

# Chapter 3

## Schools and Communities Fit for Purpose

Dorothy Bottrell

**Abstract** This chapter discusses how changing relationships of schools and communities may facilitate the expansive learning advocated by Johanna Wyn. Both schools and communities are shaped by social change, structured inequalities and policy; and reciprocally influence young people’s lives in and out of school. Both need to be responsive and adaptable in the pursuit of inclusive education and a sustainable society. Drawing on recent scholarship on school-community engagement, I argue that a community development approach reorients schools and communities as fit for purpose. Learning through and as community development provides opportunities for young people’s decision making, identity work and social action toward improving the quality of life in and out of school.

### Introduction

This chapter is a response to Johanna Wyn’s “heresy”, that schools are not fit for purpose and need to change if young people are to develop the knowledge, skills and “ways of being and knowing” they need “to be effective navigators of their own lives and participants in creating a sustainable society”. It discusses how changing relationships of schools and communities may facilitate an expansive approach to learning that can integrate individual and social purposes. As schools *and* communities are reciprocal influences on the quality of young people’s learning and lives in and out of school, working for these purposes requires “an educational system that recognises the learner and their community”. However, situating schools and learners in their social context as the “interrelationship between broader social, economic and political change” underlines the need to respond to how inequalities that have marked social change over the last quarter of a century are shaping the conditions, structures and sites of young people’s “navigations” – including their communities.

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D. Bottrell (✉)  
College of Education, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia  
e-mail: [dorothy.bottrell@vu.edu.au](mailto:dorothy.bottrell@vu.edu.au)

In educational research and practice the development of new pedagogical frameworks is in part a recognition of the reciprocal influences of schools and communities. In disadvantaged schools in particular there is renewed attention to the importance of bringing community into classroom processes to embed and value diverse cultural capital and funds of knowledge (Mills 2008; Zipin 2009). These approaches are explicitly inclusive and aim to break the nexus of educational success and the resources of privilege. In diverse ways, specific to classroom, school and community contexts, they aim to foster young people's consciousness of the value of education for navigating their lives in the present and future (Munns 2007). It is also recognised in work for educational justice, however, that there are limits to what individual teachers and schools can achieve in the face of the increasing social inequities. These inequities serve in part to consolidate hierarchies of power as classed, raced, gendered and stratified by a variety of disenfranchised/ing social identities. New pedagogies "can make a difference, but not *all* of the difference" (Original italics, Hayes et al. 2006, p. 178).

Because educational disadvantage is intertwined with a broad array of systemic inequities, changing schools alone will not enable the expansive learning purposes Wyn proposes. As Rigney argues, "the patterns of Aboriginal disadvantage occur together and are multiple, and require multilayered strategic action across education, health, poverty, housing and employment" (Rigney 2011, p. 39). Such patterns are not uniquely local but rather historically formed through policy, institutional and "everyday" forms of racialised exclusion. They are reproduced anew and often exacerbated by globalising trends of the past quarter of a century as the flow of neoliberalisation effects "*circuits of dispossession and privilege*" (original italics, Fine et al. 2010, p. 30). Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) have shown that wider disparities of income and wealth within rich nations are associated with greater prevalence of health and social problems than in more equal societies, including larger discrepancies of aspiration, educational opportunity, attainment and associated social mobility. These dimensions of social change are often most tangible at the local community level and represent significant barriers to young people's effective navigation of their lives. In short, increased social inequalities undermine the conditions of/for expansive learning and run counter to the notion of sustainable societies.

In this chapter I argue for a community development approach that incorporates place-based and student centred pedagogies as important to connecting not only with how young people are learning out of school, but to enhance the *conditions of and for* learning and to engage with questions of *what* young people need to learn for individual and societal purposes. The chapter draws on recent scholarship on schools and communities oriented toward social inclusion. This work is in the tradition of research and practice that recognises the potential of school-community engagement to contribute to the redress of educational *and* social inequity (Bottrell and Goodwin 2011a). However, in this work we recognise that invoking "community" is not unproblematic. As there are diverse communities associated with people, places, interests and issues, cross-cut by chosen and ascribed identities (Bottrell 2007), there are similarly multiple and contested notions of

