

The *CommunityMatters* approach

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... school climate research supports the conclusion that affirming interpersonal relationships and opportunities for all to achieve mastery can increase achievement levels and reduce antisocial behaviors. For example, Glasser (1998) documented the transformation of an inner-city, low-achieving school beset with antisocial behavior among its students. The transformation toward academic achievement and prosocial behavior was because of a systematic change in the ways students and teachers related to one another – a change that began by emphasizing the elimination of coercive practices intended to ‘motivate’ students.

McEvoy & Welker 2000

CommunityMatters is concerned with promoting social and emotional wellbeing in a sustainable way. This promotion permeates all aspects of a school. It involves all students, all staff, the whole school community, what the school does and how it does it. *CommunityMatters* also recognises that school communities need to be seen within the context of the broader community, and that they therefore need to work together, in partnership.

Promoting social and emotional wellbeing is achieved by enhancing what are known as the ‘protective factors’. These are factors that contribute to an individual’s capacity to be resilient, and have been identified by a number of researchers (eg Resnick et al 1993; Howard & Johnson 2000). Although obviously some of these are beyond the reach of schools, others are within their sphere of influence. These protective factors include:

- connectedness to family, friends and school
- relationship with a caring adult
- support, belonging and role-models
- self-esteem
- handling the demands of school
- belief in one’s own ability to cope
- sense of control
- individual disposition.

CommunityMatters bases its approach to enhancing protective factors, and thus promoting student wellbeing, on the following three models.

The 'whole student' approach (the *CommunityMatters* model)

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The whole student approach, p 91

This model is useful because it focuses on what protective factors look like for students in a school context. Positive learning and developmental outcomes in students depend on the ongoing opportunities for participation and the quality of relationships surrounding them (Glasser 1998). Successful schools enhance protective factors when they use a whole student approach, and:

- build caring, respectful relationships – offering support, compassion and trust – including identifying and appropriately supporting those students with particular needs;
- set high and achievable expectations – offering respect, guidance, affirmation and acknowledgement, and building on the strengths of each person, emphasising potential for growth and development;
- provide opportunities for participation, teamwork and contribution – characterised by responsibilities, real decision making, empowerment and building ownership – that create a sense of shared identity, community and belonging.

The whole student approach is detailed in Appendix 1.

The Comprehensive School Mental Health Program (the WHO model)

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The Comprehensive School Mental Health Program, p 92

The promotion of social and emotional wellbeing in schools is for all students, not only those 'at risk' and including those who do not appear to 'fit in' easily. It is separated into four phases in this model: the school environment, the school curriculum, providing additional support, and assessment and referral.

The first phase concerns the entire school community creating a whole school environment that promotes wellbeing. In the second phase, mental health education is provided as part of the general curriculum for all students. The third phase is concerned with providing additional support for those 20–30% of students experiencing problems. Finally, assessment and referrals are available for those 3–12% of students needing additional intervention. *CommunityMatters* is mainly concerned with the first two phases.

The World Health Organization model is detailed in Appendix 2.

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International agencies

The 'whole school' approach (the Health Promoting Schools model)

This model is useful because it focuses on how a school can go about enhancing protective factors for its students. This is best done where the school's community partnerships, ethos and environment, and curriculum all come together. Schools committed to the welfare and learning of all their students are constantly addressing issues such as how they, as whole schools with their own cultures, can be places to which students and staff want to belong. They work towards:

- providing a mutually respectful, inclusive, safe and supportive environment, free from prejudice and discrimination;
- ensuring that the whole curriculum, across all subject areas, promotes wellbeing, by enhancing respect for diversity and providing opportunities for participation, achievement, communication and relationship building;
- working in partnership both within the school community and between the school and outside community for the wellbeing of the school community.

The whole school approach is detailed in Appendix 3.



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The whole school approach, p 93



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SchoolMatters has more information about the World Health Organization model and the Health Promoting Schools model.



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Health promotion

What does our school do now? audit

The first step to take in working through a change process is to discover what is actually happening at the particular place and time. The following audit can be used with different groups in the school (eg staff, students, parents) as a way into understanding a school's present situation. Consider the following points before conducting the audit.

