Cultivating community: Detailing school and community engagement under complex conditions

Abstract: This article reveals the nature of actions, discussions and relationships which helped forge school-community partnerships for engaged student learning and wider community participation for students and families living under difficult socio-economic circumstances. Specifically, the article draws upon interviews with key personnel and staff involved in the establishment and enactment of a 'Community Partnerships' programme to help improve the opportunities for students attending a primary school serving a low socio-economic urban community in south-east Queensland, Australia. Drawing upon Kemmis *et al.*'s (2014) notion of educational practice as a product of ongoing interactions between particular actions ('doings'), discussions ('sayings') and relationships ('relatings'), which both constitute and are responsive to particular conditions or 'architectures' for practice, the article reveals how the conceptualisation, establishment and consolidation of the Community Partnerships programme was dependent upon specific 'relatings' between key district and school personnel, the actions/'doings' of these personnel, and ongoing 'sayings'/dialogue about their work. Collectively, these 'doings', 'sayings' and 'relatings' all helped to stimulate new conditions – 'practice architectures' – for improved opportunities for students and their families. Teacher education informed by such theorising of community-partnerships as the product of specific actions, dialogue and relationship-building is vital for developing improved understandings of such interactions and partnerships over time.

Keywords: educational practice; school-community partnerships; educational practice; collaboration; school reform

Introduction: Understanding school-community relations

School-community relations are an area of considerable interest and concern in ongoing efforts to improve the schooling experiences of students living and learning under

difficult material circumstances. ~~This paper provides~~ Here, insights into the

~~details~~ perceptions and understandings of successful school-community relationship

building in a low socio-economic municipality in a large urban community in south-east

Queensland, Australia, are outlined and discussed. ~~Specifically, the in this paper insights~~

~~seeks to are provided insights into the actions,~~ discussions and relationships which

characterised the conceptualisation, establishment and consolidation of a productive

school-community relationship. After Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer and Bristol (2014) , these actions, discussions and relationships are construed as necessary ‘doings’, ‘sayings’ and ‘relatings’ which are intimately intertwined to produce alternative conditions to those which characterise many school-community relations.

The existing literature indicates theorists’ efforts to make sense of school-community relations, including the challenges which attend their formation and development. Sanders (2003) provides a useful overview of the varying nature of school-community partnerships, identifying four groups of partners which figure prominently in the literature: businesses, universities, organizations providing internships to young people (particularly in relation to service-learning), and service professionals and agencies. By reviewing such literature, Sanders (2003) seeks to identify the main factors responsible for the success or failure of these partnerships. She provides a useful account of what she describes as ‘school-linked service integration’, which focuses upon addressing the needs of families and community members through linking schools with multiple social service agencies. Such initiatives may be coordinated at different levels, including through chief executive officers of local and state agencies, relevant councils at the state level, and/or relevant councils at local level. Another level of engagement is evident among frontline service providers who collaborate to address the complex needs of particular individuals, groups and communities. This may occur on-site at particular locations, and help to give voice to the specific needs of particular communities. Important impediments to

effective integration of services are structural and cultural barriers which inhibit collaboration amongst key participants.

Epstein and Sanders (2000) refer more broadly to the influence of the theory of overlapping spheres to capture the interacting influence of families, communities and schools in the United States and other countries. Drawing upon various ecological, sociological, psychological and educational theories on organisations and sociological research on families, schools and communities, Epstein and Sanders (2000) refer to how various internal and external structures can be strengthened or weakened, and by so doing, constitute and reconstitute the sorts of interactions which occur within such sites:

Also, much of the literature which relates to schools and their communities seeks to make sense of what are construed as tensions between the two. *The Politics of Education Association Yearbook, 1996* explores what it describes as the ‘tensions between schools and families within their communities’ (Lindle, 1997, p. 1). While presented as a volume devoted to ‘an exploration of the various obligations for schools as social institutions’, this influential compendium argues that ‘ultimately, our authors reveal the counter-culture nature of schooling in various international settings’ (p. 1). Levin and Riffel (1997), for example, refer to a school system’s efforts in Manitoba to, as they describe it, ‘think about and cope with social change’ (p. 45). Educators are described as responding to social changes around them which are seen to ‘make the work of schooling more difficult’ (p. 45). Under such circumstances, there is a sense in which social change has occurred to the detriment of schooling practices. Such accounts reflect schools as places

in which violence and insecurity have become more prevalent, and in which teachers struggle to compensate for what are perceived as children's 'dysfunctional' family circumstances. Single parent households are described as increasing, with some children living on their own, or under other problematic conditions: 'In short, the educators with whom we worked saw changes in families and communities as having major consequences for the schools, most of which made their work more difficult' (Levin & Riffel, 1997, p. 47). Relatedly, Crump (1997) reveals how schools are most comfortable operating within established bureaucratic and administrative guidelines, which ascribe community involvement to more peripheral tasks, rather than fostering more genuinely democratic school-community interactions.