community that may serve dominant interests without critical engagement with questions of who is included and excluded and how conceptualisations of individual and social purposes may reproduce or transform inequitable structures. In particular, we have highlighted policy constructions of community centred on an “achievement turn” in educational and social policy (Bottrell and Goodwin 2011b). We argue that the legitimacy accorded “community” has increasingly been harnessed by governments in Australia and internationally to manage social and economic inequity through neoliberal discourse and strategy that is essentially concerned with individualising responsibility for educational success and social cohesion, serving state and economic purposes. As existing school-community practices are shaped by neoliberalism, they can be appropriated for neoliberal purposes. Yet community development practices are clearly concerned with individual, cultural and social relational goals that are outside a neoliberal instrumental rationality. The ‘heresy’ addressed here is actually already being brought to life in many places in spite of policy-blindness to these initiatives in school-community development.

## **Learning, Communities and the Achievement Turn**

Young people’s informal learning contexts are not immune from neoliberal influences; indeed they exemplify how historical and emerging social inequities permeate young people’s lives and, as “communities”, informal learning in non-school contexts highlights the tensions inherent in community development. Whether interest, occupation or practice based communities, local or geographic communities, or communities foregrounding social identities, young people’s learning in these contexts necessarily engages with the power structures within and between communities. As Wyn (Chap. 2, this volume) argues, how and what young people learn in these contexts may empower their ways of being and knowing. For example, Australian and international studies of young people’s online experience (Collin and Burns 2009) indicate the value of social networks and their reciprocal influence on offline everyday life. Sharing information, feeling a sense of belonging, and the space to explore identities are common experiences. Exploring gender, sexual identities, issues of race and ‘dis’/abilities through social networks and blogging are means of individual and community consciousness-raising around diversity, rights and related campaigns as young people produce knowledge and collaborate in creative and political projects (Harris 2008). However, there are significant costs involved for some young people as social networks have also provided new means of intensifying abuses of power such as bullying and a platform for oppressive ideologies through racist, xenophobic, homophobic and misogynist “communities”. The new media are powerful learning tools but also infrastructure of social exclusion, including the “digital divide”, as well as key sites of pervasive marketing, consumption and top-down “e-governance”.

In this context, the skills, knowledge and identity work that help young people navigate their lives are not confined to individual matters but rather are socially

critical, concerned with rights and the “common good”. As Wyn points out, these purposes have been suppressed in the ascendance of policies centred on economic aims and narrow strategies of social inclusion premised on the idea of the “mainstream”.

As Bottrell and Goodwin (2011b) have similarly argued, and as other contributors to this book have elaborated, neoliberal educational policy, despite including broad democratic and inclusive goals, has increasingly taken a narrow focus on learning as basic skills of literacy and numeracy and these in the narrow form of performance on standardised tests. “Community” in this context is narrowly defined in terms of parents’ roles: of “involvement” for the purpose of improving their children’s test results; and in school and teacher accountability through school choice, informed by public comparisons of results. This “achievement turn” is evident internationally and has similarly applied to social policy. Strategies for building “stronger communities” are narrowly focused on economic participation and community involvement to support individual self-reliance. However, as Randolph (2004) has shown, such strategies may reproduce the “geography of disadvantage” as their implementation often coincides with scaling down government provided services for young people and families. Within the managerial model of public service in the community sector, organisations assisting people in disadvantaged communities are required to focus on “targets” (people and outcomes) and sort people into intervention programs supposedly based on standardised assessments. In this context the educational needs, interests and social opportunities of historically marginalised young people, their families, schools and communities are reinscribed in deficit terms of low achievement and failure and subject to compelled support to improve performance. For example, the professionalism of teachers and community workers is narrowly conceptualised as technical, instrumental and standardised work for “measurable results”. Expansive curricula and pedagogy in both schools and community work is subordinated to efficiencies. The overarching aim is not to transform but to fit people into the existing and inequitable institutional and social systems. In educational terms, the fixation on standardised assessment and results is an abstraction of the real demands of workplaces and civic life. In these ways, schools and communities are focal sites for governing through community (Rose 2000), a way of managing rather than addressing social and economic inequalities as “top-down” policy is “delivered” through local communities.

Both schools and communities thus need to be responsive and adaptable in the pursuit of inclusive education and a sustainable society. As Ife argues, local action is necessitated in “communities that have been excluded from the networks of power and marginalised by the new global economy” (Ife 2002, p. 144). He argues for sustainable community development that seeks to challenge structures of oppression, embrace cultural diversity and “reconstruct an agenda of globalisation that is in the interests of ordinary people and communities” (p. 224), centred on the least advantaged.

