Somebody Knows, Somebody Cares
Reengaging Students through Relationship

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Somebody Knows, Somebody Cares: Reengaging Students through Relationship explores approaches to engaging young people in schooling through advocacy models of student support. In Australia, as in many nations, increasing social, cultural and linguistic diversity in school populations is producing complex challenges for education systems, schooling, teaching and learning. This book shares research informed insights into the multi-layered approaches required to support vulnerable students and sustain school-based mentoring programs. This edited collection covers theoretical and empirical perspectives on student disengagement from schooling through these key ideas:

• The benefits of advocacy and mentoring programs on learning and school culture, particularly for students who are at risk of disconnection from learning.

• Transforming schooling from the bottom up, by listening to students, teachers and principals and supporting educators in the development of situated and dynamic conditions for learning, through school-university partnerships.

• The centrality of positive, caring teacher – student relationships, foregrounding emotional connection as a key component of effective learning, derived from the person-centred theory articulated by Carl Rogers.

Written by a team of academics, teachers and school principals, Somebody Knows, Somebody Cares: Reengaging Students through Relationship is a valuable resource for teacher educators, principals, teachers, student welfare counsellors and counselling practitioners.
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Reengaging Students through Relationship

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. When One of the Teachers Smiles at Me: The Advocacy Model in Schools  
   *Bernie Neville, Kirsten Hutchison and Tricia McCann*  
   1

2. Backgrounding Advocacy: Research Informing Advocacy Models  
   *Bernie Neville*  
   13

3. Principles and Outcomes of the Advocacy Project  
   *Tricia McCann and Brendan Schmidt*  
   25

4. Volatile and Vulnerable: Engaging Adolescent Learners through Advocacy and Mentoring Program  
   *Kirsten Hutchison*  
   37

5. ‘I Want Them to Listen to Me’  
   *Tricia McCann*  
   55

6. Running in Quicksand: Stories from the Field  
   *Caroline Walta and Kirsten Hutchison*  
   69

7. You Can’t Do Advocacy for 15 Minutes a Day: Whole School Approaches to Advocacy and Mentoring  
   *Kirsten Hutchison and Don Collins*  
   83

8. Electronic Support for Advocacy  
   *Stacia Beazley*  
   97

9. The Heart of Advocacy: Implications for Schooling  
   *Kirsten Hutchison and Bernie Neville*  
   111
WHEN ONE OF THE TEACHERS SMILES AT ME

The Advocacy Model in Schools

WHY ADVOCACY

Until fairly recently, research on school dropout or failure focused on the reasons why many students do not complete their schooling: e.g. young people drop out or fail because they are not motivated, are not committed, have no self-esteem, have no ambition or, have no skills. These factors were then conventionally related to factors outside the school: inadequate family support, poverty, peer pressure, minority status, demands of part-time jobs. More recently it has become apparent that it is as reasonable to talk about ‘problem schools’ or ‘problem classrooms’ as ‘problem students’. Poor motivation, low aspirations, low self-esteem and generally negative attitudes may indeed be brought to the school, but they can just as well be produced by school experience. There are clearly a variety of dimensions of school experience which may produce the outcome of disengagement and dropout, but to focus on conventional factors such as school size, curriculum content, school structure and material resources, is to overlook overwhelming evidence that it is the inability of schools to meet the developmental needs of students which is crucial.

The problem of designing appropriate educational provision for young people belongs within a much larger context, in which many adolescents in both urban and rural communities are seen to be ‘at risk’. The label of ‘at risk students’ is variously interpreted, but in the Australian context it is currently employed to include students whose development into happy and productive members of society is perceived to be problematic because of disability, homelessness, drug taking, exposure to sexual abuse, poverty, poor motivation and achievement in schooling, exposure to health risks, criminal activity, and lack of employment opportunity.

There is an assumption, or at least a hope, that the dangers for these young people and society at large would be minimized if the education system could provide a way of managing the later years of schooling, which could engage, motivate and support students, and give them the knowledge and skills to gain immediate employment or proceed to further study. There is plenty of evidence that young people who fail to complete twelve years of schooling are at greater risk of unemployment, mental illness, substance abuse and incarceration than those who finish their schooling.

There is a common view that ‘at risk’ students can be most practically identified in terms of literacy, numeracy and school attendance and retention. It appears that
successful programs for ‘at risk’ students are those which keep students at school for an extra year or two, or assist them to move from school to a job. Various school-based and community-based ‘dropout prevention’ programs have been tried in Australia and elsewhere. They have achieved various levels of success. Analysis of successful programs strongly suggests that one of the most potent approaches is the provision of mentors or counsellors to help students deal with the issues which lead them to disengage from schooling (Brooker, 2011).

INTRODUCING ADVOCACY

During the nineteen nineties the State education system of Victoria was dragged, with considerable resistance, into overt acceptance of an economic rationalist ideology. With some significant exceptions, the senior management of secondary schools became accustomed to the notion that the only basis for valuing schooling is its contribution to the GDP. Curriculum came to be valued for its contribution to the employability of students, rarely for its contribution to the intellectual, interpersonal, moral, or aesthetic growth of either students or the wider community. Where once it was conventional, or at least not ridiculous, to talk of students as persons with potential to grow, and the school community as a rich environment for intellectual, emotional and social growth, it became conventional to adopt a rhetoric which describes students as customers, or even as products fashioned to meet the needs of employers.

During this decade the public education system in Victoria was subjected to a number of cost-cutting measures which led to a reduction in school staff. Usually the first ones to get notice were staff such as welfare coordinators, counsellors and guidance officers who could be let go without interfering with the school’s core business. By the end of the decade these apparently non-essential services had all but disappeared in Victorian State schools. Not surprisingly, this had unfortunate consequences for students, especially those labelled ‘at risk’. Truancy rates were up and more 15–18 year olds were dropping out of school – or any sort of education – as soon as they could.