- This audit is meant simply to gauge the position of the school at the moment. It is not a 'test' that you can pass or fail.
- This audit can be conducted before and after a new initiative as an evaluation tool, to measure the extent of change. Identify when you will re-survey the same people.
- Responses of 'unsure' are as valuable as definite ones.
- Decide what you will do with the results, including who they will be reported to. The results could be reported back to all the individuals and groups of people involved.
- The results of the audit could become core information for your school's strategic planning.
- This audit complements those in *SchoolMatters* and the student survey in this book, pages 73–76. The combined results will give you a more complete picture.
- You may need to adapt some of the questions to suit your context, adding others if needed.
- Before conducting the audit with a range of groups, try it out within the staff so that any gaps and weaknesses can be identified and addressed.
- The audit can be conducted by and for a range of groups, students, parents and staff.
- Consider consulting with focus groups as well as individuals.



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What do our students think? survey, pp 73–76

What does our school do now? audit

At a whole school level do we have a positive approach to enhancing protective factors and promoting the mental health of all members of the school community?

| Practice | Strongly agree | Agree | Unsure | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|--------|----------|-------------------|
| 1 All of our students feel safe in our school. | | | | | |
| 2 All of our students feel valued in our school. | | | | | |
| 3 All of our staff feel safe in our school. | | | | | |
| 4 All of our staff feel valued in our school. | | | | | |
| 5 None of our students are stereotyped according to their cultural background. | | | | | |
| 6 All of our students are encouraged to participate in school life because we offer a range of activities that accounts for their interests. | | | | | |
| 7 We recognise and cater for a variety of learning styles. | | | | | |
| 8 All of our students can achieve success on a regular basis. | | | | | |
| 9 All of our students know that they are expected to achieve to a high personal standard. | | | | | |
| 10 All of our students and staff know that discrimination against other students or staff is not tolerated in our school. | | | | | |
| 11 Aboriginal Studies and/or Torres Strait Islander Studies are incorporated into teaching and learning, either as discrete subjects or across the curriculum. | | | | | |
| 12 Our curriculum includes diverse representations of people and communities. | | | | | |
| 13 We have school policies on such issues as diversity, bullying and harassment, and antidiscrimination. | | | | | |
| 14 We have an effective and comprehensive pastoral care program across the school. | | | | | |

| Practice | Strongly agree | Agree | Unsure | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|--------|----------|-------------------|
| 15 Parents/care givers can be confident that at least one member of staff will be aware of and responsible for the wellbeing needs of their child. | | | | | |
| 16 Our students feel confident that there is at least one significant adult in the school who will listen to them in confidence, and advocate for them. | | | | | |
| 17 We have conflict resolution processes in place to deal with conflicts between individuals and groups, and students and teachers. | | | | | |
| 18 We involve a diverse range of parents, care givers and community members in school business. | | | | | |
| 19 Our school council (or equivalent) represents the diversity of the school. | | | | | |
| 20 We are well informed about the community we operate within, and aware of issues that impact upon that community. | | | | | |
| 21 We consult in a meaningful and ongoing way with local communities. | | | | | |
| 22 We involve a wide range of community members in school matters. | | | | | |
| 23 We provide opportunities for staff to undertake professional development in cultural diversity teaching and learning. | | | | | |
| 24 We ensure that staff undertake professional development in working with diversity. | | | | | |
| 25 We support staff to collaborate in dealing positively with challenging issues, such as homophobia. | | | | | |

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Community, culture and identity

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Well, we found that in addition to family, that kids who felt that strong sense of closeness to school also did better – in a number of the areas we looked at. And by closeness to school we meant the following: Did kids perceive teachers as being fair? Did they perceive teachers as caring about them – and did they have a sense of belonging, about being in school? Now we did find that kids who did better academically tended to be happier kids, but above and beyond the influence of academic performance, that sense of bonding and attachment to school was very important ... And I'll tell you what intrigued me about that. This was the significant finding for school – that bonding and attachment – it wasn't the size of school, the student/teacher ratio, or whether it was public or private or religious – those structural characteristics did not make a difference.