The literature also reveals some support for neutral/third-parties in relation to the coordination of school-linked service coordination programs. However, such initiatives may not alter the way in which schools are organized to facilitate increased engagement with families and the community. Sanders (2003) draws upon a compelling critique by Merz and Furman (1997) to reveal how the inter-relations between schools and community via broader service provision can be a fraudulent activity.

Such understandings of school-community linkage imply a relationship in which schools are construed as useful vehicles for redressing particular disadvantages/problematic conditions within identified populations. That is, like so much of the literature which focuses upon students in schooling settings, the starting point for such collaboration is perceptions of deficit within community.

Harding (2011) refers to development of the concept of ‘cultural heterogeneity’ to describe a variety of competing and conflicting cultural models to better explain the influence of context upon schooling in disadvantaged communities. While such an approach seeks to nuance arguments made on the basis of subcultural theories such as oppositional culture, again, such approaches also reflect conceptions of communities as problematic – in deficit – rather than considerations of alternative practices and approaches, and how they might be brought about.

Some theorists have adopted more ecological approaches to try to make sense of the interrelations between schools and their communities. In their exploration of what they describe as ‘the microecology of school-community links,’ Mawhinney and Kerchner (1996) draw upon principles of communitarianism as a means of understanding the role of schools in enhancing community capacity building. Theoretical models which explore how schools can take direct roles in promoting skills necessary for community development and improvement, and in solving conflict, are advocated. Such models are augmented by others who advocate context-dependent webs of relationships which help to establish relationships but not necessarily in focused and specific ways (e.g. Long, 1958), and that the relationship between a population, organizations, and local environment in which these organizations are located are crucial (Hawley, 1986). However, Mawhinney and Kerchner’s (1996) advocacy doesn’t mobilise empirical research to explore how these theoretical resources work in relation to one another to conceptualise a rich ecology of practices.

In contrast, and drawing upon Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Leonard (2011) draws upon data relating to a sixty-year partnership at one urban high school to explore the partnerships between schools and community organizations, and effects upon student outcomes, including attendance, graduation and drop-out rates. Leonard (2011) draws across multiple examples of school-community partnerships during this wide sweep of history to argue such an ecological approach foregrounds the importance of relationships which are so necessary for achieving success in struggling city communities. However, given the broad-ranging nature of the study, and its emphasis upon various micro-, meso- and macro-systems, the research is necessarily general in scope, and struggles to provide details of the associations considered so important, and how they developed over time.

What is lacking are detailed explanations of more productive school-community relations within the literature, including some of the 'pedagogies of reconnection' which challenge such deficit standpoints (Comber & Kamler, 2004). More genuine partnerships between school and community members struggle to be recognised, even as they are acknowledged as producing beneficial outcomes where they are cultivated (Thomson, 2006). How more productive associations come about, and the relationships, activities and discourses which help forge these is not readily apparent in much of the relevant literature. This paper seeks to reveal in greater detail how school-community relations can be lived differently, and for more productive educational outcomes. The paper does so by revealing in some detail how more productive school-community relations were

established through the development of a school-community partnership – ‘Community Partnerships’ – involving a primary school serving the needs of low socio-economic status and refugee students in south-east Queensland, Australia. The paper argues that while existing theories of school-community relationships are useful, an approach which foregrounds details of how these school-community relationships came about, the actions associated with this work, and the discussions and dialogue which contributed to the conceptualisation, establishment and consolidation of this relationship-building are necessary complements to existing research, and a crucial part of teachers’ learning/education.

Understanding practice in context: Activity, discourse and relationships

Trying to make sense of the specificity of practice in context is challenging theoretical and empirical labour. Specific practices do not exist in and of themselves; rather, they are both product and productive of the broader circumstances within which they occur/of which they are a part. However, even as these practices are influenced by broader conditions, and may appear to trend towards stasis, these practices are characterised by change and transformation; they are not simply static, endlessly reproducing pre-given approaches and phenomena. Seeking to make sense of the tensions between individual/collective practices, how broader circumstances influence practice, and how change comes about is crucial for understanding the nature of more productive approaches to student and community learning, and how these might be fostered.

