

# Connecting school, family, and community: The power of positive relationships

George Otero

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## Introduction

Around the world the talk currently is all about how schools, families and communities working together can have a profound effect on all children's achievement, wellbeing and life chances. Year by year the evidence pours in about the critical role parents, family and the wider community play in education overall and school learning in particular. In addition, the interdependence of achievement, wellbeing and life chances is accepted more readily than before.

Together with associates and educators around the world I have been tracking these important trends. As founder and co-director of the Center for Relational Learning<sup>1</sup> I have been promoting the power of

positive relationships in educating future generations, regardless of economic and social circumstance. Securing equity, inclusion and social justice for every person and child in today's world requires an active partnership for learning across school and community. Creating a positive future for every child and young person is therefore the responsibility of the entire community, hopefully guided by educators who understand their purpose and role in new ways.

In this paper I will share evidence, principles and practices that schools can use to build positive and productive relationships across the school and community.

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## Education in the 21st century takes the whole community

Education in the 21st Century is complex. Parents still want the best for their kids but wonder more about how to provide what's best. Schools do their part but most nations still see gaps in achievement that reinforce division, not integration, of society. Global society requires skilled and ethical citizens capable of responding to diversity, difference and others in more peaceful, appreciative and loving ways, yet polarisation and ethnic nationalism appear to be on the rise.

Every person wants success and some degree of happiness and health from their lives but access to happiness, health and education seem to be limited to fewer and fewer. This twist of fate is presented with power and clarity in *The Spirit Level, Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, where Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett (2010) help us understand why health gets worse at every step down the social ladder, so that the poor are less healthy than those in the middle, who in turn are less healthy than those further up.

It is no longer sufficient to pay attention only to your child's education, because the vitality and future of the community is dependent on the education and wellbeing of all the children. The future of our global society is wrapped up in the future of all our children.

In this complex environment, current approaches to schooling are not working to meet the needs of all students, families and communities. Research shows that

1. social factors have an inordinate impact on learning, wellbeing and life chances;
2. often the greatest impact on learning comes from the family;

3. significant learning happens outside of the school gate; and
4. young people spend very little of their day in classrooms.

In this context, positive school, family and community relationships become a necessity in ensuring children are happy, healthy and educated.

So what is the combination of personal, social, community and school factors that will ensure happiness, health and education for all? Can we know those factors with assurance and some degree of confidence? And, finally, can schools, families and communities work together to bring those factors to bear in creating educational opportunity that benefits all learners equally?

## In education relationships matter most

Our relationships are the context for our learning, both in and out of school. Those relationships are influenced by our family, by poverty, by social class and by the strength, frequency and impact of our interactions with others (social capital). They are influenced by the school we attend, by the teachers we meet and by our friendships and civic associations. Our learning relationships are also influenced by our own resilience, motivation, readiness and ability. Some things always influence our relationships – like race, ethnicity, gender, and physical and mental differences – and the one institution or community organisation that always influences our learning is school. In today's world school has garnered a particular structure and identity, but all communities everywhere, past and present, have school – even if it is under the big tree, at home or in the apprentice hall.

current approaches to schooling are not working to meet the needs of all students, families and communities

A number of years ago, in association with colleagues, John West-Burnham and Maggie Farrar, we began to note how these factors come together to present a picture of dynamic interdependent influence on achievement, wellbeing and life chances. A gestalt or organised whole, which is perceived as more than the sum of its parts, emerged. This gestalt shows the relevant social, personal and contextual factors that have significant impact of achievement, wellbeing and life chances, based on our review of the literature.

Taken with the fact that school is always influencing these three, to us a pattern of influence arises, where contextual factors are always to be considered. Social factors hold 40 per cent influence, personal factors hold 40 per cent influence and the school provides 20 per cent of the influence. When you look at education relationally, this assessment holds promise for building relationships across school and community, and in partnership with young people and their families, which will activate most if not all of the relevant

influences on achievement, wellbeing and life chances.

