

Mandeville School Community Conversations

Wednesday 20th June 2018

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

The day of community conversations we enjoyed was deeply enriched by one parent's sharing of an African proverb (above).

The parent offered explanation of this idea in saying that the action of sharing a personal burden with a community group transfers responsibility, opening up possibilities for collective wisdom to bring about a better solution. He was keen to stress that this is not a disruptive or selfish act but one that is expected, according to community norms and values.

The word 'family' featured strongly in conversations had across the day, as did 'community'. It is worth considering here what we might mean by community.

Three thoughts from academics with a special interest in this area...

There is no recipe for community building – no correlates, no workshop agenda, no training package. Community cannot be borrowed or bought.

Thomas Sergiovanni (1994)

It [community] is defined by the participants in the very process of pursuing it. It is their negotiated response to their situation and thus belongs to them in a profound sense, in spite of all the forces and influences that are beyond their control.

Etienne Wenger (1998)

Community is a desire, continually replenishing itself as people seek voice and connectedness, in all their imperfections.

Jeremy Brent (2004)

Jeremy Brent argues that community is best understood in terms of the processes by which it comes about. Community isn't something that is given or

can be relied on. Rather, Brent says, the idea of community is attached to different forms of collective identity that have actually to be created.

In short, we cannot rely on simplified dictionary definitions. One of the critical components of an effective community is uniqueness. This trait connects community members, committing them to their commonly owned goals and values.

Insights shared by Mandeville community members in conversations held across the day signal an overwhelming desire for connectedness and a very real sense of belonging to something special and unique.

As said, the concept of ‘family’ was constantly referred to, with a clearly expressed belief in 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 and structured channels of communication are clearly valued and seen as important. The fact that school is attentive and staff listen with empathy and understanding is seen as a defining feature of family-school relationships.

One parent expressed their appreciation for the way any request to talk and share information is received by Mandeville staff. The parent compared this to the way such a request might be received at her other child’s school. We talked about how the apparent informality and readiness to listen and share which is typical at Mandeville compared with the formality (parent commonly being referred to another member of staff, or due process) that typifies the other school. We recognised that this requires discipline and commitment to information sharing; that this is not just about being generous in time giving but is critical for informed care of the child. It was noted that parents feel confident that information shared is passed on as appropriate. Furthermore, that anything could be shared without worrying, such is mutual trust.

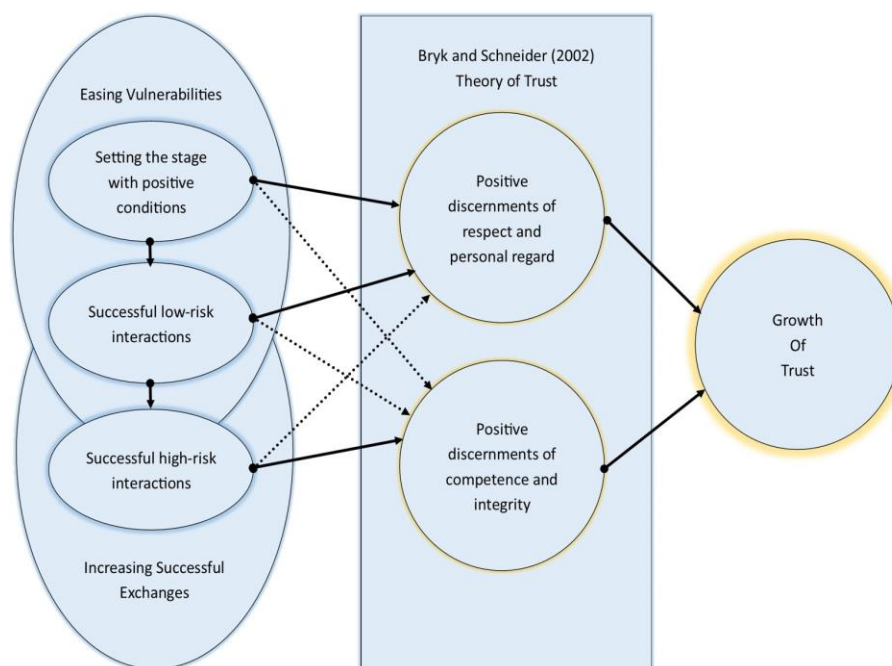
Home-school partnership in the Mandeville community is underpinned by a significantly strong level of trust. It is notable that parents respect the role professionals have to play in their child’s progress and development but this, potentially, can be problematic, for it is difficult to actually hand over responsibility and trust.

