

# Community Connection and Change: A different conceptualisation of school leadership

## Abstract

*Many of our schools are situated in communities characterised by high levels of disadvantage, presenting a range of challenges. One possible response is to acknowledge this disadvantage and to try to address some of the problems it raises for students. Another is for the school to be proactive, recognising the challenges faced by the community and taking a lead in bringing about change. Part of a larger research project, this paper explores the extraordinary leadership role of Prospect Road State School (a pseudonym) in bringing change to a multiply disadvantaged community through collaborative action with other agencies and creative approaches to bringing people together. This school's experiences and achievement illustrate what may be possible when school leadership proactively sets out to improve a community described by the principal as being 'in crisis'. The experiences explored indicate ways of rethinking the relationship between school and disadvantaged community – of working synergistically with others to make a significant difference.*

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## Introduction

This article explores changing dynamics in the relationship between a school and its community – in the context of disadvantage. Drawing on a larger study, it focuses on the experience of a state primary school in Queensland, Australia, that engaged with a school revitalisation project known as IDEAS<sup>1</sup> (Crowther, 1999; Crowther, Andrews, Dawson, & Lewis, 2001). One of the major components of this project is a conceptual understanding of leadership known as 'parallel leadership', defined as:

...a process whereby teacher teachers and their principals engage in collective action to build school capacity. It embodies mutual respect, shared purpose, and allowance for individual action (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002, p.38)

The dynamics of parallel leadership *within* the school is not the focus of this article. Instead it illustrates how a leadership team was able to take their conceptual understanding beyond the boundaries of the school, engaging with others to bring about change. It explores how shared responsibility and collective action, based on mutualism, shared purpose and the utilisation of individual skills and beliefs, was used by the leadership team at Prospect Road State School<sup>2</sup> to bring change to a community described by the principal as being in crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> *Innovative Designs for Enhancing Achievement in Schools*

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms are used to ensure confidentiality.

Community capacity building was activated by the principal and others taking on the role of advocate and catalyst for change.

## **The context of the research**

What began as an exploration of how teachers engaged in school revitalisation can create new knowledge in the form of a contextualised pedagogical framework (Lewis, 2003), developed into an inquiry on how teachers implement the framework they have created both in their classroom practice and collaborative action (Lewis, 2005, 2006; Lewis & Andrews, 2007). The research reported in this article built on those earlier studies, exploring what may be achieved by IDEAS schools in communities characterised by a high level of social and economic disadvantage. One area of the inquiry explored the development of different relationships between the school and its community. This emerged as the key aspect of the inquiry for Prospect Road State School, the outer-metropolitan state primary school in Queensland, Australia where the school transformed the relationship between school and community.

In Australia and New Zealand (as elsewhere) there is increasing recognition of the importance of schools building partnerships with their communities (e.g. Brooking & Roberts, 2007; South Australian DECS nd), including moving beyond the traditional boundaries of the school to build new and different connections (e.g. Bull, Brooking, & Campbell, 2008; DETA: Queensland nd; Tuck, Horgan, Franich, & Wards, 2008). This is particularly significant where communities are characterised by disadvantage. The experiences of Prospect Road, while not presented as typical, illustrate what can be achieved when the relationship between school and disadvantaged community is redefined.

## **Background to the Study**

Many schools in Australia, as elsewhere, are facing complex challenges. Education is seen as the key to national economic and social progress (Johnson, 2001) and schools are expected to prepare their increasingly diverse student cohorts for success in a rapidly changing world. There is a growing expectation that what students learn at school, and the attitudes they develop towards ongoing learning, will have a significant influence on their options in life and how they are able to shape their futures. There are tensions between these expectations, particularly in the context of disadvantage. Challenges of such magnitude can be overwhelming as teachers struggle to find ways to do things differently.

Many schools in Australia, as elsewhere, are situated in communities characterised by multiple disadvantage (Australia Fair, 2006), resulting in varying degrees of social exclusion (CHASE, nd; Mission Australia, 2002). Social exclusion refers to a range of interconnected social problems and, importantly, may have a spatial dimension, where people are concentrated into particular areas because of economic pressures (Mission Australia, 2002). As Atkinson and Willis (nd) point out:

Often these have a geography to them, such as housing estates where the housing system filters off less well-off residents into dwellings which may be isolated or poor quality and lead to secondary problems.

These 'spatial' differences where disadvantage is focused in a local area can have an important impact on child social exclusion (Harding, Mcnamara, Tanton, Daly, & Yap, 2006). One possible response for schools in such areas is to acknowledge the disadvantage and try to address some of the problems it raises for students. Another is for the school to be proactive and take a lead in community change. Both indicate ways of rethinking the

relationship between school and disadvantaged community – of working synergistically with others to make a significant difference.