In our book, *Schools and Communities: Working Together to Transform Children's Lives* (West-Burnham, Farrar and Otero, 2007), we suggest that the evidence makes clear that schools, in essence, replicate and reinforce their social context, and that the challenge before schools is to create a place where teaching and learning is a collaborative affair, maximising through the development of positive relationships the influence of social, personal and contextual factors, as represented in Figure 1.

Given the impact of the relational factors that now form a well-documented evidence base on what matters in achievement, wellbeing and life chances, how can the school activate those factors together with families and the community? By understanding that school is not a fixed boundary where educating the young is concerned. We know schools cannot 'do it alone' but we must see more clearly that school is surely not the be all for education.

Given the impact of the relational factors that now form a well-documented evidence base on what matters in achievement, wellbeing and life chances, how can the school activate those factors together with families and the community?

**Figure 1. The influence of social, personal and contextual factors**



Source: West-Burnham, J, Farrar, M and Otero, G (2007) *Schools and Communities: Working Together to Transform Children's Lives*, Continuum Press.

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In fact, as Don Edgar says in *The Patchwork Nation*,

*Isn't the purpose of the school to help a family raise a child, not the other way around?*

(Edgar, 2001)

Support for seeing the school as the place where positive relationships between school, family and community can be built has many advocates. Michael Fullan, the most prolific writer in the business of educational change has said it this way.

*Any school reform effort that improves relationships has a chance to succeed, any that does not is doomed to fail.*

Fullan goes on to challenge us all.

*If relationship-building is central to success, why is this basic principle of change violated so often? Because it is easier to pass legislation, announce a policy, prescribe new standards, and reorganize. Those who imagine strategies of legislation and prescription will really work are treading a fine line between ignorance and arrogance. It is much harder to work through complex problems with diverse personalities and competing groups. Yet altering relationships for the better is absolutely necessary for successful reform.*

However, in a complex world improving learning relationships inside the schoolhouse is not enough. Relationships at home matter. Relationships with neighbours matter. Relationships with community members matter. Relationships with every unique student matter. The implication of this powerful and

consistent evidence from many countries and numerous research and impact studies is clear. Positive relationships between schools, families, students, and community are essential to success in life and school.

The power of relationships in our lives and learning produces some interesting stories. If you want to get a good job and future in Australia today and you are a single mom, your best move is to marry a man with money already (Bita, 2016). If you want a very reluctant reader to improve, have the child read to dogs. (Stone, undated). If you want to increase a parent's patience, cooperation with siblings, maths and spelling, play a board game with your family one hour a week for four weeks (Otero, 2012; and also, for background, see Treher, 2011). If you want to increase attendance and academic achievement in a school, open a song room (see [www.songroom.org.au/the-impact/attendance/](http://www.songroom.org.au/the-impact/attendance/)) or start a garden program (for an international example, see [lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3475&context=etd](http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3475&context=etd)).

We are a contagious lot. We rub off on one another. This is especially true when our identity, sense of community and education are concerned. This is reflected in Bishop Tutu's wonderful explanation of the human condition.

*We are entwined in a tender web of interdependency.*

This web of relationships determines who we are, what we have, and what provides meaning. In South Africa, the term for this reality is Ubuntu. An anthropologist proposed a game to the kids in an African community. He put a basket full of fruit near a tree and told the kids that whoever

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got there first won the sweet fruits. When he told them to run they all took each other's hands and ran together, then sat together enjoying their treats. When asked why they had run like that, as one could have had all the fruits for him or herself they said: 'UBUNTU, how can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?' Ubuntu in the Xhosa culture means: I am because we are!

There are hundreds of examples like those above. They might seem like anomalies but it turns out these examples of practice are right in line with solid evidence. Education is a community function. Within every community you will find consistent and now well-documented influences on a child's achievement, wellbeing and life chances.

A prescription for a school in today's world must therefore include the commitment to have positive relationships in three spheres of our lives. Hence, we must seek effective classrooms, of course, but simultaneously develop and support effective or positive families, and effective or positive communities.

