

Mandeville School Community Conversations

Wednesday 20th June 2018

On Wednesday 20th June I had the privilege of spending the full day in your amazing school. I work with school communities to explore how families and schools might form stronger partnerships and work closely together for the good of all, especially our young ones. This begins with something that we all struggle to find time for in our busy lives, **good conversations**. That is why we held a series of conversations across the day and into the evening. I am grateful to the many parents who gave up their time to attend, and to school for making it possible for staff to attend all conversations.

The word **family** was used often in conversations had across the day, as was **community**. In my research I have spent a lot of time looking at the idea of community. I am most interested in the idea that community is not something that can be taken for granted. It is not something that just exists or happens when a group comes together. I agree with those who say that it is something that can be created by the group and that it can be built from the want of people sharing the same situation and issues to have a voice and to act together to make things better for all.

Our first conversation of the day was enriched by one parent's sharing of an African proverb.

A person who shares, in a group, a problem, does not intend to disrupt.

We were grateful for the parent's sharing and explanation of this idea. He said that the action of sharing an issue with a community group is not a selfish act but one that shares responsibility, offering opportunity for the whole group to find a solution.

Talk of 'family' and community came up in every conversation had. The idea of Mandeville being one family. Indeed, one parent described school as feeling like "home from home". Another parent valued the "peace of mind" having their child placed in Mandeville offered. Good communication is clearly valued and seen as important, as is having the opportunity to talk and share information. The fact that

school staff listen with empathy and understanding is seen as a very strong feature of family-school relationships.

One parent shared her appreciation for the way any request to talk and share information is welcomed by Mandeville staff, comparing this to how difficult it was to do the same in the school attended by one of her other children. We talked about how this was not just about school staff being willing to give up time to listen and talk but that it is important for the care of the child that two-way communication exists; family to school, and school to family. It was said that parents feel confident that information shared is passed on to those who need to know, and that anything could be shared without worrying. We talked about how important **trust** is here.

It is clear to me that family-school partnership in the Mandeville community is built on a very strong level of trust. Parents respect the role professionals have to play in their child's progress and development. But it was also recognised how difficult it is to actually hand over responsibility and trust.

Thoughts shared by Mandeville parents and staff in conversations held across the day showed a very strong desire for connectedness and a very real sense of belonging to something special and unique.

We talked about how easy it is for some parents to feel alone, isolated. A good example of this was offered by one parent in her experience of public transport. She talked of the lack of awareness and understanding shown by some transport staff, such as bus drivers, when getting on the bus with her child. This is something others said they have experienced. If we think of the African proverb shared with the group, we can see that such a problem being shared can be talked about. The person sharing the issue soon discovered that she was not alone in experiencing such treatment. A solution could be that school and parents might meet as a group with representatives from local transport providers and talk about ways of making bus drivers, for example, more aware and so more understanding. The same approach can be taken to other issues and problems faced by Mandeville community members.

This takes us back to the idea of community and what that is. My experience of the Mandeville school community is that you have great respect for one another

and hold one another in the highest regard. A level of trust exists across the Mandeville school community that I have not seen in any other school community that I have worked with. I witnessed this too when sat having my lunch in the dining hall, and then when we spoke with members of the school council. The Mandeville School Council members enthusiastically expressed their want for more: music; trips - by train (especially Tube); visits to libraries; swimming (in-school, with parents); soft play; iPads and technology.

Other hopes and requests, shared in the community conversations, included:

- More opportunities for swimming - children and parents together
- More support for parents around transition to secondary school
- More physiotherapy
- Website for parents focused on sharing of child activities
- Visible information on staff and their roles
- More opportunities for parents to join assemblies e.g. Star of the Week
- Feedback forms for parents (maybe anonymous?)
- Parents notice board for information sharing

I would like to thank Denise Feasey for organising the day in a way that made all of this possible. It was a fantastic learning experience for me, too. Mandeville is one incredible school and you are one amazing group of people; a true community.

Report by
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June 2018

