



## The tussle of community: learning through community action

**Do community partnerships within education include young people as active participants? asks ROGER HOLDSWORTH. He challenges us to think about how young people can be real, learning, members of their communities, and demands that schools should recognise – ‘intellectually and practically’ - their own involvement in the issues facing their communities.**

When we talk about community partnerships within education, we tend to leave young people out as active participants. These partnerships are then different ways of doing things to young people, not partnerships with young people. If we are to see community partnerships as offering hope for building inclusive and progressive communities, we must explicitly see them as supporting young people as full and active members of those communities.

In this article, I want to point to some approaches and programs with which I've been involved, that open up possibilities for purposeful roles for young people within their communities as part of their studies. But first I want to provide a context for the development of such approaches.

Various citizenship studies, particularly the Australian work of Suzanne Mellor (1999), have indicated the powerlessness expressed by young people in being able to influence their world. We also hear, through various research studies, the strong voices of marginalised young people who are alienated from their schools, their communities, and their learning:

Teachers get frustrated with kids with low abilities. Don't bother explaining things. Write things on the board and then just get us to copy it down. Boring and don't learn a thing. Having to ask for help and then not getting it because they can't be bothered. Think you are not trying when you are; they just don't explain it properly.

*Male Indigenous student,  
14 yrs, NSW rural*

If you don't do as they say you are out, you are over a barrel even though they present this image of 'it is up to you, we respect your decision...'; we have no real power.

*Female student, 16 yrs,  
Tasmanian rural*

The teachers, and the freedom thing; how are we supposed to learn how to be responsible if you are never given any responsibility?

*Male student, 18 yrs,  
Tasmanian metropolitan*

Others talk more positively of being in different or 'alternative' programs and say what they value about how they were treated in these:

The workers treat us like adults. They do not put us under pressure to do things; they let us make our own decisions.

*Male, 16 yrs, WA Metropolitan*

School was shocking until this program - Paul is really good... I used to give the teachers shit - but not any more. He talks to you as a person - it is more like a job and he is the boss. I like the way I am treated. We build stuff that is useful ...

*Male, 16 yrs, SA regional centre (ACEE and AYRC, 2001)*

These voices may merely illustrate the tip of an iceberg, with larger numbers of young people alienated and distanced from engagement as active shapers of their futures, but also more who are passive and withdrawn from expressing anger and resentment (Holdsworth, 2000). We also have asked many young people about the communities in which they take part, and become alarmed that they appear not to be significantly engaged in these either.

This is not a situation with which we can be content. It convinces us that we must build approaches in schools that enhance the role of young people in constructing and determining personal and social futures: the communities in which they live.

In the 1970s, these conversations and thoughts motivated me to be part of a team that established the Lynall Hall Community School (initially as an annexe to Brunswick Girls/East High School, and then as a separate state-run school) with different relationships between young people and adults, and between young people and community spaces, and with an explicit inclusion of community-based learning approaches. (See Cumming, 1999 for more examples of these learning approaches.) At the same time, we began *Ascolta* - a local multi-lingual community newspaper, put together by primary and secondary school students from several neighbouring schools. It published community news and comment and culture approximately 6-8 times a year for about a decade and in turn led to active student participation in creating and broadcasting radio and television programs.

More recently, I have been working - as a researcher and documenter - in

support of various curriculum approaches including Student Action Teams, and I've been sharing these and similar approaches through the *Connect* magazine for over 25 years (Connect, 1979-2004).

#### **Why community linkages?**

In advocating and implementing various forms of community-based programs, we see these first as effective approaches to learning. But we also go beyond that to see that there is the potential for supporting the development of young people as effective, committed and active members of their multiple communities.

Traditionally, we have argued that community-based learning has benefits for young people's skill development:

- It provides young people with opportunities and experiences that develop knowledge and skills from sources other than the classroom.
- It provides young people with opportunities to test their own knowledge and skills in real-life situations.

Such an approach also has benefits for young people's personal, social and civic development:

- It develops young people's awareness of individual and community responsibility and the benefits to be derived from active participation.
- It provides young people with opportunities and experiences that strengthen and enhance their connection with their communities.
- It gives young people a stake in their communities as well as fostering an optimistic outlook for their futures.

But we now go beyond those outcomes to see that such intentional linkage has benefits for the development of inclusive communities:

- It provides opportunities for young people and adults to develop positive relationships that might not otherwise exist, as they get to know, respect and learn from each other through their common interest.
- It provides community recognition of young people as valued contributors in and to their communities, and

encourages active citizenship and social inclusion.

- It supports the engagement of young people in their communities as a vital and necessary condition for the ongoing evolution and advancement of those communities.