To its credit, the conservative Kennett government acknowledged that there was a problem and attempted to do something about it. In 1998 Education Minister Philip Gude approved funding for a project aimed at a radical transformation of the way teachers related to senior students. The ‘Advocacy Project’ developed and tested a model in which each student would have a teacher who was committed to meeting with them regularly for a conversation about their learning and anything that helped or hindered it. The project started in a small way, with a three-school pilot project and a focus on improving the attendance and retention of post-compulsory students. The incoming Bracks Labor government continued the funding and support. Over the next four years, the project was so successful in achieving this objective that it expanded to over 150 Victorian state schools, in which a significant number of students were able to spend fifteen minutes each fortnight with a teacher-advocate.
who was committed to listening to them and helping them deal with whatever issues — academic, psychological or social — they were currently confronting. It became increasingly clear that students in primary and middle school, as well as senior school were helped emotionally and socially, as well as academically, through having a teacher-advocate. Students with advocates were more likely to come to school each day, more likely to stay at school and more likely to feel good about themselves. They were also likely to get better academic results (Ocean, 2001).

However, in Education as elsewhere, innovations have a brief shelf life. When it had become patently clear that the Advocacy model could deliver what it promised, other projects were prioritized and funding for Advocacy ceased. Apparently, once we know that that something works, we do not need to do it any longer. It’s much better to find some strategy which has failed in the UK or North America and adopt it as a creative response to a uniquely Australian problem.

Nevertheless, a number of Victorian schools, inside and outside the State system, manage to find the resources to provide their students with mentors or advocates. They are driven by the same conviction as impels some schools to engage chaplains. Their experience tells them that we cannot expect children and adolescents to focus on their schooling unless their social and emotional needs are attended to. One way of doing this is to make sure they have a reliable and trustworthy adult to talk to. There is overwhelming evidence that children who have such a person in their lives are much more likely to complete their schooling and grow into happy and productive adults than those who do not. It is not always possible for parents to fill the role.

Between 2008 and 2012, a group of researchers from La Trobe University, several of whom are authors of chapters in this collection, conducted a research project, Engaging adolescents in schooling: A longitudinal study of student use of electronic self-assessment tools within Advocacy models of student support, funded by the Australian Research Council. The aims of the project were to examine the impact of an Advocacy model of student support on adolescent engagement in learning on students in regional/rural and low-socioeconomic metropolitan areas. The implementation of the Advocacy Program in schools included the use of an online set of learning tools, the Student Self-Assessment Inventory (SSAI), later renamed the Student Achievement Inventory (SAI), developed in collaboration with teachers and students, which were designed to compile and report on students’ learning goals, attitudes, values, opportunities, challenges, school connectedness, emotional wellbeing and career plans. The intent of the researchers was to further refine a flexible model of Advocacy to fit the needs of a range of schools, which would be effective in engaging students in learning and potentially, radically change the culture of middle years and senior secondary education by reshaping teachers’ roles and student attitudes to learning.

In the post-compulsory context in which the Advocacy model was tested and supported, its appeal to school principals came primarily from evidence that adoption of the program would produce measurable benefits in the form of higher
university entrance scores, lower exit rates and a smoother transition from schooling to employment, and would enable them to demonstrate accountability within this framework. These outcomes of the program are certainly to be valued. However, these outcomes are not the only outcomes to be sought through student advocacy, and the sterile ideology that has driven Australian schooling in its recent unfortunate history is not the only ideology that can justify a society’s commitment to education and its’ expenditure on schools.

**THE AIMS OF EDUCATION**

Whatever our politicians might think, teachers do not get up each morning filled with the desire to contribute to Australia’s economy by fashioning skilled and compliant workers for industry. They have many different ways of explaining why they stay in such a difficult and under-valued profession, and we do not need to list them here. Rather, what we want to do is point briefly to a broader view of education. There are other aims of education and other arguments for introducing some form of student advocacy.

We might argue, for instance, that the primary function of schools is the education of aware and engaged citizens of a democratic society. If the message of schools is that the more powerful members of a society have the right to command the less powerful members, irrespective of whether the latter believe it is in their best interests, they will carry this message into their adult lives. Unless the students in our schools experience democratic processes in their schooling and come to take responsibility for the impact of their actions in the community to which they belong, they are unlikely to develop the attitudes and skills required of members of a mature democratic society. The Advocacy Program is designed to educate students in democracy. It is built on the notion that mature democratic societies and organizations are founded on mutual respect. It acknowledges the reality that contemporary Australian teachers actually have little coercive or positional power over students and that the attempt to exercise it is often counter-productive. In a democratic model of education, positive teacher-student relationships and productive learning environments are defined in terms of power distribution and recognition of student rights — freedom, privacy, choice, due process and participation in decision-making. In implementing the Advocacy Program, teachers and students engage in a collaborative exercise to pursue the best interests of the students. The experience of a reliable relationship with a teacher who is genuinely interested in their wellbeing, listens with respect to their concerns, understands them well enough to offer appropriate advice when it is asked for and is willing to hand them power over decisions which affect them, enables them to approach their schooling as a cooperative venture in which they can choose to be engaged without the need to preserve their adolescent identity through resistance.

We might follow William Glasser (1997) in arguing that we each distinguish between a ‘quality world’ (which comprises the core group of people who satisfy
our needs for belonging, power, freedom and fun) from the rest of humanity (which is either irrelevant to our need-satisfaction or blocks such satisfaction). Glasser suggests that if a teacher and the subject she teaches belong within an adolescent's quality world, they will choose to engage with the subject and learn. If not, they will quite rationally choose not to learn. The Advocacy Program represents a systematic approach to satisfying the needs of 'at risk' students by providing a safe environment where teachers demonstrate that they care for students, where coercion is eliminated and where students are given the opportunity to choose.

We might follow Carl Rogers (1980) in arguing that the quality of relationships between teachers and students is critically important for students’ learning. Good teacher-student relationships have a rather wider effect than simply making schools nicer places to be. We have strong research grounds for arguing that they make a critical difference to students’ academic learning, self-image and social adjustment (Cornelius-White, 2007). Or we can point to the extensive theory and research within neuroscience and cognitive-behavioral psychology on the impact of an emotionally supportive environment on cognitive processing. Research on the interaction between the human emotional system and cognitive system has led to the conclusion that ‘facilitative’ or ‘supportive’ environments, which produce ‘positive affect’, are critically important for cognitive processing (Panksepp, 1998). One of the well-documented effects of good teacher-student relationships is the perception by students that school is a safe place to be. The Advocacy Program acknowledges the impact of the teacher’s friendliness and support on students’ learning and the survival of ‘at risk’ students and sets out to make the school a safe place to learn.