In their efforts to make sense of how individuals learn and change in context, Lave and Wenger (1991) make the case for individuals learning in collaboration with others, in the form of various ‘communities of practice’. Such communities provide the conditions for forms of ‘legitimate peripheral participation’ which make it possible for individual actors to learn to enact particular practices. Furthermore, Wenger (1998) argues organizations can create various ‘learning architectures’ as part of this process, which contribute towards the individual and collective learning which occur within them.

Schatzki (2002) takes a more sociological rather than individualistic, psychological approach to understanding practices, arguing that practices comprise clusters of activities characterised by particular actions – ‘doings’ – and language – ‘sayings’ – which ‘hang together’ in comprehensible projects. Importantly, this social life occurs at specific sites which are characterised by their own particular conditions of existence.

In their efforts to understand educational practices in context, Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer and Bristol (2014) draw upon Lave and Wenger’s communities of practice, and Wenger’s notion of learning architectures, as well as Schatzki’s more sociological approach to understanding practice. Rather than just highlighting the importance of the specific actions/‘doings’ and dialogue/‘sayings’ which characterise practice, Kemmis *et al.* (2014) also draw out the importance of relationships – ‘relatings’ – between those involved in the various communities which comprise sites of learning. Consequently, educational practices are understood as the product of the

interplay between particular actions/doings, discourse/sayings and relationship-building processes/relatings.

This interplay can only be properly understood by seeking to make sense of how such individual and collective activities, dialogue and relationships also constitute the broader social conditions which make such actions, discourses and relationship-building possible. Understanding the dialogic relationship between these individual practices and the broader conditions of/for practice is essential for making sense of such practices, and for considering how to foster practices which will contribute to more productive and positive outcomes – in this case, for schools and their communities. To make sense of the broader conditions within which social action unfolds, Kemmis *et al.* (2014) refer to such conditions as constituting interacting cultural-discursive, material-economic and socio-political characteristics. These socio-political characteristics are indicative in language, and evident in the particular ‘sayings’ which constitute practice. Material-economic characteristics reflect particular actions or ‘doings’ which help constitute the social world, and socio-political features constitute specific relationships or ‘relatings’ between those involved. Collectively, the interplay between these phenomena constitute particular social conditions or ‘practice architectures’ which influence the actions, or practices of individuals and groups.

These ‘sayings’, ‘doings’ and ‘relatings’ not only help to fashion the conditions within which individuals and groups act, but also enable changed practices. Social practices are not simply a reflection of the broader cultural-discursive, socio-political and material-

economic conditions, but are the active result of individual and collective action and activity which arise out of concerns about current conditions. Changed practices arise out of active engagement by people seeking to change their conditions. These practices are necessarily site specific, and are characterised by their own particular teleologic projects which help give meaning to practices (Schatzki, 2002).

Consequently, a practice may be understood as the interplay between individual and collective activities, and the broader conditions with their particular cultural-discursive, material-economic and socio-political arrangements which both influence and are influenced by individual and collective actions:

A practice is a form of socially established cooperative human activity in which characteristic arrangements of actions and activities (doings) are comprehensible in terms of arrangements of relevant ideas in characteristic discourses (sayings), and when the people and objects involved are distributed in characteristic arrangements of relationships (relatings), and when this complex of sayings, doings and relatings 'hangs together' in a distinctive project (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014, p. 31).

Identifying the particular sayings, doings and relatings of those involved in creating changed conditions for subsequent practices is important for understanding how more transformative change may come about, and how conditions for change may become established.

Context: Southern Cross Primary

The research applies these understandings of practice to the activity, discourse and inter-relations of district personnel, staff, students and community members in one school site in south-east Queensland, Australia. Senior administrators within the district office were initially concerned about unmet needs amongst students within schools in different parts of the district. While originally focused upon secondary schools, a small subsample of primary schools undertaken in the early 2000s revealed the needs were just as acute in the primary as in the secondary schools. Initial concerns about perceived needs in the primary schools led to a census of all primary schools within the district to ascertain exactly what the needs were. This revealed fourteen per one thousand students were ‘out of home’ (living in varied circumstances including foster care, family group homes or extended family care).