#### **Young people and community**

In various recent studies (ACEE and AYRC, 2001; plus some forthcoming studies), we have been talking with young people about their involvement with communities. Many have a positive and inclusive sense of community as a good place to be, something to which they belong and, perhaps because of that, something that needs to be looked after. As one student notes:

### ***students take part in initial workshops about their ideas on what is fair and unfair in the world, about the 'big possibilities' for communities and for change, and about what they could do to 'make a difference'***

The community is a place you feel comfortable to live in and if it's in trouble you want to help out - like a friend you help out so they are happier and feeling better, you want to do that with the community too.

Based on such responses from young people, the following four aspects of 'community involvement' can be defined: (We are drawing also here on concepts around environmental education.)

a) *about the community:*

Students learn *about* their existing communities with information provided by local

government, community groups etc. This may take place in 'civics' classes or other curriculum areas. Many local groups and Councils have information pamphlets; some Councils have recruited and trained students as Student Information Officers, to convey information through peer linkages.

The study of local community can be a powerful inclusion within any subject. It can enable social comparisons between areas to be made and can support students' understanding of the possibilities of their neighbourhood. However, simply learning about the community

learn skills through their application outside the classroom and also gain a 'hands-on' appreciation of what resources exist. But simply, learning in a community location can add little to an understanding of community and a student's role within it, unless this aspect is specifically and strategically included. Such an approach can still locate the idea of community as 'other': something that is fixed, distant and 'adult'. However, opportunities may be created for the learning to develop in ways that encourage students to see these resources as 'ours', open to change and development. Programs could build in regular opportunities for student reflection about the relevance of local facilities, availability of resources, decision-making roles and future possibilities. Students could be asked: What needs to be developed? What could be changed? Why? How?

c) *for the community:*

Students learn through carrying out service projects that can contribute to or enhance existing community services. This can include human service or community resource production. (See, for example: <http://www.servicelearning.org/>). Youth development programs in various states have a strong service learning component in which students work with 'Meals on Wheels', environmental groups and other services, visit senior citizen centres to present activities or entertainment, produce resource directories for other young people, help at special education settings, take part in 'Clean Up' Days and so on.

It is recognised that such activities can bring students into an active, practical and positive role within their communities. They can change young people's perception of community organisations, but can also change the community's perceptions of young people, as they are seen in productive, helpful roles. However, service learning roles often locate young people as *apart from* these communities: *servants*, but not *of* community. The perception of community is 'distant' (or 'other'), fixed, and adult-determined. While young people can see themselves as useful contributors to their communities, there may be further opportunities to develop such approaches into questioning the

nature and structure of those communities, the ways in which decisions are made, social and economic futures for the community and so on.

d) *with the community:*

Students learn through carrying out local investigations, making proposals and taking action as *citizens* and *members* of their communities as part of their curriculum. It includes the development of roles for young people as researchers, activists, lobbyists and decision-makers. Students (and schools generally) learn through work in partnership with community groups and local government. Students have been involved in studies and action around important local issues – environment, safety, recreation, resource development and so on. There have been many examples where local government and other bodies have commissioned or supported Student Action Teams within local schools and some of these are outlined below.

Such partnerships provide the most exciting possibilities for students to learn and to contribute to communities of which they are members. They also enable students to see themselves as contributors to communities that change and respond to needs. This, in turn, provides students with more relevant and realistic learning experiences that do not idealise or overly simplify communities and the processes that happen within them.

### Traditional responses

As noted above, the most frequent response from schools and system programs to community involvement has been the establishment of community service models. When we ask young people about the nature of the activities that are organised for them through such school programs, they mention things like:

- *Maintaining community facilities:* working bees at the tennis club; cleaning at the primary school; tidying the drill hall.
- *Helping at community events:* ANZAC day, Poppy Day, the Royal Show; taking part in special parades and events.
- *Helping in local sports activities:* the canteen at the footy club or the pigeon racing; giving out

within a classroom can be a purposeless and boring exercise unless it is linked with other approaches that engage students in forming and shaping their questions about their communities. A study of a local community could start with students (the experts) introducing the teacher (the 'outsider') to their community, either with information or by conducting a real or virtual tour of that community, with the teacher asking provocative, incisive questions about the nature of that community.

b) *in the community:*

Students learn *in* and *from* community settings - resources (buildings, personnel) and learning institutions (eg community library). Some Councils have encouraged students to use Council Chambers for meetings or training events.