## Positive classroom relationships

John Hattie looks closely at relationships in his research. He is interested in what relationships have positive influence on achievement or might we say academic performance. He spends little time on wellbeing or life chances, as most schools in the west believe academic achievement is the key to a successful life. Even with this bias the relationship between teacher and student, and the quality of that relationship, is most significant (Hattie, 2008, p 119).

Today, Hattie has a simply mantra for improving achievement: 'Know thy impact' (Hattie, 2012). This is quintessentially relational learning and leadership advice.

In *My Favourite Teacher*, edited by Robert Macklin (2011), the power of positive teacher–student relationships to change lives is demonstrated in story after story, from Australians of all ages and from all walks of life. The following quote, from Phillipa McGuinness' contribution to the book, states the tone one finds throughout.

*I don't remember a single curricular thing Miss Edgar taught me in Year 6. But I do remember her as the first teacher who I thought might exist outside the classroom, and the first teacher who seemed to think that we might too.*

Know thy impact indeed.

More effective classrooms are indeed necessary, but not sufficient to ensure a socially just inclusive education, an education that builds on the positive aspirations, talent and love of every culture, group, family and community.

## Parent and community engagement matters now more than ever

Parent and community engagement is as crucial to student success as an effective classroom. In fact, the good school is one that builds relationships that increase the effectiveness of the classroom, the family and the community all at once. Children simply spend much more time with and around their parents, families and communities than they do in school. Children learn while living in families, neighborhoods, and communities.

A prescription for a school in today's world must ... include the commitment to have positive relationships in three spheres of our lives.

A key finding was that schools with strong parental involvement were 10 times more likely to improve substantially in maths than schools with weak parental involvement.

All children will learn better and learn more when the school and parents and the wider community find ways to work together, bringing the strengths, experience and resources of all to the educational process.

The biggest factor in a child's learning turns out to be how parents relate to the school, to each other, to their children and to fellow citizens. This factor can be enhanced and does not involve money or legislation, or even finding and keeping great teachers – all good tools for improving schools but more engagement with parents matters most.

Study after study now supports the contention that an educational partnership between school and parents is the biggest factor in a young person's learning and development. In 2012, one more international study showed parental involvement to be the largest single determinant in academic achievement. The overseer of the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) says the biggest gains come

*when parents read a book with their child, when they talk about things they have done during the day, and when they tell stories to their children.*

(OECD, 2012)

The educational power of parents was demonstrated when OMD Insights<sup>2</sup> got 125 families around Australia, with children five to twelve, to down the Nintendo or equivalent electronic gaming machine and play board games at least once a week for a month. The results were stunning. It was found that playing board games at home just once a week helped improve the children's concentration, social interaction and cooperation with siblings. It also boosted their patience, concentration, teamwork, sharing,

communication, sportsmanship, critical thinking skills, maths and spelling. Family relationships improved and parents were amazed that children did not need to be glued to the TV (Otero, 2009; Critchley, 2009).

Research conducted over a ten-year period in Chicago, USA (Sebring et al, 2006) established that parent and community ties are one of five 'essential supports' to ensure that all children are improving in reading and maths. A key finding was that schools with strong parental involvement were 10 times more likely to improve substantially in maths than schools with weak parental involvement.

Moving beyond the schoolhouse doors, the researchers found strong interconnections between schools and their communities. Community factors, like church going and crime are inexorably entwined with school effectiveness. Schools in communities where people did not believe they had the ability to make a positive change were twice as likely to stagnate as schools in communities where people believed they could. It is clear that to educate children to their full potential, families, communities and schools must be partners. Families and communities need their schools and schools need their families and communities.

Parent engagement in their child's learning and development takes many forms.

Learning manners, values, compassion, hard work, play habits, kindness, religion, and citizenship are all contained in the relationships children experience at home, in the neighborhood, on trips, in church, at a restaurant, visiting other families and participating in sport.