## Community Development Practices for Expansive Purposes

Community development has priorities and forms that are highly diverse: they include residents' action groups, intercultural dialogue, advocacy and support groups, the establishment of new services, education and training, local environmental and heritage campaigns, networking and inter-agency collaborations. The core principles of contemporary practice reflect the historical roots of community development in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, with the goal of democratising state institutions through grassroots decision-making and popular control of social resources. With the enduring aim of social justice, now commonly integrated with environmental justice around the goal of sustainability, community development is concerned with the local-global connectedness of inequalities that are people and place-based.

Principles that guide the work of community development include developing “bottom-up” agenda, participatory collective action and mutual support (Fawcett et al. 2010). Community development begins with people's concerns and aspirations specific to their historical and cultural settings, and proceeds by harnessing community expertise and resources for practical action, including the knowledge, skills, stories and cultures of residents, workers, organisations and networks, along with a range of other physical and economic resources. Inclusion is a central process and value in community development. As Ledwith suggests, it “embraces a range of ways of being in the world that are not seen as *deviant* from the norm – young, old, ‘dis’abled, single, lone parent, lesbian, gay, all faiths and none, and so on” (2011, p. 42, emphasis in original). Inclusionary practice is enacted through dialogue and participatory processes and grounded in ongoing analysis of power. As any local community typically involves diverse groups with both shared and conflicting interests, working with conflict is expected, indeed considered a basic principle (Kenny 2007). This requires attention to process as much as project to work against hegemonic ideological, structural and everyday forms of oppression and exclusion; while harnessing the power of individual and collective agency realizable through local community praxis (Westoby and Shevellar 2012). Both within and beyond local communities, advocacy for rights and resources is an important role of community workers.

Engaging schools and communities in community development thus reorients education toward improving the quality of community life and changing the conditions of and for lifelong expansive learning. Young people engaged in community development regard their opportunities for learning as making a difference rather than as fitting into or finding ways to navigate inequitable structures and barriers. Navigating paid work is a case in point. Alongside the positive experiences of work, opportunities are highly classed and gendered, and workplaces can be sites of harassment, bullying and health and safety concerns (NSW Commission for Children and Young People 2005). Such patterns underline the importance of educating

young people on their rights to and at work and, as Wyn suggests, how their labour market and work experiences are structured historically and politically. This involves learning about processes “creating labour market insecurity (flexibility) and replacing collective bargaining with incentives for individual ‘achievement’” (Connell 2013, p. 279) as well as skills for advocacy and organising.

## Community Development In and Out of School

There are many ways that schools and communities can and currently do work together for community development centred on expansive learning. They include collaborative projects and processes in schools and in the local community. A community development framework may indeed reconceptualise communities *for* schools and communities *as* “schools”.

Community development may be situated in the school, to harness support to education programs, young people and families. Examples of this approach include youth workers and social workers in school programs, the community schools model in the US and full service or extended schools in the UK which co-locate health, welfare, family and recreational services in the school grounds. In NSW, the Schools As Community Centres program similarly takes an interagency approach to supporting the development of individual, family, school and community capacities. Specific programs such as supported playgroups, breakfast programs, parent education, early literacy and cultural events have emerged out of discussion and service planning with families. As hubs for community activities, SaCCs connect families and schools with community resources (Velkou and Bottrell 2011).

Community development focused on environmental sustainability co-ordinates community participation in developing on-site “learnsapes” such as microecologies of wetlands, rainforests and indigenous, sensory and kitchen gardens. The national network of Sustainable Schools now includes one third of Australian schools. Their projects are diverse, including water and energy conservation, recycling, plant propagation and other biodiversity work. Similar networks are growing internationally. For example, Eco-Schools involve over 11 million young people in 52 countries. Most sustainability programs take a whole-school approach and involve multiple partnerships with community organisations, businesses and government agencies.

