

The Family Learning Network

The impact of a school community partnership on its stakeholders

Preliminary Report

Judith Peppard, Julie McMillan, Diana Miller & Phillip Slee
School of Education, Flinders University

Introduction

Broadly speaking health and well-being is a resource for individuals and families and their children – supporting our capacity to adapt to, respond to, or control life's challenges and changes. There is mounting international evidence to show the link between social status and poor education outcomes (Marmot, cited in Coghlan, 2010; Wilkinson, 2009). In South Australia, Glover and colleagues have demonstrated that, *"the social and economic environment is a major determinant of the population's learning, development and wellbeing..."* (Glover et al, 2010, p. 5). Schools alone lack the capacity and resources needed to both educate and counteract barriers to learning experienced by many socially disadvantaged students. Partnerships with parents, families and communities can provide needed resources, support and assistance to schools (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Peppard et al, 2008; Sanders, 2001; Warren, 2005).

Slee (2006) has highlighted the need to create pathways out of disadvantage by building community capacity and improving support for families through better coordination of services and programs across sectors (Slee, 2006: v). Slee's research struck a cord in Adelaide's northern suburbs, one of the most disadvantaged in South Australia (Glover et al, 2006; 2010), inspiring the Northern Area Community and Youth Services (NACYS) Inc., and Elizabeth Downs, Elizabeth Park and Elizabeth East Primary Schools, to join forces to form the Family Learning Network. Established in mid-2006, the Family Learning Network (hereafter designated as the 'FLN') seeks to promote student achievement through community capacity building and coordinating crisis intervention for families in distress.

The FLN engaged Flinders University to conduct an evaluation of its work in late 2006. Baseline data were collected in 2007, its first full year of operation (Peppard et al, 2008). This research provided an overview of the nature of the FLN, its functioning and its potential. In an evolving collaborative partnership between the FLN and Flinders University, stage two of the evaluation was conducted in 2009. This entailed a closer examination of the model under-pinning the FLN.

The following preliminary report is presented with a view to informing the FLN in its future planning. It outlines the results of interviews conducted with key stakeholders within FLN; the NACYS Chief Executive Officer (CEO), school principals, school counsellors, the NACYS social worker and parents. It also presents the results of observations of students in the classroom and surveys conducted with their teachers.



Flinders
UNIVERSITY



Principals/NACYS CEO: “a positive school-family relationship”

The principals of Elizabeth Downs, Elizabeth Park and Elizabeth East Primary Schools and the CEO of NACYS lead and manage the operations of the FLN. They see themselves as responsible for the big picture issues; identifying community needs, planning programs in response to those needs, and acquiring funding to carry out the FLN program. The latter involves collaborating and sharing resources within the FLN itself, seeking funding from outside agencies and government departments, and developing strategic alliances with other community groups. One person described it as “*tying the bits together*”. In the interviews they spoke about the links between family circumstances and student learning, the importance of being flexible and responsive, and engaging with families “*wherever they come in*”. They recognise that, in order to promote student academic achievement, they need to address the pressures that many families in their community experience. In their view the objectives of the FLN and the programs and services it offers “*run side by side*”.

Principals gave examples of ways the FLN was pro-active; the community garden, playgroups, health days, and adult education programs offered at school sites, the Internet Café being one example. These programs build capacity by increasing the resources available in the school community and enabling parents to meet each other, develop friendships and further their education. Informal contact with the school through these activities gives parents an opportunity to “*talk things over*”, “*get it off their chest*”. This is important for those parents who may have had “*fear and concern about making contact*”. In this way information about the FLN services and programs is conveyed and programs are more likely to be taken up. School is the main contact for some families; a point at which to engage “*...they access things they can get out of the school or via the Network*”.

The NACYS CEO and principals described how the FLN had increased their own capacity to respond to the needs of families. For NACYS the schools provide a setting for service and program delivery, extending the agency reach, whereas principals found they were able to provide a greater range of programs and services to families and students. They explained it this way:

“Before (FLN) I had few options...I didn’t know what to do with these students...school counsellors could only do so much...”

