

Back to schools

Human services workers increasing opportunities for early intervention and social inclusion from the school base

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This paper argues that Australia is lagging behind in recognising the important role social workers and other human services workers can play in schools to improve social and educational outcomes for students. It reports on a small, school-based, human services program, the Schools as Communities program, located in the Australian Capital Territory, and outlines key themes that emerged in interviews with principals and other school staff about the program's effectiveness. The program's outreach workers, who were mostly social workers, had a dual role working with individual families and facilitating community development initiatives of benefit to the school community. Case studies demonstrate how their presence contributed to earlier involvement and support of vulnerable families. They also illustrate that the school setting enabled social workers to work more effectively to build social inclusion in local communities. The paper argues the case for using a wider range of human services professionals from the school base and calls upon education and human services systems to create more effective governance arrangements to make this possible. An expansion of the traditional disciplinary base of education to incorporate social workers and other human services professionals who are skilled at working across multiple domains is essential if schools are to maximise the impact of early intervention and prevention in working towards a more socially inclusive society.

There has been long-standing international interest in delivering human services from school settings as a form of early intervention with children and young people. Human services programs in Australia, however, have had difficulty 'breaking into' schools, despite the obvious nexus between these domains (Winkworth & McArthur 2005). Unlike the situation in the United States, and more recently re-developed in the UK, social workers and other human services workers in Australian schools have made only fleeting appearances over the past century. Although excellent examples of practice in Australia exist, they are not well known and are not part of mainstream school policy, governance or practice.

This paper reports on some of the findings from an evaluation of one program which was carried out by the authors in 2005. *Schools as Communities* (SAC) is a small Australian program set up in 2000 in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). We describe the program, situated within a discussion of the importance of providing human services programs with an inter-sectoral focus, and outline some of the evaluation findings. We argue that programs such as these can play an important role in preventing harm to vulnerable children and their families as well as in helping to build social inclusion in their local communities. Finally, the issue of program sustainability is briefly discussed, including appropriate governance arrangements for professionals with social work and other human services credentials.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The concept of schools being a hub or centre for human services is not new in the international context; Dryfoos (2005) and others (Franklin & Allen-Meares 1998; Gilligan 2000; Winkworth 2003; Winkworth & McArthur 2005) have argued that examples framed by ideas of collaboration and community have been around for more than 100 years. Early last century, US progressive educational reformers envisioned schools as providing a wide range of human services aimed at alleviating poverty and responding to human needs by providing lunch programs, health clinics and other human services (Sedlak & Schlossman 1985).

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The UK, too, has used models that aim to make an important contribution to local families and communities from the school base (Cummings, Todd & Dyson 2006). In the late 1960s in the United Kingdom, a number of innovative programs were developed when it was recognised what an important role schools could play in 'preventative social work' (Healy, Hampshire & Ayres 2004; Webb & Vulliamy 2003). The mid-1990s saw a resurgence of such projects, fuelled by the sharply escalating rise in school exclusions and reported increases in pupil problems associated with family breakdown (Webb & Vulliamy 2003).

In Australia, school education is the province of the states and territories. Each takes a different view of strategic directions to tackle 'student welfare' issues. Social workers, who claim to be the leading practice profession in Australian human services settings (Healy 2004), were employed in schools across Australia as part of the 'Disadvantaged Schools Programs' during the Whitlam years (1972-1975) (McKinnon, Kearns & Crockett 2004). However, with the notable exception of Victoria, these programs were disbanded in most states and territories under the pressure of economic reform in the 1980s.

Earlier visions of reform re-emerged in the 1990s as schools attempted to address the increasing complexity of social problems affecting public schools. 'Full Service Schools', consisting of short-term, Commonwealth funded programs primarily aimed at keeping young people from leaving school, were highly promising but were not sustained when funding ran out.