Sustainability projects are also community based. Along with service learning, community-based research and participation in forums, events and social action projects, this form of community development situates the community as “curriculum”. For example, schools may link with local councils, youth services and other NGOs, resident groups, government agencies and chambers of commerce to plan and work on urban renewal or regeneration toward social, environmental and economic sustainability. Young people’s action projects make a significant contribution toward these aims (Walsh and Black 2011). In “student action teams” (Holdsworth 2005), the “ruMAD?” (are you Making A Difference) (Black et al. 2009) and similar

programs, young people design and implement social action around highly diverse issues including racism, homophobia, bullying, homelessness, community safety, transport, physical and mental health.

Community development situating communities *for* and *as* schools opens up opportunities for expansive learning. It involves “real life” learning in/with local communities and the development of transformative skills for citizenship (Black et al. 2009; Hayes et al. 2006) in collaborative planning, research, organising, negotiating and communicating. For example, one ruMad? project undertaken by young people from a rural school in Victoria raised community awareness about depression. They organised forums, staged a photography exhibition at the local art gallery and presented at a music festival. Additionally, young people may draw on new extended networks and knowledge of community resources gained through this work, for their wellbeing and further developing school and life skills.

The roles and relationships enabled by community development foster identity work on many levels. Collaborating as co-learners means that the role of teacher or leader is a fluid one, as experience and expertise are taken to be more important than age. For example, young people may often take the lead with fresh, innovative ideas for tackling social problems; their lived experience of “youth issues” positions them as expert groups with critiques and insights regarding dominant institutional framings of those issues (for example youth crime and victimisation) as personal problems. Young people may be the most expert group in terms of how technologies can be harnessed for their own and others’ learning and in change projects where their utility is centred on knowledge production rather than consumption. While community development has traditionally focused on local communities, young people may well lead action for change in and through diverse communities including those online.

Community development is an important means of strengthening community ties. For young people, this may mean seeing themselves, their peers, parents, teachers and community members in a new light, as they demonstrate their talents and passions, and take on responsibilities unavailable in regular schooling. Perhaps even more importantly, they, and their families and schools, are seen by others in new ways. For example, te Riele (2011) found that the personal relationships of community work in a regional town broke down the sense of “us” and “them”, including significant shifts in employer attitudes that have brought strong and lasting support to the school. Community development work may thus establish conditions for continued breaking down of segregation and prejudice in everyday encounters well after a project is completed.

## **Community Development, Identity Work and Alliances**

Because it is relational and involves negotiating conflicting interests within heterogeneous communities, community development, like teaching, is complex work. One ambiguity of the work is the desire to build community solidarities while

working with the principle of respect for people's level of participation – in the context of personal commitments and societally uneven commitment to work for social justice. For young people, space for participation with and without adults is an important condition of learning and identity work. For example, young women engaged in online communities are often “expressing a desire to occupy public space on their own terms”, in resistance to “regulatory culture” (Harris 2008, p. 492) which may be associated with community.

School-community engagement is being developed in the context of neoliberalism. Consequently, while disadvantaged schools and communities are compelled to reinvent themselves as achievers and economic contributors, there tends to be a policy silence on broader issues of the uneven distribution of privilege and advantage. In this context, *community development as school-community alliance* emphasises the crucial role of advocacy. For example, in residualised public schools located in residualising communities, advocacy through local community development can be extended through the building of social movements around school-community issues (Anyon 2005). Community engaged teachers (Gale and Densmore 2003) are well positioned to lead this work, extending advocacy for the school to build its community support and linking with other organisations, including labour coalitions or “community unionism” (Tattersall 2010, p. 18) to improve the quality of people's lives in school and community. K. Freebody et al. (2011, p. 78) argue that “along with enhancing the educational experience of students, schools and communities that advocate for one another reveal and challenge those practices and policies that can intensify disadvantage and exclusion”.

Just as education systems rely on the work of disadvantaged schools, the beneficial conditions enabling individual wellbeing and privilege in “other” communities are intertwined with disadvantage. From this perspective, the conditions of/for privilege also need to shift, for they too are detrimental to young people's identity work. As Connell (1995, p. 15) has argued, “education that privileges one child over another is giving the privileged child a corrupted education, even as it gives him or her a social or economic advantage”.

Community development may, then, bolster a split system of “common good” praxis and individualised and self-interested accumulative development, unless we question the benefits of Whiteness and the uses of power based on wealth and hierarchies of social and cultural domination and distinction. A challenge for expansive community development work, then, is to reach communities of privilege, across as well as within communities.

