Breaking into schools

Establishing high quality human services in educational contexts

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This paper explores the ACT Government's investment in a school based human services program. This program aims to improve educational and social outcomes for children and young people by creating effective working relationships between families, communities and their schools. It considers the contemporary challenges to achieving a quality service in a domain not normally inhabited by human services professionals. The main focus of the paper is an analysis of some of the factors which were considered in establishing a high quality service.

The paper draws attention to the importance of developing a conceptually sound program model, in particular one which demonstrates how evaluation can be integrated throughout the program cycle. It argues the importance of pursuing two key pathways to quality: the achievement of professional standards in program design, and the pursuit of the consumer voice in shaping and judging program performance.

The paper contends that program sustainability in this field of practice hinges on recognising who the consumers are, and achieving a range of outcomes which address their varied needs and priorities.

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In February 2001 the ACT Government launched a high profile, new program which it called *Schools as Communities*. The explicit program goal was to improve social and educational outcomes for children and young people by creating strong and effective working relationships between families, communities and their schools. This was to be achieved through two sub programs, the first of which is the subject of this paper. These two programs are:

- Skilled community outreach workers working from selected school and preschool sites with children at risk and the families and communities that support them, and

- Strategic projects across the ACT community to enhance partnerships between families, communities, local business, schools and government.

The first program, which at the time was administratively located within the child, youth and family division of the ACT Department of Education and Human Services, was clearly intended to build a bridge between the often disparate education and human services sectors. (The *Schools as Communities* Program is currently situated in the Office for Children, Youth and Family Support, and is no longer co-located with the ACT Department of Education.)

This paper argues that human services programs in Australia have had some difficulty 'breaking into' schools, despite the obvious nexus between these domains. Unlike the status of school social work and other human services programs in the United States, human services personnel in Australian schools have made only fleeting appearances over the past thirty years. Although excellent examples of practice exist, they are not well known and are certainly not part of main-stream practice as they are in the United States.

In this paper we draw attention to the importance of developing a conceptually sound program model, in particular one which demonstrates how evaluation can be integrated throughout the program cycle: planning, implementation and judgements about outcomes. We assert that a sustainable model will take its lessons from history; will be based on an understanding of the needs and priorities of its service users; will be client focused; and will place a high value on planning and evaluation. We argue that the *Schools as Communities* program has the potential to

become a mainstream model for the delivery of human services through schools, but that its future will depend on a capacity to show that it delivers what it promises.

SCHOOL SOCIAL WORK THEMES IN HISTORY

As a field of practice, social work in schools is now nearly a century old in the United States; just a few years younger than the profession itself (Torres 1998) which emerged in Western society from the religious and philanthropic movements of the late 19th century (Meares, Washington & Walsh 1986; Costin 1969). In 1975 and again in 1990, surveys conducted by the National Association of Social Workers revealed that school social workers were employed in more than 50 jurisdictions in the United States, 20 of which required a masters level degree in social work. The trend in the US is for an increasing number of human services professionals working from the host domain of the school, with a growing emphasis on more stringent certification and specialised training for these professionals (Torres 1998). In contrast, social work, with its broad structural perspectives, had no place in Australian schools until the Labor Government's program of social reform in the 1970s.

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Shifting models – looking in and looking out

Throughout the 20th century, models of school social work shifted in response to public policy and changing views about children, families and communities. In America and, to a lesser extent, Australia, two themes emerge and re-emerge as characteristic of the education systems' approach to children and young people who do not thrive in the school domain. One is a centralisation and internal control of problem solving efforts, and the other is a decentralisation and turning outwards for solutions (Streeter, Brannen & Franklin 1994; Tyack 1992).

