

TOWARDS A 'LEARNING COMMUNITY': THE CASE OF RANA PRIMARY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT

As we look at various schools, there appear to be those that can be broadly categorised as 'successful', or in the predominant terminology exhibit 'quality' features. In such schools, children seem to be learning effectively, there is a strong sense of community and interaction, and often support derives from the wider community context. This is usually accompanied by a strong sense of 'ownership', by all stakeholders, of both context and 'content', demonstrated in a particular allegiance to the school and the learning that occurs within. However, these are often generalised perceptions and we have little in terms of strong basis for such assertions or valuations. Accordingly, acknowledging the potentiality for such schools, we need to discover more about them, what it is that contributes to situations of 'Learning Communities' where teachers, pupils, and, to varying extents, the community become involved in educative contexts and processes. The notion of schools as learning communities has attracted increasing interest and comment within Australia in recent years, and has been the subject of various Departmental publications, often, however, without seeking to examine the school-based reality of such an approach to schooling. The focus of the paper is upon a case study of one particular school in rural New South Wales. It is not being held as a paradigm of a 'learning community', but rather is an instance where there is strong community involvement and perception that it is a 'successful' school. The study involved qualitative approaches, in-depth observation, interviews and informal discussion with all members of the school (students, staff, parents and community members) over the 1996 school year.

INTRODUCTION

In 1995, the New South Wales Department of School Education (DSE) produced a discussion paper which sought to "*promote the building of learning communities throughout all sectors of the Department as a basis for enhancing professional development and student learning outcomes*" (DSE, 1995: Forward). This DSE approach was based upon the work on learning organisations in USA business contexts by such as Senge (1990) which emphasises a need to develop the capacity of the whole organisation to learn, rather than focussing on the learning of isolated individuals. However, the DSE approach has been derived from the American business context, rather than developing an analysis and interpretation focussing on the school context. Once again, then, this is a change imposed from without, and one where the business rhetoric has been 'implanted' without further consideration, and, despite the use of the term 'learning community', the document presents an unchallenged case for 'learning organisations'. It is in this sense, then, that we have sought to argue (see, Cocklin, *et al*, 1996a,b; Coombe, *et al*, 1996) for the adoption of the term *Learning Community* (see, Wagner, 1993) for educational contexts, but within a framework which allows for the interchange of ideas between both perspectives, 'community' and 'organisation'. Accordingly, rather than merely imposing the 'organisational learning' model upon education, as it might be argued the DSE has sought to do, we need to reinterpret it in view of the educational contexts and goals.

What we need, therefore, is to develop approaches which build upon the skills of teachers, which recognise their professional expertise (see, Sellars, 1996), and which provide

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...new guidelines and principles for knowing how to work in, lead and renew our schools in our rapidly changing world; and ones that aren't just borrowed uncritically from the profit-centred world of business. (Hargreaves, 1995:4)

The process, then, is one of reflection-in-action whereby concepts derived from the literature on 'learning organisations' and 'learning communities' are applied within case study sites invoking strategies which

...allow and encourage schools to engage in the kind of democratic dialogue that fosters the development of a polity, a community with shared purpose. (Darling-Hammond, 1993:760)

It was with such perceptions and understandings underpinning the approach that case studies were conducted within rural New South Wales schools (see, Cocklin, *et al.*, 1996a,b; Cocklin & Davis, 1996a,b; Retallick, 1966). The present paper focuses on one particular school, Rana Primary, and examines the basis for considering this context as indicating aspects of the 'learning community' notion as it is enacted in action.

Rana School and The Research

Rana Primary School was opened in 1935, and has been a two-teacher school for most of its history. During the research in 1996, David Kennedy, the Principal, taught Upper Division (Years 3-6), and Bev Osborne, as a long-term casual, taught Lower Division (Kindergarten-Year 2), while there was also a part-time release teacher/librarian, school secretary and school handy-person. There were 38 students at the start of the research, 18 (9 girls, 9 boys) in Upper Division, 20 (9 girls, 11 boys) in Lower Division. Although the majority of students come from the Rana district, others travelled past their local school to attend Rana Primary.