“Now there is a structure for identifying families in need of support and reviewing outcomes”.

In addition, the availability of the NACYS social worker enables students and families to be seen quickly, avoiding long agency waiting lists, and providing support to families in a timely manner.

“...if we’re at the school at playgroup we can actually speak to somebody within the school, and it’s a lot more comfortable, or it was for me and some of the other mothers that were attending playgroup.”

NACYS social worker and school counsellors: “support for those students who are in the most need”

The NACYS social worker and school counsellors work with principals to identify students and families in need of FLN programs. In a community where there is multiple disadvantage, many families face complex challenges.

“...families can get really caught up in the crisis that can happen, and school sometimes comes last, and that’s sometimes the way it has to be because you’ve got to manage a family and your mental health first”.

School staff have to make difficult decisions about which children will participate in FLN programs. In the context of limited resources “*what we try to do is set up the programs and support for those students who are in the most need*”.

Collaboration is important in maximising available resources and connecting students and their families to programs and services.

“...the complexities of kids and families these days ask for a lot more expertise and a lot more collaboration...without something like the FLN where we can help engage families with agencies of support, we’d struggle a lot more to be able to do our job around educating our kids”.

“...it’s all about collaboration, because I think if we’re all working separately we’re going to be going on an upstream battle...it’s about making sure that we’re working together as much as we can”.

The counsellors and social worker observed that participation in FLN programs led to improved outcomes in students’ behaviour, participation and engagement with school. They attributed this to the programs’ emphasis on addressing students’ social-emotional issues and improving their coping strategies. They stressed that having access to the NACYS social worker on the school site was important to the improvement in student academic outcomes.

“...without the support and without the services that have been provided... I think s/he could have got lost in his/her education very, very quickly”.

“...because of NACYS and the FLN...this family has been able to overcome their crisis, connect with the school, and connect with the teachers”.

Parents: *“they brought fun into the school”*

Parents reported a range of involvement in programs, from minimal to extensive, participating in different ways and with varied points of entry. Parents who participated in FLN programs expected emotional and academic support for their child and as a result, improvement in their child’s confidence, self-esteem and achievement. They reported that counselling with the NACYS Social Worker was particularly important in providing their child with social and emotional support.

“...having somebody here to talk to [him/her] within the school ...I find that [s/he] comes home much happier.”

Some of the best aspects of the FLN for parents were family social activities such as playgroup, the community garden and barbeques, where parents were provided with information about community services in an informal environment.

“...if we’re at the school at playgroup we can actually speak to somebody within the school, and it’s a lot more comfortable, or it was for me and some of the other mothers that were attending playgroup.” This fits with the FLN’s aim of building community cohesion. Activities like these build school-parent relationships as well as positive relationships between the school and the broader community.

Providing opportunities to socialise at school, addressing the learning, social and emotional needs of children while creating fun and engaging activities, were consistently expressed as some of the most beneficial aspects of the FLN. *“I think my kids loved the gardening and mainly – the hands-on stuff – the interaction.”*

“...they (FLN) do try ad help the kids out in every way they can.”

Parents were very positive about the benefit that accrued as a result of their children’s contact with the NACYS social worker.

The corollary of this was disappointment when there was an interruption of the service or when it was not available. This occurred because the social worker was only at the school site one day a week and at times was required to deal with unexpected emergencies. In addition, when the NACYS social worker resigned to take up another position in 2009, lack of resources to replace the social worker in the short term limited the availability of this service. Parents generally reported that children relied on the social worker support and expressed a desire for continuity and consistency of service and better communication about the programs and their child’s progress.

“Maybe a bit more feedback like to the parents... I don’t really know what they’re doing with him, all I know is that – that he was getting help.”

“...there’s not enough information about what they’re about, for parents.”