Early last century, progressive educational reformers in the United States wanted schools to include a wide range of human services to alleviate poverty and respond to human needs. The vision for reform included lunch programs, health clinics and a wide range of other human services (Sedlack & Schlossman 1985), which we now see sporadically emerging in some Australian programs. By the 1950s, however, most public school systems in America and Australia had become large bureaucracies operating as closed systems (Tyack 1992). During this time the school social worker's role of home-school liaison worker was abandoned in favour of a more specialised social casework role. The primary value of the social worker in American schools became the worker's capacity to assist teachers in identifying early emotional problems and childhood personality disorders. Minimal attention was given to collaboration with personnel or human services systems outside the school (Franklin & Allen-Meares 1998).

There is very little accessible historical material on the interface of human services and education in Australia. Children in need were, and still are, seen by guidance officers or school counsellors who are (usually) teachers with postgraduate qualifications in special education and psychology. They provide important services to the child or young person who is having difficulty in the classroom, but their focus is school based.

Forging links with communities

During the social reform of the Whitlam Labor Government, social work programs were established in a few disadvantaged schools in various states in Australia. Drawing on a range of models, these programs had some success in forging links between schools and local communities and in creating more effective working relationships with community service agencies. The change of government in 1975, however, and the strong industrial foothold that teacher-trained school counsellors exerted in the industrial arena, saw the demise of social and community models before social workers were able to establish a professional niche in education.

Innovative programs with a focus on children's broader social environment further declined in Australia under the pressure of economic reform and new public management in the 1980s and 1990s. Initiatives for children at risk, which took schools beyond the school gate, were modified once again towards classroom focussed interventions. At the same time, human services departments narrowed their child welfare focus to a forensically driven child protection model which established government human services departments as the sole combatants of child abuse and neglect (Mendes 2001; Tomison 2001).

Full Service Schools

In the 1990s some of the earlier visions of reform resurfaced as human services agencies grappled with escalating reports of child abuse and schools attempted to address the increasing complexity of social problems affecting public schools. Models of practice spanning a number of domains, including interventions with individuals, families, groups, classrooms and local communities, larger systems and policy development, re-emerged in the United States. Services, also known as 'school linked' services, 'full service schools' and 'wraparound' services, developed a profile in America and then in Australia. The aim of these programs in America was

to achieve a more integrated response to the problems facing children at school. Increased linkages between human service systems enabled greater collaboration between professional disciplines and sectors involved with individual, child and family wellbeing. In Australia *Full Service Schools* consisted of Commonwealth funded pilot programs, primarily aimed at keeping young people from leaving school. According to people working in the sector at this time, many of these, though regarded as highly promising, were not sustained when the funding ran out.

Proponents of the push to integrate services regarded the school as the central hub for human services delivery because it allowed maximum access to children (Franklin & Allen-Meares 1998). Dryfoos (1991, 1996) presented persuasive arguments for centralising family support services and locating them in school sites. The term 'full service school' was originally used in Florida legislation to describe the establishment of 'one stop centres where the educational, physical, psychological and social requirements of students and their families are addressed in a rational and holistic fashion' (Dryfoos 1996, p.19).

Dryfoos (1996) asserts that driving the movement in the US have been teachers and educators frustrated by children arriving at school daily in a state unfit to learn. The impact of homelessness, drug use, poverty, violence and neglect have long made their presence felt in classrooms; Ryan (1996, p.2) argues that 'to meet the challenge of an advanced industrial society, no one group of professionals can function in isolation from another.'

In Australia, the apparent failure of human services departments to reduce child abuse and the frustration of the education sector in tackling increasingly complex social problems in schools led these separate silos once again to renew interest in cross-sectoral models. By the end of the 20th century, some of the Australian states had recognised, once again, the interdependence of schools, families and communities and that problems involving one also involve the others (Lawson 1994, p.64; Ainley et al. 1995).

A number of collaborative ventures emerged such as the NSW Interagency Schools Community Centres pilot project, 'with a view to preventing disadvantage at school entry' (Cant 1997); some highly effective programs funded under the Commonwealth Government's *Full Service Schools Program*; and various school-based and community-focussed projects emerging in the not-for-profit sector (for example, the Ardoch Youth Foundation in Victoria). In Victoria in the late 1990s the *School Focussed Youth Services* established regionally based programs to link schools and welfare organisations in systemic ways (Department of Human Services 2003).