We could argue from the research on belongingness that students’ need to belong has to be satisfied in the school environment if the school is to have a positive impact on their learning and development. In her review of the literature on belongingness, Karen Osterman points to the evidence that the need to belong is associated with differences in cognitive processes, emotional patterns, behavior, health, and well-being (Osterman, 2000). There is strong evidence that the development of a positive sense of self and positive social attitudes, the establishment of academic attitudes and motives and the experience of successful participation in school processes, as well as academic achievement, are all directly related to belongingness.

Many, hopefully most, students have relationships with teachers and other students that enable them to experience the school as a place where they comfortably belong. Unfortunately, many students have no such experience. One of the strengths of a successful Advocacy Program, is that such students will have one person in the school who will take on as a professional responsibility, the task of establishing a personal connection with them.

We might argue further that anti-social, aggressive and self-destructive behavior among children and adolescents has its source in stress, and that an important way in which schools can respond to this problem is to meet their real needs, among which are a safe environment, caring adults and appropriate opportunities for learning. We can point to research in this framework that demonstrates the importance of
developing support systems that provide young people with a sense of connectedness, safety and capacity for initiative through relationships with caring adults (Maeroff, 1998). There is strong research evidence that the willingness of students to work for academic goals and to support each other in doing so, depends on their perception that teachers care about them as persons and as students (Harter, 1996).

The Advocacy Program is an attempt to take some of the randomness out of satisfying students’ needs for safety and affirmation. Many students are lucky in the quality of the relationships offered them by their teachers. Others are not. Incorporating advocacy into a school’s processes and structures is designed to ensure that the students in most need of a consistently supportive relationship will get it, and that the teachers most capable of providing it are given the support (and, where necessary, the training) to do so.

TEACHERS, MENTORS AND ADVOCATES

Schools are still constrained by an ideology that gives priority to what information and skills exiting students take with them from school to work. What ought to get more attention in a world where ‘change is the only constant’ is how they create a world through processing their experience. Although Newton’s clockwork universe has long ago been replaced by a universe characterized by chaos and complexity, no longer built of ‘things’ but of relationships, schools are still expected to treat knowledge as a ‘thing’ to be transmitted, possessed, measured and traded for a prosperous life. We should not be surprised to find many young people reluctant to accept this nonsense. They are, however, interested in experience and apt to be engaged by an education that takes experience seriously.

Many adolescents attend school reluctantly. It is a huge part of their lives but they find neither meaning nor purpose in it. The Advocacy Program introduces an invitation for regular reflection with a skilled and caring adult on the personal experience of learning and the meaning of this experience for one’s life. The advocate’s ability to assist the students in reflection and goal-setting, in developing awareness of the ways they learn best and the ways they resist learning, makes a significant contribution to the adolescent’s identity-formation.

For a couple of decades, it has been unfashionable within State systems of Education to promote the notion that schools have any business focusing attention on students’ psychological or spiritual wellbeing. Politicians of all persuasions have perceived the function of schools in terms of their contribution to the economy. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that this is not enough. Chaplains are welcome in many schools because school communities realize this. They are welcome because they are committed to attending to the social and psychological wellbeing of children, as well as their spiritual wellbeing – a task which teachers allegedly lack the time and skills to do. However, it is fair to ask whether it is necessary to bring in someone from outside to do something that teachers could be doing themselves.
The suggestion that teachers could be doing more than they are already doing is inclined to cause some palpitations in the profession. However, the reality is that in many schools teachers already do, as a matter of course, what some schools are employing chaplains to do. They don’t limit their role to guiding (or pushing) their students through the curriculum. They have genuine relationships with them. They know which of their students needs special attention, which of them is having a hard time at home or at school, which of them is at risk in some way or other. They know how to listen to students, and how to talk to them. They take some responsibility for seeing that each student’s experience of school is a positive one and that schooling is a meaningful experience for them. They are concerned about their students’ psychological and social wellbeing, and are willing to engage with them as they construct the values and meanings which will shape their lives, though they are less likely than chaplains to label the needs thus addressed as ‘spiritual’.

On the other hand, it must be acknowledged that there are plenty of teachers who strongly resist the notion that they should have a commitment to anything other than teaching their classes, or any responsibility for their students’ social and psychological wellbeing. They are not trained for it and, anyway, they haven’t time. They argue that welfare coordinators, school counsellors, even chaplains, are the people who should be bothering about this. If students need coaching in constructing a meaningful life, the school can initiate a mentoring system, which conventionally involves inviting people from outside the school community to act as guides for particular students.

Alternatively, schools can expand the role of teacher, encouraging teachers to take on a mentoring role with students, meeting with mentor groups of a dozen or so students each week, providing the students with the opportunity to use the group and the teacher/mentor to deal with whatever is important to them. Some commit to the Advocacy model as it was originally conceived, giving students a regular opportunity for a one-on-one conversation with a teacher-advocate about their learning. All of these approaches depend for their effectiveness on the quality of the relationship between adult and adolescent. They have all proved to be effective in dealing with students’ needs and making school a meaningful experience for them.

Advocacy differs in some respects from mentoring as it is generally understood. The label ‘advocate’ has been adopted from the beginning, rather than ‘advisor’ or ‘mentor’, to emphasise a particular aspect of the relationship. The task of the teacher-advocate is not to manage the student’s behaviour but to listen to the student and be a reliable support. This involves having an understanding of the student’s background and motivation and being prepared to persevere with the relationship. An advocate is committed to making sure that the young person’s point of view is heard if they are in conflict with a teacher or the school.