There are those occasions when, as a visitor, you enter a school and there is a certain, very subjective, feeling that things are working. The students and teachers appear comfortable with their situation, there is a sense of enjoyment, and a feeling that learning is taking place. Furthermore, there is a strong sense of 'community' and interaction, and often support derives from the wider community context. Such were my impressions when I first came to Rana Primary School in September 1995. During the remainder of the year, I continued to spend time at the school, as a visitor, working with teachers and students, teaching some lessons, and participating in end-of-year school-community functions such as the fete and Concert.

The initial intentions of the research arose from these first contacts with the school with a view towards seeking to determine 'what worked and why'. The research question, therefore, was: *what is it that makes the school what it is, and how can this understanding be better used and translated into more effective learning for the school and its community?* In adopting this, we sought to start with a description of the culture of the school, then, through an action orientation use these findings to examine and reflect upon the situation, effecting strategies and processes of change and development as a result (Cocklin & Davis, 1996a). The conduct of the research was one of 'involved participation', where at various times I took the roles of 'teacher', 'friend', 'critical advocate', in a context where, rather than 'making the familiar strange' (Delamont, 1981), I sought to have a shared experience of the school in action. The research involved interviews of staff, students, and some of the parents, as well as extensive observations, by myself, while David used 'oral history' interviews to focus upon:

What has happened in the past that has bonded the community and the school so closely together and how does this affiliation work to make the school the 'learning community' it seems to be.

The intentions of the research are ongoing, a process of continuing data collection, analysis, reflection, and professional development.

THE BACKGROUND

While located only a few kilometres outside a major rural centre, the school and community are very much isolated and independent of their larger neighbour, reflecting both history and geography. Opened up in the 1930's as a series of rural blocks, the district comprises small farms on the banks of a large river subject to occasional flooding which precluded denser settlement preserving the rural nature. The initial forty-one settler families, who balloted for the blocks, arrived in an area covered with weeds, no houses or roads and no boundaries to the farms. With the Great Depression in full swing, some were among the unemployed, and all were pioneers in the sense that they had little more than the basic tools and a willingness to turn their block into a home to sustain them. Separated from the town they came to rely on each other, and from early accounts rapidly developed a strong sense of community. Most occupied their land and lived in tents or shacks for the first few years while they built a permanent home, they walked to town for food, drew water from the river, and worked together to get their land prepared. As the Depression eased, some of the men obtained work in town, leaving further development of the farm to their family, and to evening work. Indeed, accounts describe fencing activities undertaken at night where lanterns were placed on posts to align them, and 'all the community turned out to help'. In the present, this independence from the larger centre, and the sense of 'sharing' and working together tend to remain, reinforced by the number of descendants from the original settlers who remain.

Rana Primary: The 'Learning Community'

From the initial data, people within the school and community adopted the term 'learning community' to describe the context. Accordingly, the focus of the investigation was to elicit those factors which contributed to this perception, and to locate them in the lived reality of the school from student, teacher, and community points of view.

A 'Tradition' of History and Involvement

It was apparent that some of the current situations within, and perceptions of, the school reflected the historical context of both school and district, which, as David suggested, should serve to remind us that:

The school has 'reaped the rewards' from the historical development of the community and will continue to do so as long as it remembers its origins and 'feeds' the needs of the community to be involved.

This, I suggest, reflects a point of difference from the notion of continuous improvement derived from the corporate sphere which underpins much of the change rhetoric at present. While Senge (1990) advocates a *continuous improvement*, schools are also characterised by heritage, tradition, continuity and a consolidation of processes, practice and content. For schools, then, change for change's sake alone should not be the goal. In short there are elements of the school we may wish, upon critical reflection, to preserve (Hargreaves, 1995).