Professor Michael Resnick in conversation with Norman Swan, ABC Radio National's Health Report, 22 September 1997

It has been shown that students who feel that they are treated fairly and cared about, and have a sense of belonging or connectedness to school, tend to be happier and achieve more success than those who do not. In other words, they have better mental health outcomes. To understand what this means for schools, it is necessary to explore how they, as discrete communities within broader communities, can be places in which young people are treated fairly and cared about, and with which they feel connected. To do this, we will be looking at what 'community' is and how a person's identity is impacted on by the community. We will also consider how cultural issues impact on both communities and individuals.

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Resilience sites

Community

The most important influences (both positive and negative) in shaping the identities of Indigenous young people appear to be: family and the wider Indigenous community – values, practices, support; significant people within the school – teachers, principals, parents/carers, AIEWs, peers; school systems and activities – curriculum, language, alternative programs, vocational education, Indigenous cultural activities; role models, particularly Indigenous role models; and the wider Australian community (eg media, the police).

Purdie et al 2000, Positive Self-Identity for Indigenous Students and Its Relationship to School Outcomes: Final Report, Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, p ix

Community is broadly defined as any group of people with interests in common. Given the huge latitude of such a definition (eg the global community) it is essential to think about communities in their contexts. A community can be seen as an historically, geographically or culturally connected group of people. The term can also be used to describe a group of people with a particular common interest or circumstance (eg the school community).

Belonging in a community teaches people about relationships and values, and enhances connectedness and resilience. In this sense it is a protective factor in mental health. Feelings of connection to a community can help people to:

- achieve full intellectual potential
- attain cultural identity
- know the importance of family
- think logically
- develop a conscience
- become self-reliant
- cope with stress and frustration
- handle fear and worry
- develop future relationships.

Above list adapted from Swan, P & Raphael, B 1995, Ways Forward, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health Policy National Consultancy Report, Commonwealth of Australia. Commonwealth of Australia copyright reproduced by permission

Communities of people exist in countless ways, alongside and within each other. There are communities of people who live in the same area or region, who have the same religious beliefs or who share the same sexual orientation. People of different ages, or at different stages, also have their own cultures. They are formed around activities like skateboarding or travel, styles of music like hip-hop or country, and interests like playing video games or bridge. 'Virtual communities' are becoming increasingly culturally significant and are highly relevant to many young people. While people may move freely between some communities, other communities are so much a part of people's identities that moving outside of them, voluntarily or not, can be very difficult.

Communities, from the Australian nation to the local football club, develop their own cultures – their own network of beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and history. They can develop unwritten or written codes or rules of behaviour, in which may be expectations that unless you follow the rules (eg about religion, gender roles or marriage partners) you will be rejected.

While some experience small communities, in particular, as extremely supportive, others (who do not conform) can find them difficult. Being rejected by a community can result in feelings of alienation and powerlessness, with potential mental health implications.

Some communities have evolved from a heritage dating back many thousands of years (eg Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities). These communities have a crucial role in maintaining and nurturing cultural tradition and identity. However, even communities that have developed over long periods of time can be fragmented through experiences of trauma (eg forced removal, torture, war).

Communities can be stereotyped by 'outsiders'. This is particularly so if they represent values that are different from, and sometimes in opposition to, the values of the 'outsiders'. It is quite possible that such differences exist in one location, such as in a town or school. It is common for individuals to identify with a particular community, but not with the stereotypes that characterise it.

Many people also successfully move between communities. Gaining experience of diverse communities enhances resilience in that it can enrich our understandings about difference, and makes it less threatening.

Students inevitably have to move between their 'outside school' community and the 'in school' community. For some students this transition is reasonably easy, with both communities having similarities. For other students there may be such disparities that the transition becomes difficult, leading to alienation and feelings of disconnectedness.

Because social and emotional wellbeing is promoted when students feel a sense of belonging with both communities, the teaching, learning and

ethos of the school will be enhanced by its connections and partnerships with the broader community outside the school. Working in partnership brings with it invaluable resources and relationships to which the school would otherwise not have access.

Current work by schools in developing partnerships with the broader community often ignores two critical dimensions: identifying who is 'community' and creating appropriate processes for establishing community partnerships. *CommunityMatters* explores these two dimensions.

The school community

... partnerships with communities of interest outside school settings ... will enhance mental health and mental health literacy.