The role of teacher-advocate or school-based mentor is different from the conventional roles of teacher and counsellor. The focus is on the student’s learning and what contributes to it or gets in the way. The advocate does not reprimand, evaluate, instruct, direct, interpret, control or even (most of the time) advise. Many
of the teacher’s habitual behaviours have to be abandoned in the advocacy role. It works best when the advocate is not the student’s classroom teacher, because the classroom teacher’s need to manage the student can get in the way of the student talking freely and the teacher genuinely listening. Besides, from the student’s point of view it may be the classroom teacher who is the problem they need to talk about.

An Advocacy Program commits resources to encouraging teachers to do what good teachers have always understood to be necessary and have always tried to do. What is significant about it in the current context, is that it represents a re-valuing of the pastoral role of teachers, after a period in which it was unfashionable or unpolitic to give it any value at all.

I’M NOT A COUNSELLOR

The advocate is not the student’s counsellor. She meets with the student to discuss learning, not social or emotional problems. The paradox in this is that the focus on learning provides students with the opportunity to deal with everything else. While students for the most part acknowledge that their conversations with their advocates are helpful with regard to their studies, they tend to be more appreciative of the chance to talk about things like friendship, family, hopes and fears. When they are asked what is good about having an advocate, they say that it is good to know that one of the teachers is interested in who they are and how they are coping with school (Ocean, 2000).

Not all teachers want to be advocates or mentors or have the skills to take on the role. Some of them see their role simply as teaching History or Mathematics and don’t want to get distracted by caring about their students’ psychological wellbeing and life outside the classroom. They act as though their students’ engagement in learning is unrelated to their psychological wellbeing. Some teachers are unable to abandon the habit of judging, directing and reprimanding students – legitimate behaviours for teachers, but behaviours which are not compatible with an advocacy role.

Advocates need many skills which, hopefully, they share with counsellors. They must be able to listen. They must be prepared to understand the way each child or adolescent perceives their world. They must be prepared to stay the distance with damaged or ‘difficult’ students and not give up on them. They must be capable of understanding that a young person’s behaviour, no matter how anti-social or self-destructive it may appear to be, is simply the attempt to deal with the world as they find it.

Teachers on the whole, do not choose their profession in order to focus on their students’ welfare. Their focus is on their students’ learning. One thing that sets advocacy programs apart from those which employ chaplains or mentors from outside the school is the principle that the teacher-advocate’s central task is to support students’ learning. This is where teachers’ expertise lies, and this is the focus of their conversations with the children or adolescents for whom they
WHEN ONE OF THE TEACHERS SMILES AT ME

take responsibility. This sits beside another principle which is equally important. Academic success, engagement in learning and psychological wellbeing cannot be separated. Advocates encourage students to talk about whatever is preventing them from making the most of being at school. Sometimes it is a welfare issue which needs to be referred to a different kind of expert. More usually, it is a learning issue which fits within the expertise of the teacher. Most often, all the student needs is to have someone listen and understand. Many students in our schools are at risk in one way or another, and having a reliable and trustworthy person to talk to makes all the difference to their lives.

WHY NOT?

Un fortunately, even when the long term benefits of an Advocacy program are glaringly obvious to school principals and their staffs, their enthusiasm is constrained by a lack of resources and the perceived need to chase short term goals. When they do take the plunge and commit substantial teacher resources to the advocacy approach to engaging students in schooling, they find that not only does it enhance the experience and satisfaction of the teachers who take on the role, but that it makes everybody’s jobs easier. Often, students who have previously been labelled ‘problems’ begin to find that their experience of schooling need not be a bore and a waste.

We could justify committing resources to student advocacy on the basis of research into the effectiveness of specific ‘protective mechanisms’ which impact on the wellbeing and academic success of children broadly classified as ‘at risk’ (Pianta, 1999; Rutter, 1987; Brooker, 2011). This research suggests that positive adult-child relationships, even transitory ones, are a key protective factor in enabling at risk children to become competent students.

Teacher-advocates do not approach students to discuss welfare issues, but to help them reflect on how they are managing the business of being at school. As it turns out, once a trusting relationship has been established, students seize the opportunity to talk about welfare issues, but this is very much their own decision. They make this choice because they believe they have found someone who respects them, someone who is trustworthy, and someone who will not give up on them. The contact with a committed teacher-advocate not only makes their time at school more meaningful and satisfying, but makes a substantial impact on the kind of future they can expect.

There is persuasive evidence that the impact of successive adult-child relationships is cumulative, either for better or for worse: high-risk children’s and adolescents’ adjustment, self-image, success and retention at school are positively correlated with good teacher-student relationships and negatively correlated with poor ones (Gannezy, 1994; Werner & Smith, 1980). Research on adolescent resilience, focusing on successful students from high-risk environments, has provided strong evidence that positive, supportive relationships with peers, parents and other adults
are a major factor accounting for their staying at school and achieving academic success. The evidence suggests that encouraging teachers to develop friendship relationships with adolescent students, or simply increasing the time teachers spend with students out of class, provides protection against at-risk behavior and increases students’ engagement in schooling (Brooker, 2011; Macmillan & Reed, 1994; Claudet, 1995).

In the following chapters, the authors explore some of these dimensions of advocacy research and practice, in a variety of contexts and from a range of academic and practice-based perspectives. In Chapter 2, Backgrounding Advocacy, Bernie Neville reviews the academic literature underpinning the notion of advocacy in education, relating to the proposition that students’ wellbeing and learning is strongly influenced by the quality of their relationships with teachers. It focuses on important research and theory from the interconnected fields of teacher-student relationships, learner-centered education, learning environments, protective factors for at-risk students and the impact of emotion on learning.

In Chapter 3, Building Blocks for Advocacy Work in School, Tricia McCann and Brendan Schmidt describe the origins of an innovative foundational advocacy project, designed to support student learning and student engagement. The Advocacy Research Project particularly focussed on establishing advocacy relationships in schools, with professional development for teachers to become advocates. The evaluation found that when advocacy relationships were trusting and consistent, both teacher advocates and students reported deeper engagement with their schools.

