# VET and community development: A case study from a socio-economically disadvantaged community

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## 1. Abstract

This study uses an ethnographic research methodology to examine how VET and a community development project in Tasmania are interacting to produce encouraging outcomes in a community marginalised by socio-economic and other influences, including the complex relationship between literacy and persistent poverty. The case study focuses on a group of residents engaging both with the community development project and with a VET course in Certificate II Community Services (Children's Services), with a visiting tutor from TAFE Tasmania.

The prevailing discourse of this community – where the term 'discourse' constitutes people's internalised values and the way they behave (Gee 1999) – is a discourse of the dominated. Most residents have been Housing Department tenants for years. Most are on welfare benefits from Centrelink. Most perceive themselves as subordinates in the inherent power relationships, and under a degree of compulsion to comply. Engaging with the community development process and with formal learning through TAFE Tasmania has required courage and determination.

TAFE Tasmania was able to offer access to a delivery of Community Services (Children's Services) which would be unintimidating and supportive. Students of a range of age, gender and educational attainment engaged with best practice ideas in child care in their lessons, then took their new understandings and put them to work during the project's school holiday activities program.  They also took their new knowledge home, where it would have its effect on their own parenting practices.

Education and training are vital key elements on the pathway to empowerment. Together with other education and training initiatives of the project, the experience of the TAFE students lays a living foundation for this community's development.

## 2. Introduction

'Windsor Park' is a 70% public housing estate, located in an isolated area on the perimeter of Hobart. It is a community marginalised in a number of ways by socio-economic and other influences, with a high unemployment rate, a high proportion of welfare-dependent people, and limited access to services and social activities. There is very little employment available in the local area. A community development project has been ongoing for three years, with the aim of empowering community members to participate in the planning and integration of service delivery, and to enhance opportunities for people in the community. The project is mainly funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

The effects of isolation and poverty go deep in the social fabric of 'Windsor Park'. They are evident in the very language of the people. The prevailing discourse of this community – where the term 'discourse' constitutes people's internalised values and

the way they behave (Gee 1999) – is a discourse of the dominated. Most residents have been tenants and welfare recipients for years. There is a perception that they are subordinates in the inherent power relationships, and that they are under a degree of compulsion to comply.

However, education and training, emanating from the project directly and from its links with local service providers, are having promising outcomes. Some community members have gone 'back to school'. One of these is a member of the community management group being supported by the project. She does accounting work for organisations in the community, drawing on what she learned at high school years ago. Now she has enrolled for an Open Learning course to update and consolidate her knowledge.

One of the strongest outcomes of the project has been a school holiday children's activities program, where good numbers of volunteers from the community have formed an organising group with the Children's Worker employed by the project, to plan, implement and supervise a broad range of activities for local children during school vacation times. During the program's first year, volunteers underwent some training sessions conducted variously by the Children's Worker, the Project Facilitator, and Volunteering Tasmania. Nutritional Food Workshops were held in conjunction with this training. Informal learning by volunteers occurred as teamwork skills, conflict resolution strategies and use of a framework for grievance procedures were encouraged by project workers.

In August 2002 fourteen volunteers indicated interest in enrolling in Certificate II Community Services (Children's Services), with a visiting tutor from TAFE Tasmania.

The group, mostly women, ranged in age from seventeen to forties. Most had been local residents for a number of years. All were unemployed, and some had never been employed. All had left school before Year 12. Some had had difficult experiences there. A few had participated in short courses through Centrelink.

**3. Literature review**

Community development has been defined as the level of control communities have to plan, develop, implement, and maintain effective community programs which impact on their individual and collective social and economic futures (Poole 1997). Recently, the NEEF (National Education and Employment Forum) Report (Feeney et al. 2003) looked at geographical areas of concentrated disadvantage where poverty, isolation, limited education, welfare dependency, unemployment and persistent long-term unemployment combine to produce 'vulnerable communities' (p.17). The creation of community development programs aims to help unlock the cycle of poverty, unemployment and isolation in which people in these communities find themselves (Good Beginnings Australia 2003).

The NEEF Report drew attention to the close correlation between socio-economic status and educational outcomes (Feeney et al. 2003). Low socio-economic status appears to have a significant effect on participation and achievement in post-

compulsory education and training (NBEET 1996; DETYA 1999; Baum et al. 1999; Watson and Pope 2000; Zappala and Considine 2001).