According to Bryk and Schneider's conceptualisation of *Relational Trust*, we typically use four key elements to discern the intentions of others in schools: respect, competence, integrity, and personal regard for others. Respect involves a basic regard for the dignity and worth of others. Competence is the ability to carry out the formal responsibilities of the role. Integrity is demonstrated by carrying through with actions that are consistent with stated beliefs. Personal regard involves demonstration of intentions and behaviours that go beyond the formal requirements of the role. All in all, a genuine sense of listening to what each person has to say marks the basis for meaningful social interaction.

Relational Trust:

- Reduces vulnerability and encourages risk taking
- Facilitates public problem solving
- Establishes a professional community of mutual support
- Creates a moral resource for school improvement
- Influences belief in the organisation's mission

Bryk says that *Relational Trust* works through low-risk social interactions and high-risk social interactions; *Respect* and *Personal regard for others*, under low-risk; '*Competence*' and '*Integrity*' as high-risk interactions.



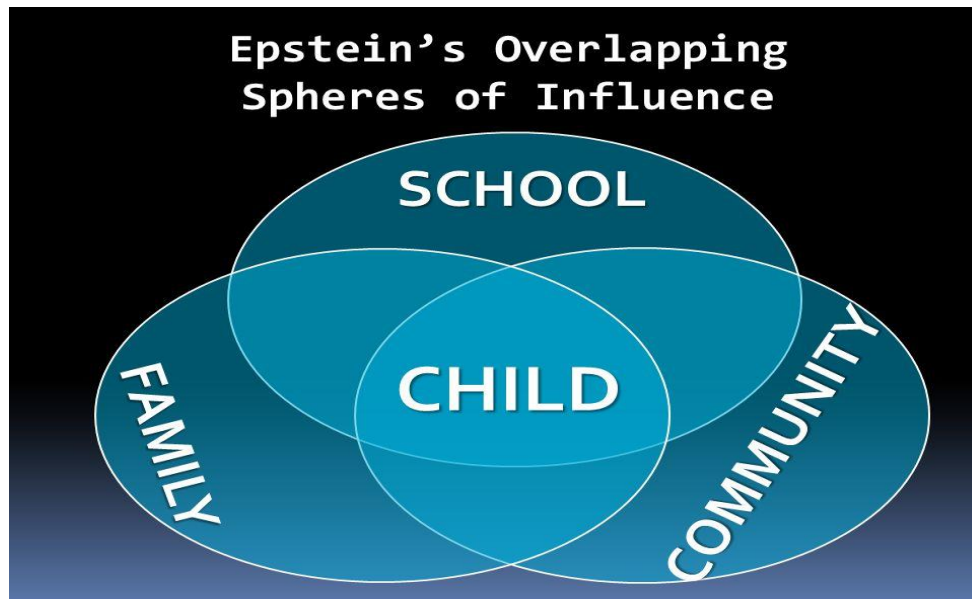
The conversations that we had indicate that the level of relational trust at Mandeville is extremely high, and is so strong because of the degree of competence and integrity shown by staff. Staff members are recognised as highly trained, honest and realistic.

Interesting, then, if we take this guiding definition for relational power as defined by Warren and Mapp (2011):

‘If unilateral power emphasises power “over”, relational power emphasises power “with” others, or building the power to accomplish common aims’.

We talked about how we might combat feelings of isolation and act as one body, in the spirit of the idea shared by way of an African proverb (above).

Dr Joyce Epstein states time and again in her work that ‘School, family, and community partnerships is a better term than ‘parental involvement’ to recognise that parents, educators, and others in the community share responsibility for students’ learning and development.’ Epstein developed her theory of overlapping spheres of influence, saying that students learn more when parents, educators, and others in the community work together to guide and support student learning and development. In this model, three contexts – home, school, and community – overlap with unique and combined influences on children through the interactions of parents, educators, community partners, and students across contexts. With attention to contexts and social relations, the theory of overlapping spheres of influence changes the narrow focus of “parental involvement” from what an individual parent does to a broader, more realistic representation of how students move, continuously, in and out of several contexts and how the influential people in those contexts may work together to contribute to students’ education and development.