The Australian federal government has been exploring specific strategies that allow schools, parents and communities to

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work better together educating the young. The resource, ‘Strengthening Family and Community Engagement in Student Learning’ (DEEWR, undated) documents practices that schools have taken, and intend to take, that foster a partnership with parents, families and communities to ensure effective education, wellbeing and life chances for all children.

A few of these practical approaches and actions for partnering are:

- offering opportunities to parents for their own learning and development, including accredited and community-based learning, and providing a dedicated learning space for parents;
- connecting with parents in the early years, so that parents can begin to network with other parents, find out about school organisation and how children learn from play experiences;
- reaching out through making personal contact with families and creating opportunity for parents and school staff to talk regularly and to contact informally – for example via phone calls to parents or meeting parents after school as they pick up their children – as well as formally.
- creating a school environment that welcomes parents, which might include dedicating space within the school ground as a meeting place for parents, or creating a community hub;
- offering opportunities for parents to learn about child development and contemporary teaching practices in areas such as literacy and numeracy, and by providing practical suggestions about what parents can do to assist children’s learning.

The emphasis on the profound role of families, in terms of achievement, wellbeing and life chances, has led to a policy and practice focus in the United

States called a two-generation approach. The Annie E Casey Foundation (AECF), a world leader in child wellbeing, now sees the interdependence between good policies and programs for kids, and the promotion of strategies that increase the stability of families. The two go hand in hand; hence the Foundation’s phrase ‘a two-generation approach’. A recent policy report states the following.

*Recognizing this connection between child and family wellbeing and future success, we and others in the public, non-profit and private sectors are exploring ways to address the needs of families as a whole.*

(AECF, 2014)

The Casey Foundation’s emphasis is on low-income families but securing a happy functional family can be a stressful activity even in middle class Australia.

Getting the relationship right between schools, their families and the members of the wider community is the number one priority for school leaders. This holds true regardless of the social class or status of the families. Because families are under more pressure than ever, and holding together as family is more important to society than ever, school can and must be a resource to families in their primary function of educating our children.

Community Engagement increases the likelihood that critical factors that influence achievement, wellbeing and life chances will be brought to bear on student learning in the circumstances of their lives. As the quote from a most recent article in the Stanford Social Innovation Review indicates, our evidence-based and data-driven strategies to improve schools will fall short unless the community is directly engaged in school life (Barnes and Schmitz, 2016).

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At our Center, and in the partnership model we propose, leaders are shown how to build relationships with the community, grounded in the belief that every community has the inclination and ability to educate the young. In today's world the community needs a school that will activate that inclination and ability. The processes we have found that secure this engagement are those that build trust and promote dialogue. These include learning walks, community conversations, and Better Together conferences. Other engagement strategies capitalise on opportunities to form active partnerships between schools and community organisations. Regardless of approach, the focus of community engagement must be to directly involve community members, especially parents, in the work of educating the young. As my colleague Miguel Acosta<sup>3</sup> has commented, 'It can't be about us without us.'

Engaging a community is not an activity that leaders can check off on a list. It is a continuous process, which aims to create relationships that will support learning year after year, regardless of who administers the school. The goal is to have community members who are intimately connected to the school, and to the children in their keep.

This direct involvement requires school leaders to connect the school to the community and the community to the school. We seek to engage community in the school with programs, services and partnerships that are designed to increase student learning; but this relationship is not complete until the community becomes the context for learning as much as the school. The state schools in Far North Queensland have made this mutual engagement a top priority of their

community engagement strategy (see [education.qld.gov.au/schools/parent-community-engagement-framework/](http://education.qld.gov.au/schools/parent-community-engagement-framework/)).

So, the whole-school community model that we advocate looks at community engagement in two ways. First, leaders must seek to link the community to school; and second, leaders must, in partnership with community members, develop community-based learning experiences and opportunities. In the book *Creating Powerful Learning, A Whole School Community Approach* (Csoti, Otero and Rothstadt, 2011), two schools in Melbourne – Noble Park Primary and Elwood Primary – describe relationships with and in community that form the basis of an education which is community-owned.