Schools – Building social capital

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the concept of social capital received growing attention in the theoretical, empirical and policy literature. Renewed interest in broader social approaches to school issues was sparked by Coleman's (1998, cited in Productivity Commission 2003) study of the relationship between social capital, human capital and school attendance in the United States, and by various studies on the positive links between indicators of social capital measures and other aspects of children's welfare. Garbarino and Sherman's (1980) study of two neighbourhoods with similar demographics but differing rates of child abuse, for example, found that people in the high child abuse neighbourhoods had lower levels of social capital than those with lower rates. Similarly, in a longitudinal study of disadvantaged preschool children in four US cities, Runyan et al. (1998) found that their indicator of the social capital of the mother was the best predictor of a child's ability to avoid behavioural and emotional problems.

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The literature on prevention and early intervention clearly establishes schools as ideally located to connect families with community resources. It also focuses attention on the capacity of schools, through mentoring programs, to build resilience and capacity in children and young people. The most recent trend to emerge, however, has been the interest in schools playing a central role in building social capital and facilitating community engagement in local neighbourhoods. Dorothy Scott (2001, p. 76), for example, refers to community building at the neighbourhood level and generating networks through programs like FAST (Families and Schools Together). Peter Botsman (2001) claims that the school should be the centre of 'place management', enhancing the quality and responsiveness of services to regional needs and challenging bureaucratic decision making.

> The child care centre, kindergarten and school are regarded as central to building social capital because they are the most fundamental of our community institutions (Botsman 2001, p.69).

School-based programs for children and young people 'at risk' and their families have proven success in meeting such objectives as: engaging families in the school community;

improving the educational attainment of students; decreasing rates of absenteeism; and decreasing anti-social and disruptive behaviour in the classroom (Scott-Skillman 1992, Sutherland & Sokal 2003). Ryan (1996) points out that schools do not generally suffer from the negative connotations of other agencies and as an institution with a long-term involvement in the family, they provide an ideal base for reaching both children and their parents.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO ENGAGE SCHOOLS WITH COMMUNITIES IN THE ACT

It was this latter interest in community capacity building that led the ACT Government in its 2000-2001 budget platform to invest in social capital (ACT Government 2000). Along with a number of other programs, funding was allocated to the development of a new *Schools as Communities* program. Under the banner of 'building social capital', this new program was expected to improve educational and social outcomes for children and young people at risk by bridging the gap between education and human services and facilitating the creation of active and supportive communities.

The challenge to deliver a high quality program

The remainder of this paper is devoted to a discussion of the challenges faced in developing a sustainable human services program within the unfamiliar territory of government primary and secondary schools. With a commitment by government to strengthen the resource base of the program if it delivers satisfactory outcomes, there was a clear onus on program developers to establish a high quality, high profile service. This meant not only designing and implementing a program which met the essential quality criteria of comprehensive, accessible, appropriate and responsive services to children and families, it also meant recognising that at this time in history schools were, once again, looking outside the school gate for solutions. To keep their gaze firmly fixed on a socio-ecological approach, it was necessary to pay close attention to the needs and priorities of a diverse group of stakeholders and to clearly demonstrate that the program could deliver what it promised.

PATHWAYS TO QUALITY

In recognition that consumers and program providers have different views about quality, we will take two broad approaches to describing how quality is achieved in this program (Jones & May 1992, p.325).