One of the schools with the most acute needs was ‘Southern Cross’ Primary¹. At the time of the district census, 53% of students at Southern Cross were considered either homeless or marginalised. Located in one of the poorest urban communities in the state of Queensland, indeed Australia as a whole, the district census revealed how the school served a significant immigrant and refugee population with complex needs. Comprising approximately 230 students and ten full-time teaching staff, the particular needs of the school were considered acute. Within the school, support was provided by an additional six specialist/support teaching staff, including a ‘Literacy and Numeracy

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

Improvement/Curriculum Support' teacher, a teacher librarian, two English as Second Language specialists, and two additional support teachers (who worked across the domains of Inclusive Education, English as a Second Language, and the Preparatory years (the latter being a relatively new structural addition in the Queensland context focused on the early years of schooling)). As reflected in much of the literature relevant to such communities, a variety of social support structures were in place in the local community. This included: a 'New Arrivals Programme' to assist immigrant and refugee families to adapt to their new surroundings; various community support structures, such as Queensland Programme to Assist Survivors of Torture and Trauma, Access Services, Multi-Link (a public sector service designed to effect whole-of-government approaches to low socio-economic status and diverse communities); and the St Vincent de Paul organisation (an aid organisation supported by the Catholic Church). However, while these organisations provided assistance to families associated with the school, members of the school district, the principal and key members of school staff argued the availability of these services alone was insufficient, and more needed to be done to improve school-community relations.

As a result, a decision was made to establish a school-community partnership, the 'Community Partnerships Programme' to assist students and families associated with the school. This initiative led to support for the employment of a Cultural Development Officer/Worker, who worked closely with teachers to help make the curriculum more engaging for students, and, a Community Development Officer/Worker, who worked more closely with families of students to ensure their continued attendance and

productive involvement in schooling. The involvement of these new personnel led to the establishment of new initiatives within the school, and new inter-relations with staff. How the Community Partnerships program was conceptualised, came into existence, and became consolidated through the involvement and increased interaction with community members, is the focus of this paper.

Methods

To ascertain how the Community Partnerships programme became established and consolidated within the school, 13 key district personnel, teachers and community members were interviewed. Six focus group interviews with students within the school, and three classroom observations, were also undertaken. This included a series of observations of students interacting together in the school, including in a school-based community garden established as part of the scheme. Interviews occurred over a two year period, were undertaken at the school site (except for those involving district office personnel, which mostly occurred at the district office), and were between 20 minutes and one hour duration (although several interviews were much lengthier, particularly those involving a former principal and systemic personnel).

Prior to a more detailed analysis, an emergent thematic approach, involving searching for recurring patterns within the data (Shank, 2002), was undertaken to identify key themes. This revealed the importance of three phases during the Community Partnerships programme: initial conception; establishment, and; consolidation. In light of Kemmis *et*

al.'s (2014) notion of practice, each of these themes was revealed as characterised by particular 'doings', 'sayings' and 'relatings' in the context of particular social conditions/practice architectures. The research presented helps make sense of this specificity within broader practices of conception, establishment and consolidation of the Community Partnerships project.

Findings: Cultivating community

Conceptualising Community Partnerships – Responding to challenging conditions

Concerns about how to respond to the needs of students living in poverty and homelessness in the district motivated key district personnel to undertake the 'doing' of allocating additional resources for research into the needs of struggling families and communities. This included forging a relationship/'relating' to a religious minister within the community who had experience of working with disenfranchised communities. His work involved undertaking considerable research to better understand the nature of the needs of the most marginalised communities within the district:

I started working here in the area of homeless and marginalised students who attend [District] schools. How could they respond better to that work? How could this place [District] respond better to those young people and their needs? I was asked if I would also be involved with Southern Cross. The research that I did at

the time showed that over 53% of the young people in Southern Cross were homeless - were 'out of home' - or marginalised (Laurie, Minister).

This work also included relationship-building through talking/'sayings' with experienced personnel to help encourage them to work with disenfranchised communities:

... So here in [District Office], they decided to respond to that ... And so they asked a lady by the name of Daisy Flint who was an ex-principal of Smithfield² if she would spend some time looking at Southern Cross to see what would be a good response down there. So Daisy asked me if I would join the group and I did. And we met for maybe a year or two years or something, and gradually formulated 'Community Partnerships' (Laurie, Minister).

The Community Partnerships approach explicitly involved 'relating' with several key personnel within the region, including the 'area supervisor' responsible for the local cluster of schools of which Southern Cross was a part, as well as the principal and another local minister within the community:

I work with her very closely with [Daisy] and that reference group that she had set up at the time and obviously Alissa Monson³ was a part of that group. And one of the area supervisors, Dysart Tenley from here, and the local parish priest Father Tobias (Laurie, Minister).

² ~~All names are pseudonyms~~; Smithfield was a similarly poor neighbourhood to that serviced by Southern Cross Primary.

³ The principal at Southern Cross who instigated the Community Partnerships approach.

The initiative also involved relationship building with key personnel from the District Office, including personnel who conducted more detailed research within the school community itself:

So, one of the key members of the group, Ms Ellie Jones, through the student protection area – she brought in the value of connecting with people from universities to get some research happening, to help, like I suppose, just to help with that reflective process of what was happening. And then engaged a previous principal to do the research into full-service schooling... . It was important to tap into the community to see, to find out from the teacher perspective, parent perspective, what their hopes and dreams, for example, were about (Alissa, former Principal).