One innovative collaborative venture which emerged during this time, and which continues to be a major, school-based, community program, is the NSW Schools as Community Centres Program (SCCP). In its early stages, the program focussed strongly on developing networks, community strengthening and a systems approach to the role of the school (NSW Department of Education & Training, personal communication, 2005). Today it takes a cross-sectoral, collaborative approach by establishing partnerships with parents and other key stakeholders. The program sees the school as part of a wider network and not necessarily simply the focus of program activities. This is particularly evident in the early intervention 0-8 years programs (Cant 1997; NSW Department of Education & Training, personal communication, 2005). In the late 1990s, the Ardoch Youth Foundation established *School Focussed Youth Services* in Victoria, a regionally based program to link schools and welfare organisations in systemic ways (Victorian Department of Human Services 2003). More recently in Victoria, a reform of school-based services is underway which aims to provide services that are well coordinated and targeted at those children and families with the greatest need. The Department of Education notes:

Effective partnerships between schools, early childhood services, local government, health and community services can enhance the quality of student support and benefit schools, students and their families (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2008, p.8).

In 2004, youth support workers were placed in all 22 ACT high schools. The initiative was developed to provide students with 'opportunities for growth and to enhance their experiences within an educational setting' (ACT Department of Education and Training 2004).

However, in spite of these notable exceptions, human services agencies and educational settings early in the 21st century remain largely separate and 'siloed' in Australia. Unlike in the USA where school social workers and other non-teacher trained human services professionals are employed in schools in more than 50 jurisdictions (Torres 1998), social and community models are not strong in Australian schools. Social workers and other professionals equipped to work with the social and community milieu so critical to positive outcomes for students have not succeeded in establishing a professional niche in school educational settings (Winkworth & McArthur 2005).

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SCHOOLS FOR EARLY INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION

Research in early intervention establishes that there are critical years in child development and that intervening early in the lives of children at risk can positively influence parenting practices and longer term outcomes for children (Karoly, Kilburn & Cannon 2005; Little 1999; Lyons & Winje 2007; Rutter 2002). Although schools cannot by themselves solve the 'complex social economic and family issues' that present daily in the classroom (Usdan 1990), school-based programs for children and young people at risk and their families have proven successful in engaging families in the school community, improving the educational experiences of students and linking families to services early. Schools that provide services universally do not generally suffer from the negative connotations of some other human services agencies. Where other institutions associated with mental health and child protection, for example, are not easily able to reach out to or sustain contact with vulnerable people without an invitation to do so,

schools are institutions that have a long-term involvement in families; they provide an ideal base for proactive engagement with children and adults (Dryfoos 2005, Webb & Vulliamy 2003).

SCHOOLS AS A BASE FOR INCREASING SOCIAL INCLUSION

Social inclusion is a broad, Utopian concept that refers to quality of life, including the right and support necessary to be involved in decisions affecting oneself, one's family and one's community. It also refers to levels of participation in the social and economic life of the community (Mitchell & Shillington 2002). Amartya Sen describes social inclusion:

... as characterized by a society's widely shared social experience and active participation, by broad equality of opportunities and life chances for individuals and by the achievement of a basic level of well-being for all citizens (2001, p.222).

Education is fundamental to social inclusion. The positive developmental and educational focus of schools provides opportunities to engage with families in normal, non-stigmatising ways and to facilitate the social networks that contribute to overall quality of life. This, in turn, has demonstrable benefits for children; the research establishes that children generally fare better in communities with high levels of social capital and community engagement. Garbarino's examination of child abuse reporting data from 58 counties led to the conclusion that social and economic status of local communities was associated with levels of child abuse/maltreatment (Garbarino 1976). Significantly, he argued that it is not only economic stress that negatively impacts on the coping mechanisms of parents but also that the neighbourhood and community in general may be seen to compound the problem. He claimed that improving the standard of living and resources or 'support systems' (p.185) available to parents in local communities would reduce the incidence of child maltreatment.

Vinson's (2004) study of disadvantaged postcodes in NSW and Victoria supports these earlier studies. His findings demonstrate the effectiveness of whole of community approaches in developing educational, work, health and other opportunities for children in the most disadvantaged NSW postcode which saw the suburb move from having the highest number of child abuse reports (that is, the worst 1% of postcodes in 1999) to the top 25% in 2004. Community engagement activities included large, successful festivals, drama groups for local youth and a successful Crime Watch system involving informal surveillance by residents (Vinson 2004). These activities involved groups of people across sectors and were organised from normal, non-stigmatising, everyday places such as schools.