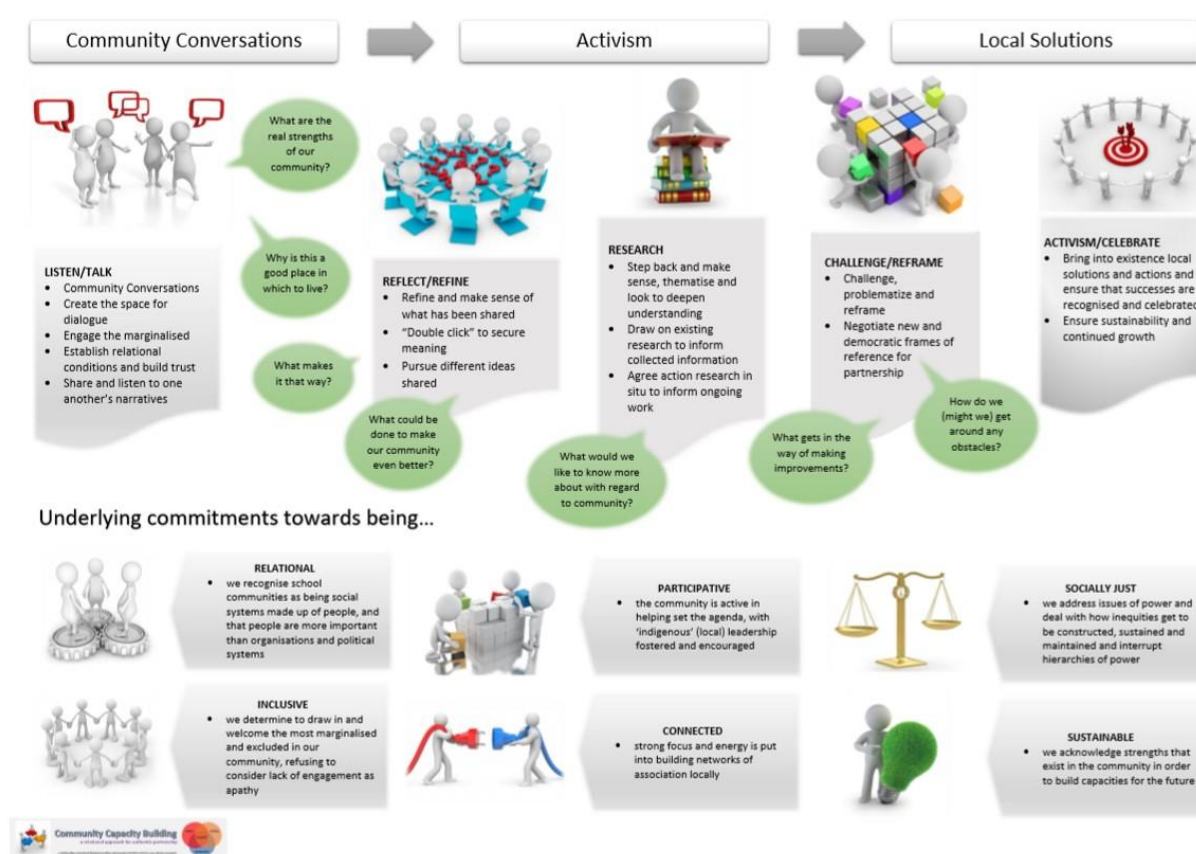


I am very aware (and ever more so having had the privilege of spending a day in conversation with the Mandeville community) that simply talking of 'parental involvement' or 'parental engagement' in children's learning does little more than touch on the complexity and closeness of the home-school partnership required in communities such as Mandeville. It is especially interesting, then, to think back on a recent conversation I had with the relational theorist, Dr Scott Eacott.

