The changing role of schools in the local community

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Introduction

Particularly since the mid 1960's, education systems have increasingly reflected on their relevance to the education needs of society. As their responses to these needs are becoming more effective, so schools are maturing from being simple providers of knowledge to being sophisticated human development centres. Rather than just crafting knowledgeable citizens, they are aspiring to craft learning citizens, empowered to contribute positively to and lead the betterment of society.

The emerging role from being a significant thread in the fabric of society to being a weaver of the fabric itself seems to be defined by three concepts; the school as a community hub, the school as a comprehensive service provider and the school as a precinct or village. Each of these concepts is explored as follows.

The school as a community hub

Traditional indicators of local communities include the social hierarchies, beliefs, systems of etiquette and taboos, centres of family and notary power, sentimental and sanguinial kinship structures, and recreational as well as formal rituals. These create, sustain and perpetuate local alliance and have been traditionally expressed through such constructs as governance, hubs, services and close extended families. Generational friendship alliances and long-standing relationships with neighbours also play significant roles, and a person's workplace being within or close to their local community helps to create a strong sense of attachment to that community.

With the advent of increased mobility, transience and ever-improving communication technologies, communities are becoming less defined by location and more defined by ties of interest, profession and common experience. The extended family is increasingly becoming physically decentralised, although its bonds often remain strong, existing in the cyber-matrix created by satellites and fibre-optics. The set of traditional indicators now applies as much to disperse communities as it does to local

communities, with the possible exception of the hubs which, in the past, consisted mainly of places of worship, clubs and social venues.

Clubs, such as sporting, theatre and service clubs, do not necessarily draw on members of a local community for membership anymore and this is also true of social venues, such as live music venues, night clubs, cinemas and restaurants. Instead, they attract attendance through their diversity of offering and even to the extent of ethereal networks. Being able to draw on a wide, highly mobile and large group of people allows them to specialise without losing viability.

Throughout more recent times, places of worship have increased in variety, especially in the industrialised world. This is so within a given religion as well as in the variety of religions. With access to variety, people exercise their ability to choose and their chosen place of worship can often be outside their local community. Sectarianism has also continued to increase in the industrialised world while, in particular, Pentecostal churches are on the rise. Combined with the increase in variety, these factors have probably negatively affected the proportionate number of people attending a local place of worship regularly.

Places of worship have a distinctively social role. They monitor and regulate social behaviour, influence political opinion, provide pastoral care and welfare support, engage the disaffected and provide social cohesion. The decreasing use of the local place of worship as a predominant community institution, particularly in communities of Western culture, is leaving an ever-widening gap in these aspects that help define communities. It is therefore both a contributor to and victim of the dissipation of local communities.

An exception to this is the group of minority churches, mosques and temples nested in a wider Western communities. These are strongly associated with immigrant monocultural communities, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, synagogues and Sikh temples, and often continue to play a strong social role within that particular community.

Family engagement, filling the gap
There seems to be a growing sense that families are becoming more aware of the widening gap left by dispersed local places of worship, clubs and social venues; a sense that they are developing a corresponding desire to fill that gap to regain their sense of belonging to a local community. One indicator of this is that they still tend to classify other people in terms of community and do this by identifying their centres of alliance. For example, in Melbourne, people who have just met often ask, 'Where do your children attend school?'

The answer to that question provides a set of associations that help mark their location, alliances, social class, degree of influence and the norms of their sub-cultural tribe. It provides a classification of identity and a context from which to move

forward with a relationship. This may indicate that schools are increasingly providing the common identity and context that define and bind local communities.

An increasing engagement of families by schools also deepens the emerging perception of a school as a community hub. Respected research shows that significant adults in a student's life, who are engaged in education, have a positive effect on the academic success of that student. The realisation of the importance of a school-family partnership in education, along with the service provision aspect of student-centred learning, has increased the interest of parents in many schools and focused their attention on the importance of being involved in school functions.

Many schools encourage and reward family engagement by organising social occasions that were traditionally the domain of places of worship, clubs and social venues. Bingo and trivial pursuit nights, sausage sizzles, fancy dress parties, formal and informal dances, graduation and other ceremonies are all designed to help blur the distinction between school and home and project the school as being accessible and supportive. Parent associations provide families with a sense of influence over decisions that affect the quality of service provision and, increasingly, parents are encouraged to be members of important subcommittees of the school governance bodies.

Schools with students from diverse backgrounds have great difficulty establishing family involvement in the education of their students, especially those whose adults do not feel empowered to contribute to or be engaged with schools. Negative perceptions of schools as a legacy of their own schooling, insufficient competency in the language of the host country, work demands and feelings of inadequacy are all contributors to disengagement. Nevertheless, such adults commonly see the school as their key link to community services and, although they may rarely visit the school, they still consider it as a community hub.