National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989

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Health promotion

Schools are communities that exist within wider communities, and they need to be understood this way. For this reason *CommunityMatters* encourages schools to establish partnerships with the community that will holistically address the social and emotional wellbeing needs of all students. There are a number of ways that 'school community' can be defined, but in this context the definition is broad, and includes:

- parents, family, friends, teachers and community members (the caring relationships);
- community organisations, doctors, youth services, police, communities of faith, local welfare and health agencies, and service groups (the support services);
- mental health services, psychologists, psychiatrists and juvenile justice agencies (specialist intervention and treatment).

As with communities generally, each school has its own culture. The attitudes, beliefs, behaviour and history of the school all contribute to its culture. With an understanding firstly of the mental health and wellbeing needs of students, and secondly of the diversity within the student group, schools need to examine whether their particular culture does in fact promote the wellbeing of all their students.

'... educators need to approach learning not merely as the acquisition of knowledge but as the production of cultural practices that offers students a sense of identity, place and hope.'

Giroux 1992

Culture

Culture is so much a part of us that we do not realize that we might behave differently from others. Most of us do not think that sitting at a table to eat, eating three meals a day, having different foods for breakfast and dinner, brushing our teeth, or sleeping in a bed are culturally determined behaviors. We know these habits and customs as the only way to behave.

Gollnick, D & Chinn, P 1990, Multicultural Education in a Pluralistic Society, 3rd edn, Merrill Publishing Co, Columbus, p 7

There are many meanings of the word 'culture'. *CommunityMatters* defines it as the network of beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and histories that are prevalent among communities of people. The following understandings inform this definition.

- Cultures are shared systems, but inherently diverse. Shared cultural patterns bind people together as an identifiable group, but there are many individual, group and subcultural differences within cultures.
- Everyone has culture, which is learned from birth; it is not genetic or biological and it is more than what part of the world we originate from; it is a lens through which we see the world.
- Culture is so much a part of us, we do not realise we are culturally determined. Culture is an integral part of how we think, feel and behave and may 'seem natural'.
- Cultures are a great source of strength for those people who feel connected to and embedded in them. They can be a source of great difficulty for people within them who do not 'follow the rules'.
- Being dynamic, not static, cultures change over time; they adapt and accommodate to other cultures, environments, available resources and technologies.
- People with multiple cultural backgrounds need to negotiate ways of moving between them.
- Within nations or societies or communities there are dominant and marginalised cultures. The dominant culture of a school may favour certain styles of behaviour, ways of talking and interacting, and privilege certain students over others.

'Culture is socially created forms of human interaction and cohesion.'
Cope & Kalantzis 1997, p 4

'... culture is not simply "a factor", or "an influence", or "a dimension" but ... it is in process, in everything we do, say, or think in or out of school.'
Spindler, G & L 1994, Pathways to Cultural Awareness: Cultural Therapy with Teachers and Students, Corwin Press, USA, p 2. © 1994. Reprinted by permission of Corwin Press, Inc.

Identity

When young people have positive conceptions of themselves both as Indigenous people and as students, attachment and commitment to school, and successful school performance will be more likely outcomes than when there are excessive contradictions or tensions between the various aspects of self.

Purdie et al 2000, Positive Self-Identity for Indigenous Students and Its Relationship to School Outcomes: Final Report, Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, p ix

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Education and health reports

Our sense of identity is one of the basic contributors to our mental health. It impacts on our thoughts and behaviours, our feelings of connectedness and our resilience. We construct our identities according to such things as where we come from, what we believe in, who we relate to, how we belong, how we behave and what we do. Because identity is fundamentally about who we are and how we fit in, it is crucial to situate it in the context of community and culture.

The questions 'Who am I?' and 'How do I belong?' go to the very heart of our human existence. Most students are acutely aware of issues around who they are (and who they are not), where they fit in, whether they are valued or liked by teachers and peers, and whether they are different from others. The ways in which they come to terms with these identity issues will be closely tied to their feelings of connectedness and resilience. In this way, identity has a direct bearing on their mental health status.

It is important to remember that identity is not static. It refers to all the things that define who we are at any given moment in our lives. Identity refers to much more than, say, ethnicity. Identity is shaped by our experiences which change and develop as we develop and grow older. Identity for adolescents and young adults is also shaped by their stages of development, so that issues such as relationships with friends, explorations with sexuality and concerns with body image, tend to become significant.