Vocational Education and Training (VET) activity, however, can build community capacity in a number of ways. Individual capacity is at the very foundation of community capacity. As skill and knowledge are acquired, the individual's self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence are increased, and the individual's job-readiness is improved. Further, VET exposes the individual to the experience of networking, interaction and support, and may be the catalyst or facilitator for new networks and connections (Kilpatrick, Bell and Falk 1999; Balatti and Falk 2000). These connections are a vital part of social capital building, which occurs as local people develop their neighbouring behaviour, basic voluntary participation and leadership activity (Saegert and Winkel 1998; Falk and Kilpatrick 2000), and which is a vital part of community development. As well as intra-community connections, external networks are also a vital part of the social capital of a community (Falk and Kilpatrick 2000), providing access to resources and new ideas. VET may play an important role here, countering the social isolation experienced by vulnerable communities, and supplying access to material resources, role models, and 'the kind of cultural learning from mainstream social networks that facilitates social and economic advancement in modern industrial society' (Wilson 1991, p. 463).

## 4. Research method

The research drawn on in this paper is from a developing doctoral thesis entitled 'The literacies of "empowerment": Literacy practices in a socio-economically disadvantaged community'. The overall aim of that project is to examine how a community development project is impacting on literacy practices and skills of community members who engage with it.

The research questions for this paper, 'VET and community development', are:
- What interaction is occurring between VET and the local community development project? What factors impede interaction and what factors promote it?
- What are the outcomes of participation in VET for individuals and community groups?

The research for the paper was conducted as an instrumental case study (Cresswell 1998; Yin 1999), using the ethnographic techniques of observation, documents and recording of interviews (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

The data for this paper were generated from three main sources:
1. Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with:
- six Certificate II Community Services (Children's Services) students. (These interviews took place over a period of six months, during which time the number of students participating in the course decreased. One of the students interviewed later dropped out of the course.)
- their TAFE Tasmania teacher and the TAFE Tasmania team-leader.
- the Children's Worker employed by the local community development project.

2. Observation of one one-hour teaching session in the 'Windsor Park' community building in August 2002, and observation of the students functioning as volunteers on two occasions during the September 2002 school holiday activities program.

3. Examination of textual material:
- the relevant units of the Community Services Training Package, which describe the underpinning skills and competencies required;
- the texts of teaching and assessment materials provided to the students.

Interviews lasting 30–40 minutes were audiotaped, transcribed, and a data-coding framework was developed according to the approach of Tesch (1990) regarding a qualitative organising system for data reduction. Thematic analysis (Aronson 1994) was then undertaken by linking certain codes used within the coding framework to the relevant research questions. A number of themes and sub-themes were identified.

## 5. Findings and discussion

Six months after children's school holiday activities program volunteers first signified their interest in participating in the Certificate II Community Services (Children's Services) course, no one has yet completed their assessment in the four units selected for them to begin with: CHCCHILD1A 'Work within legislative and ethical requirements'; CHCCN1A 'Maintain a healthy and safe environment'; CHCCN2A 'Provide physical care'; and CHCICAA 'Communicate with children'.

There are four reasons contributing to the delay. The enrolment process was very slow, due to difficulties with costs and completion of forms; some students did not attend every teaching session; TAFE's December–January vacation period interrupted tuition for nearly two months; and there have been difficulties finding appropriate assessment opportunities.

Numbers of participants in the course have dwindled. As of February 2003, it seemed there were six students remaining. However, participants, their tutor and her team-leader, and the project's Children's Worker all remained very positive. New people were also showing interest in doing the course.

TAFE Tasmania has made a creative effort to accommodate the learning needs of its 'Windsor Park' students. The tutor goes to them. Tuition takes place in a local community building. The tutor has a cheerful manner which the students find easy to relate to. Observation of one session suggested that everyone was enjoying his or her learning. Observation of the students working as volunteers during the September 2002 school holiday activities program indicated that their recent learning was in the foreground of their minds and was being effectively integrated into their work. There was a lot of talk about how matters they had discussed in class related to their activities in the holiday program. The holiday program was therefore a vivid example of what can be achieved when VET and a community development project interact: there were positive outcomes for the community's children, for the volunteers, and for the project.

A number of themes emerged from the research, which will now be discussed.

*Student support needs*

When VET comes to a community of multiple disadvantage, student support needs are higher than usual. These include basic financial and childcare needs and motivational and educational needs.

The students all sought funding for their tuition through Centrelink or their job agencies.

> The processes involved in signing them up for the course were very slow and quite stressful. There is a cost to each student, which is hard for people in these socio-economic circumstances. Not all were eligible for the same level of assistance from Centrelink or the job agencies.