This relationship building was underpinned by a strong ethical and moral base oriented towards social justice, and, through discussions between staff, including the former principal, assisted staff to work together to support one another under sometimes challenging circumstances:

[F]or me personally, I mean it's definitely a strong sort of social justice ... For myself personally ...what I've learnt from this school is the way that it does have an ethical and moral basis to learning, to all learning, and it's a strong ... a strong

social justice tradition, and it's about giving an opportunity to all people.

(Cameron, Cultural Development Officer).

What are we on about? Well this [strengths-based approach and social justice] is part of what we're on about. And we acknowledge that we are on about this

(Laurie, Minister).

This common focus around social justice and a strengths-based approach to understanding communities led to considerable dialogue/'sayings' about the need to employ a Community Development Officer with important, specific skills which involved actively acknowledging the resources which people brought with them, rather than focusing upon deficits:

I was arguing for Community Development worker ... What I like about Community Development and why I thought that it'd be really important was because it brings people together, right so it's not just a professional person with a client. But it brings people together and the people are helped to identify needs and then the people together are empowered to meet those needs. So there's all those things of like participation, inclusiveness, skilling and then also there's a strong possibility that it can also lead into Paolo Freirian stuff, conscientisation, politicisation that kind of action ... because I think that one of the things that education should be on about is education for transformation. (Laurie, Minister)!

The ‘doing’ of active involvement of the leadership team within the district office was crucial to the success of the initiative:

And of course [Director of district] Doug Harris, his heart is with this kind of stuff, and I think that’s made a hell of a difference as well (Laurie, Minister).

In this way, multiple relationships were forged with personnel across the school and system, through ongoing dialogue and the act of pushing for improved practices within the school and system more broadly. A complex web of relationships/‘relatings’ was forged which helped to support subsequent talk and actions which sought to make a difference in these children’s lives.

Establishing Community Partnerships – New roles

District support for the Community Partnerships programme soon led to the action of employing the Cultural Development Officer and Community Development Officer. The ‘doing’ of establishing these roles also included ongoing support:

The school gets additional funding for Community Partnerships, which funds myself and James. [Community Partnerships also funds] the community centre – development of the community centre – professional development for us, and conferences, and whatever that we can hold, and various other things (Cameron, Cultural Development Officer).

In turn, the Community Development Officer was commissioned in the 'doing' of working with and 'relating' to students' families, and the Cultural Development Officer working with and 'relating' to teachers and students. The Community Development Officer actively engaged in relationship building and worked from a 'strengths-based' model, evident in how he overtly valued what students had to offer. He saw the students as possessing abilities and resources not typically recognised in schooling settings, but inherently valuable. Through interactive talk/'sayings' and activity/'doing', there was recognition of the importance of the skills and resources which students brought with them:

... The skills they have in, because they're living in a really, well we call it a 'community of difference' but a really culturally diverse community – interacting with each other through language barriers, through different cultural beliefs and practices. So they're learning all these different skills and strengths. And it's about finding ways for the children to be able to display that stuff, and recognise that that is important knowledge (James, Community Development Officer).

This relationship building and dialogue around strengths-based approaches were similarly evident in relation to the principal. The everyday action of accepting the students, and the resources they brought to school with them, was particularly important:

I think for Southern Cross the most important thing about the practices were that they were strengths-based practices. And having an acceptance of the particular experiences and the characteristics of the children who would come to school there, and their family backgrounds; it is very much a community of differences with both the social [and] cultural backgrounds of the children.

So, what that meant in terms of practices first and foremost was just a ready acceptance of, 'These are our children, and these are who they are'. And what is it about these children that we can tap into to promote, or, as best we could, accelerate their learning? So, that would mean recognising their – recognising – I suppose, well not just recognising but having a really intimate knowledge of their cultural influences ... (Alissa, former Principal).

In this way, through different forms of relationships/relatings, difference was construed as a resource, rather than a deficit. The action of adopting a 'strengths-based approach', and the 'talking up'/sayings around this initiative helped bring into being a different set of practices than is typically the case in schools.

Consolidating Community Partnerships

One of the ways students engaged more meaningfully with schooling practices was through the 'doing' of a programme to help restore damaged bicycles. This initiative, alongside the development of a school-community garden, valued and recognised

students' strengths, and helped to forge new relationships/relationships within the community:

One other project which we started last year was operation 're-Cycle', which you may have heard about – recycling old dump bikes. So two of those [disengaged] boys were involved in that and one specifically had a real strength in that area. And it was about working with his strengths for the good of the community. So there are many others; many of our 'new-arrival' children⁴ really excel in the garden, and we have used cooking and gardening in the past as a way of developing English and language skills (James, Community Development Officer).