THE SCHOOLS AS COMMUNITIES PROGRAM IN THE ACT

PROGRAM DESIGN

In 2001 the ACT launched a high profile early intervention program in selected primary and high schools which aimed to improve educational and social outcomes for children and young people by creating effective working relationships between families, communities and their schools. The program was introduced as part of the 'ACT Government's commitment to building social capital' (ACT Government, cited in Collins & Winkworth 2001).

Schools as Communities (SAC) was seen primarily as a family and community strengthening program within the Community Services Division of the (then) ACT Department of Education and Community Services. Because administrative responsibility for child and family welfare was collocated within the same portfolio as school education, there was minimal attention given at the time to cross-divisional governance arrangements. However, at the time of the evaluation, the administrative arrangements had changed and the program is now located within the Office of Children, Youth and Family Support in the more recently formed ACT Department of Disability, Housing and Community Services. These administrative arrangements are of significance to this paper as they go to the heart of all inter-sectoral, collaborative initiatives. We argue there is a need for strong inter-departmental governance arrangements and other structural changes to facilitate the sustainability of the program, including the full acceptance of social workers and other human services workers into the culture and institutionalised structures of the school.

The SAC program guidelines refer to the explicit focus of the program on improving social and educational outcomes for children and young people at risk of not achieving educationally or at risk of child abuse and neglect. It aims to do this by creating strong and effective working relationships between families and their schools and communities. This was to be achieved through two sub-programs, one of which included skilled community outreach workers (mostly social workers) working from selected school sites with children at risk and their families and communities. The outreach workers had a dual role involving both case coordination for individual families and the facilitation of community development initiatives of benefit to the school community. Their primary objective was to establish and maintain links between families, schools and community groups and service providers. This involved working both with families directly and with the broader community to develop initiatives that care for children, reduce parental isolation and provide parents with new knowledge and skills.

The second sub-program, which is not the subject of this paper, involved the funding of strategic projects across the ACT community to enhance partnerships between schools, families, communities, local business and government.

In 2001, schools were chosen based on a range of data which included the IRSED (Index of Relative Social and Economic Disadvantage) from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the ACTCOSS Poverty Task Force findings, and Department of Education, Youth and Family Services data, including the suburbs which yielded most children on care and protection court orders. At the time of the evaluation, the number of school settings had not changed in four years: there were eight community outreach workers operating in 10 primary schools (and their on-site pre-schools). Community outreach workers also worked from two high schools.

THE EVALUATION OF THE SAC PROGRAM

The Institute of Child Protection Studies at Australian Catholic University was commissioned by the ACT Office for Children, Youth and Family Support to carry out the evaluation of the SAC program in March 2005. The evaluation examined both outcome and process, and we were asked to identify the factors that influenced or affected the program's results. A detailed discussion of the research design, methodology, ethics process and findings for the evaluation can be found on the Institute's website (www.acu.edu.au/icps). In summary, the evaluation was conducted between March and September 2005 and included a broad range of data collection activities:

- initial discussion workshop: involving all SAC workers currently employed under the SAC program, together with the program coordinator;
- interviews with school principals: in-depth, semi-structured interviews were held with all 12 principals (and in some cases deputy principals also) of participating schools, 2 at high schools and 10 at primary schools;
- telephone survey of parents: 132 parents who had had contact with SAC workers in preceding twelve months were invited by letter to take part in a telephone interview; of these, 34 consented to participate and were subsequently interviewed;
- survey of child protection workers: a survey of ACT statutory child protection workers was circulated electronically, with 14 responses;
- analysis of child protection files: 10 selected child protection case files were analysed in detail to ascertain the extent of contact with SAC workers;
- analysis of documentation for SAC Strategic Project grants from 2001 to 2005: this included details of grants and final project reports;

- reports and publications: the evaluation took into account a number of earlier reviews and reports arising from the SAC program as well as source documents such as the original program guidelines and the research context which provide the original underpinning for the program;
- analysis of data from the SAC database;
- analysis of child abuse reporting data.

This paper focuses on data collected from interviews with principals and other school personnel (i.e. welfare teachers) and identifies two key themes from the findings which address the main thesis of this paper: that social workers and other human services professionals working from the school base are regarded as valuable contributors to early intervention with children at risk, and that they also play an effective role in building social inclusion in local communities. Examples and case studies are used to demonstrate these themes. The broader evaluation findings are not the focus of the paper.