The first will be to consider quality from a professional perspective, that is, from the point of view of pursuing recognised professional standards of practice including a conceptual framework, high standards of program planning, staff credentials, a staff culture of excellence, and high quality training and professional development. The second will be to consider the consumer's perspective on service

quality, in particular how the consumer would judge the program's success in delivering comprehensive, accessible, appropriate and responsive services. Finally the critical role that an evaluation framework plays in contributing to the survival of the program will be discussed

The professional pathway to quality

Establishing a professional program model

In view of the ephemeral nature of many previous programs in schools and the wider political expectation to report on 'measurable outcomes' (Tomison 2000), there was an imperative to set up a model program which was conceptually sound, transparent in its methodology and firmly grounded in research. Being a new program provided the opportunity to embed from the beginning the continual nature of evaluation into the ethos of the program. As there are many different evaluation types, for this paper we have framed the discussion of the development of the *Schools as Communities* program using Owens and Rogers' (1999) broad categories of evaluation.

The first step of designing the program took 6 months preparation and was greatly assisted by the appointment of a policy officer. Early tasks included a review of the literature so that research findings and best practice models could be identified and adapted to the local environment. A community, cross-departmental and interdepartmental consultation and a community education campaign, involving more than 75 groups, followed. This type of evaluation activity is what Owens and Rogers (1999) categorise as a proactive evaluation, which allows program planners to use the evaluative process to make more analytical and informed decisions. This seems self evident as a requirement to program planning but, as Owens and Rogers point out, there are few examples of this process. Indeed policy makers often make decisions based on personal preferences, what they know, or are unduly influenced by political pressures (Owens & Rogers 1999, p.172).

It became clear through this process that the model needed to include a set of outcomes and performance measures that addressed the priorities of all stakeholder groups:

- the education sector's concern about challenging behaviours in schools

- the child protection system's expectation that the program would support families and reduce child abuse

- parents' and citizens' concern with levels of parental participation in schools

- tangible demonstration for the government that the program could address policy goals (in this instance, 'building social capital').

The strong theoretical framework or program logic was an important step in program development and it was intended that the causal mechanisms be articulated clearly. This was important to enable the link between program activities and the intended outcomes. A further important element of this stage was the very public community education campaign aimed at increasing the credibility of the program, particularly within the education sector. One of the important challenges for program efficacy was to convince educators that the program was underpinned by intellectual rigour and a common set of goals, principles and desired outcomes. This process also led to the beginning of a shared professional discourse between human services and education. Using Owens and Rogers' categories, this stage was a clarificative evaluation which aims to clarify the structure and functioning of the program (1999).

A professional approach to achieving quality means little unless the main service users regard the program as comprehensive, accessible, appropriate and responsive.

Coherent program guidelines – crucial to a common understanding of the program among stakeholders

People who work in schools are often very confused by the complexity of the human services sector. It was therefore important that the program 'logic' (Jackson & Donovan 1999, p.215) was explicitly stated in a way that drew together the rationale, the policy and theoretical base, and the problems that the program would solve. It also clearly articulated program aims, objectives, strategies, target groups, criteria for success and performance measures. The published guidelines thus became a simple tool for explaining the program to all the key stakeholders: parents and citizens, school personnel, human services staff and the government of the day (ACT Government 2001a).

A public launch of program guidelines, which included an international speaker, two ministers and widely distributed publications of the program guidelines and the conceptual framework, heralded a strong cross-sectoral commitment to the success of the program. It shaped the common view and united the stakeholders. It also ensured that schools which were not selected to participate in the initial round knew about the program and would keep a watching brief on opportunities to join up.

Finally, ongoing communication with both sectors – education and human services (specifically child and family

welfare) – was critical to program development, so program guidelines were followed up by regular descriptive progress reports. These included non-identifying case scenarios describing examples of all strands of the community outreach workers' role: casework, family support and community engagement.

Developing a professional staff culture

Schools are staffed by education professionals and school cultures are generally characterised by the pursuit of professional excellence. To increase the program's credibility with the education sector, it was important to replicate both of these characteristics in the program design. An important feature of the program was therefore the requirement for community outreach workers to have eligibility for membership of a professional association. Furthermore the job specification concentrated on demonstrated professional skills in casework, crisis intervention, mediation counselling, family support, community development and community engagement. All but one of the 12 staff involved in the program at its inception were social workers. An intensive three week induction and team building experience for new staff was followed by one full day a week together as a staff group to pursue professional and program development and evaluation. It also encouraged a positive balance of 'tight adherence to fundamental organisational values' on team days, and autonomy and an entrepreneurial approach to the job when staff returned to their local communities to work (Peters & Waterman 1982).

