

Chapter 12

The Impact of School–Community Involvement on Students, Teachers, and the Community

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ABSTRACT

Business and community groups have a long history of involvement in schools. Although their role in schools is gaining prominence and recognition in national and state government education policies, few Australian studies have investigated this phenomenon from the perspectives and experiences of all the stakeholders: students, teachers, and the community. This chapter seeks to increase understanding of school-community involvement by reporting on a study conducted within two high schools in Adelaide, South Australia. Drawing on interviews with students, staff, and the community, and inductive grounded theory research techniques, this chapter examines current perspectives and experiences with a view to informing future policy development. Findings indicate that while many positive outcomes occur when schools and the community work together, the potential of school-community involvement is not always fully realised. The recommendations aim to redress this by enhancing opportunities, reviewing policies, and building capacity within schools and the community.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we examine the practice of school-community involvement. In particular we are concerned with the impact that school-community involvement may be having on students, teachers

and the community. School-community involvement has the potential to benefit many people and organisations. Community and business organisations can contribute to and support schools by providing resources, finances and social support (Hands, 2010). Each arrangement is unique and

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this can be challenging for schools to manage. This chapter examines current arrangements by exploring the perceptions of students, teachers and community personnel regarding the impact of school-community involvement.

BACKGROUND

By helping to develop skills and capacities, the community can provide multiple opportunities for achieving and increasing learning and wellbeing outcomes within schools. Consequently, community involvement has become an integral part of many schools. Throughout this chapter the term “school-community activities” is used to refer to the many varied things that schools and the community can do together (e.g., programs and services). The diversity of activities across a school reflects a wide range of needs and preferences, and organisational capacities and constraints. At any given time, school-community activities at different stages of development co-exist; that is, some activities are under construction, some in progress and others concluding. Activities may be once-off or ongoing. The extent of involvement can be considered on a continuum from no—to extensive—involvement. Other variables include size, duration, participation and location (Gregoric, 2013).

The paradigm¹ of school-community involvement is much more than individual school-community activities. School-community involvement is about the collective and integrative nature of individual school-community activities. Sanders (2003, p. 162) considered community involvement in schools as the “connections between schools and individuals, businesses, and formal and informal organisations and institutions in a community.” Similarly for the purposes of this chapter, school-community involvement is defined as the many ways in which schools and community and business organisations interact. Relationships between students, teachers, com-

munity and business organisations and others actualise school-community involvement.

School-community interactions are inherently complex and multi-dimensional involving the convergence of people, activities and organisations that manifests differently in different schools (Gregoric, 2013). Awareness of this confluence, and how it changes over time, is key to understanding the complexity of school-community interactions. The school-community interaction framework captures this complexity by highlighting the core components enabling school-community involvement (see Figure 1 below).

The school-community interaction framework (see Figure 1) highlights the dynamics between people, organisations and activities associated with school-community involvement. The focus in this chapter is on one of these core elements — the people, with a focus on students, teachers and the community. Yet in so doing acknowledgement and discussion of the other elements is unavoidable.

A range of terms, such as partnerships, collaborations and connections, are used in the academic literature to describe school-community relationships. As highlighted by Kowalski (2010), the lack of consistency in their definition and use is problematic as findings about one specific relationship type may not necessarily be transferable to relationships of a different nature. For example, “school-community partnership” frequently, but not always, refers to the more mutually beneficial arrangements. Less engaging relationships have, however, been referred to as “school-community partnerships” within the literature (for example, Broadbent and Cacciattolo (2013) include teacher participation in a community based youth career and transition network). Regardless of how defined, the focus here is in the co-existence of all these different types of relationships. Therefore, the broad multi-party orientation adopted in this chapter encompasses all school-community relationship styles. The involvement of families in schools is not considered in this chapter.

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