Identity includes:

- gender and sexuality
- community, cultural and religious backgrounds
- family relationships and situation
- religious and political beliefs
- relationships with friends
- economic, employment and community status
- community networks and support

- abilities and experiences of achievement
- physical characteristics including body shape and size
- mental and physical health
- intellect and individual learning styles
- geographic location.

'Race' has not been included in this list because it is not agreed whether it is a useful or valid way of classifying people. Racial classification has been, and still is, inextricably linked to beliefs in racial purity, superiority and exclusion. It is more useful to look at the individual elements of what used to be called a 'racial identity'.

Some aspects of identity are given, some can be chosen and some can be changed. Where we do have some control is how much significance we place on each aspect. We can do something about our relationships with friends, but it is generally accepted that we cannot do much about our sexual orientation or gender. It can be a fact that a person is from a religious background, but they may be able to decide whether this will, or will not, be an important part of their identity.

People, however, do not exist in isolation. The relationships we have with individuals and communities are basic to how we see ourselves. How we are reflected by other people can be fundamental to how we construct our own identities.

The attitude and behaviour of significant others are the most important factors in the development and maintenance of a positive self-identity for Indigenous students.

Purdie et al 2000, Positive Self-Identity for Indigenous Students and Its Relationship to School Outcomes: Final Report, Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra, p ix

There can be serious mental health implications if a person's positive sense of identity is threatened by a widening of the gap between how they see themselves and how others see them.

Some examples of this are:

- Two children are at the same school and both identify as Kurna. One has a lighter skin colour than the other and his friends and teachers keep telling him that he cannot really be Aboriginal. He begins to move away from his community, rejecting his culture and suffering depression in the process.
- A student takes a great deal of pride in being responsible for running the family household, which is done efficiently and happily. At school he is



Enhancing Resilience 1 has classroom activities around culture, identity and society.

very quiet and the teachers tell him and his mother that he has low self-esteem. He gets really upset about this, and refuses to go to school any more.

- A student has diabetes which she has managed herself very successfully for a number of years. Her school treats her diabetes as a disability. This causes her to doubt her sense of identity, which up to now has been grounded in her own abilities to take care of herself and be independent. She becomes withdrawn, refusing to participate in school camps and excursions.

It is probable that the more resilient a person is, the less impact this widening gap will have.

Community, culture and identity in Australia

Community, culture and identity are inextricably interwoven. In a country like Australia with such diversity of communities and cultures, and a relatively young national identity, this is particularly significant.

The 1996 census found that the total population of Australia was almost 18 million. Of these:

- Some 353,000 (or about 2%) were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and around 3.9 million people (25%) had been born overseas in over 200 countries.
- Fourteen per cent of Australians were born in non-English-speaking countries, a further 3.8 million having one or both parents born overseas.
- There were 14 million people who only spoke English at home, while 2.6 million people spoke a language other than English.
- People identified with 92 religious denominations and more than 280 major languages, including more than 150 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

Australian Bureau of Statistics 1996a

Multiculturalism is now a defining characteristic of contemporary Australian life. Not only are there many cultural groups but, importantly, many relationships exist between groups. This raises the question of whether it is possible to neatly define Australian culture. How, for example, do beliefs in such notions as 'mateship', 'diversity', 'individualism', 'she'll be right', 'globalisation' and 'a fair go' fit together?

WWW

Statistics

The policy on multiculturalism identifies key principles, such as:

- loyalty to Australia – a commitment to Australia’s interests and future;
- acceptance of the Australian system – all Australians are required to accept the basic structures and principles of Australian society (eg democracy, the laws, the Constitution);
- mutual respect – all Australians have the right to express their culture and beliefs and this involves the reciprocal responsibility to accept the rights of others to express their views and values.

As there are different views about multiculturalism in Australia, it sometimes emerges as an issue surrounded by intense feelings. This has been evident, for example, with some political parties advocating the end of the policy. Conflicting points of view often centre on what the notions of equality/equity involve. Some argue that it means treating everyone in the same way. Others argue that it means acknowledging difference, especially when that difference is associated with disadvantage.

However, one of the issues that is clear in Australia is that power is not distributed evenly within or between cultures. The dynamics of power relationships and the way they affect individuals and groups must be an integral part of our understanding of cultures. Such an understanding is essential for the creation of school environments and curriculum that will value diversity, and thus promote the mental health of all members of the school community.