And we look for creative ways to engage the kids, so that we know that that child will engage it. Like, we've got two Year 7 boys who have really struggled this year, but in looking for creative ways to engage them, they've started a project with Cameron who is our Cultural Development worker. So, with James, who is our Community Development worker, Cameron engages, looks for different ways to engage the kids. So, he's got those two boys in a programme, that they've just made up called 're-Cycle', ... (Mitchell, Deputy Principal).

The new 'relationships' were evident in how the principal recognised the value of the Community Development and Cultural Development Officer roles and the need for ongoing dialogue to ensure their roles were understood by teachers, and that the officers

⁴ Refugee children, newly arrived into Australia.

were not overwhelmed by potential involvement with teachers. This led to ensuring both officers were part of the formal leadership team within the school. Also, the action of employing the Cultural Development Officer led to student involvement in a project to raise awareness of the attractions and benefits of living in their local community:

So one of the things he [Cultural Development Officer] did last year with the Year 5 class was looking for ways to engage with the local community, so he would take groups of five kids out and they'd go for a walk around, down to, ... Park down the back, or down to the shops, and just take photos of the local community. And then from that, made a book, like a coffee table sort of book, with all the new images ... So that was a 12 month, a whole school year, project that they did (Mitchell, Deputy-Principal).

These actions/doings were clearly valued by students, as evident in their recall and talk about the event, almost two years later:

we had to take a picture and see what it meant to us... and I wrote that people should be more respectful to the environment because it's not just other people's; it's theirs (Andy, Year 6/7 student).

The success of many of these initiatives was also expressed in the establishment of a community garden on the school grounds. The 'doing' of the garden was itself construed

as a resource to highlight students' capacities, and to promote recognition of their strengths, and thereby new forms of relating to one another:

And I think a big thing for our community here is that our children have some really inherent strengths ... So through gardening activities, a lot of our children's problem solving skills are really good, and really pretty advanced (James, Community Development Officer).

The 'doing' of establishing the garden also contributed to relationship building whereby community members took responsibility for the garden, and the activities within it, engaged with students, and stimulated dialogue amongst themselves and students about activities within the garden:

In 2006, we did garden days each month on a Saturday where we'd sort of get people to come in and hang out. We'd want people to hang out, but people sort of came to work a little bit too, through to now. Well, this year's been probably the most successful year in the garden out there. We've got people volunteering and coming for completely their own reasons now ... So, the community are using that really, for their own purposes now, and we can support that in our project. And I guess the cross-over happens that those people are also here during the school days, wandering in and out and having contact with kids at certain levels. And if not, the infrastructure's there, and there's that curiosity set up, I guess now, that we've got so many different things. And there's either familiarity from kids

because they know who's made something, or it looks similar to what they've seen before, maybe in their own country, or it's unusual, so they're asking questions (Cameron, Cultural Development Officer).

The strength of the relationships forged with community members was evident in community members' engagement in the garden, and how they saw the garden as an important vehicle for students' own learning more generally:

In [city], [there are] 450,000 households. So that mean, I calculate that, in 1 week, 2.2 million kilogram of kitchen scrap! I compare with my house, 5 kg per week, so 450,000 household 2.2 million. ... It cost money [to pay for waste removal] So that's why ..., they can increase their household recycling ... and also they can have [a better] environment, and also they can decrease their food costs That's very important, so everybody can do this. I would like to integrate, the school garden, and the classroom. I would like to see as an outdoor classroom here, and also as a ... laboratory here. You see a lot of labs are artificial in the classroom. ... in the garden you can learn a lot! ... So that's why [it is] very important [to have the garden] (Dennis, community volunteer and Burmese refugee).

In this way, the 'doing' of establishing the garden, 'talking up' this work, and supporting new roles/'relatings', such as that of the Cultural Development Officer, contributed to

new forms of communication and relationship-building between students and members of the community.

Discussion: School and community engagement under complex conditions

The way in which the education district within which Southern Cross Primary was located initially sought to better serve its most marginalised students is evidence of particular actions – ‘doings’ – which are perhaps unusual in many school-community relations. Rather than simply construing the social circumstances which influenced the school as problematic and difficult (Levin & Riffel, 1997), new relationships – ‘relatings’ – were encouraged to foster more productive and engaging discussions – ‘sayings’ – between members of the community and school personnel. The work of the minister who acted as a district research officer into the nature of the student body which attended each school within the district was pivotal to providing the stimulus to facilitate change within the district as a whole, and Southern Cross in particular.