Students tell us that they value experiential learning that is located in 'real world' situations. They both

water at the fun run; joining clubs - Fishing and Surf;

- *Serving community safety:* doing life-saving courses 'in case people may need us'; learning how to swim and rescue others; CFA junior volunteer; helping with first aid at the festival.
- *Cleaning or maintaining the environment:* taking part in Clean Up Australia; picking up litter to make coasts look more beautiful; recycling; tidying in the national park; tree planting; doing 'stuff' at an environment centre.
- *Providing intergenerational support:* helping old people generally, including getting firewood; helping or performing or playing music at a hospital.
- *Fundraising:* helping to raise money for charity through fetes and tin-rattles.

We are struck here by the 'distance' or separation of these young people from the examples of community they provide – the sense of 'otherness' of those communities. Such traditional community-involvement programs may reinforce alienation by an emphasis on 'community service' that places young people *outside* those communities, serving them, but not being involved in their *creation* or *development*. Here, the community and activities are: adult-determined, simple, uncontentious, conservative, whereas we know that communities can, in reality, be: diverse, determined by all members, complex, contentious or problematical.

Rather than simply attack such traditional forms of community engagement, we can link them to ideas of active youth/student participation. Engagement with forms of community service 'that are meaningful to young people' provides one possible opportunity to transform that relationship, as young people move into a more active participatory role around questions of *what service is important, why it is carried out, and what ends may be achieved*.

**Teacher:** You need to make sure you find an appropriate community group to do this with if you want it to work.

**Student:** And young people need to pick it so they really want to participate.

But the tendency to see community service as a simple solution to civic disengagement becomes even more worrying. There are now strong pressures to institute programs that require some form of work by young people in community settings. This pressure harnesses both an increased interest in volunteering and the citizenship education agenda, and currently manifests itself in the UK in debates about requiring some form of 'compulsory civic service' by young people (Williamson, 2004). In the USA, there are similar movements within schools and systems under the heading of 'service learning' (Ausyouth, 2000).

### Different approaches

In contrast, we need to look at other models of community learning and action in which the ideas of community are more contentious, and in which young people are encouraged to play roles in investigating, proposing and acting around the nature of the community they desire. These unite ideas of learning *about* (and *from*) the community, as well as working and learning *with* community groups. They also unite program ideas of youth participation (extending this meaning from program decision-making to community decision-making) with community connections. This is not to say that such approaches cannot also be used to contain and control young people, but principles that underlie them appear to be more 'resilient' in creating new relationships of young people with their communities.

### Student Action Teams – state program

Formal and documented programs of *Student Action Teams* began around 1998 in Victoria. The concept has since been adopted and developed in various forms of partnerships between schools and agencies – including government - at state and local levels.

The definition of Student Action Teams is relatively simple:

*Student Action Teams involve a group of students who work on a real, identified issue of community interest. The students carry out research on the problem and develop solutions – either proposals for others or action they then take.*

(Holdsworth et al, 2001)

Student Action Teams work around the following *principles*

- an active role for young people as part of their community;
- young people as community investigators;
- young people doing something that makes a difference or brings about change;
- programs that involve learning and that meet academic goals.

*Criteria* for Student Action Teams have similarly been suggested (Holdsworth et al, 2003) as:

- student engagement with the project focus or topic: either student choice of this, or substantial student decision-making on how to approach it;
- student engagement with project decision-making and implementation;
- a focus within the community (geographic, social or cultural) - preferably beyond the school;
- identification and formation of a student team or teams;
- processes of research and action by students that intend to make a difference around the chosen focus/topic within the community.

The initial statewide program of *Student Action Teams* involved teams of students in 20 Victorian secondary schools, commissioned by the Department of Justice (with support and management through the Department of Education) to define, investigate and propose or take action around *community safety*. The student teams initially met to discuss and accept the challenge and to receive training. They then worked (in various ways) within the schools to understand what 'community safety' meant, to research local issues associated with it, to investigate what was needed, and to design and implement appropriate local programs. In the second phase of this State Program, 36 Student Action Teams were supported in primary and secondary schools with similar intentions.

In some cases, the students worked in their Student Action Teams within existing classes (so a whole class group was involved, and sent a few representatives to the initial training sessions), or the school formed new electives. In other cases, teams were formed outside the formal curriculum (sometimes small teams of four to eight students), and the students were withdrawn from

classes or met at lunchtimes, after school or in 'free classes'.

Since the original statewide program, various forms of the Student Action Teams concept have been developed in local areas. Some have involved local Councils or community groups who have approached schools and then provided support for groups of students to investigate, and report or act on issues of mutual interest.

Almost any school or community issue is appropriate to the formation of a Student Action Team. One teacher said:

If there's a community issue to be tackled, our normal approach is now to set up a Student Action Team to deal with it.

Some schools have developed these Teams around in-school teaching and learning approaches or about student wellbeing issues. For example, Student Action Teams have researched and developed action on bullying, on truancy (with regular truants forming the Student Action Team), on grading policies and so on. While this is immensely valuable and addresses issues within school communities, there is broader value in those Student Action Teams that have investigated and acted on wider community issues.