Once again the Stanford article makes this priority clear.

*It's important, in other words, to view parents and community members as producers of outcomes, not just as recipients of outcomes. Professional leaders must recognize and respect the assets that community members can bring to an initiative. If the goal is to help children to read at grade level or to help mothers to have healthy birth outcomes, then leaders should consider the roles that family members, friends, and neighbors can play in that effort. A mother who watches kids from her neighborhood after school is a kind of youth worker. The elder who checks in on a young mother is a kind of community health worker. Supporting these community members—not just for their voice but also for their ability to produce results—is crucial to the pursuit of lasting change.*

(Barnes and Schmitz, 2016)

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## Implications for leadership

These perspectives on education in the community have significant implications for our understanding of the nature of leadership. The focus has to shift from improving the school as an institution, measured by very limited criteria, to developing social capacity in the community – still measurable but using very different criteria. It is reasonable to argue that the development of social capital would be a major factor in facilitating school improvement.

The management of an institution is specific, focused and controllable; leadership in the community is diffuse and complex. Educational leaders are very well placed to provide leadership in the community – schools as institutions usually have very high social capital; educational leadership is fundamentally concerned with values and is essentially aspirational in nature. In many communities, schools represent the biggest single public investment, and are the best-resourced organisations – yet many only function for a limited time each year. Most importantly there is a symbiotic link between schools and their communities – children. Schools need to be successful with their communities, not in spite of them.

The Stanford article hits the nail on the head.

*Data-driven and evidence-based practices present new opportunities for public and social sector leaders to increase impact while reducing inefficiency. But in adopting such approaches, leaders must avoid the temptation to act in a top-down manner. Instead, they should design and implement programs in ways that engage community members directly in the work of social change.*

(Barnes and Schmitz, 2016)

In the same source, a former director of data and analytics for a US city offers a cautionary tale that illustrates this idea.

*We thought if we got better results for people, they would demand more of it. Our mayor communicated in a paternal way: 'I know better than you what you need. I will make things better for you. Trust me.' The problem is that they did not trust us. Relationships matter. Not enough was done to ask people what they wanted, to honor what they see and experience. Many of our initiatives died – not because they didn't work but because they didn't have community support.*

## Working better together through natural ways of learning

If schools, families and communities are going to work together to educate all children to their potential, they will all have to speak a common language and use six natural ways of learning, which I have identified over the last several years. These natural ways of learning are familiar, available and frequently used by schools, families and communities. They find form in all cultures and communities and form a time-honoured set of educational methodologies. So many schools are founded on them, yet our tendency in schools is to over-manage and over-organise learning in these natural ways.

We therefore 'professionalise' learning – alienating and mystifying parents, community members and students with procedures piled on procedures. We attempt to deliver instruction and therefore learning. We organise outcomes like reading conceptually and create 'reading levels' and other static, externally defined

Schools need to be successful with their communities, not in spite of them.

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signs of educational success that are difficult for even the most technically skilled teacher to practice, much less for parents, community members and young people. Even the recent ‘innovations’ in education, such as maker education, blended learning, MOOCs<sup>4</sup> and the like, create a bubble for learning, untouched and isolated from the influence of these natural ways of learning.

I first discovered that families and communities naturally educate their young using some time-tested ‘natural pedagogies’ when visiting a display at the Cleland Animal Preserve near Adelaide. In the museum space was a pithy, but for me profound, display of the time-honored ways in which Indigenous people educate the young. The display focused on play, games and story. Education was available and happening in community because adults knew that children learn naturally through **play**, **games** and **story**. School might be foreign, but parents and community could be assured that by drawing on natural ways of learning, practised over centuries, their children were receiving a basic education – truly a strength-based approach.