In Chapter 4, Volatile and Vulnerable: Engaging adolescent learners through advocacy and mentoring programs, Kirsten Hutchison explores the intricacies of teacher and student relationships, drawing on a selection of teaching and learning biographies, developed through interviews with secondary students and their teacher/advocates over three years. She illustrates some of the complexities involved in adolescent disengagement with schooling and explores the impact of an advocacy model on the students’ experiences of schooling, learner identities and aspirations. The teacher and student biographies demonstrate how relationships with teacher advocates or mentors are critical to engagement in learning for secondary students and lead to enhanced connectedness and commitment to learning, to the school community and to students’ aspirations.

In Chapter 5, I Want Them to Listen to Me, Tricia McCann, reflects on her experience of implementing an Advocacy program in one school. She navigated the differing perceptions of the program held by teachers and students, together with the conflicting demands on advocates, as she undertook multiple roles as advocate, researcher and provider of Professional Development to teachers.

In Chapter 6, Running in Quicksand: Stories from the field, Caroline Walta and Kirsten Hutchison give voice to the challenges faced by students, teachers, and researchers working in secondary schools with high proportions of multiply disadvantaged students, located in economically depressed regional areas. The analysis focuses on a number of themes: the academic, social and cultural factors
WHEN ONE OF THE TEACHERS SMILES AT ME

impacting on student performance in this setting; the variety of staff responses to management and support of students in need; the obstacles to the development of a co-ordinated whole school response to multiple forms of disadvantage and the impact of minimal support on those who attempt to advocate for students at risk. The chapter illustrates the complexities for educators working within contexts of multiple disadvantage. It underlines the need for school structures to support people in advocacy roles highlighting the positive impacts of advocacy where it can be meaningfully administered and sustained.

In Chapter 7, Whole School Approaches to Advocacy & Mentoring, Kirsten Hutchison, a university based researcher and Don Collins, a secondary school principal, engage in a dialogue about the power of advocacy and mentoring programs in defining and shaping school cultures. Their conversation foregrounds the importance of whole-school approaches to advocacy and mentoring programs, outlines key organisational features and highlights the potentially transformative effects on students, staff and school culture.

In Chapter 8, Using Digital Data to Support Student Engagement, Stacia Beazley documents the role of electronic questionnaires in assisting advocates and mentors in their work with students. The development of the Student Achievement Inventory (SAI), a set of online tools for students to create a profile of their interests, skills and attitudes, learning styles, goals and future plans, was a collaborative project between researchers from La Trobe University and a group of Victorian schools. The SAI enabled schools to compile critical information about how their students learn, their attitudes to various subjects and the ways they are taught, students’ ambitions and the obstacles they face in making the most of their schooling. Use of the SAI by students encouraged reflection on their learning and scaffolded deeper understanding of their individual goals and aspirations for learning. This chapter describes the potential contribution this instrument offers to school information systems, advocates, mentors and students.

In the concluding chapter, Implications of Advocacy Work for Schools and Teachers, the authors, Kirsten Hutchison and Bernie Neville, outline the sets of knowledge and understandings about teaching and learning developed through the school-based advocacy programs described in this collection. Within a performative educational climate of outcomes driven performance assessment, the chapter reiterates the role of emotional and interpersonal relationships in good teaching and learning and argues for the acknowledgement, embedding and valuing of the suite of ‘caring attributes’ evident in advocacy and mentoring programs in professional educational settings.

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2. BACKGROUNDING ADVOCACY

Research Informing Advocacy Models

The advocacy project emerged from a particular understanding of the process of learning and teaching. It is an understanding which, unfortunately, has never been seriously supported by the politicians and bureaucrats who control the delivery of what they like to call the “provision” of education. Nevertheless, it is central to the way that many teachers understand their task.

For some teachers, the proposition that students’ well-being and academic success is somehow related to the quality of their relationships with their teachers is too obviously true to require comment. For others such an assertion is a nonsense. Indeed, for the past couple of decades it has been unfashionable to make such a claim. Nevertheless, there is a good research basis for doing so.

The following review looks at four areas of research relating to the proposition that students’ wellbeing and learning is strongly influenced by the quality of the relationships which they have with their teachers and that, if they do not have a relationship with a caring and trustworthy adult in their out-of-school life the availability of such a relationship in their school experience is crucial.

We have very credible theory and strong research evidence to justify the claim that the re-structuring of schooling to include a relationship-based element such as advocacy would be an effective way of dealing with the disengagement of the many students who attend school reluctantly, leave as soon as they can, and gain little from the experience. Too often, these students move into lives characterised by unemployment, depression and other forms of mental illness, drug dependence and anti-social or criminal behaviour. Underlying our understanding of the sources of this disengagement is the possibility, indeed probability, that in many cases it is not a fault in the student, but rather a fault in what their schooling offers them.

The original advocacy program was established and received funding as a “learning management” system, whose purpose was to halt the decline in engagement and retention in post-compulsory classes in Victorian public schools. However, it was based on the understanding that student psychological wellbeing and engagement in schooling are intimately connected and that initiating and developing respectful advocacy relationships between teachers and students might have an impact on the culture of a school. Specifically, it was proposed that if the advocacy model was applied as it was designed to do, the school culture would become more student-
centred, more respectful of students’ needs and perspectives and more supportive of students’ emotional development, including their need to experience autonomy and relationship.

The following review focuses on relevant research and theory from these interconnected fields:

- The teacher-student relationship
- Learner-centred education
- The learning environment
- Protective factors for at-risk students
- Learning and emotion

A study of the research findings in these areas finds little difference between the patterns prevailing at the different levels of schooling. Accordingly, this review includes studies dealing with all levels of schooling, on the assumption that what is true at one level of schooling is generally true at the others. Likewise, it is assumed that what is significant for students in USA, Canada, Ireland and UK is likely to be significant also for students in Australia. Currently, there is no persuasive evidence to suggest otherwise.

While there is a wide-spread assumption that teacher-student relationships are important in schooling, not much attention is paid to the evidence that good teacher-student relationships have a rather wider effect than simply making schools nicer places to be. We have strong grounds for arguing that they make a critical difference to students’ academic learning, self-image and social adjustment.

