

Report Summary

Walker, C.S., Semann, A. (2016). *Schools as banks for social capital: A study of school and community collaboration in two Victorian primary schools*. Semann & Slattery, Sydney.

This report presents findings from a two-year study of the developing collaboration between two Victorian primary schools and their community partners. The aim of the study was to learn about the workings of collaboration between the two schools and their communities to build social capital, assess their collaborative efforts, highlight elements that worked well, and identify opportunities yet to be seized. It was found that, in a relatively short period of time, the Schools as Banks for Social Capital Project (SBSC) experienced considerable growth and was tracking to be a highly effective school-community practice.

Key findings

In two years the initiative saw a dramatic increase in the number of community collaborations. Overwhelmingly, these collaborations were found to be highly successful in meeting mutual goals. Key themes emerged across school, family and service provider perspectives: having a shared vision, trust, effective channels of communication and having active involvement and advocacy from leadership in both sectors are key elements to joint working.

Findings relating to school-community collaborations

- The total number of partnerships recorded increased over time with a dramatic increase in the second year of the study (see Table 1).

	Year 1	Year 2
SBSC Project	10	21
St. Anthony's Catholic Primary School	8	31
Dandenong West Primary School	6	37

- Commonly identified by both schools and community partners were a list of strengths echoing previous research in the field around best-practice principles and inter-agency working. These included:
 - having a shared vision;
 - respectful relationships;
 - trust at an organisational level;
 - clear and open communication;
 - present and effective leadership;
 - being flexible;
 - the provisioning of the project worker/ dedicated staff;
 - willingness of staff;
 - supportive relationships; and
 - access to a wide knowledge base and resources.

- To describe partners' range of engagement in collaboration from none to full collaboration, a horizontal integration continuum tool was employed. An overall movement forward was recorded on the scale of collaboration for both schools.
- In the first year, the schools and the SBSC Project rated the majority (52%) of their collaborative activities as 'very successful – 75% of mutual goals met' or 'ideal'. In the second year of the study, this figure increased and steadied at approximately 70% and the amalgamated figure consisted of slightly more partnerships being described as 'ideal' than as 'very successful'.
- The appointment of a coordinator has been vital to the connection making and relationship building process, and has allowed for a coordinated delivery model of inter-agency working whereby a wide range of services and programs have been tailored to meet a unique set of needs.
- The SBSC Project leadership has been stable, committed and inclusive, qualities that are conducive to building a strong culture of collaboration.
- Relationship building takes time. Often, after the initial contact relationship building activities will go on for months before specific partnership ventures are discussed.

Findings relating to school staff

There was a measurable and positive change in staff attitude towards collaboration over the course of the study. At the outset, a notable number of staff at both schools expressed a lack of willingness to be involved. However, the end of the study documented evidence of teacher buy-in and a positive shift in perspective. Staff recorded an increase in the number of experiences working collaboratively and felt, on average, more clear about their role in the partnership, that goals were usually well articulated, there was effective communication, relevant personnel were involved, and that strong leadership was directing collaborative efforts.

Findings relating to families

Families highly valued the programs and activities offered by the schools as well as their relationships with the staff that deliver them. Families felt they were treated well and found facilitators easy to talk to and clear in their objectives. Services and programs on offer were meeting the needs of many families and almost all families indicated willingness to continue their involvement with activities at the school.

Background

The communities of Dandenong West and Noble Park, where the current research takes place, are amongst the most disadvantaged in Victoria. That being so, the particular needs of Dandenong and Noble Park communities have served as a catalyst for the SBSC Project to take shape. The SBSC Project is aimed at developing capacity between child and family support services and schools with the explicit aim of building relationships and partnerships that change, improve and enhance lives across local communities. The research investigates the workings of these partnerships.

Method

A mixed methods approach was employed to reflect the views of families, the SBSC Project Worker, the Catholic Education's Cluster Engagement Leader, principals and community partners between March 2013 and December 2015. The researcher gathered both quantitative and qualitative data. Surveys, interviews and telephone consultations were used to document stakeholders' feedback.

Key features of effective inter-agency working

This research was concerned with a school-community collaboration that encompassed many different cross-sectoral community partnerships. These partnerships, ideally, should embrace practices that characterise effective inter-agency working. Best-practice characteristics were therefore identified which assisted in providing a theoretical framework and an evidence base from which to begin and focus the research instruments. Best-practice principles and practices identified in the literature around school-community collaboration included:

- Commitment or willingness to be involved – where those involved want to be involved and have a belief in multi-agency collaborations, rather than being directed to engage in it
- Understanding roles and responsibilities
- Common aims and objectives
- Communication and information sharing
- Leadership or drive – two essential ingredients of the leadership role included having a vision and tenacity
- Involving the relevant personnel
- Sharing and access to funding and resources – this could manifest in, for example, pooled budgets, joint funding, and the identification and use of alternative resources to enhance inter-agency working (Atkinson, Doherty & Kinder, 2005)

Conclusion

While still in its infancy, the SBSC Project has made some major headway in terms of laying down a foundation for effective partnerships. In a two-year period a great deal of community resources have been channeled to provide services, programs and activities aimed at meeting the needs of children and families in Dandenong and Noble Park. This report has documented progress while also underlining the considerable investment needed in terms of time and staff resources to continue developing and nurturing relationships. Indeed, the importance of having a dedicated partnership coordinator, the Project Officer, cannot be understated. Also noted were the beginnings of an important shift in school staff attitude, a shift necessary for positive outcomes to be realised.

References:

Atkinson, M., Doherty, P. and Kinder, K. (2005). Multiagency working: models, challenges and key factors for success. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 3 (1), 7–17.

This project and report was undertaken by Semann & Slattery, a research, consulting and professional development firm. For more information please go to www.semanslattery.com

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