Diversity and dominance

A school curriculum or environment can appear on the surface to be culturally inclusive. However, without an understanding of how the dominant culture works to privilege some and marginalise others, this may be little more than tokenism. A contentious issue is whether people from marginalised cultures need to learn how to operate within the dominant culture, and whether this can be done without compromising their own cultural identities. Tackling this issue in partnership with communities will give students and staff a key to understanding the relationship between self-identity and power.

In any attempt to understand the complexity of culture and community, and what impact this has on individual students, it is necessary to know and understand more about the diversity of Australian society. Chapter 3 addresses issues for groups of students who are most likely to be marginalised.

A whole school approach to the development of an inclusive school environment where all young people feel safe, valued, engaged and purposeful, will tackle some of the ways that power is embedded in culture, including the school culture. This will be accomplished most effectively while working in partnership with the community.

‘Students would learn “to take risks, to struggle with ongoing relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside of their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of a world which is ‘not yet’ – in order to be able to alter the grounds upon which life is lived”.’

*Simon in Gollnick & Chinn
1990, p 32*

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Diversity and wellbeing, p 33

The *CommunityMatters* Partnership Process

Health promotion is carried out by and with people, not on or to people. It improves both the ability of individuals to take action, and the capacity of groups, organizations or communities to influence the determinants of health.

World Health Organization 1997

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Working together –
community does
matter, p 81

This section of *CommunityMatters* begins to explore ways in which schools can establish partnerships with their diverse communities to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of the school community. Working in partnership is addressed in Chapter 5, informed by understandings about the issues for particular diverse groups.

This section:

- provides a model of a partnership process;
- identifies partnership principles;
- provides a way of identifying the community.

The *CommunityMatters* partnership process is intended as a guide, to help schools work strategically in both establishing partnerships and working with them. The domains that we will focus on are fundamental, but often ignored. These are the first three: identifying the community, establishing community partnerships and planning together (see diagram on page 21).

Working in partnership to promote the social and emotional wellbeing of students will strengthen the care and support needed to promote mental health. This can include:

- the caring relationships (eg parents, family, friends, teachers, community members);
- the support services (eg community organisations, doctors, youth services, police, communities of faith, local agencies, service groups);
- specialist intervention and treatment (eg mental health services, psychologists, psychiatrists, juvenile justice agencies).



The *CommunityMatters* Partnership Process

What is a partnership?

The following understandings about partnerships apply as much to partnerships of two people as they do to those of many people or groups.

Partnerships can be defined as people having a joint interest and can be established for short-term or long-term ventures. They exist on a number of levels, such as formally or informally, collaboratively or cooperatively. Through partnerships, people pool resources, share risks, increase efficiency, and integrate and coordinate services.

Good partnerships are essential to good mental health, promoting feelings of connectedness and building communities. They recognise, accommodate and value the different attitudes, beliefs and ways of behaving (the culture) of the partners.

Working in partnership is likely to produce better outcomes than acting alone (Melaville & Blank 1998), though it may take longer, both in the short term and long term. This means that considerations of social capital become as important as those of economic capital.



Because all schools are different, there is no one right way to approach the issue of establishing effective school/community partnerships for mental health promotion. They will, however, have more chance of success if:

- the administration is committed to a whole school approach to the issue;
- there is a particular person or group responsible for overseeing the social and emotional wellbeing of students (eg the core group);
- staff members understand the importance of working in partnership to improve the wellbeing of their students, and are supportive.

Collaborative partnership principles

Years ago, former Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders, with her tongue firmly planted in her cheek, recounted a definition of collaboration as 'an unnatural act between non-consenting adults'. She went on to say: 'We all say we want to collaborate, but what we really mean is that we want to continue doing things as we have always done them while others change to fit what we are doing'.

UCLA 1999, p 1

If a partnership is to be one in which the partners have equal influence and outcomes are not fixed in advance – in other words, collaborative – there are some basic principles to be followed that themselves reflect good mental health promotion. These are:

- valuing partnerships
- building trusting and respectful relationships
- community participation and community accountability
- a long-term view of change
- social justice
- affirmative action that challenges power relations.