Key theme: Early intervention with children at risk

Interviews with principals and other school personnel confirmed the role of schools as normal, non-stigmatising environments which provide easy access to children, young people and their families early in the life of problems, and are ideal settings for connecting them with helpful resources and other forms of social support. Three sub-themes emerged under the umbrella concept of early intervention: firstly, building trust early; secondly, connecting families to services and bringing services into the school; and thirdly, early intervention and protection for children at risk of harm.

Building trust early

Almost one-third of all families referred to the SAC program were considered by school staff to be experiencing drug and alcohol, mental health, financial, and housing problems which were impacting on children and young people. All 12 principals interviewed noted the skill that social workers and other human services workers demonstrated in actively reaching out and making connections with these families, gaining their trust, and encouraging and supporting them to come into the school.

The worker fulfils a role the school can't. She acts as an excellent advocate between the school and parents of at-risk kids. Many of the students need a lot more than teaching when they come to school and it is difficult for teachers to always provide what they need; our SAC worker is the person who is able to deal with this, fill this gap (Principal 3).

A key role for the worker is to win parents over from their mistrust and suspicion of schools. Ours [SAC worker] is fantastic at making these kinds of connections: she seems to be seen by parents both as a member of the school staff but also sufficiently removed from the school for them to be able to confide in her, without fearing that it will go straight back to

the school. She is an extremely helpful go-between – seems to keep these two roles in perfect balance (Principal 4).

Much of the feedback from principals and other staff focussed on the extent to which having a worker on site made it easier for children and families to ask for help and access services. Using a model that is clearly different from the traditional appointment system with professionals, human services workers endeavoured to be as accessible as possible to families by, for example:

- staff introducing the worker to families as part of the standard enrolment procedure; or by the Principal and worker regularly hosting morning teas for parents as an opportunity for informal contact between the worker and parents and between parents themselves;
- the school promoting the worker's role to families as a resource to help with difficulties or crises that might come up for any member of the family, not just for the children; and
- allowing the worker's role to be seen as separate from disciplinary procedures, the enforcement of school rules and school hierarchies.

The positive developmental and educational focus of schools provides opportunities to engage with families in normal, non-stigmatising ways and to facilitate the social networks that contribute to overall quality of life.

Connecting families to external services and bringing service into schools

All principals spoke positively about the liaison and case coordination role played by their SAC worker with a network of services.

The worker has been a mine of information about sources of community support and has broadened the school's ability to support families by helping them link with help in the community (Principal 1).

The SAC worker's role is basically a liaison role that brings a different mindset about how links can be made across schools and their communities. Principals know about 'education', and think about what 'schools' do, without the perspective of how they fit into their communities; SAC worker's knowledge of community and its resources is crucial; it brings a broader knowledge (Principal 7).

Workers were not simply referring families to services outside the school. They also attracted services into schools to provide support and training to both students and parents, usually in group settings. The focus was on areas as diverse as nutrition, anger management, peer pressure, parenting skills, recreational activities, sexual assault and family violence. In one example, a worker negotiated for a significant community-based family support program to operate from unused classrooms on the school site, leading to more integrated service delivery and readier access for parents.

Early identification and protection of children at risk

Schools involved their SAC workers in different ways where there were concerns about child abuse. All were part of the school's special needs team, which is often the forum for deciding a report to the statutory agency should be made. Some principals discussed particular cases with the worker before deciding whether and how to report, particularly if the worker had a background in child protection. An important consideration in the reporting process was the likely impact of the report on the child and on staff. The SAC worker assisted in the process of preparing the school for possible repercussions and putting in place, with the guidance officer or school counsellor, supportive processes for children. One Principal commented that he would deal with the police in a serious case, but would involve the worker in supporting the child and liaising with the family. This reflects principles of child-centred practice by ensuring that children are involved in what happens to them and are informed about processes that affect them (Winkworth & McArthur 2006). Providing support to the child/family and liaising with the care and protection worker were mentioned as common and very helpful roles for the SAC worker. It became apparent in the analysis of the data that SAC workers who had previous working histories in child protection were particularly helpful in dealing with the complexities of this kind of work as they better understood the process and had confidence in talking to parents about safety concerns.

