that all of the teachers used to settle students into their new class and school. It was seen as a strategy that helped new students to "learn the routines of the classroom and also the routines of the school" (deputy principal interview). According to one teacher, "making new friends ... is the biggest challenge" for new students and assisting them to "fit in" socially was important. Many of the

teachers indicated that they selected “students who are liked by many and have a wide friendship group” as buddies, as that was a fairly efficient way of assisting new students to “sort of windup in a friendship group.”

The teachers emphasised that there was a need to help families make links between their old school and their new school. For example, one teacher talked about the importance of making sure that all teachers:

encourage the parents to bring in what they have; don't buy new books; just bring what they've got from their previous school ... so you get to see (work) samples straight away ... and spend time with that child and just have a casual chat, talk to them at lunch, position yourself in the classroom near them when they are doing their work.

Although this was a money-saving exercise for parents, it also facilitated the process of teachers getting to know their new students. Indeed, the teachers appeared proactive in valuing what families brought to the school context and they talked about the advantages of the parents spending time in the school and classrooms. One of the teachers pointed out that:

The more interest they [parents] show at school, the more they're here seeing what we do, the more they've got to converse about at home, the more strategies they're aware of, the more they know their children's friends. Like there's a lot of benefits in coming.

Additionally, some of the teachers talked about building relationships between the school and parents and about the importance of parents feeling as though they were part of the team that was educating their child. One teacher emphasised the necessity for teachers to respect parents, because “they’re actually on the team and their contribution is valuable.” In her classroom, parents were “welcome at any time.” When the parents spoke English as an additional language, she found that it was helpful to give them the opportunity to use their home language for some literacy learning tasks with their children. She provided parents with guidance about when to use English and when to use the home language as part of homework. For example, when talking with parents whose home language was Turkish, she said:

It's okay to talk about this book in Turkish, because it's the conversation and the background knowledge that we need ... It's fine to do the chatting in Turkish ... It's fine to speak in both languages.

It was apparent in such situations that the students’ home practices were valued and woven into the ways that learning tasks could be done. Other teachers also noted how essential it was to understand families’ access to digital technology and to books, as knowing about how children developed basic skills was important information. One teacher said:

Well, sometimes they have the digital world, like they have the internet; some are wirelessly connected with everything ... sometimes they don't have the books and whatever, but they've already got their basic skills through other means.

It was clear, however, that teachers worked on many fronts to move students quickly into school learning. For teachers, the immediate focus was on the social aspects of moving into a new school. As one teacher explained, it is important to ensure that “the social stuff” is in place, as “they’ve got to trust us as a school.” However, she also explained that the academic component of schooling also needed to be a focus. Another teacher noted that:

After their emotional needs have been met then I see where they are with their academic work, get to parents find out where they come from, what kind of education had they had before they came to us. Is there anything that I needed to know about them?

One strategy that the teachers used was what they referred to as “fast assessments” of students’ academic levels. They did this so that they could make decisions about where to pitch learning initially and what groups to place students into. According to one of the teachers:

I like to do an initial quick assessment ... then I’ll continually monitor ... sometimes you might think they don’t know a lot and it’s just nerves and they need to settle in ... but sometimes an alarm bell rings, then I talk with learning support.

It became obvious that the teachers’ actions across classes were similar. They worked together and with ancillary staff to ensure a whole school approach to the transition of students into a new school. Additionally, the teachers did their planning in groups—early years, middle years and upper years—and non-contact time for teachers was organised so that this was possible. As one of the early childhood teachers explained:

There is a benefit that we now plan together, that we’re given non-contact time to plan together, so we’re all thinking, so we’re all sharing ... and working it out together.

For the teachers, the shared planning was a form of professional learning. Several teachers acknowledged the usefulness of talking about students’ work samples and coming to shared understandings about achievement levels.

The school’s strategic approach

What became evident during the research was that all staff in the school had discussed and agreed on approaches that would assist new students and their families to move into the school. It was also obvious that the principal and deputy principal, as the school leaders, modelled what they regarded as effective practice and worked on similar strategies to the ones used by the teachers in classrooms. Indeed, the deputy principal had stated explicitly that “we are the face of the school,” a role that they took seriously.

While such cohesion in the actions of school staff might seem strange or unusual, the school community was a fairly stable one. The majority of the teachers had been at the school for many years. Indeed, some of the teachers had grown up in the area and some had even attended the school when they were children. Like the principal and deputy principal, the teachers seemed to have a vested interest in the school’s success. In addition, the school had maintained a single staff room for all staff and it was evident that the whole school staff were used to meeting regularly before and after school, as well as during break times, unless they were doing playground duty. This seemed to support the cohesive approach that was evident.

The research data demonstrated that school personnel were intent on making sure that students and families felt a sense of belonging in the school. There certainly seemed to be an understanding by the school staff that students would not perform to their academic best unless they regarded themselves as members of the social milieu of the school. Parents too were invited to join the school community and school staff made that invitation on a daily basis.