From the oral history interviews, certain characteristics of the school, and school-community relationships, emerged. The sense of community and togetherness owes aspects to the relationships among the first settlers where "Everyone helped one another". One of the dominant themes was that of 'pride', as a past-pupil from 1938 recounted:

It went from one generation to the other and that went down through the school. All grew up like one big family - real close ties - all the generations of children [from the original settlers] went to Rana School. You took a pride in your school because we were all so close ...so much so that even when we grew up, the ones that didn't shift away from Rana still continued that same effort that your parents had.

This ongoing contact with the school reflects both an allegiance and ownership which continues to be a particular feature of the context, clearly evident at various school functions where both members of the local community and past pupils were regularly in attendance. Furthermore, past pupils often 'drop in', and during the research a 'day off' from secondary school saw some sit in on classes, take part in the lessons, and offer assistance to the teacher and students. This ownership and relationship with the school continues, as one parent commented about her older children who had left Rana:

Even with the bigger girls now, they pretty much think of Rana as 'their' school. I've got to tell them about it because they want to know what's going on - anything that's got to do with Rana they just help.

While this has presented but a slice from the history, certain aspects do emerge as 'themes' which help to elaborate the relationship. There has, then, been a sense of pride, involvement, allegiance to and ownership of the school from the early days, all of which continue to be demonstrated in the current context of both perceptions and relationships between school and community. From the time of initial settlement, and continuing to the present, the strong sense of community and working together for the benefit of all underpins the ongoing perception that '*what we do is for the kids*'. These aspects have contributed to a sense of 'stability' within the community and school, and which continues particularly from the relationships between the school and the original families and their descendants.

It may be suggested, then, that the 'culture' of the school is a factor upon developing this sense of 'community', certainly in so far as it is not something to be 'externally imposed' but one which develops over time and through particular relationships and strategies. It is not being argued that a 'learning community' cannot develop within a school, rather that the starting point must be the historical context which may involve processes of *reculturation* (see, Hargreaves, 1995). This also allows consideration of the point that schools are not just marked by their commonalities, but also their differences. A marked contrast to the uniformity of product, architecture, technology, and work practices, which underpins the 'McDonaldization' (see, Ritzer, 1993; Craft, 1996) of society and, it may be argued, aspects of the 'learning organisations' model within the business world.

A 'Great School': Student Ownership and Empowerment

The current students also spoke of a strong sense of pride in 'their' school, stating that this was the best school, also reflected in the point that there were no major changes suggested, as Kat remarked "*I don't really want to change the school*". The sense of ownership also came through strongly, expressed in terms of 'our' school and their loyalty to it, for instance when asked to sell his school to me, Mark said:

To make you come here I'd tell you how great we are. Well, I've been to two other schools. The first one was really good, the second was a bit down in the dumps, and this one is great.

For those parents from outside Rana district, it was evident that they had selected the school after either experiences from, or considerations of, alternatives:

Mainly because it was a small environment. Because everywhere we went it wasn't much different than what you would get around Sydney - they were concrete jungles. How big was the school - that was the first question - how many kids. Then, the teacher/child ratio, and resources. And how David was over the phone. When I rang [their closest school] the Principal up there - at the time - didn't sound very good. Then we rang David and you just had that good feeling - just the way he sounded and the way he talked to you.

The bases of such selections, as another parent commented, reflected a variety of factors, including:

Being a split [multiple grades] class situation, it allows them to expand, and progress and grow, as they feel comfortable, and I guess a lot of that stems back to the ability of the teachers. He has come home and said 'I've got Year 6 homework'. He complained a bit and I told him he should be proud of himself because it was a great effort. Now if he was in a structured school he wouldn't have that flexibility and that's where I believe that our kids are fortunate....

Perhaps indicating the attitude towards school, particularly by the students, were remarks Bev Osborne made during Term 1 upon the unusual situation at Rana where *'you have to kick the kids, and some of their parents, out at the end of the day'*. Here Bev was commenting on the fact that at the end of each day there were always some students still in the classroom playing on the computers, talking with each other, or with the teachers, or playing around the grounds. Often, too, the parents stayed after school, talking with each other or with the teachers. As Bev noted, in all her prior experiences, students were always in a rush to leave the school, and few if any parents entered the school grounds other than on formal visits. This enthusiasm for school was noted by parents as well:

The best thing my children have learnt is the fact that they like school and it's not a common thing for children to like school. It's rare that we have had to drag them out of bed. Most morning's Mark's up and dressed by 7.15, ready to go. He would walk out the door there and then.