The school as a comprehensive service provider
Student-centred learning
In the past model of local community, schools were a single service provider rather than a service hub. They had the well-defined role of providing students with competency in literacy and numeracy, along with collections of knowledge and skills that were arbitrarily categorised into subject areas. Now, they at least profess to be student-centred, which moves their emphasis from the subjects they are teaching to the learning needs of the students being taught. The advent of student-centred learning marks the shift from the nineteenth century paradigm of education provision to the modern paradigm. It has proven to be a gradual, painful and incomplete shift but is nevertheless an enduring one.

The advent of student-centred learning broadens the context within which schools work. The needs of the student being taught are more than academic and their readiness to optimally learn is now recognised as being directly related to their

developmental, social, physical and mental health. Consequently, schools now intersect more closely than ever with other providers of family support. The difference between those providers and schools is that schools have a central, overarching focus lacking in other providers, and that is optimising the readiness of students to learn.

A focus on learning readiness
Without such a global common focus, the other providers find it difficult to collaborate and coordinate a total service provision. They are more focused on particular aspects of family need, such as welfare or health. Because families invest heavily in the education of their children, both emotionally and financially, they focus their hopes and dreams on schools and are likely to support any attempts that increase chances of academic success. This pressure of expectation and the willingness to engage other service providers in maximising success tends to make the school the unifying centre of service provision and therefore a new hub for families in a local community.

The implications of this for schools are many. It is no longer as simple as educators saying that they are teachers. They are now more than teachers; they are optimisers of student learning; facilitators who empower learners with the strategies they need to visualise a preferred future, identify indicators of achievement, strategically plan for achievement, persist, reflect, adapt, modify and reach realisation. It is therefore in everyone's best interests if the student arrives at school in an optimum state of learning readiness.

Schools can no longer be seen as just providers of education; they now also have a responsibility to be co-providers of learning readiness. If the school is perceived as a new community hub and the expectation of families and teachers alike is that students should be considered in terms of their developmental, social and health needs, then systems and services need to be available to address those needs. For this reason, it is desirable that at least one key person on the staff acts as a coordinator of student services. Their job is to work as a case manager; accepting referrals, substantiating the extent of need and accessing services from a range of providers to ensure that the needs are effectively and efficiently met.

The school as a precinct or village, the importance of citizenship
If students are to be life-long learners, then their needs are similar to those of every other person in the community. They need to know how to independently learn as adults in the context of the everyday real world, whatever that may be in their geographic location. The limitations to this include their inability to be financially independent and their continuing need for parenting throughout their adolescent years. However, if students are to become ever-developing citizens, it is desirable that they learn in the context of citizenship. The more a school intersects with its wider community and feels like the real world, the smoother the transition to adulthood will likely be.

This challenge particularly applies to high schools because their student body consists of emerging adults. High schools of over 2,000 students have a unique opportunity to support their mission of empowering students to be highly functioning citizens by either accessing or emulating as practicably as possible the facilities and services of a real community. Because of their size, they can be a precinct or simulate an actual village, albeit an adolescent village with predominantly adult governance.

Schools already emulate important aspects of society and often do it better. They have a rule of law, cultural mores and expectations. They are industrious, self-improving communities with traditions, rituals and taboos. The members are largely inclusive and supportive of each other and united in a common mission. What they usually don't have are the choices, symbols and systems that encourage behaviours evident in self-regulated, autonomous adults. A significant step towards establishing a supported transition to adulthood could be to make available some of those choices, symbols and systems.

According to town planner and director of GeoLINK, Rob van Iersal (http://www.geolink.net.au/), villages are marked as much by their social feel as their physical containment. Aspects such as community spirit, defined community groups, community participation and dynamic interaction, along with feelings of being safe, people knowing you and being friendly, define a village.

Core village principles include the ability to access goods and services by walking, self-reliance, active democracy and having a distinctive image. From this, it can be seen how choices, symbols and systems that support appropriate adult-like behaviours can be established around the principles and definition of a precinct or village.

Although it is not a focus of this article, an interesting consideration for high schools is the core village principle of having access to goods and services by walking. This suggests that, especially for 'super' schools of more than 2,000 students, the goods and services typically available in university campuses may be appropriate.

Taking systemic control

If an emerging role of a school is to be a community hub, provide comprehensive service to students and emulate a precinct or village, then recognition of the relevance and importance of this expanded role needs to be articulated. Control over its intent and design needs to be deliberately assumed. This places responsibility on governments and other providers of major education systems moving towards a 'super' school model, to consider this wider definition of schools and respond with appropriate design solutions. Otherwise, they risk creating unwieldy leviathans of dysfunction and mediocrity.