The teachers’ actions seemed to focus on building connections to place—the school (Lovell, 1998). At the same time, the teachers were trying to help families and their children build social bonds with members of the school community while ensuring that families experienced and felt

a sense of belonging, reflective of the visceral experience suggested by de Jong (2015). All school staff were engaging in listening to parents. However, as stated earlier, the principal made it clear that parents were listened to and issues were investigated, but the school reserved the right to make what it regarded as the most educationally sound decision.

Although the teaching staff did not talk about any theoretical or research foundations to support their actions, it seemed that their ideas were founded on similar reasoning to that identified in the work of González, Moll and Amanti (2005c). Families were seen as having strengths, knowledges and skills, although these were not necessarily the ones that ensured success at school. By encouraging families into the school grounds and classrooms and engaging in discussions, the staff was helping to make families' cultural and linguistic strengths visible. In allowing students to use notebooks from previous schools, teachers were making visible students' school lives in other locations. In effect, this was enabling the teachers to gain insights into what students knew and could do, thus helping them to design appropriate learning opportunities and to meet students' learning needs more quickly than they would have otherwise.

Making families welcome in the school and helping them to feel a sense of belonging, however, were only part of the school's strategy. It was also evident that the school wanted families to become insiders, rather than to remain as outsiders to the school's practices (Gee, 1996). The school's ways of 'doing' education were made visible to families, through simple strategies like giving them a tour of the school grounds and letting them become part of daily school events. As a result, the families had opportunities to learn how to become insiders in the Discourse of the school. As Gee (1996) highlighted, taking up a Discourse relies on getting the 'saying' and the 'doing' right (p. viii). The emphasis on social aspects of schooling, therefore, seemed to be an effective way of building understandings about school practices and enabling new students and families to learn the social and cultural practices of the school's particular ways of doing, being and knowing.

The school's approach demonstrated action on many fronts. The principal was very keen to talk about some of the additional projects that the school had put in place. These included parent training programs, which seemed part of the school's attempts to build a sense of belonging. By acculturating parents into the practices of the school, this was seen as a way of helping parents feel as though they could achieve insider status. Another of the deliberate actions was the employment of diverse role models within the school. The principal explained that "one of our teacher aides has a physical disability" and "we've even got the chaplain in working with kids so that they see a male reading." The visibility of diversity was seen as a positive that encouraged students to "have a go."

Conclusion

The single case study described in this article highlights the way that one primary school in a rural area set out to welcome families, particularly mobile families who were not permanent residents of the community, into the school context. The school staff had set out to ensure that their way of working and encouraging families to participate in the school would help new students to fit into the school community and, ultimately, to achieve both social and academic success. The school's approach was focused on how to improve schooling for new students, as mobility was a feature of the school population as well as the community more generally. In particular, the school set out to ensure that students settled socially into the school, then to work on their academic abilities.

One of the successes of the school's approach seemed to be that it focused on whole families, rather than just on the students who enrolled at the school. In fact, the school staff made sure that parents felt welcome in the school context and experienced a sense of belonging, while doing the same for the students. It was evident that, through this approach, family diversity was valued. At the same time, the school ensured that diversity was visible. The school's attention to, and embracing of, diversity seemed particularly important in the community context where the school was located. Indeed, the school was located in a community where deficit discourses circulated about families who moved temporarily into the area. Despite this, however, my observations suggested that deficit discourses were not evident in the talk of the school's staff. Since research has indicated that discourses that circulate in communities are often reflected in the discourses in school contexts (Henderson, 2001, 2008, 2009), it appeared that the school was achieving success at pushing against dominant deficit discourses, by building relationships between the school and community members, regardless of whether they were permanent or temporary residents.

Sometimes Fairclough's (2001) context-interaction-text model is used to map the contextual constraints that impact on what is said and done in particular contexts. However, the case study presented here demonstrates that action within the school—evident in what was said and done—was working at pushing outwards towards the broader community context. Instead of the community discourses constraining the school's actions, the school was extending its influence into the community and offering alternative discourses to the prevalent deficit discourses that circulated widely. It did this by encouraging students' families to join the school community, thereby fostering and enabling more positive stories about family diversity, including the mobile families who attended the school for variable lengths of time.

These enabling practices were evidence of the school's role as a hub for the community's socio-educational development. Through fostering school-family relationships, the school's actions had the potential to influence the relationships amongst the school, the families and the rural community more generally. Although the aim of the school's practices was to ensure students' engagement in learning through the participation of mobile families in schooling and building a sense of belonging in the school context, the approach offered more extensive possibilities. With the physical movement of families between the school and the community beyond the school fence, both temporary and residentially-stable community members were ensuring the flow of ideas between contexts. In effect, the school was offering a form of education to the community at large.

One of the limitations of the study was that it focused only on the perspectives of the school principal, deputy principal and classroom teachers. Neither the views of the children nor their parents were sought. Nevertheless, this single case study has provided evidence of how positive moves might be made to work towards the socio-educational development of a community. Without the continuing flow of people through the community, it was unlikely that the community would be able to survive economically in the long term. The school's actions were helping to build positive relationships, thus helping to maintain both social and economic benefits for the school and its community and providing an educational focus that extended beyond the school context. This "thinking beyond the school," to borrow the words of Bill Green (2015, p. 45), is the type of action that has the potential to make a difference to a community.

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