Certain features emerge from such comments, in particular the notions of size and relationships, including those involving teachers.

Small Is Better, But Relationships Are Central

In these times of change, where the political arena is more concerned with a notion of 'efficiency' where 'big is better', and issues of class size are being overlooked, it is always encouraging to note that with teachers, students, and parents there is a realization that there are considerable advantages in the 'small school' environment.

For the students, the issue of size included a number of positive benefits, such as space provided by the large area and small number of students, relationships in terms of making friends, and the contributions made to the teaching/learning situation, as Nicole comments:

There's not much people - I just always like to go to schools with not much people so there's not much bullying. That we all get to learn a lot more because there's not many of us and the teacher has more time to teach us. Most of us get along very well. And there's not much people so you could have more chance of getting friends in other classes. You just get to know other people in higher grades who know more.

The interaction effects of size, and their contribution to both relationships and learning featured prominently in parent comments as well:

I took them up to [nearby school] for a week and the kids nearly died. They didn't like it. It was too big, too much of a shock for them, I think. They were used to having, not only me, but other parents. They were really used to having that 'closeness' with everybody else. Then I brought them down here and that was the end of it.

It was evident throughout the data that the small size contributed to the formation of a particular set of relationships, between students, with teachers, and with the wider community. On the other hand, we would be loathe to suggest that size is the determining factor, rather that perhaps the aspect of pupil:teacher ratio needs to be given consideration in larger schools, as well as relationships and community involvement. Again, then, such relationships and involvement are something which all must work towards, a process of negotiation and personal and professional development, not something which can be either 'implanted' or 'created' over a short period of time. Central, too, are issues pertaining to the teaching approach characterising the school and the particular approach to leadership. In this context, it can be noted that a relieving Principal in 1995 saw the community 'withdraw' from the school, indeed some consider removing their children, a situation which had also been evident when David assumed the Principal's position:

Second objective, I suppose, was to build up the community support again, because it had suffered a little because of the previous Principal. He had come from Regional Office and hadn't been in a school for about 8 years - and that was reflected in the comments by the parents - the fact that he 'locked' himself in the office and wouldn't talk to anybody. Another objective was to get out and make the school a community school again, and reinforce some of the things that people had been saying that they wanted done.

A Sense of 'Family': A Collaborative Culture

With the students, friendships and relationships were an important facet of their lived experiences at Rana. As Taylor indicates:

It's got good kids. Some [bad] behaviour - well, some of them - but there's no bullies. Because everyone cooperates. Yeah, like a family thing. Some fight but not as much. We sort it out.

I: Who 'sorts it out' - teachers or students?

Both.

This notion of 'family' came through in the majority of discussions, with parents, students, and teachers. The students talked in terms of 'these are my friends', and the changes in such groups over the time of the study, and also reported situations which appeared most akin to a form of sibling rivalry. Overall, however the general point was made by parents that:

[school] seems to bring out that protective 'big brother' attitude to the little kids. I think it's taught them a lot about relationships. Because they've got all the kids, they've got the teachers, then they've got the parents, then the community - everybody is so involved, and there's so many different personalities involved - it gives them a good grounding.

I: Getting on with a 'range of people'?

Yeah. It is like a family. I mean, the girls [daughters] will fight amongst themselves, but heaven help anyone else who steps in and tries to fight. The kids [at the school] are very much like that, too - stick someone else in there that tries

to start a fight with one of the other kids - doesn't matter who they are - and the kids form a group. Just the same as a family.

The students made similar comments, reflecting their loyalty to the group, also noting that this was conferred by membership of the school. Parents and students also noted that this group allegiance continues after they leave Rana and go to secondary school.