## Play

Of course, over the 15 years that have passed since my realisation, confirmation of the benefits to learning of play, games and story abound. In fact, in the recent book *Einstein Never Used Flashcards*, the authors, Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and Roberta Michnick Golinkoff (2003), both internationally recognised scholars in psychology and human development, with 35 years of research behind them, put forward this equation – based on years of examining the evidence that scientists have collected on intellectual and social

development – that PLAY = LEARNING. No definition of play beats the one they quote, of one five-year-old when asked what play was: ‘Play is what I do when everyone stops telling me what to do.’

## Games

Games are now the centerpiece of innovation in curriculum and pedagogy. We are just now coming to realise that learning happens most productively and engagingly when we are playing a game. As David Perkins states in *Making Learning Whole* (2009), learning happens best when we are playing a version of a whole game. Every computer and video game is complete unto itself and the feedback system inherent in the game keeps one engaged.

Perkins, a noted authority on teaching and learning and co-director of Harvard's Project Zero, introduces a practical and research-based framework for teaching. He describes how teaching any subject at any level can be made more effective if students are introduced to the ‘whole game’, rather than isolated pieces of a discipline. Perkins explains how learning academic subjects should be approached like learning baseball or any game, and he demonstrates this with seven principles for making learning whole: from making the game worth playing (emphasising the importance of motivation to sustained learning), to working on the hard parts (the importance of thoughtful practice), to learning how to learn (developing self-managed learners). It may seem like news to professional educators, but parents and communities have long known that teaching and learning through games is natural, fun, productive and makes a family and community strong.

We discover who we are when we explore the stories of others.

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## Story

Traditional potters in the pueblos of New Mexico create storytelling pottery figures with children adorned from head to feet. The storyteller plays the most important role of teacher in the family and community. My story, your story, our story. These stories level the playing field so everyone has value, importance and power regarding their learning. We discover who we are when we explore the stories of others.

Reading is one of the best ways to know the stories. Sitting around the camp fire, hearing songs that relate stories that matter, is another way. Listening to a mentor talk about their life and work helps the young understand the unique and personal journey we all have before us. Stories teach us what is good, proper, evil, mysterious, wonderful, scary and hopeful. Stories hold the truth of our history and the soul of culture. Stories are the threads of our learning. We spin the stories and we weave a life, individually and in community. Learning is always embedded in the story. Most western pedagogies are about knowledge, and wisdom has been lost. Story always contains both. In the telling of the story, the primacy of building relationship between and among community members happens. Community is built in the process. What opens us to others is hearing and relating to their story.

These three natural ways of learning offer schools, families and communities a common curriculum, which can be used to increase every person's learning journey.

I have also found three other natural ways of learning that can be tapped by everyone involved in educating the young. They are **art**, **dialogue**, and **ceremony**.

## Art

I visit dozens of schools. When art is nurtured and valued and modeled, especially by an Art teacher, the school hums with creativity, expression and joy. Art is a Western concept for the artifacts of human impulse to create. In fact, many traditional cultures whose art we admire greatly have no word for art in their language. What makes life in human communities unique is the artistic impulse (see, for example, Pretty et al, 2003, who refer to the earlier work of Sarason, 1974). To be human is to create. Art in all forms, and there are many, is the learning pathway to being wholly human. Being better human beings is a goal of most 21st Century schools. Art is the vehicle.

## Dialogue

Dialogue is simple. You are in dialogue when you enter a conversation and you cannot know the answer or result when you begin. It is the essential method of democratic living and the most important communication tool in a true partnership. Dialogue helps us move through the hierarchy of relationship building, described earlier. Dialogue teaches us the skills for democracy that are sorely needed in our conversations within schools and among all stakeholders in the education game, including students. One of my favourite dialogues is called a community conversation. In a circle, a mixed group of parents, students, staff and community members simply answer three questions together.

- Who are we?
- What's worth learning?
- How do we learn that together?

This dialogue, often only an hour long, always moves the school, families and

Most western pedagogies are about knowledge, and wisdom has been lost. Story always contains both.

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community collectively forward, in working together to educate children and young people. Over the last six years, I have consulted with the Catholic Education System in Melbourne and school after school – both primary and secondary – has utilised and adapted this dialogue (CEOM, 2014).