RESEARCH ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE QUALITY OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION AND STUDENT SELF-CONCEPT, MOTIVATION AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

The major body of this research has its origin in the theory and research of Carl Rogers and his associates in investigating the impact of the counsellor-client relationship on the outcomes of counselling. Rogers himself proposed that the counsellor qualities which are critical in effective counselling are the same as the qualities which are critical in effective teaching. Between 1960 and 1980, there was substantial research undertaken within this framework on the impact of specific teacher attitudes and behaviours (empathy, acceptance, warmth, genuineness) on students’ self-concept, learning and behaviour. There is abundant research evidence that the teacher’s communication of these qualities is associated with positive learning outcomes for students at both primary (Aspy, 1977; Christensen, 1960; Flanders, 1967; Skinner & Belmont, 1993) and secondary levels (Boak & Conklin, 1975; Kratchovil, Carkhuff, & Berenson, 1968) and also for adults (Wagner & Mitchell, 1969; Neville, 1978). There is evidence likewise, that the level of teacher functioning (as defined by these qualities) has a positive impact on students’ motivation and engagement in their schooling (Aspy & Roebuck, 1977; Moje, 1996), on self-concept (Aspy,
Aspy, & Roebuck, 1984) and on classroom behaviour (Stoffer, 1970). Research carried out by Carkhuff and his associates (1971) focused in particular on the impact of adult “helping” relationships on the behaviour and achievement of children and adolescents whom we now classify as “at risk”.

Cornelius-White’s (2007) meta-analysis of studies of the impact of positive teacher-student relationships (as defined within Rogers’ person-centred framework) clearly demonstrates a positive association between the relationship variables and participation, critical thinking, satisfaction, math achievement, drop-out prevention, self-esteem, verbal achievement, positive motivation, social connection, grades, reduction in disruptive behaviour, attendance, and perceived achievement. Cornelius White’s conclusions are supported by research conducted within other frameworks. (APA, 1997; Lambert & McCombs, 1998).

RESEARCH ON LEARNER CENTRED EDUCATION

Rogers’ educational theory emerged from his experience and reflection on the process of what he originally called “non-directive counselling” and later renamed “client-centred therapy”. By the time he published his reflections on education in his book Freedom to Learn, he was referring to “student-centred” teaching, placing it within the broader philosophical framework of “the person-centred approach”. At the heart of this approach is not a set of techniques, but an attitude of respect for the subjectivity and autonomy of the individual, who is perceived to have within him or herself, the resources to make appropriate choices regarding what and how he or she learns. The constraints on this awareness and exercise of choice – such as fear, habit, negative self-concept or the desire to please – are minimised in the context of a non-judgmental relationship with a trusted person who understands, respects and cares about the client or student. Rogers’ conviction that the provision of such a relationship enabled the student to choose and act in his or her true best interests was based on his notion of an “actualizing tendency”:

The person-centred approach depends on the actualizing tendency present in every living organism – the tendency to grow, to develop, to realise its full potential. This way of being trusts the constructive directional flow of the human being toward a more complex and complete development. It is this directional flow that we aim to release. (Rogers, 1986, p. 37)

The teacher or advocate may be confronted by an angry or depressed adolescent whose “actualising tendency” is difficult to detect behind the screen of self-destructive or anti-social behaviour. Nevertheless, if we follow Rogers in this “way of being” we will understand that student-centred teaching and advocacy is by no means a totally permissive, laissez faire approach which encourages young people to follow whatever impulse dominates their feelings at the moment. Rather, it is an approach which, while fully acknowledging a student’s feelings and understanding that he or she has good reasons for feeling that way, encourages them to reflect on
whether this is what they really want. Central to Rogers’ theories of therapy and education is the notion of congruence or genuineness. If the teacher/advocate can be genuinely himself or herself in the relationship, without being dominated by the expectations of role or status, the student can learn to behave likewise.

Within such a framework it is desirable that a teacher/advocate is not the student’s classroom teacher so that the teacher roles of control and instruction will not inhibit the advocate’s basic task of non-judgmental listening. The student’s current life may be happy or miserable, the experience of school may be engaging or alienating, but somebody knows, somebody cares. It is the listening that makes the difference.

Since the publication by the American Psychological Association of Learner-centred psychological principles: A framework for school redesign and reform in 1997 there has been a great deal of attention given to learner-centred schooling, with little or no reference to Roger’s theoretical contribution.

Where research in this field originally focused on the tools and the individual learner, there has been an increasing focus on the need for these elements to be supported by an appropriate school culture, in which the teachers applying learning-centred principles are actually committed to the philosophical position in which the latter are grounded (Carr-Chelman & Savoy, 2004). The learner-centred model, when allied to electronic delivery, is most effective in a school culture which supports a flexible pace, respects individual needs, caters to different learning styles, allows diversity in assessment, support, and personalised attention (Murphy & Rodriguez-Manzanares, 2009).

When the Advocacy Project was set up in Victorian public schools in 1999 it was described as a ‘learning management system”, a description which by-passed the other envisioned consequences of its’ introduction. This was in the context of an assumption that electronic delivery would increasingly become the norm, particularly in the senior school. The design of the one-on-one advocacy model was predicated in part on the need to meet the challenge alluded to by Murphy and Rodriguez-Manzanares:

The ability of high school students to self regulate may not be well developed, particularly if they are coming from a classroom environment where that ability was not required. Promoting learner centredness in a context of distance learning may therefore require that teachers help learners to manage their autonomy and to self-regulate. (Ibid, p. 605)

Moreover, the advocacy model was grounded in the notion that the support and encouragement of autonomy and self-direction is desirable at all levels of schooling, in all content areas and through all modes of content delivery. Clearly many teachers are unwilling to accept this notion or, if they accept it in theory, are unwilling to change their behaviour to relinquish the control with which they identify in their teacher role. Lambert and McComb (1998), Wiemar (2002) and William (1996) draw attention to this phenomenon at various levels of schooling. It was proposed that the introduction of a one-on-one learner-centred, ‘learning management system’, at the
core of which was a genuine and trusting teacher-student relationship, would have an impact on the culture of the school and extend to influencing teachers to adopt a more learner-centred approach in their classrooms.