This sense of involvement and collaboration also extended to the classroom relationships. Here, students worked together, helping each other, and providing a 'learning support' network. This existed across the various age grades, which again was seen as a strong benefit of the situation:

Instead of working on your own, if you've got a problem you've got another person next to you to ask to help you out with it. It's just like one big class instead of just 1,2,3.... It's better to be all together. (Colin)

The combination of factors within the school also appeared to contribute towards a 'lifelong learning' view amongst the students, such as Colin's response when asked when, or if, he would stop learning: "you learn something new all the time, you never stop learning".

Overall, the teacher/student relationships at Rana are very 'close'. Partly, this can be attributed to the size factor, as both teachers have said 'in a small school you're never off duty'. However, it seems to have more to do with an attitude of involvement, as Mark commented: "It's them [teachers] being with the children all the time. I think it's great".

At both Recess and Lunch, the teachers are out in the playground, often joining in games and participating in activities. In the classroom there is very much an ethos of '**working and learning with**' students in a collaborative learning style. Throughout, parents and students placed particular emphasis upon these close, personal, relationships as one of the defining characteristics of Rana Primary.

Educating Children: Teaching and 'Management'

While history, size, and relationships all were contributory factors in the development and continuation of the 'learning community', perhaps of greater significance at present, certainly in terms of the perceptions of students and parents, was the approach to teaching. As a parent noted, the teachers were considered 'part of the family', by community and students, and this was due to:

Attitude. Just in my experience, some teachers haven't got that attitude - they are there to 'teach at' the kids - they are not there to work with the kids. They've [the 'good ones'] got a lot of enjoyment, a lot of thought, into what they do for the kids - the kids are actually learning because they are enjoying it and they're interested in what they're learning. And nobody is left out - whether they're an 'A' student or 'bottom of the line' student. They've [teachers] got a little bit more time, a little bit more thought, about ways in which to approach that child to get them to want to learn. Instead of seeing the classroom as 20 or 30 kids that you've got to teach this thing, I think the attitude is 'there's such and such over there, and they're not really good at this, but they're really good at that'. They see it more as an individual thing. It's 20 individuals, rather than '20 kids' or 'a class'.

This view from the parent provides a contradiction to that so often championed in the political and media rhetoric. In both these contexts, there has been an increasing pressure to 'return to traditions' of teacher-directed, rote learning of content. This has been accompanied by increasing 'controls' on education and teaching, a direction towards a 'uniformity' of approach and content.

As Woods & Jeffrey (1996) argue, teaching as an 'act' needs, not constraint, but flexibility, the very antithesis of the 'McDonaldization' approach. Certainly, for teachers there are many contradictory pressures at present. On the one hand, claims for autonomy and flexibility, for creating an educational system 'responsive to the local context', where 'equality and quality' are promoted, on the other for education to become 'more business-like', more 'managerial', more 'efficient' defined in terms of 'market responsiveness' and 'market forces'. Increasingly, then, the terminology of education is being couched in terms of an instrumental, centralised, curriculum, 'standards' which measure 'proficiency' across the country and allow 'comparisons' between schools, a mono-cultural approach to content and pedagogy, and a domination by narrowly defined 'outcomes' which are 'measurable' in terms of quantity (see, Bates, 1993; Retallick, 1994; Woods, 1995).

As indicated by the data from Rana, the alternative is a focus on the individual child, an approach which caters for that child, and one which sees teacher and student working together in a collaborative learning experience (see, Sugrue, 1997). As Woods (1995:3) notes, this learning is where "*pupils have control over their own learning processes, and ownership of the knowledge produced, which is relevant to their concerns*". If we are to move towards a true 'learning community', schools must seek to develop a focus on 'educating children':

the 'job' is to teach kids not get 'bogged down' in management - and not a 'fixed structure' - need to be adaptable and open to change - change to make learning for staff and kids more effective. And 'push the Department line' - that's what we've got to say - [laugh] - the 'systemic' - we realise we're a political body, we have to do what we're told - in some aspects, you just can't get away from it, but there are other parts that you work within. Translating what the system wants us to do, but putting it in to the kids and community needs. You're looking at utilising those things, but around the kid's needs. But, there are things that kids need to be taught that they don't want to learn. It's their development - and sometimes their development has to be structured - it can't be free rein all the time. It's a combination of a number of factors.