Dialogue is the alternative to war and violent conflict resolution. In a speech by Tenzin Gyatso, His Holiness, The 14th Dalai Lama, delivered to the 39th Anniversary of the Tibetan National Uprising, Dharamsala, India, March 10, 1998, His Holiness states the hope of dialogue, based on more than 1000 years of Buddhist experience.

*Great changes are taking place all over the world at the dawn of a new millennium. While there are instances of new conflicts breaking out, it is encouraging that we are also able to witness the emergence of a spirit of dialogue and reconciliation in many troubled parts of the world. In some ways the 20th Century could be called a century of war and bloodshed. It is my belief that humanity in general has drawn lessons from the experiences gained during this century. As a result, I believe the human community has become more mature. There is, therefore, hope that with determination and dedication we can make the next century a century of dialogue and nonviolent conflict resolution.*

We are early into the 21st Century and we will need to make dialogue a mainstay of relating at every level of society.

## Ceremony

Finally, there is ceremony. Ceremony is the way in which humans break out of individualistic thinking and experience, to experience and honour that which is larger. If I am who we are together, as Ubuntu declares, then ceremony is how we demonstrate this truth. To participate in relevant ceremonies makes us stronger, more than the sum of us. Ceremony allows us to learn what cannot be taught through telling. Ceremony marks rights of passage. Ceremony helps us live with the ups and downs, the highs and lows, the coming (birth) and going (death) of life. Ceremony saves us from our rational mind, from our need to control, and opens us to the sacred. Social capital rests on ceremony; and high social capital is what school leaders (and I count teachers here) build when they attend to the relationships that influence learning (West-Burnham and Otero, 2004).

Examples of powerful ceremony abound in school settings: awards, graduation, and induction ceremonies just to mention a few categories. Family and community ceremonies are even more diverse and essential. When schools, families and communities examine these ceremonies again – with an eye to learn consciously through collective celebration, struggle and remembrance – we all benefit.

Barbara Ehrenreich, in her book *Dancing in the Streets* (2007), reminds us in the West that humans are happiest when doing things together; that we are social beings who relate best through collective celebration. Our achievement, wellbeing and quality of life will be enhanced by embracing ceremony, dialogue, art, story, games and play as the natural ways of learning – and, therefore, the best way to engage schools, families and communities to educate our kids.

Ceremony allows us to learn what cannot be taught through telling.

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## Positive relationships between school, family and community: A whole-school and community approach

Positive relationships between school, family and community, have the power to ensure success in learning and life, for all of our children and youth. Relationships between and among professional educators, parents, community members and youth are crucial. Where each is aware of significant influences on achievement, wellbeing and life chances of social, personal, community and school dynamics; where each respects the role the others play in education; where natural ways of learning are practiced and promoted; where we all collectively focus on five key learning relationships; and, finally, where the school as a central community organisation makes building relationships characterised by trust and dialogue; the core business of the organisation – equitable and excellent education for all our children, regardless of status, station or circumstance – will thrive.

As indicated earlier, I have been working closely with two Victorian school principals to develop a road map, so to speak, for guiding such relationship building. The model proposed, and now successfully implemented at Noble Park Primary and Elwood Primary over the past seven years, has several unique features, all intended to show school leaders what relationships are important and how they can build positive relationships with parents; with the wider community; and with each and every young person. Over time, the result is a true partnership between and among staff, parents, community members and youth (see Csoti, Otero and Rothstadt, 2011, currently in revision).

Other schools and school systems are finding their own way into the relationship building that is required if we are honouring all the important documented influences on learning. The Far North Queensland State Schools Regional Office has spent four years developing a community engagement strategy, which starts not with the schools but with community conversations, where the strengths and aspirations of everyone in the community can be front and centre at the beginning of discussions, and where culture, language, food and fun are the teachers. The leaders there know that connecting parents to kids' learning, and connecting school to community and community to school, is a conversation that the community must lead in partnership with the local school, especially in disenfranchised and truly multicultural communities. As the State School Improvement framework suggests, relationships across school, family and community must result in collective empowerment of everyone who influences learning (see, for example, Watterston, undated).

