

Schools as a core social centre – Mary Tobin

We know, and we're naming in the office, and I know you live it out in the places that you work and live in, schools we believe are a core social centre for the community. When we look at the demise of many other institutions, be it the church, family, the local village, the scout groups; the things that for many of us may have been part of the infrastructure when we were growing up have dissipated for many people. But the one centre in its ideal, that notion of the community-based school where everyone is welcome, where they can come into; the local Catholic primary or secondary school. That can become the core social centre that reinvigorates community, both within its walls and out into the broader community, where not just the young people are coming but their families and other connections can begin to see this place as a core social centre.

It can bring back community and in its own right because of the way that it operates and includes people and works with people it can become a real identity in the community where there's no stigma, where everyone is welcome and the school lives that out.

Schools where we're promoting wellbeing and inclusivity (not just in mission statements) but in the way we operate is where we have those challenging conversations. So it's about that notion of not just social capital; we all take about that. Social capital can be easy; you think about you group of friends and your colleagues, there's a natural social capital. We have a common cultural understanding, there are ways that you can come together, similar values. But the notion that VicHealth talks about in the real challenge for schools is the bridging capital. What do you do when you bring diverse groups together that may not normally meet, that may not share common understandings of family life, that may not share common understanding social economic frameworks? That's the real challenge and that's what can lead to the demise and fragmentation of schooling that we set up schools for particular groups because their social capital is common and we push out those who don't belong. The challenge for all effective schools, and the absolute mandate of the Catholic schools, is that our schools should be modelling what does bridging capital look like and how do we really build in that inclusivity. They're challenging questions but unless we ask the questions and look at what our school represents :-

- who is welcome?
- which kids are celebrated?
- which parents feel that this place is the place for them?
- which values are promoted?
- who feels as though this place is for them?
- who can afford the uniform, access the uniform, know that they can come here?

The questions can go on but unless we drill down to those questions we're not beginning to look at the notion of a school as a core social centre.

What the research is beginning to show more and more is that (and, again, you live it, you know it) students with poor social connectedness, who experience conflict with others are more likely to experience depressive symptoms in later years whereas those with good social connectedness as well as a good school sense of connectedness experience the best outcomes with regards to mental health and completing school. We know that the research tells us further that the schools that can engage and connect kids are more likely to continue school. We know that kids that successfully complete school are more likely to have life-long better health outcomes and pathway choices. We know that the research says that despite the family environment the schools can make a real difference to that. It's the intersection between the school itself and the moving into the bridging capital; the working with parents broadening out that sense of welcome and really making that quite explicit not just tokenistic. Those two areas can move together and really lead to much more improved outcomes for a greater percentage of young people.

The research that's coming out around social cohesion is really quite profound because it's at the core of who we are as human beings. To see it validated through research throws out the myth that if you just keep on focussing on curriculum you can make a difference. The research also says that the bottom third cohort of young people who don't achieve, just working in an evidence-based wellbeing approach, those kids (within a whole-school approach) can lift their results.

I was lucky enough recently to represent the CEOM in the UK at a conference called "The Outward Facing School" and they wanted to hear more about our work on this project called the School as Core Social Centre. I was lucky enough to be taken around to four inner-London schools who 3 or 4 years ago were labelled on those horrible league tables as low-performing schools and they've been transformed by a whole variety of ways. But what's happening in London... in the 18 weeks before I arrived, 18 young people had died through knife attacks. The social vibe in the UK is so much worse than it is here with gated communities everywhere, the private school market bussing kids out to particular schools, kids not mixing, kids going to their own youth clubs from different social sets, different ethnic groups sets. Law and order is being used, and has been used in recent years, to reign this in and rebuild the community. Finally the lights have gone on in the UK and, after a week I can't comment on the effectiveness of it, but what they're saying is that we need to start in education to rebuild social inclusiveness, social cohesion, we need law and order but we need to rebuild the notion that our local schools are the place where we building social cohesion.

If the school is the core social centre and we can build social cohesion... the buildings are empty for half the time, they're empty on weekends. So they're not expecting teachers to do all of this, but they're putting in coordinators and enablers to say "who else in our community can come in and build these schools as places in the community?" I was just so lucky to see some fantastic examples where people just said "we've got to start small; how do we do it?" And you've got all the natural resistance; we can't do any more, we already work too hard. But they just had one person who said who was one of those generous souls that you find in any team or community; she said "why don't I not work on a Wednesday and I'll get some time in lieu and I'll do something on a Saturday." And that's how it started. The principal agreed and this was in a school with knife attacks, and that was three years ago and that woman now through working in a really... just like us... trying, starting, generosity... has got a thousand people using the school across the weekend. They run themselves. There's a knitting club and a gardening club and a vegie garden and they use the computers and they have language classes, but all she's done is coordinate it. Other people in the community are doing it all; they're just opening up the venue. But what's happened in a school where the enrolments were diminishing, these people have come to see this place and she's said "why don't you come in on Tuesday and use the IT room" or "why don't you bring your knitting; we'll show the art class on Wednesday." So enrolments are going off the radar because it's become a safe and a trusted place.