Accordingly, the approach of 'teaching' has a considerable impact on the development of the school as a 'learning community'. It is marked by a flexibility of pedagogy, both teacher-centred and child-centred, within a context where it is 'learning together' of skills, processes and content (see, Woods & Jeffrey, 1996; Sugrue, 1997).

The overall approach should be directed towards an emancipatory praxis, one where:

The question for the educational leader is not "Am I emancipated and how can I emancipate my staff?" but, "How can I engage in forms of critical, self-reflective and collaborative work which will create conditions so that the people with whom I work can come to control their knowledge and practice?" (Grundy, 1993:174)

School-Community Relationships

There is a strong sense of school/community interaction at Rana Primary. Parents are involved in and with the school across a variety of in-school and out-of-school activities. It is also very evident that parents feel comfortable about coming to the school, even coming in just for a look during the day. This sense of 'ownership' permeated the community "*To everybody it is their school*". For some, the size of the school, as well as the approachability of staff contributed:

Again, just to have some sort of a say - because it's a small school - you can really have a say - make a contribution. The guy we've got there promotes that type of thing.

Overall, there were general expressions that the school was 'open' to the parents, that they were encouraged to come in and participate. The basic approach, then, is one of 'partnership' between community and school:

I have always felt perfectly comfortable with coming in. The teachers will help you. It's a two-way street...working with the parent. And the parents coming in and actually helping with the kids. I think it's got to be a partnership to work. I mean, they won't always have a 'good' partnership - they will disagree and that - but, if they feel comfortable to disagree and that - and work it out like that. I think that's the most effective way.

From the student point of view, they appreciated this school/community linkage, and the 'extended family' situation which existed both outside and inside the school, as indicated in this conversation with Mark:

The community, how it is involved in the school. The community comes in and walks through - they always know something about Rana School. Well, a lot of parents [in other schools] often don't know anything about their school. It helps a lot with the students as well. The parents know the teachers, and they work in the school with reading and things like that.

I: Those things are important - to you as a pupil?

Yes, very important.

They also, however, were in some cases quite emphatic that it was 'their' school and while help was appreciated there was a need for parents to also acknowledge that ownership was the responsibility and perhaps right of the current students. While evident within the classroom where responsibility was encouraged, the students also expressed the hope that parents would allow them greater responsibility particularly at joint school-community events: *Like, some parents are pains. Like, you know the fair we had - well, they wouldn't let us do anything* (Kat).

Towards A 'Learning Community'

It is not suggested that Rana Primary is a paradigm of a learning community (see, Cocklin, *et al*, 1996a,b), but rather that there is strong community involvement and perception that it is a successful school. This, then, provides the foundations for the ongoing reflection-in-action and professional development of all members of the community as they seek to 'become' a learning community. Furthermore, it needs to be noted that 'becoming' a learning community is a process and not a product, it is ongoing and developmental, a process of history, relationships, teaching and leadership processes and styles, and not something that can be 'implanted' or created without consideration of every aspect.

The overall outcome of a 'learning community' school, we suggest, is a sense of empowerment. The community feel that it is their school, that they have both a right and an obligation to participate in the school, and in the educative processes. Similarly, the students have the perception that in their school they can exert influence, are given responsibility, and are valued in terms of their opinions and person. This is further enhanced by an approach which focuses on teaching and learning **with** all members of the community underpinned by collaboration and negotiation.

At Rana Primary, there is a sense in which:

In a community of learners, everyone is about the business of learning, questioning, investigating, and seeking solutions. The basis for human interaction is no longer a hierarchy of who knows more than someone else, but rather the need

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