## Professional development and learning journeys

As John Kotter, probably one of the top management and change consultants alive today suggests, our relationships change when we change, and we change best through a 'see, feel, change' approach, rather than an 'analysis, think, change' process (Kotter and Cohen, 2012, p 10). Kotter and Cohen state, 'people rarely change through a rational process of analyze, think, change.' Relationships are guided by our emotions as much as our brains.

The key to changing our selves, and thereby our relationships, is new experiences.

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The key to changing our selves, and thereby our relationships, is new experiences. The Center for Relational Learning has conducted over 25 ‘study tours’, or ‘learning journeys’ as we prefer to call the experience, with educators from England, Canada, Australia and the US. These learning journeys get educators out of the box, viewing families and communities as school assets only, and immerses them in the global microcosm of Northern New Mexico, where a ‘see-feel-change’ approach to professional development occurs.

Instead of looking at families and communities through the lens of the school, leaders are then immersed in a multitude of communities, seeing first-hand what life is like for others and what education means to a variety of families and communities, both modern and traditional. From that experience, participants visit schools but see and feel the school from a larger viewing

point. Through dialogue, ceremony, art, and story each person finds that who s/he is, personally and professionally, really matters. The change is categorical. Participants no longer see themselves as service providers but as co-educators, working with and alongside colleagues, families and communities, seeking the best education for every person. They no longer relate to others mostly through their professional role, but rather as individual persons among persons.<sup>5</sup>

Such a transformative experience, based on a core method of see-feel-change, is required in order for professional educators to catalyze and participate, and to lead in developing relationships that bring all the social and personal factors available to bear on educating every child to her/his potential.

Our future, our children, our communities, are counting on us.

The key to changing our selves, and thereby our relationships, is new experiences.

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## Endnotes

1. For details and background see the organisation's website, at [relationalearning.com](http://relationalearning.com).
2. OMD is an integrated communications agency delivering media and marketing solutions globally. Its philosophy is summarised as 'Insights–Ideas–Results'. (For more detail, see, for example [www.omdgermany.de/en/about-us/credo/insights-ideas-results/](http://www.omdgermany.de/en/about-us/credo/insights-ideas-results/)).
3. Miguel Angel Acosta is Director of the Santa Fe Community Partnership.
4. Massive Open Online Courses are 'aimed at unlimited participation and open access via the web. In addition to traditional course materials such as filmed lectures, readings, and problem sets, many MOOCs provide interactive user forums to support community interactions among students, professors, and teaching assistants (TAs).' This definition was sourced on 10 July 2016, at [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive\\_open\\_online\\_course](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massive_open_online_course)).
5. For background and further details, see the relevant website section at [relationalearning.com/learning-journeys](http://relationalearning.com/learning-journeys).

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(Editor’s note: Readers seeking this reference work should note that according to Wikipedia, Continuum International Publishing Group was an academic publisher of books with editorial offices in London and New York City. It was purchased by Nova Capital Management in 2005. In July 2011 it was taken over by Bloomsbury Publishing. As of September 2012, all new Continuum titles are published under the Bloomsbury name (under the imprint Bloomsbury Academic).

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George Otero

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Dr George Otero, born and raised in New Mexico, has worked internationally as a teacher, educator, international consultant, social entrepreneur, keynote speaker, workshop presenter and author. He and his wife, Susan, operate the Center for Relational Learning (CRL), based in Santa Fe, New Mexico. They assist schools, businesses, public agencies, and communities, in Australia and the United Kingdom as well as the United States, to target mutually identifiable areas for change, opening new avenues of learning, growth, productivity, and collaboration. He has spent three to four months a year in Australia since 1998 and consults with schools and systems, and coaches individuals, on relational learning and leadership. He has authored three previous papers and conducted a number of seminars for CSE.

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