A number of researchers have investigated the approaches used by schools to generate improved student learning outcomes in low socio-economic areas (Grant, Badger, Wilkinson, Rogers, & Munt, 2003; Mellor & Corrigan, 2004.; Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). While it is acknowledged that there is no single blueprint for improved school effectiveness and that schools need to undergo an improvement process that responds to their community's unique characteristics (Black, 2006; Harris & Thompson, 2006) their findings reveal some common themes. Grant et al. (2003) name six key elements of effective practice in disadvantaged school: productive ways of understanding issues of disadvantage; contemporary constructions of literacy and numeracy; difference and diversity as productive resources in schools; developing a productive whole school response; developing productive programs and pedagogies; and sustaining improvement. Muijs et al. (2004), identify a range of positive strategies leading to better learning outcomes and sustained improvement despite significant contextual challenges. This includes developing shared school leadership; creating a positive school culture, a focus on teaching and learning; building a learning community; continuous professional development, creating an information-rich environment and external support. Harris and Thompson (2006) emphasise the importance of a cohesive staff, committed to the view that all students can learn. Such a staff can generate 'energizing beliefs' (Grant et al., 2003) that sustain commitment, despite difficult circumstances and ongoing challenges, generating a culture that nurtures potential. Other clear themes are the importance of raising student achievement through quality pedagogy, high expectations and collaborative effort.

The research outlined above is significant and presents a picture of positive processes and strategies that can be used *within* the school to improve student learning outcomes. It is increasingly clear that while school communities may be characterised by disadvantage, schools can work in ways that can positively impact on student success. The focus of this article goes beyond this. It is concerned with how such approaches may be enhanced by a parallel (yet interconnecting) process of community change. Tentatively, it is suggested redefining the role of the school (its 'place') in the community has implications for both community and student – because they are interwoven. At the very least, the experiences at Prospect Road State indicate the value of further inquiry into this relationship.

## **Prospect Road State School**

Against a background of rapid change and increasing expectations about what schooling can (or should) achieve, schools are facing complex challenges. For those schools situated in communities characterised by a high level of disadvantage, the challenge is compounded. The experiences and achievements of Prospect Road State School illustrate what may be possible when school leadership proactively sets out to bring change to a community through collaborative action with other agencies and creative approaches to bringing people together. Prospect Road is a suburb of the Queensland state capital, an industrial area on the city fringes. What follows is a brief snapshot of the suburb in 2002, too set the scene for the change which followed.

### **Prospect Road: A snapshot**

As a suburb, Prospect Road has significant numbers of Pacific Islander and Vietnamese people, along with Indigenous and Anglo-Australian populations. Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001), indicated that 39.5% of the population were under 15 year old, 38% were

born overseas, 28% spoke languages other than English, and 8.6 % of the population were Indigenous. ABS statistics also indicated that as a suburb Prospect Road was characterised by disadvantage in terms of low income, low levels of educational attainment, low occupational skill levels, and high rates of unemployment. This is significant:

Many aspects of disadvantage go hand in hand...those experiencing multiple disadvantage have poor outcomes across a range of dimensions of life...Multiple disadvantage can be perpetuated across generations. [It] can also lead to exclusion from society and lack of access to goods, services, activities and resources (ABS, 2004)

Unusual, perhaps, given these statistics, was the absence of agency and outreach services. While suburbs in relatively close proximity were well serviced in this way, Prospect Road was not. Despite being bound by three highways, it was difficult to access, relatively isolated and with limited transport options. This was a significant factor as transport disadvantage can be related to social exclusion – where people are not able to fully participate in society, for example, because of difficulties in gaining access to social and community services. (Dodson, Gleeson, & Sipe, 2004).

Described as the ‘second most disadvantaged non-indigenous community in Queensland’ (Manager, Community Renewal at Prospect Road) this suburb consists of approximately 600 houses, a high proportion of which are public housing or rented – accommodating a somewhat transient population. Here is evidence that with the rising prices of inner city areas, lower socio-economic and disadvantaged populations have tended to move to outer-urban areas – concentrating families with high support needs.