Above list adapted from Parks Community Health Service 1997

The interest in such collaborations is bolstered by the renewed concern about widespread fragmentation of school and community interventions. The hope is that by integrating available resources, a significant impact can be made on 'at risk' factors.

UCLA 1999, p 5

Identifying your community



‘Initially, the group should be limited to those with a very clear stake in the outcomes of the group and should be relatively small.’

Karasoff 1998

The first and most important step in establishing any kind of partnership with a diverse school community is to establish who makes up that community, and what resources, services and programs are available to it. Schools in rural and remote areas may need to expand their idea of community to draw on a wider circle of support and expertise.

If your school already has established a core group you are under way. If not, identify and establish a core group of people within the school community who have both a responsibility for and a commitment to the social and emotional wellbeing of students. This can include people who represent welfare, student management, curriculum and professional development. This group could be an existing pastoral care or student welfare group, and needs to work with or report directly to the principal.



SchoolMatters has more information about establishing a core group.

The core team will need to have a good understanding of the school community as well as the wider local community to ensure that:

- social and emotional wellbeing is seen in its social and cultural contexts;
- strengths and needs can be properly assessed and prioritised;
- both school and community resources can be identified and used for maximum benefit;
- appropriate school/community partnerships in mental health promotion can be developed;
- strategic planning, professional development and implementation can proceed in partnership;
- review, evaluation and future planning can be conducted.

Who is our community? database

The database on pages 25–26 has been designed to help identify the community context of the individual school by mapping what cultural and community assets exist in the school and community. It asks for contact details of people within a range of community- and government-based organisations and services, as well as individuals. It is essential to establish contact and communication and/or to strengthen existing lines of communication with these groups, in order to promote mental health in a holistic way.

The database can be completed by all the staff in small groups or the core group, and will provide the background information that is needed to proceed.

Who is our community? database

| 'In school' community | |
|--|--|
| 1 Who on the school staff (teachers and support staff) are interested in and committed to mental health promotion? | |
| 2 Who on the school staff identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander? | |
| 3 Who on the school staff identify as coming from a non-English-speaking background? | |
| 4 How many students are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander? (include numbers and percentages) | |
| 5 What diverse cultural and linguistic groups do our students belong to? (include numbers and percentages) | |
| 6 What cultural groups within our community contribute to our school's teaching and learning, and how do they do this? | |
| 7 What cultures contribute to our school's ethos and environment and how do they do this? | |
| 8 What cultures are involved in our school's partnerships and services, and in what way? | |
| 9 What local community groups do school staff belong to? | |
| 10 What local community groups do our students belong to? | |

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Continued

| 'Out of school' community | |
|---|--|
| 11 Are there any other cultures, apart from those above, that contribute to our school's teaching and learning (and how)? | |
| 12 What local, state and/or federal government services are available that actively promote social and emotional wellbeing? (include contact details) | |
| 13 What other services are available that actively promote social and emotional wellbeing? (include contact details) | |
| 14 What organisations specifically deal with the concerns of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and what programs do they offer? (include contact details) | |
| 15 Who do these contacts identify as being important individuals within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (eg Elders)? | |
| 16 What organisations specifically deal with issues of same-sex attracted people and what programs do they offer? (include contact details) | |
| 17 What organisations specifically deal with people with disabilities and what programs do they offer? (include contact details) | |
| 18 What organisations deal with people from non-English-speaking backgrounds and what programs do they offer? (include contact details) | |
| 19 Who do these contacts identify as being important individuals within their communities? | |
| 20 Who are ex-students who may have something to contribute? (include contact details) | |
| 21 Who are other key people or groups in the community who would contribute to promoting student wellbeing? (include contact details) | |

Staff activities for professional development

These activities have been included as examples of how material in this book can be used for professional development. In doing so, schools will become familiar with the issues, and consider what they mean for their school and classrooms.

It is the failure or inability of the school to bridge between conflicting cultures that renders schooling a risk-inducing phenomenon for many students. Since learning is such a personal achievement, it is critically dependent on the learner's engagement in the process. When the learning process comes to be associated with that which is 'not me', that which is alien to me, learning task engagement is interfered with.