The action of establishing the reference group as part of this process was also pivotal to the sorts of change considered important within the district. This work – doings – of forging necessary relationships – relatings – was enabled through various meetings which provided the discursive conditions – sayings – to better understand the nature of what was required to effect positive and productive practices and relationships between members of the school and community. Comprising an experienced principal working in a similar community context, a local minister with considerable experience of the needs of the

community, the area supervisor responsible for schools in that part of the district, the child protection officer, the current principal and the initial minister with expertise in researching marginalised communities, the act of establishing the network enabled relationship building processes supportive of efforts to work differently at the school level. This network brought together individuals with either knowledge of the specific schooling context, or knowledge about how to effect positive improvement in such settings. This entailed a different set of roles and relationships for these members than was usually the case in more typical school-community service arrangements (Merz & Furman, 1997).

During the establishment phase, the act of employing the Community Development Officer and Cultural Development Officer within the school as part of the 'Community Partnerships' programme was the next instrumental step for forging very different and productive relationships between members of the school and community. The explicitly strengths-based approach adopted by key personnel within the district office, recognised by the principal of the school, and evident in the words and actions – the 'sayings' and 'doings' – of the Community Development Officer and Cultural Development Officer, all reinforce this as a different approach to improve school community relations. The employment of the Cultural Development Officer and Community Development Officer represent specific material-economic arrangements strongly oriented towards a notion of practice as praxis – as morally informed and committed action in practice (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014). Subsequent actions of the Community and Cultural Development Officers were closely allied but different from and complementary of one another, and more intimate

and involved, than many of the more external associations involving front-line service providers in individual agencies and schools and families (Sanders, 2003). The actions and activities of the Cultural Development Officer, in particular, involved working more closely with teachers and students – forging strong relationships to try to assist in promoting engaged student learning. The Community Development Officer’s ‘doings’ entailed interacting with members of the parent and local community to assist them to navigate the support services they required, and to better understand the home and community environments of particular students, as well as to assist teachers understand these students’ circumstances. Such relationship building contrasts with notions of ‘cultural heterogeneity’ and efforts to understand communities simply in relation to subcultural theorising processes (Harding, 2011). A more proactive approach on behalf of both officers, who actively promoted the capacities of the students and their families, also stood in contrast with the notion of tensions which characterise descriptions of many school-community relations (Lindle, 1997).

These strengths were particularly evident through engagement in the establishment and consolidation of the school-based community garden, the artworks in the community project, and ‘re-Cycle’ project. These initiatives all comprised activities, ‘doings’, which validated the contribution of marginalised students and/or key personnel within the district, enabling the consolidation of the Community Partnerships programme. Such grass-roots initiatives were the outcomes of earlier and ongoing dialogue and relationship building which took seriously recommendations about how to respond to the needs of marginalised students within the district’s schools. Changed practices at the level of

students were evident in how students engaged in these programmes. Through better understanding their local environment in the photographic journal/coffee table book project, and building relationships with community members who used the garden, for example, students were engaged in schooling in a different way than if they had less individual and collective responsibility for it. What occurred as a result of these activities became a source of inquiry, facilitating significant dialogue – ‘sayings’ – as students sought answers to the different activities which were occurring in, for example, the garden and community. Again, understanding the relationship building which occurred through the activities involved in working and dialoguing about the book and garden contrasted with efforts to simply theorise the cultural heterogeneity which characterised such sites (cf. Harding, 2011).

That members of the community actively engaged in the garden as a resource for knowledge building and community development, as well as for improving schooling practices for students, was also significant. The way in which one member of the community felt sufficiently confident in his role and relationship to the garden and the school to advocate for changed schooling practices which employed the garden more actively is evidence of the changed practice architectures – cultural-discursive (sayings), material-economic (doings) and socio-political (relatings) conditions – which characterised this site. Again, such talk, in conjunction with working in the garden, and forging relationships with students and other members of the school community, could be construed as a form of praxis which sought to go beyond an individualistic sense of

morally informed and committed action to a conception of action which encouraged changed conditions for practice, as well as changed practice.