Why? The great sieving process I think. This would be the shortest waiting list for public housing, the least desirable public housing, so the most needy come here... more often than not you would see family next to family next to family all of whom would have high support needs. Regularly they didn’t get on. When I came here there was an awful lot of fighting between families – huge conflict between families in the school (Principal - MB)

In 2002, the Principal of Prospect Road State School perceived that the community was ‘in crisis’ with ‘no services’ and ‘neglected by governments at all levels’ It was ‘a community where all the social ills can be seen simply by walking around...Poverty is the major factor’. She perceived that there were barriers everywhere – and that these needed to be addressed. Vinson (2004) argues that where there is a concentration of disadvantage, locality specific measures may be needed to supplement general social policy and that strengthening the connectedness or social cohesion of a disadvantaged community is an integral part of renewing the life opportunities of people (Vinson, 2004, p15). Vinson observed that some communities burdened by disadvantage appear more resilient than others in overcoming adversities and that a community’s internal relations can play a significant part in shaping its wellbeing.

What follows is an account of how the school, particularly through the leadership of the principal, prompted a move along the continuum from social exclusion to social cohesion – by working with others to bring services into the suburb and by bringing people together.

### **Initiating the Links: The Story from the Leadership Team<sup>3</sup>**

Going back to 2002 –the staff at Prospect Road State School had concerns about ‘a whole raft of issues’ proving difficult to resolve. The principal recognised that there must be a range of agencies working on parts of these issues:

... but it was difficult to find out how to connect with them, to identify the key players and work with multiple layers of leadership...But, when you ask enough questions...you find a few people who are like-minded, or who have similar need to progress their agendas (Principal, MB).

Taking early steps, the principal and deputy started talking with people in a project operating in a nearby suburb – this was the *Pathways to Prevention* project (Griffith University and Mission Australia), an early intervention strategy. They also started to talk with people from other departments and agencies – all those who might be talking about how awful it was in Prospect Road because of lack of services and lack of progress – and then made the effort to bring those people together.

A significant step was the decision to bring the community together through holding a community festival at the school:

...and then we decided on the festival – a party...a local market place where agencies could start to show their wares and start to talk about what they do...we got in the jugglers and the acrobats, a few rides and some food and it was hugely successful... beyond our wildest dreams the number of people that turned up [about 600]. We had the table where you got feedback, where you asked questions, where we got some ideas from the community about what they needs were. We had some roving reporters (Principal: MB).

As well as bringing the community together, for family recreation at no cost, that first festival provided a way of linking the community with a range of agencies in a positive and happy environment. This was an important exercise in relationship building, allowing the community to see people from the various agencies, in a different way, “...as part of a community of workers and helpers” (Principal, MB). This was important because there of the lack of ‘shop fronts’ for agency or outreach services in Prospect Road. ‘Workers and helpers’ at the festival included people from Family Support, Health and Welfare, and the Community Centre. There were youth workers from Pathways to Prevention and police liaison officers, “walking around handing out Easter eggs – with baskets in their hands trying to normalise that relationship a bit more” (Principal: MB). The presence of people from the Community Centre in the school (for the first time) was important. The school and the Community Centre being the only ongoing government institutions in Prospect Road. The Coordinator of the Community Centre developed a close working relationship with the school leadership team – motivated by strong shared beliefs in social justice and the need to be proactive in bringing about community change.

Prospect Road has attracted a lot of attention over many years...but it has never got them anywhere. It is known as a very poor community but no one ever did anything with that information. MB and I were prepared to continue being really noisy about this little community that wasn’t getting anything and to encourage other people to be really noisy as well and to keep saying the same thing. We know the stats about this suburb but what are we going to *do* about it (AB, Coordinator, Prospect Road Community Centre)

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<sup>3</sup> The leadership team at Prospect Road consists of MB – who was principal for four years (2002 – 2005) and WH, who had a number of roles in the school over time including Acting Principal in 2001, Resource Teacher, Deputy Principal (when student numbers allowed), and again, Principal in 2006. Although WH had some time out of the school in as Acting Principal of a school in a nearby suburb, she played a key role in supporting and sustaining the changes described.

The initial festival was a great success – the first of a series of bi-annual community events held at the school. Looking back, in 2005, the principal reflected that more recent festivals were serving a different purpose – providing the opportunity for families to have fun together. Over the years music had been a highlight of the festivals – and this was particularly successful where the bands had links back into the community.

I think now it is achieving a need for fun – people need to have fun in their lives and they need to have things to go to that they can afford, it is a real family occasion as such (Principal: MB)

The opportunity for family fun was not something to be taken for granted in Prospect Road:

If you walk around, you never have Mum, Dad and the kids. It's always Mum with the kids, Dad is never around. At the Festival, it's special – you have both of them. There's the sausage sizzle for 50c – and its \$5 for all day rides – the kids get a lot of free activities. That helps. You see Mum and Dad sitting up here watching them all (Parent).