While Principals stated it would be difficult to establish accurately whether there had been an impact on their rate of reporting child abuse and neglect, most considered that the presence of a worker in the school made it more likely that children who are 'really' at risk of harm would be identified. They suggested this was either because the workers' involvement with families made issues more visible, workers' visits to homes revealed circumstances the school was not aware of, or having a worker in the school increased awareness of the reporting role.

Although collaboration between SAC workers and statutory care and protection workers was clearly apparent, one notable finding in the evaluation was that interviews with care and protection workers indicated that they were not

always aware of the SAC worker role, their potential in supporting families at risk or the utilisation of the SAC worker when there had been a report. The evaluation also found that neither schools nor care and protection services fully realised the potential early intervention role of SAC workers with vulnerable children who were seriously at risk of encountering the child protection system.

CASE STUDY 1

The following case study¹ illustrates how social workers and other human services professionals can assist the parent while remaining child centred. It also briefly demonstrates the capacity for coordinating work with other agencies which do not usually involve themselves with schools and the potential for working closely to reverse seriously risky situations.

LUCY

The SAC worker became involved because of the behavioural problems of Lucy, aged 8. Lucy is the youngest of 4 children at the school with parents in a very violent relationship. She was regularly on suspension and was not able to participate in the classroom without causing disruption, including regular violence towards staff and students.

When Lucy's mother separated from her violent partner, the SAC worker supported her in a number of ways including the coordination of other services such as police, Child Protection, Domestic Violence Crisis Service, Youth Justice and Drug and Alcohol services; referrals to other agencies (e.g. Centrelink, employment services and counselling). The relationship the SAC worker developed with Lucy's mother empowered her to make significant changes to her life, including stable housing and taking up further education. The SAC worker assisted this process by providing information, transporting her to appointments, supporting her in court and liaising with the schools of her older children.

The worker also provided support to Lucy by acting as an advocate during disciplinary procedures at school, providing space for 'time-out', and transport to various appointments. The worker supported the child to make and maintain school friendships. Through the support and interventions with Lucy and her mother, the risk of harm was also reduced.

What happened

- Lucy's mother remained separated and then divorced from her violent partner.

- Lucy's mother completed year 12 and gained entry to CIT for further study.
- Care and protection orders were removed.
- Over a 12 month period, Lucy's school suspensions reduced to nil.
- Lucy became a fully functioning member of the class.
- Her violent outbursts to students and teachers disappeared.
- Her current teacher, who has no previous experience of the child's behaviour, considers Lucy to be one of her favourite students.

An expansion of the traditional disciplinary base of education to incorporate social workers, counsellors, youth workers and other human services professionals ... is essential if schools are to be forceful agents in the creation of a truly socially inclusive society.

Key theme: Builds social inclusion

Drawing on the previously discussed understanding of social inclusion, the evaluation demonstrated the capacity of social workers and other human services professionals in schools to actively connect families to non welfare related community networks, increase participation and improve quality of life. Almost all (96%) of families referred to the program had *direct* contact with the SAC worker, reflecting the effectiveness of an outreach home visiting model. Workers demonstrated success in networking *beyond* schools, establishing links and collaborating on shared initiatives with external community groups. Principals spoke of the value of the worker as a 'bridge'; as someone who can connect with children and their families and then help them link with services and support inside the school and in the wider community. They indicated that the workers have a much broader and arguably more complex role in the school which relates to immersing themselves in the life and community of the school, understanding how a particular school's culture works, and helping parents to link with each other and not just with the worker or external services. One Principal described the complexity of the role and the skills shown by the worker in her school in the following way:

[The SAC worker] is very attuned to signals in the environment, to the likelihood of a particular situation arising. She is proactive and alert to what's going on ... she understands that her role isn't just about responding but also

¹ Case studies were developed from material provided by SAC workers and Care and Protection files. Some details have been changed to protect privacy.

about networking, making links, and creating opportunities to get involved. She's been able to really involve herself in building the 'social community' of the school, including better links between school and parents and between parents themselves, as well as with external agencies (Principal 1).