RESEARCH ON MEETING STUDENTS’ NEEDS THROUGH LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Theories of students’ needs and rights lead to diverse and contrary recommendations: for more autocratic schooling (at risk students need order and direction); for more academically focussed schooling (at risk students need clear academic goals and strong academic support); for more vocationally oriented schooling (students need to prepare for employment); for more caring schooling (students at risk need emotional support). Most such recommendations are ideologically based, and can generally produce research findings to support them. Nevertheless, in the context of the present discussion, we can argue that there is a substantial body of evidence that the satisfaction of particular interpersonal needs is a significant factor in school performance and retention.

Glasser (1990, 1997) has introduced the notion of the “quality school”, arguing that we each distinguish between a “quality world” which comprises the core group of people who satisfy our needs for belonging, power, freedom and fun, from the rest of humanity – which is either irrelevant to our need-satisfaction or blocks such satisfaction. He suggests that if a teacher and the subject she teaches belong within an adolescent’s “quality world,” he will choose to engage with the subject and learn. If not, he will quite rationally choose not to learn. Glasser documents the impact of a systematic approach to satisfying the needs of at risk students which includes the provision of environment in which teachers demonstrate that they care for students, in which coercion is eliminated and where students are given the opportunity to choose.

Elkind (1986) has argued that anti-social, aggressive and self-destructive behaviour among children and adolescents has its source in stress, and that an important way in which schools can respond to this problem is to meet students’ real needs, for a safe environment, caring adults and appropriate opportunities for learning. Other work in this framework demonstrates the importance of developing support systems which provide young people with a sense of connectedness, safety and capacity for initiative (Maeroff, 1998) and with relationships with caring adults (Haynes, 1998). Likewise, there is strong research evidence that the willingness of students to work for academic goals and to support each other in doing so, depends on their perception that teachers care about them as persons and students (Wentzel, 1995; Harter, 1996).

Research-based discussions of the influence of the “caring school” on students’ motivation and achievement are usually presented within a relational perspective, which sees caring as independent of liking, but rather as having the characteristics of acceptance, attention and valuing (Noddig, 1992; Thayer-Bacon, 1993),
attitudes which teachers extend beyond the school to the students’ families. Parallel discussions of the impact of the “democratic school” underline the importance of maintaining teacher-student relationships that are grounded in mutual respect and the teacher’s willingness to hand students power over decisions which affect them. In this model, the good teacher-student relationship and the good learning environment are defined in terms of power distribution and the recognition of student rights – freedom, privacy, choice, due process and participation in decision-making (Pearls, 1991; Pearls & Knight, 1999; Thayer-Bacon & Bacon, 1998).

Until fairly recently research on school dropout focused on the reasons why individual students do not complete their schooling: e.g. young people drop out because they are not motivated, are not committed, have no self-esteem, have no ambition, have no skills. These factors were then conventionally related to factors outside the school: inadequate family support, poverty, peer pressure, minority status, or the demands of part-time jobs. More recently it has become apparent that it is as reasonable to talk about “problem schools” or “problem classrooms” as “problem students” (Eccles & Midley, 1989; Knight, 1991). Poor motivation, low aspirations, low self-esteem and generally negative attitudes may indeed be brought to the school, but they can just as well be produced by school experience (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). There are clearly a variety of dimensions of school experience which may produce the outcome of low retention rates, but to focus on conventional factors such as school size, curriculum content, school structure and material resources, is to overlook overwhelming evidence that it is the inability of schools to meet the developmental needs of adolescents which is crucial.

RESEARCH ON STUDENTS AT RISK: PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS

Rutter (1987) and Pianta (1999) have summarised research on the effectiveness of specific “protective mechanisms” which impact on the academic success of children classified as at risk. This research leads to the conclusion that positive adult-child relationships, even transitory ones, are a key protective factor in enabling at risk children to become competent students. (Werner & Smith, 1980; Garmezy, 1994). There is persuasive evidence that the impact of successive adult-child relationships is cumulative, either for better or for worse. Research within Pianta’s closeness/conflict/over dependency framework indicates that high-risk children’s and adolescents’ adjustment, success and retention at school is positively correlated with teacher-student closeness and negatively correlated with teacher-student conflict (Pianta & Walsh, 1996; Baker, 1999). This supports Carkhuff’s finding (1969) that “helping” relationships may be for either better, or for worse, and that it is the “level of functioning” of the teacher, counsellor or case-worker which determines whether the impact of the relationship is positive or negative. The relationship does not have to have any suggestion of “counselling”. Further research on at risk students has brought renewed attention to the impact of caring student-teacher relationships and a relationship focus in schooling (Baker et al., 1997).
Research on adolescent resilience, focusing on successful students from high-risk environments, has provided strong evidence that positive, supportive relationships with peers, parents and other adults are a major factor accounting for their staying at school and achieving academic success (McMillan & Reed, 1994; Beck, 1997; Zimmerman, 1999). The evidence suggests that encouraging teachers to develop friendly relationships with adolescent students, or simply increasing the time teachers spend with students out of class, provides protection against at-risk behaviour and dropping out of school (Radvanski, 1987; Lawton et al., 1988; Claudet, 1995; Fashola & Slavin, 1998).

The decade prior to the establishment of the Advocacy Program saw the publication of a number of reports on the effect of consciously developing teacher-student relationships with high risk students within an advocacy, mentoring or monitoring framework. Such studies have reported a significant improvement in attendance, discipline, academic achievement and attitude to school in the targeted population (Abcug, 1991; Sanacore, 1991; Flippo et al., 1997; Evelo, 1996; Testerman, 1996). There are also available a number of personal accounts by teachers working with delinquent or behaviour-disordered youth, which emphasise the critical importance of establishing good relationships if this work is to be productive (Dolce, 1984; Howe, 1991). Another finding relevant to the advocacy model, is that high risk students are less likely to drop out of school if a teacher or teachers have managed to establish a positive relationship with the students’ parents.

The research outlined above supports the recommendation reiterated by many studies of the management of at risk students: that a personal, individualised, connection with a sympathetic and skilful teacher is critical. There appears to be a strong case for arguing that in managing the learning of students whose engagement and achievement are problematic, schools should consider developing organisational structures which facilitate ongoing one-to-one attention, communication and monitoring of students by teachers who are both interested and skilful.