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School cultures can position some groups of students (and staff) in ways that make connections with the school community difficult, if not impossible to achieve. If schools want to provide all of their students with environments and experiences that promote mental health, it is important to pay particular attention to areas where connections may need to be enhanced. In the same way as people can feel alienated from any community, so too can students feel alienated from their school community. The difference is that schools have a responsibility for the wellbeing of their students, whereas other communities may not take on that responsibility.

The dimensions of student alienation have been described (Mau 1992) as:

- powerlessness
- meaninglessness
- normlessness
- social estrangement.

The challenge for teachers and schools is to transform these dimensions of alienation into dimensions of connectedness. The following activities are designed to facilitate the beginning of this process.



SchoolMatters has an analysis of Mau's dimensions of alienation.



Enhancing Resilience 1
has ideas for forming
small groups.

1 What helped you to feel connected in the most successful and satisfying workplace that you have worked in? In other words, what kept you going back each day?

- a Either as a whole staff group or in smaller groups of about ten people, brainstorm responses to the above question.
 - Accept all ideas and contributions.
 - Consider the full range of positive workplace structures, both formal and informal.
- b Ask small groups to report back.
- c Discuss how the staff responses might compare with student responses to a similar question about school.
- d Provide staff with the dimensions of alienation for students (refer to *SchoolMatters*), and ask them to comment on similarities and differences between these and their responses.
- e Follow up with activities 2 and 3.

2 Making connections

Consider dividing into small groups by using a method from *Enhancing Resilience 1* to mix the membership of groups.

- a Consider and discuss hypotheticals 1–4 with staff.
- b Brainstorm the structures and strategies your school has in place that would help these students make connections.
- c What else could your school do to strengthen connections for all students?

Hypothetical 1

Jack is Koori, lives in the city, misses school noticeably often for a number of reasons, including family and community commitments, and regularly does not complete his homework.

Hypothetical 2

May's parents struggle with speaking English. May lives in a largely Cambodian community, doesn't feel comfortable inviting non-Cambodians home and has no non-Cambodian friends at school; her parents cannot cope with parent–teacher interviews.

Hypothetical 3

Saroya's family have recently been accepted as refugees after spending ten months in a detention centre; she cannot speak English well; her father was killed in Iraq; she has no idea where her older sister is.

Hypothetical 4

James lives in a small regional town, does not have a girlfriend, would rather watch a video than football, desperately wants to move to the city, and is confused by his sexuality.

The experiences of culture, reality gaps, prejudice and stereotypical assumptions, can seriously affect learning outcomes.

Connectedness may depend on the:

- degree of feeling accepted
- English language acquisition
- cultural conflicts within the school
- the degree of trauma experienced as a refugee
- perceived cultural differences acting as barriers to friendship.

By definition, recently arrived refugees need time and appropriate processes/experiences to 'connect' with new circumstances. They or their parents may also have experienced war-trauma, torture or loss through death or separation, and will probably still be experiencing post-traumatic stress.

Young people who are perceived to be same-sex attracted often experience intense harassment, including hostility and violence. There is increasing evidence that homosexuality is a contributing factor in self-harm/suicide among young people.



Mau's dimensions of student alienation are explored in *SchoolMatters*.

3 Explore Mau's dimensions of student alienation to understand more about what connectedness means for students.

- a Divide into small groups. Consider using a method from *Enhancing Resilience 1* to mix the membership of groups.
- b Distribute the worksheet on page 31, which uses terms from Mau 1992, to the groups.
- c Ask groups to:
 - clarify what they think is meant by each of the dimensions (ie powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness and social estrangement);
 - check these ideas against Mau's analysis in *SchoolMatters*;
 - make a list of possible opposites (dimensions of student connectedness) for each dimension of alienation;
 - discuss ideas of how the whole school could transform these dimensions of connectedness into practical strategies (write these on the worksheet).
- d Feedback ideas to the whole group, either immediately or by posting completed worksheets on the staffroom wall.
- e As a way of prioritising the ideas, ask group members to 'vote with three dots' the strategies that they think will make the biggest difference.
- f Collate votes and report to the whole staff, possibly at the next meeting, to discuss further action.

From alienation to connectedness

| Dimensions of student alienation | Dimensions of student connectedness | Strategies for connectedness |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Powerlessness | empowerment | goal-setting section in each student's diary |
| Meaninglessness | | |
| Normlessness | | |
| Social estrangement | | |

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