Where and how resources should be deployed?

In determining how resources would be deployed there were two major issues to consider: whether the program should be managed by government or by the not-for-profit sector; and how decisions should be made about site selection (ie, from which schools and preschools should the service be delivered?).

Progam management

The recent pattern in the human services area has seen governments restructuring and limiting service delivery to core statutory business (Briggs & Campbell 2001). The arguments in favour of outsourcing the program therefore generally ran along the lines of the not-for-profit sector's increased capacity for innovation and flexibility, its diverse funding base and its strong links with local communities.

These arguments were rejected for a number of reasons. It was critical for the sustainability of the program for well supported professional staff to work on an equal footing with educational professionals. It was also important, given the ephemeral nature of these programs in the past, that executives from both sectors were in a position to battle out

broader policy and program issues around the same executive table.

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) articulated the arguments in favour of programs of this kind being directly provided by government in 1996 when confronted with the potential outsourcing of the Victorian school social work services. It asserted that a government-based service enabled the program to take on a wider range of important roles than just providing services to children and families. These included advocacy and developmental functions, to bring about change for groups of students and for school systems (Grace & AASW 1996). The AASW argued that outsourcing would lead to 'bandaiding' and support of the status quo. It also argued that individual professionals employed directly by schools or not-for-profit agencies would lead to a loss of:

- predictable standards of service

- a long term socio-ecological and social justice perspective

- service coordination, acceptability and accessibility to parents

- mutual accountability

- the schools' voices within broader social change initiatives (Grace & AASW 1996).

The most convincing argument for government retaining direct responsibility for this program, however, was the need to build a strong, sustainable model, taking maximum advantage of the unique administrative alignment of education and human services in the ACT Government at the time.

Site selection

Finding a way to distribute resources fairly and in a way that will generate maximum return on investment is a critical quality consideration for human services. A strong debate rages in government circles about universal versus targeted services. These issues were resolved by reference to the research on population versus screening based programs (Guterman 1999) and the vast body of knowledge indicating the importance of neighbourhood networks in preventing child abuse and neglect and juvenile crime (Garbarino & Sherman 1980; Ryan 1996; Hampshire & Smeaton 2001). The new discourse on social capital added further insights by asserting that resources should facilitate general community building activities, but should also be deployed in a way that ensures the most disadvantaged can access them (Bullen & Onyx 1999; Latham & Botsman 2001).

The program therefore chose an aggregated targeting approach, that is, it determined that it would provide a non-stigmatising, universal service to all families within particular neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods were

selected because they had high rates of substantiated child abuse and neglect and juvenile crime and because they rated high on the index of relative social and economic disadvantage. The program also confined its resources mostly to primary and preschools, where research indicates that interventions with families and communities will be most successful at ameliorating risk (Olds 1988; Karoly et al. 1998; Cashmore 2001).

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The route to quality which focuses on relationships with service users

A professional approach to achieving quality means little unless the main service users regard the program as comprehensive, accessible, appropriate and responsive. A number of quality assurance strategies were put in place to keep the program firmly focused on the needs of its client group. These included:

- recruitment panels which included principals and representatives from parents and citizens bodies

- service user committees to steer the program in local areas

- a pamphlet to all parents and teachers advising what they can expect from the service

- an initial community attitude survey to all families in school cluster areas

- a database which tracked all items of service including the reasons for referral, actions, timeframes, etc

- a service satisfaction feedback form to all service recipients

- a parent/school telephone evaluation survey at the end of the first year

- a comprehensive process evaluation involving parents, teachers and community service agencies.

In practice this consumer led approach to monitoring quality has been instrumental in identifying barriers to accessibility of services, tailoring services to specific needs, timeliness

issues, and range and breadth of services offered to families, schools and communities.