Relationships are central to learning through community development that provides conditions for dialogue, decision-making and identity work, to build trust, solidarities and commitment to social justice. It provides opportunities for young people to work with a diversity of individuals, groups, organisations and authorities – often extending beyond the local – to participate in official and informal decisions affecting them and their communities and through observation and active roles in negotiating different perspectives imbued with differential power, to appreciate the politics of communities and social change and how the local intersects and is shaped by societal structures, policy and social processes.

A year-long project undertaken by Strathfield South High School (a highly multicultural community) illustrates these facets. In a series of workshops involving local community members, youth workers, academics and peers from Windsor High School (predominantly Anglo-Australian with a significant proportion of Aboriginal students), young people researched, debated and analysed racism and stereotyping, tracing the interrelationships of pejorative public perception and media treatment of Muslims with the racist treatment of Indigenous communities and vilification of various groups throughout Australian history. The film made by the students, *We Are All Australian* (NSW DET 2008), documents their research, interspersed with excerpts from the workshops, showing young people in dialogue about “difference” and power, exclusion, inclusion, personal and collective responsibility.

Stoudt et al. (2012)’s participatory project, *Polling For Justice* (PJF) on differentiated youth experience of education, health and criminal justice illustrates ways in which privilege is contested when a community of researchers brings diverse expertise to the work. The group included students from the richest and poorest schools in New York, young people identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning sexualities, formerly incarcerated, homeless, and immigrant, working with activist academics and professionals. As well as documenting circuits of dis/advantage, in presenting their findings, the team used performance methodologies to both unsettle “audience members/readers/adults and youth of privilege standing by as witnesses and bystanders” (p. 187) and to build political solidarity. Through such collaboration, young people, educators, social workers, lawyers and the diverse public audiences of the group’s presentations of the research may gain insights that resonate with Wilkinson and Pickett’s (2010), that working to address these inequalities is in everyone’s interest. As their evidence shows, better health and social outcomes, including community life and social relations, accrue to all levels of society where disparities of wealth are smallest. Moreover, their analysis suggests that greater equality is a pre-condition for social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability. As PFJ illustrates, learning in and with diverse communities opens up public spaces to bridge understandings, challenge us all to be more than “bystanders” and to build commitments, through empathy and solidarity, to justice.

This is uncommon community development, yet it may be necessary if, as Wyn proposes, young people are to participate in experiences where learning to be successful “navigators” matters beyond self-interest for a sustainable society. However, this significant work is no substitute for the role of “quality government” (Rigney 2011, p. 47) in redistributive and recognitive social inclusion.

## Conclusion

The expansive practices discussed in this chapter may contribute to schools and communities ‘fit for purpose’ where young people develop ways of being and knowing to effectively navigate their lives and build a sustainable society,

with overarching aims of equity and social inclusion. However, because school-community relationships are re/forming in the context of neoliberalism, they can be, and often are at the policy level, represented as a good fit with neoliberal purposes. A more expansive view of learning in and out of school could be integrated into the model of predominantly separate schools and communities in service of the achievement turn. Indeed, the imperative that young people, especially those “at risk” learn to “navigate life’s challenges” (Australian Government 2010, p. 3) is a centrepiece of youth policy that is concerned with the production of entrepreneurial, individualised and responsibilised identity and citizenship (Kelly 2006).

In the context of increasing educational and social inequities, spearheaded by neoliberal economic priorities, the role of education for social change through collective work has become more pressing. A community development approach may harnesses the commitments and resources of activist professionals in schools and community work toward transformational goals. As the collaboration of schools and communities it is not only concerned with including young people but their active participation in community building, forging new roles, relationships, social arrangements and democratising institutions for a sustainable or more “expansive” (critical, just, generous, caring, solidaristic) society, locally and globally. Learning through and as community development thus invokes the broader democratic and emancipatory purposes of education and reasserts the ideal that schools may be agents of social change (Connell 1995; Lingard et al. 2011; Smyth et al. 2009).

Reorienting education toward expansive purposes requires change in a broad range of institutional and community contexts and, as Wyn has argued, most importantly at the policy level. Perhaps if young people are to gain what they need from schools *and* communities, we most need a “heretical break” (Bourdieu 1983, p. 313) with neoliberal priorities that have narrowed the conceptualisation and scope of learning, community capacities and collaboration between schools and communities.

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