Theories of teaching and learning used to ignore the role of emotions in the classroom, assuming that they were a kind of waste product which got in the way of the brain’s more important functions, such as cognition, memory, decision-making and planning. It is no longer possible to make this assumption. Researchers such as Damasio (2003), Panksepp (2004), Ledoux (2003), and Davidson (2012) have produced ample evidence that in normal human functioning, cognition and emotion cannot be separated. Emotion and cognition work together to enable us to deal with and explore our world.

Thanks to new technologies including electroencephalography (EEG), positron emission tomography (PET), computerized axial tomography (CAT) and functional magnetic resonance imaging (FMIR) we know a good deal today about how our
brains construct emotions. The new fields of interpersonal neurobiology (Siegal, 2007; Badenoch, 2008) and affective neuroscience (Panksepp, 2004; Davidson, 2012) are challenging many of our conventional understandings, particularly the notion that thinking and feeling are separate operations and that it is the teacher’s primary task to engage students in the former.

It seems that our commonsense notion that we have a thought and it makes us sad does not sum up the process very well at all. On the contrary, it appears that in many cases what Damasio calls an “emotionally competent stimulus” (p. 55) in the brain’s environment, automatically triggers activity in certain parts of the brain, most notably the amygdala, which is located deep in the temporal lobe. We become aware of this as a feeling, and this feeling generates thought. What the research shows us is that our bodies register emotions before we are aware of the feelings that accompany them. Indeed, the body-states which we feel as sadness, actually slow down our capacity to think. This would be of minor interest to teachers, were it not for the fact that a lot of learning theory assumes that learning is essentially an outcome of thinking, and ignores the role of emotion and feeling. The notion that feelings generate thoughts, rather than the other way round, obviously has implications for the way teachers approach their task. However, what is most relevant to the current discussion, is the evidence that a student’s emotional state can enhance or inhibit their ability to learn.

To quote Damasio (2003), “the fluency of ideation is reduced in sadness and increased in happiness” (p. 101). Given (2002) points to the research evidence that learning can likewise be shut down by fear and anxiety, whether they are aroused by immediate events or have their source in childhood trauma, regardless of whether the fear or anxiety is present in awareness. She points out that “chronic disruptive behaviour may be symptoms of chronic stress syndrome resulting from ongoing responses to subtle fears” (p. 24). Similarly, Teicher (2006) observes that any animal exposed to stress and neglect early in life develops a brain that is wired to experience fear, anxiety, and stress, and suggests that the same is true of people.

If the infant’s first experience is to resonate with the stressed and anxious inner worlds of her caregivers, or if she suffers neglect or abuse in her first months, the implicit memory of these experiences will be stored in her lower brain and constantly reactivated as she goes through life. She comes to school damaged, with a deep but dysfunctional knowledge of the world of relationships. Research is showing that negative experiences, especially in early life, damage our brains. Martin Teicher and colleagues (Teicher, 2002; Teicher, Tomoda, & Andersen, 2006) found that verbally abusive parents can cause lasting damage to pathways that regulate emotions and process language in their children’s brains. We have known for a long time that exposure to physical abuse and neglect causes brain damage in children. In the past decade it has become clear that simply witnessing violence has these consequences, as do verbal, emotional and sexual abuse. Some children and adolescents come to our classes damaged. Bullying and punitive teachers reinforce the damage.
The challenge for teachers is firstly to notice, secondly to care and thirdly to respond with empathy and integrity. The care system, which – like the fear system – evolved in us to enable the species to survive, is a command system that prompts us to particular behaviours to protect the young. The other side of this coin is the child’s need for a trustworthy and reliable adult with whom they will feel safe, and peers to whom they can become emotionally connected (Cortina & Liotti, 2010). Along with this is a sometimes ambivalent yearning for attachment (Bowlby, 1982; Ogden et al., 2006; Knox, 2003) and a capacity to rewire her brain differently, if the opportunity is provided (Doidge, 2007; Schwarz & Begley, 2002; Panksepp, 2004).

New experiences structure the brain for the better. Our students’ brains are sculpted by their experience. Research on brain plasticity is indicating that every positive experience, including the experience of positive relationships, grows new neural pathways in our brains, whatever our age.

For many, we hope for most students, remediation of damaging experience is not required. However, there are young people for whom remediation through positive relationships is exactly what is required. The brain of a damaged child who is held safely in caring relationships will change over time, even against a child’s initial resistance. What is demanded of teachers and other involved adults is the tolerance to cope with the consequences of previous damage: non-judgmental empathy and the determination not to give up on the child. Not every teacher has the emotional resources for this task but this need can be met by training (neuroplasticity even extends to the brains of teachers) and by providing each child with access to a responsible and caring teacher-advocate.

CONCLUSION

There are other relevant fields of theory and research which could be included in this review. There is an emerging literature on the changing role of the teacher in an age where the teacher is no longer the distributor of knowledge. Teachers may cling to an outdated conception of their role and its significance in the construction and transmission of knowledge, but technologies of information and communication are speedily diminishing this role. It appears increasingly obvious that teachers must accept an identity as guides to learning rather than providers of knowledge. It is in such a context that advocacy claims a place in schooling.

We can find an extensive literature in the fields of counselling and developmental psychology – whether in humanistic-existential, psychoanalytic or cognitive-behavioural frameworks – which supports the notion that young people need to have a relationship with a trustworthy and caring adult who has their best interests at heart. We cannot assume that such a relationship exists within every young person’s experience, nor can we always assume that when children place their trust in an older person outside the family that the latter has their best interests at heart.

The Advocacy Project was initiated as a means of dealing with a perceived problem of school engagement and retention. Objective evaluation of the project has
demonstrated that this aim was achieved. Moreover it has become increasingly clear over a decade’s experience that providing students with a consistent and trustworthy advocate/mentor who is tasked to listen to them, not to manage them, has very positive outcomes for their psychological and social wellbeing, not to mention their academic achievement.

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