Conclusion

The advocacy for the Community Partnerships program, and the way it played out in this specific schooling setting provides a clear narrative of the specific details of initiation, establishment and consolidation which could serve as a model for more engaged and engaging approaches to school-community relationships in other sites and settings. It also provides important insights for initial and continuing teacher educators to consider how best to cultivate a broader understanding of the nature of productive educational practices amongst those who work, now and in the future, in schools. The work of the various members of the Southern Cross school community did not simply transpire spontaneously on site, but was instead nurtured at different phases, and by different individuals and groups within the district through specific actions, dialogue and relationship-building. A very particular set of needs led to the instigation of the programme, and preliminary support for its enactment. As a consequence, specific actions were taken and specific discussions had to forge specific relationships to encourage different schooling practices and relationships from those which perhaps more typically characterise school-community relations in struggling communities. A variety of discussions were held between different members of the district, school and local community at different stages to foster its instigation, development and consolidation. Kemmis *et al.*'s (2014) conception of interacting 'doings', 'sayings' and 'relatings' are

useful resources to help make sense of the specific acts, dialogue and relationship-building which helped to forge changed school-community relations and engaged schooling practices – pedagogies of connection and reconnection (Comber & Kamler, 2004). These theoretical resources are a useful vehicle for shedding light upon the particularity of practice which characterises such school-community associations, the individual phases in their development, and as a potentially productive technology to assist those in other sites to engage in the necessarily situated inquiries to improve their own school-community circumstances. Such an approach demands education be understood in more encompassing ways, and for teachers to see their teaching practice as ecologically arranged with other practices within and beyond the physical boundary of the school. Teacher-Preservice and inservice teacher development focused on such boundary-crossing is essential for improved engagement and student learning within the classroom.

While the challenges of working in complex communities should not be underestimated, the data does provide evidence of how a concerted, resourced, systemic approach within one school district helped to instantiate a different set of schooling conditions than had existed previously. Responsive, agentic actions, dialogue and relationship-building helped encourage more productive individual and collective schooling practices to become established. And these ‘new beginnings’ served as the stimulus for further productive change, displaying the potential to become established as sedimented practices, and conditions for practice – new practice architectures – to challenge more established and problematic associations described within much of the school-community

literature. While such work, dialogue and interactions are not easy, they do hold within them the capacity to better understand the details of productive change under challenging circumstances.

References

Comber, B. & Kamler, B. (2004) Getting out of deficit: Pedagogies of reconnection, *Teaching Education*, 15(3), 293-310.

Crump, S. (1997) Schools and their community: Tensions and tradeoffs, in: M. McClure & J. Lindle (Eds) *Expertise versus responsiveness in children's worlds: Politics in school, home and community relationships* (London, Falmer Press).

Epstein, J. & Sanders, M. (2000) Connecting home, school, and community: New directions for social research, in: M. Hallinan (Ed) *Handbook of the Sociology of Education* (New York, Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers).

Harding, D. (2011) Rethinking the cultural context of schooling decisions in disadvantaged neighborhoods: From deviant subculture to cultural heterogeneity, *Sociology of Education*, 84(4), 322-339.

Hawley, A. (1986) *Human ecology: A theoretical essay* (Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press).

Kemmis, S., Wilkinson, J., Edwards-Groves, C., Hardy, I., Grootenboer, P. & Bristol, L.
(2014) *Changing practices, changing education*. (Singapore: Springer).

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*
(Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Leonard, J. (2011) Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory to understand community
partnerships: A historical case study of one urban high school, *Urban Education*, 46(5),
987-1010.

Levin, B. & Riffel, J. (1997) Schools' understanding of changing communities: in M.
McClure & J. Lindle (Eds) *Expertise versus responsiveness in children's worlds: Politics
in school, home and community relationships* (London, Falmer Press).

Lindle, J. (1997) Introduction and overview: Mapping shifting community relations in
children's worlds – expertise vs responsiveness, in: M. McClure & J. Lindle (Eds)
*Expertise versus responsiveness in children's worlds: Politics in school, home and
community relationships* (London, Falmer Press).

Long, N. (1958) The local community as an ecology-of-games, *American Journal of
Sociology*, 64(3), 251-261.

Mawhinney, H. & Kerchner, C. (1997) The microecology of school-community links, *Journal of Education Policy*, 12(1-2), 29-36.

Merz, C. & Furman, G. (1997) *Community and schools: Promise and paradox* (New York, Teachers College Press).

Sanders, M. (2003) Community involvement in schools: From concept to practice, *Education and Urban Society*, 35(2), 161-180.

Schatzki, T. (2002) *The site of the social: A philosophical account of the constitution of social life and change* (University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press).

Shank, G. (2002) *Qualitative research: A personal skills approach* (Upper Saddle River, NJ, Pearson).

Thomson, P. (2006) Miners, diggers, ferrets and show-men: School-community projects that affirm and unsettle identities and place, *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(1), 81-96.

Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning and identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).