Scott challenged me on my reference to 'school', 'families' and 'community' in my research. Scott suggests that school communities (in the broadest sense of the term) are a coherent whole and that every school has its own trajectory. Scott recognises that while saying that every school is unique we rarely put into action attempts to see what different groups want and expect out of schooling. The challenge is that there needs to be a way to recognize and acknowledge the many different perspectives that may come forward and doing the work (collectively) that translates it into some form of concrete outcomes. To achieve this, Scott says, we need to take the time to tease out what the community at XYZ look like. What are their distinctive features. All activities should contribute to this work.

This is why I advocate a **community capacity building** approach, starting from the viewpoint that all communities have assets, skills and resources, but they also have constraints that limit what is possible. Professor John Smyth (2011)

contends that these strengths and constraints are not universal but differ from person-to-person and are highly context dependent. Contexts are as important as the individuals that inhabit them. Capacity building approaches provide space for those most affected at the 'grass-roots level' to identify the constraints they are experiencing. And so, the adoption of 'co-learning' and 'problem-solving... dialogue among equals' (Eade, 1997) trumps the idea of 'experts' administering to those deemed inexperienced. This is what Smyth terms a *relationship-centred and dialogical problem-solving approach*. I have devised this infographic in pulling together ideas and insights from academics and practitioners.



If we focus on some key messages that came from conversations had across the day we can see how the process might work at Mandeville, starting with the issue of feeling isolated...

In conversation, one parent shared her experience of public transport, despairing at the lack of awareness and understanding exhibited by transport staff; in the example given, a bus driver. The parent is clearly not alone in experiencing such

treatment, as evidenced by the response of others participating in this particular conversation. If we move through the process described above to 'Activism', we see how collective reflection and thinking on the issue might lead to further investigation and research around other's experience. This can then lead us to seeking of solutions, drawing in, maybe, representation from local transport providers. In essence, this matches the principles and methodology suggested through the African proverb shared at the beginning. I have greatly simplified the steps to resolution but this offers a good example of what might be achieved if school communities act as one body and engage in activism in seeking local solutions.

Issues will range from the more local to societal in nature. In conversation, another parent shared her anxiety around transition to secondary school; no doubt one shared by many others. This lived reality is indeed something that can be eased if shared and worked through with relevant representatives drawn to the table.

In conversation, another parent raised an issue that has implications on so many levels. As growing knowledge and standards of care impact on life expectancy of children with certain conditions we are faced with the possibility of our vulnerable young outliving their parents. This raises the question of how society prepares itself for such a reality and is best equipped to provide and maintain appropriate care for vulnerable adults. It was agreed that if we - communities such as Mandeville - do not speak up and apply pressure on government to meet our expectations here then who will speak for us? Engaging with and drawing relevant people to our table, or seeking a place at their table, is far more likely to happen through the force of a powerful collective.

The wonderfully inclusive and trusting culture that defines the Mandeville community way provides the bedrock for something powerful, impactful and a force for positive change, addressing issues that affect the Mandeville community and communities like it. As represented graphically above, the conditions for community capacity building (driven by: community conversations > activism > local solutions) require whole community commitment to being relational, inclusive, participative, connected, socially just, and sustainable.

Given the energy, passion and insight demonstrated by all those Mandeville community members who engaged in the community conversations held on 20 June, I would suggest that the will and potential already exists to plan for an event for reflection and consideration on how momentum can be given to work on seeking solutions to issues that might need addressing. This may include, for example, awareness raising and application of pressure on bodies such as local transport networks to reflect on and improve their practice. It may include the potential for creation of a pressure group (aligned with other school communities) that works on lobbying parliament, forcing positive change.

I am aware that this represents quite a leap forward. Part of my thinking is based on the belief that other Mandeville community members, not yet active, can be made aware of the work being done on the community's behalf by fellow community members, addressing real life issues affecting all, and feel compelled to participate themselves.

Whilst this backfill takes place - growth of community participation - school can further increase its credibility so far as listening and taking action is concerned by thinking on and addressing suggestions raised during conversations, including:

- More opportunities for swimming - children and parents together
- More support for parents around transition
- Increased physiotherapy offer
- 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

A final word from our most important community members, the children - represented by the Mandeville School Council. The group 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.

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