Integrated and ongoing evaluation

The importance of proving the worth of this program is clear when one considers the number of different stakeholders, the competition for finite resources in statutory child and family welfare, and the industrial significance of introducing social workers into a territory which is normally the jurisdiction of teachers and guidance officers. From the outset it was critical not only to incorporate a culture of evaluation into the day-to-day life of the program, but also to allocate resources for external evaluation.

The *Schools as Communities* program linked planning and evaluation closely together, using routine data collection as a way of identifying trends in program operation and using this information as the basis of weekly reflections on progress. This action research process where questions were asked about practice and tested in practice enabled the team to make changes to practice, try new things and to share knowledge.

Evaluation was a high priority for professional development of staff and the department used its partnership with Australian Catholic University to bring in particular expertise, not only to help evaluate but to train staff in how to do this.

The program completed a formative or process evaluation in 2002 that aimed to answer questions about what the program was doing, how it was doing it and whether it could improve on its performance. The research found that the program is well supported in the communities where it has been established. It received positive feedback from both parents and school principals. It was able to demonstrate a clear understanding about the program model from workers. However it was recognised that some revision of program guidelines was required to reflect how the program had developed.

In 2005 a more comprehensive 'summative' or impact evaluation will take place which will ask questions about what the program has achieved, how well it has performed and whether it was worth doing (Owens & Rogers 1999; Jackson & Donovan 1999). An assessment of the impact of the *Schools as Communities* program is timely, as the program will have had an opportunity to be established.

As became evident in the pre-program stakeholder consultation in 2000, if the program is to be sustainable, the answers to these questions will need to satisfy four key groups of stakeholders, each with distinctly different priorities:

- the education sector whose priority is solving the challenging behavioural problems of individual children and young people

- the human services sector whose priority is a reduction in child abuse and neglect using the school to support families and to identify children at risk

- parents and citizens who want to see an improvement in parental participation in schooling and improved educational outcomes for disadvantaged children

- the policy objectives of the government of the day who wanted to see and count the tangible evidence of social capital in communities and their schools.

In addition further challenges to the program's sustainability include the recent administrative change which saw the separation of child protection and early intervention services from the Department of Education. It remains to be seen whether the shifting priorities of different departments impact on the coordination and resourcing of the program.

Understanding the principles and program logic takes sustained attention. Over time, as staff change, orientation and an ongoing commitment to professional development are essential. These can be achieved by the continuous and active encouragement of the team to meet weekly to pursue a critical reflection of their practice.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines some of the key issues in past and contemporary service delivery by community service programs (child and family welfare) operating from educational contexts. In particular it draws attention to the ephemeral nature of such programs in Australia compared with the United States, and the absence of a strong discourse on Australian models of practice.

The main focus of the paper is an analysis of some of the factors which were considered in establishing a high quality service in a new ACT government program. The paper does not attempt to describe in any depth the conceptual framework of the program or the detail of the program model. (A full account of these is provided in two ACT Government (2001a; 2001b) publications: *Schools as Communities: The Research Context* and *Program Guidelines 2001*.) Instead it focuses on a discussion of professional and consumer pathways to quality, including the development of a conceptually sound program model, the recruitment and training of professional staff, a theoretical framework for site selection and a range of consumer focused quality assurance measures. Finally it reinforces the importance of continuous evaluation and the important role that staff on the ground play in this process.

Educational contexts provide a very rich array of opportunities for early intervention, family support and community engagement. They are, however, precarious and often lonely domains for human services workers. It is imperative that programs build support structures for staff and provide ongoing opportunities for professional learning

and involvement in program development, so that staff will develop the strong professional identity necessary to satisfy stakeholders but at the same time remain focused on the main consumer group.

In conclusion, the salient point for social workers and other human services professionals in schools is the importance of identifying key stakeholders across sectors, understanding their priorities and constructing a high quality service model which can deliver appropriately linked outcomes for children and families, as well as the systems that support them. ❖

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