Anecdotally, at least, there is evidence of the positive effect the festivals had on the community, particularly in the relationship between community and school:

After the festivals, we noticed a calming, even after the first festival, a calming of that angeriness in the community. We noticed a decrease in the violence, but we knew you wouldn't be able to quantify anything like that, you just noticed it. Even the parents coming in – there wasn't that hugely aggressive front coming through the door. By and large they talk to us now (DP: WH).

As significant as Prospect Road festivals were, bringing the community together, in a positive family environment – this was only part of the strategy for promoting change. An initial network had been formed, leading to the decision to hold a festival. This network now began to expand. The initial community activity came to the attention of the Brisbane City Council and the Department of Communities. The interest lead into broader involvement and consultation. The school leadership team were becoming more broadly involved and better able to engage in a process of community consultation. They had heard that Community Renewal (through the Department of Housing) would only come to Prospect Road if there was a body in the community representing all the stakeholders:

We took that forward with lots of consultations, talking, meetings...and eventually we had a thing which has become *the Community Reference Group in Prospect Road*. This group represents the agencies, the residents and a whole raft of governments at all levels. And so twelve months later we were able to get Community Renewal to come into Prospect Road...so that brings with it multi-million dollars of government money to address the lack of services to Prospect Road. That's what the teachers were talking about – there's no doctor, no chemist, the transport is dreadful - all those layers, you look through them all (Principal: MB).

These services that had not previously existed are planned are planned for within Community Renewal, a highly resourced whole-of-government program that works with community to bring about change. Once the Community Reference group was established Community Renewal worked with this group of residents to identify the major issues the community sought to address.

....six major issues were identified – around transport and mobility, around family health, around crime and safety, around housing, around community infrastructure and around employment and training in connection with the industry (close by) (Manager CRPR)

With a budget of several million dollars to draw on, an 'Action Plan for Prospect Road' was developed and solutions to issues identified began to be negotiated. "Now anything is possible" (Principal: MB).

### **Meanwhile: In the School**

While the focus of this paper of the school and community, it is worth noting that successful changes within the school were also affirmed with awards and a number of funding grants, including \$25,000 dollars from the Federal Immigration Department for a Harmony Project – used for "Living in Harmony" (which became part of the school's vision statement). Significantly, in 2005 the school won an Education Queensland showcase award for its excellence in leadership, specifically for its leadership role in helping to build a strong and positive community:

School initiatives have focused on improving staff morale, improving social outcomes for students by working with local social service providers, and boosting student confidence and leadership by encouraging them to participate in events.

The school has taken a leading role in the formation and operation of the Prospect Road Community Reference Group, which has been responsible for a coordinated approach from local and state government service providers, stakeholder groups and residents to local needs and issues.

The school is regarded as the hub of the community and the development of partnerships with residents, government agencies and support networks has contributed to a greater sense of community pride and achievement (Education Queensland, <http://education.qld.gov.au>).

Connections to the community were also made, prompting positive change. In recognition of the link between learning and physical needs, food (and clothing, where needed) was provided for students. The timetable was adjusted to allow an earlier start to the school day. This had the effect of reducing the amount of family conflict spilling into the school grounds before school started (DP: WH).

### **Changing leadership dynamics**

It is interesting to track the progressive shift in leadership dynamics in relation to driving community action and change at Prospect Road. The process was initiated by the school leadership team. By connecting with a small group of like-minded others, this broadened into the key stakeholders – a core group from the school, from the Prospect Road Community Centre, Brisbane City Council and Department of Communities. The actions of this core group, led to the establishment of the Prospect Road Community Reference Group – a large and broadly representative group, now chaired by a community person and with an action plan for change.

The organisation of the festivals has also evolved. The first was organised by the school leadership team

I don't know how we did that first festival. It was us running around getting everything happening - plugging extension cords in, and the night's over and it is the two of us pulling in the extension cords (MB & WH).

In contrast, the seventh Festival held in December 2005, was mostly organised by the Festival Committee, which is an arm of the Community Reference Group and organised mainly by community members.

The principal's reflection on her leadership in the process is illuminating:

One of the things that I am particularly interested in is parallel leadership. We used to talk about the rock - it was very hard to drag the rock when there was just the two of us. We really needed to get other people on board and I think that by and large that we have.

There is probably so much more that I could have done, but at the same time I know that every day was filled to the limit....There's probably a model of the leadership that's much more brutal...This style of leadership has a personal cost in time – maybe a different style would give you more time but it wouldn't give you more outcomes (Principal: MB.)

While the parent and student opinion surveys have shown steady improvement since 2002, to being above like schools and state means in a number of area, one of the challenges is that this kind of leadership does not necessarily sit easily within a systemic frame driven by measurable outcomes. As WH points out,

The outcomes that come from taking such a proactive role in the community are extremely difficult to measure...our community doesn't remain stable so it is very hard to get the quantitative data (Principal: WH).