The choice of the focus for the Student Action Team – either by students who feel strongly about an issue, or by local groups in 'commissioning' students to tackle an issue (and then being an audience for their outcomes and proposals) – is very important. It must be an issue which is real, which motivates students, on which students can have an impact, which is achievable within schools' time constraints (eg a term, a unit, or acknowledging student travel on buses etc), and which meets schools' learning objectives. A crucial aspect is the choice of such a *powerful topic*.

Some powerful local topics have been found to be:

- safety, including traffic safety;
- the environment;
- recreation facilities and use of public space;
- transport;
- relationships including issues of violence, racism, physical safety, friendship, bullying etc;

- school transitions – from primary to secondary, from school to work etc.

But there are many others that teachers and students will be able to suggest from their local knowledge – issues that are contentious and open to investigation and action.

The *Student Action Teams* program produced two evaluation reports by the Australian Youth Research Centre (Holdsworth *et al*, 2001; Holdsworth *et al*, 2003: available at: [http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/EP\\_M/YRC/publications](http://www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/EP_M/YRC/publications)) as well as a 'How To' manual that is available online from the Victorian Department of Education and Training (at: <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/mys/engagement/studentactionteams.htm>).

#### *Student Action Teams – local program*

Recently, I've been working with a group of 14 primary and secondary schools in Melbourne's northern suburbs using similar Student Action Teams approaches around *traffic safety*. Here, we set up an initial challenge to an inter-school student forum about the death and injury rates of young people on suburban roads, and asked students if they were interested to investigate what the local traffic safety issues were: where people in the schools felt safe and unsafe, and what created these feelings.

Students met in three inter-school student forums during a year, accepted the challenge and began to research the issues within their own schools and neighbourhoods. Later in the year, they shared their research results and developed some proposals for action – around concepts of 'education', 'enforcement' and 'engineering'. Late in the year, they came together again to share information about the action they'd been taking and the outcomes for their communities. They worked with others within their schools and communities – parents, the local Council, police and so on – as partners in challenging and developing their safer communities. This project was the topic of a special issue of *Connect* magazine, and you can read about similar projects in various states in different issues.

#### *RuMaD?*

Similar approaches are involved in the *ruMaD? Program* (*ruMaD?*,

2004) in which students explore and design ways in which to 'make a difference' to their world and their communities through their school studies. Here students take part in initial workshops about their ideas on what is fair and unfair in the world, about the 'big possibilities' for communities and for change, and about what they could do to 'make a difference'. In some cases, students are encouraged to transform the passive fund-raising of Student Councils by creating Student Foundations – around a slogan of 'Change not Charity'.

#### *Real Learning Real Futures*

In Tasmania, a group of secondary schools in one area are sharing curriculum approaches that incorporate 'authentic learning' in community settings. These schools are working together to establish and maintain a larger sense of community (between themselves), taking an inclusive approach to the participation of students (involving a mixed group of young people, not just those regarded as 'at risk', while still being particularly concerned to ensure that those who have previously been marginalised get included this time), and working with community organisations around real projects that make lasting impacts within their communities (Holdsworth, 2004).

#### **New visions of communities**

In various ways, these initiatives focus on the idea that young people can and should share in the tussle of community as an intentional learning experience. They also demand that schools are not divorced from the issues facing their communities, but inherently involved in them – intellectually and practically. They recognise that there is a diversity of views about what communities are and how they are formed and maintained.

If such approaches are to be developed, there are, however, some important implications to be acknowledged. First, schools and students need to ensure that the tasks in which they are engaged are real ones and not hypothetical, trivial or 'make work' tasks. Secondly, schools need to recognise that they are part of those communities, with interests, needs and points of view that need to be negotiated with others. Thirdly, the activities in which students are engaged require flexibility – of movement, of

timetables and of supervision. Depending on age levels, the nature of these activities may need to be focused in different ways, without losing sight of the essential elements. Our experience in these approaches also leads us to recognise that narrow definitions of community must change. Putnam (2000, 2001) and others have pointed to a decreased incidence of people joining groups – and this has been particularly focused on young people. It is alleged that young people are not committing to ideas of community involvement. However, it has also been suggested that we may be blind to current and diverse meanings of community that are created and structured by young people; there are new ways in which young people are taking social and political and cultural action, outside of those traditionally sanctioned. It is essential that the voices of young people in defining their (and our) community and in recognising their roles within those communities are heard (Irby *et al*, 1998; Mohamed and Wheeler, 2001). Schools have a vital role in assuring and enabling young people so that they can and will make a difference to the world.

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