Teacher survey and student observations

The student observations provided an in-depth visual analysis of student engagement in learning activities for each child. Direct observation provided evidence of degrees of participation in learning activities in the classroom; indicating that the extent to which families felt connected with the school and engaged with the FLN was consistent with the degree of observed student engagement in learning. The students who had continuous and extended periods of participation in FLN programs demonstrated greater levels of observed engagement (e.g. on-task behaviour) in classroom learning activities. In addition, teachers’ survey responses supported observation results. One teacher noted the change in behaviour with the comments *“...classroom task performance has improved greatly...s/he is getting along better with others most of the time now”*.

“Before (FLN) I had few options... I didn’t know what to do with these students...school counsellors could only do so much...”

Now there is a structure for identifying families in need of support and reviewing outcomes.”



Summary and recommendations

This preliminary report offers an insight into the functioning of the FLN and its impact on children and families. There was a high degree of consistency in the views expressed by stakeholders about the benefits of the FLN and the challenges it faces. We use key words that appeared frequently across the interviews – collaboration, resourcing and fun – as organising concepts to present the following recommendations.

Collaboration

The collaborative work of the FLN should be continued and strengthened. There is independent support for this recommendation. The FLN has been recognised nationally, winning a National Australia Bank (NAB) Schools First award for collaboration in 2009.

Resourcing

The FLN collaboration is resource poor and labour intensive, given the high level of need in the community and demand for programs and services. Much time is taken up in locating funding for social work services and enrichment programs for children and families. Lack of resources was identified as a barrier to program and service continuity and consistency and reduced the time available for communicating with parents. All stakeholders valued the work of FLN and saw the need for better resourcing so that its program could be maintained and expanded.

Fun: “(making) schools a happy place for students to be”

The terms ‘fun’ emerged across the interviews as an important contribution FLN makes to school life. In a community dealing with so many challenges, opportunities to meet and have fun take on added significance. They contribute to social and emotional wellbeing and act as a leavening agent, raising community spirit and opening up possibilities for community members to work together to achieve shared goals. Parents confirmed that fun activities, social skills development, emotional support and health and nutrition programs were among the most beneficial aspects of the FLN. With this in mind we recommend that the FLN continue to focus on building community capacity while providing support for families in crisis. As one parent put it, “Keep them (NACYS) in the school!”

References

- Coghlan, A. (2010, February). Act early in life to bridge the health gaps that blight society. *New Scientist*, 11.
- Epstein, J.L., and Sheldon, S.B. (2002). Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 95(5), 308–319.
- Glover, J, Hetzel, D., Tennant, S and Page, A. (2006). *A Social Health Atlas of South Australia 3rd Edition*. Public Health Information Development Unit, Adelaide, South Australia: The University of Adelaide.
- Glover, J. Hetzel, D., Tennant, S., and Leahy, K. (2010). Understanding Educational Opportunities and Outcomes: a South Australian atlas. Public Health Information Development Unit, Adelaide, South Australia: The University of Adelaide.
- Peppard, J., Lewis, F., McMillan, J., Palmer, C. Lawson, M. and Slee, P. (2008). *The Family Learning Network: an Evaluation*. Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia: Shannon Press.
- Sanders, M.G. (2001). The role of ‘community’ in comprehensive school, family, and community partnership programs. *The Elementary School Journal*, 102(1), 19–34.
- Slee, P. (2006). *Families at Risk: The Effects of Chronic and Multiple Disadvantage*. Flinders University, Adelaide, Australia: Shannon Press.
- Warren, M. R. (2005). Communities and Schools: A New View of Urban Education Reform. *Harvard Educational Review* 75(2), 133–174.
- Wilkinson, R. (2009). *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, London, UK: Allen Lane.

Suggested citation for this report:

Peppard, J., McMillan, J., Miller D. and Slee, P. (2010). *The Family Learning Network: The impact of a school community partnership on its stakeholders, Preliminary Report*. School of Education, Flinders University, Adelaide, South Australia.