WH identifies social justice as her leadership driver and highly rates these difficult to quantify outcomes, despite the extraordinary level of commitment required – the personal cost in time, the emotional drain, and the lack of value placed on the community leadership skills for promotion. For WH, leadership driven by a social justice agenda requires high expectations and the belief that significant change is possible:

Genuine leadership extends beyond the bounds of the school...it embraces the whole community. A school isn't simply the kids that walk in at 8.30 and leave at 2.30. So – it means embracing their lives, and where they are coming from. ..Two-way communication is vital ...leading 'with' people is important and giving people the skills to be able to manage themselves ....giving them the skills to be leaders (Principal: WH) .

The school is part of the community and it has been pivotal in bringing about change because it reached out *into* the community – prior to that, we may as well have had 6 foot chain wire fence around it. MB and I were able to draw people along...they have come together in a fairly self-sustaining way. [With the previous] brick-wall mentality..., we were on the edge of the community Our teachers, on the whole, drove in to save the children and drove out again I think very much that MB came to it with a picture of life *could* be (Principal: WH).

The Manager of Community Renewal acknowledged that the school was 'a critical hub' in the Prospect Road community and recognised the 'significant leadership role' played by the leadership team within the community. As the only government players based in the suburb, the school leadership team had the "knowledge and expertise to provide advice and guidance" which was very helpful in the formative years of the Community Reference Group:

Quite clearly (they) have been focal points – not only being receptive to ideas but also proactively involving the community...very much involved in community networks...and part of a wider community...It does raise a lot of questions of that are the required skills for a principal in this sort of environment – getting into a community development type role (Manager CRPR).

## Some tentative discussion

This account is significant in several ways. Firstly, it provides a link between parallel leadership and community capacity building. Hounslow (2002), notes that community capacity building is most commonly applied to disadvantaged communities, arguing that disadvantages will become more deeply entrenched unless more effective interventions change the current trajectory. Howe and Cleary (2001, cited in Hounslow, 2002) define community capacity building as “The ability of individuals, organisations and communities to manage their own affairs and work collectively to foster and sustain positive change. They go on to note that it demands ‘place’ rather than program focused management, and a “bottom-up and joined-up” approach to solving multi-faceted problems.

One of findings of research carried out by Mission Australia (2002) was that factors such as equality, trust and integrity in partnerships were key factors in the success of community capacity building. The research reported:

It was noted, many times, that successful community capacity building projects and partnerships involve all members equally, and work *as part* of the community, rather than acting on *behalf* of the community (Mission Australia, 2002, p.23).

Howe and Cleary (2001, cited by Hounslow, 2002, p.22) argue that the process of community building is as important as the outcomes, and recognise “the importance of local identity, leadership, knowledge and management”. It seems that the leadership processes used by the school leadership team as a way of working with the community were effective adding to understandings of the applicability of parallel leadership and of the interaction between school and community.

Secondly, it indicates the broader applicability of this conceptualisation of leadership by providing an example of how its key features *mutualism, a sense of shared purpose and allowance for individual expression* (Crowther, Kaagan, Ferguson, & Hann, 2002) can be adapted and successfully used to guide action when administrator leaders are working in parallel with others in the community. The sense of shared purpose grew out of the recognised need for change. The mutualism is a recognition that change is to be facilitated through networking and cooperation – through actively bringing like minded people together to set a process in motion. The allowance for individual expression is relatively easy to identify, as people from different organisations were drawn together with common purpose. In this case, the school leadership team has transferred understandings of parallel leadership to a different context, beyond the school, with significant success. Another important insight provided by this case is the way that the dynamics of parallel leadership unfolded – two people established a small group, the small group drew in more members and was the springboard for the creation of the broadly representative community reference group. This dynamic could perhaps be pictured as a spiral or a circle that grows and changes.

This brings us back to the interconnecting processes of school and community change. The school leadership team played a significant role – through the festivals, networking, advocacy, and facilitating the establishment of the community reference group. The Manager CPPR recognised the connection between community change and student outcomes.

It is not about just providing a learning environment – It is about the Principal – when you talk about school based management they are trying to provide the best learning environment for the kids coming into their complex. That is probably their primary mandate. Places like here realise that if you are going to do that then there is going to have a be a whole range of changes out there that are going to provide longer term support this environment.

This is a key insight. It is reasonable to assume that the improvement of conditions within a community will positively impact on the efforts of a school to improve its learning environment. The two are interconnected. The significance of this case study, is the role the school leadership team has played in bringing about that community change.

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