In the following examples, principals and other staff identify the value of the social worker or other human services worker's role in developing formal or informal partnerships to create opportunities for social participation, an important element of social inclusion:

- greater informal parental involvement in the school, e.g. through regular morning tea groups;
- more formal parental participation in activities related to the running of the school, such as the canteen or the Parents & Citizens;
- 'community building' activity within the school where parents as well as people from the local community participate together in small, school-based activity groups, e.g. crafts of various kinds, a computer literacy course, playgroups, community gardens;
- school-based activities such as parenting courses which have something of a therapeutic focus but which also aim to encourage parents into the school and establish a support network for parents of children with special needs in the school;
- community information 'expos' involving extensive collaboration with community agencies;
- an annual, suburb-based, Community Carnival involving children and families from the local government primary school (with a SAC worker), the local Catholic primary school, and the local pre-school and child care centre;
- school-based services to children and their families which rely on community involvement to operate, e.g. a breakfast program which targets children with particular needs brings in an outside service (Tucker Talk) but has also involved the P&C, the local church and the high school; and
- an innovative health and well-being service coordinated by the worker, providing a range of health services to school families, from direct bulk-billing through GPs from the nearby Aboriginal Health Service, dental health, nutrition, immunisations, maternal health nurse, right through to general health promotion/education.

CASE STUDY 2

The following case study further demonstrates how social relationships built in the school can be used to develop new social networks outside of the school. It also illustrates how small community activities can develop social

connectedness and community capacity after a critical incident – in this case, the 2003 Canberra bushfires.

KNITTING DUFFY TOGETHER

This community capacity-building group aimed to support and strengthen the local community and enhance individuals' recovery after the devastation of the Canberra bushfires in 2003. Its aim was to draw on the benefits of art and craft work to promote general and mental health.

The group developed from a small parent craft group already meeting at the school. With encouragement and practical support from the SAC worker, group members decided to broaden the group by inviting the wider community to join, and the range of crafts was expanded to include creative knitting, felting, wool dyeing, and larger projects involving all of these.

Parents, local volunteers, Duffy P&C and the SAC worker were involved in the establishment and running of the group, which involved the participation of about 30 people.

Outcomes

- New friendship networks were formed.
- Parents who normally would not feel comfortable to be involved in the school increased their level of contact with the school.
- Individual and community emotional recovery and resilience were strengthened.
- Opportunities for fun were provided and the group developed pride in their creative work through a public display in the Healthpact exhibition window.

THE NEED FOR CROSS-SECTORAL GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

The international literature recognises the differences in values and priorities which exist between the culture of human services workers and those of teachers, and the tensions which these can generate (see, for example, Gilbourn & Youdell 2000; Hallett & Birchall 1992, cited in Webb & Vulliamy 2003). Although there are many overlapping features to the work of human services professionals and teachers, some essentially different understandings, values and priorities inform the way they work with students. British studies argue that if schools are to be successful sites for social work, the tensions arising from the different cultures of teachers and social workers must be recognised and addressed (Webb & Vulliamy 2003).

One question raised by principals and school personnel was how to effectively sustain the program. SAC workers were originally employed by a government department which brought together the portfolios of education *and* community services, but this is no longer the case. Although there remained a strong commitment to continue funding the

program, it has not increased in size and there has been a substantial turnover of SAC workers. While we have not systematically reported on the views of social workers in this paper, our interviews with these workers indicated that they find working in a school something of a professional 'no man's land' between two different sectors.

A number of principals called for stronger links between the school and the program, including cross-sectoral governance structures at both the school and the departmental levels. Shared governance at the departmental level in particular could enable planning for the future, including the need for professional structures for those who are not teachers and who work across both education and community services. This is a challenge for all inter-sectoral work in which new structures are endeavouring to address complex interlinked problems. The issue of better inter-sectoral governance arrangements and structural issues such as professional pathways need to be addressed if programs such as the ACT SAC program are to stand the test of time.

CONCLUSION

Education for all is the basic foundation of an inclusive society. It is the view of principals and other school personnel that the *Schools as Communities* program has demonstrated a range of positive social and educational outcomes for vulnerable children, young people, their families, their school and their local communities. It is essential that evidence from programs such as these is used to more fully realise the potential role schools can play in early intervention to assist vulnerable children and families. An expansion of the traditional disciplinary base of education to incorporate social workers, counsellors, youth workers and other human services professionals who are skilled at working across multiple domains is essential if schools are to be forceful agents in the creation of a truly socially inclusive society. ■

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