> (Children's Worker, October 2002)

They required considerable support from the Children's Worker and their TAFE tutor in order to engage with the processes of enrolment and training.

> There were problems just getting the form filled in, related to literacy … knowing how to enrol. That whole process took endless talking. There were forms not coming back. Finally we tried to get them into TAFE as a group, to get some orientation, experience a classroom and so forth. My understanding was that no one had transport. So the project arranged for transport. Even then, not all of them came on that particular day. So the enrolment process still wasn't complete. I now have four students enrolled. I have another enrolment form here that's not quite complete. And a sixth one … For one student it's been an on again off again kind of situation.

> (TAFE Tasmania tutor, February 2003)

Another issue for the students is childcare. There is no childcare available in 'Windsor Park'. Students with young children said this adversely affected their attendance at classes.

Ongoing moral support was also important to the students. The Children's Worker was available in the community most days and was able to provide advice on the training. He was also present during the holiday activities program. The students said they would have liked also to have the tutor present for more time during the holiday program.

> We had a difficulty in TAFE, in that I could only go out for an hour, and be with them. And what they were wanting was for me to go every holiday program meeting time, to work with them.

> (TAFE Tasmania tutor, February 2003)

Comments made by some students in class revealed a degree of uncertainty. 'Is it OK for us to remind each other, if one of us makes a mistake during the holiday program?' asked one.

Some expressed concern about 'written work' in class. The tutor told them: 'Any written work we do will be group written work.' Two students immediately declined to write for the group. One said: 'I'm good at spelling and that sort of thing, but my actual writing's too messy.' However, one student volunteered to write on behalf of the group. Another student said that she was used to writing. '[During the holiday program] we go through the rules every morning with the children, and I write them on the blackboard.'

*Teaching issues*

The effect of educational disadvantage is not simply a deficit in reading and writing skills, but also in attention, comprehension and cognitive engagement with the educational materials.

> The level they're starting on is the equivalent of the VET course in schools and we've selected our four particular units of competence that are pre-requisite and co-requisite to the certificate 3 qualification. The Training Package is quite complex because in a sense the cert 2 and cert 3 are intermixed. We've only selected four units to begin with.
>
> (TAFE Tasmania tutor, February 2003)

Most of the students are parents, and to a varying degree they already possessed most of the underpinning knowledge and underpinning skills for CHCCN1A 'Maintain a healthy and safe environment', CHCCN2A 'Provide physical care', and CHCICAA 'Communicate with children'. One student said: 'A lot of this is common sense. I do it at home.'

The tutor said: 'I taught Maintaining a Safe and Healthy Environment by getting them to work on a safety audit as a group.' The students said they enjoyed group work. One said, 'It's more like what we do in the holiday program. Ask each other and back each other up, that sort of thing.'

The fourth unit, CHCCHILD1A 'Work within legislative and ethical requirements', requires a considerable amount of underpinning knowledge (e.g., legislative requirements, UN charter of rights, codes of ethics) which would be new to most of the students and which involves coming to grips with a new and difficult literacy, the literacy of the law. Introductory teaching on this unit has focused on issues of immediate relevance to the holiday program, presented through questions and general discussion.

Reading, writing, speaking, listening and numeracy skills are also necessary to fulfil Performance Criteria. Implied in these criteria is the assumption of a repertoire of literate practices (Hull et al. 1996; Gee, 1990, 1999), which would enable trainees to:

- report evidence of injury or neglect accurately
- record explanations of injuries or changes in behaviour offered by children, parents and others
- carefully follow legislative requirements
- supervise children in accordance with legal requirements and regulations
- respect and follow, where possible, different cultural practices
- store food within appropriate temperature limits
- follow regulatory requirements on preparing food hygienically
- model a positive and respectful communication style.

The 'Windsor Park' students are building on their repertoire of literate practices, but it takes time, and this is being allowed for in the teaching process.

*Assessment issues*

One of the challenges facing the TAFE Tasmania tutor is to find enough contexts to assess her 'Windsor Park' students.

> Usually they have a workplace and they enroll in units and they're assessed in the workplace. With regard to the units that we're assessing, we need to assess the students with babies and young children as well as school children. The holiday program and the homework program [another program offered by the project] reach the 5 to 12 year old age group. We need to find a place with under-fives.
>
> So we need to work out a way to assess these particular students across the other age groups, and we haven't come up with a solution yet. We're hoping there might be perhaps a playgroup within the community out there, that we might be able to access. Or something like that, where we can assess evidence of good practice, communicating positively with young children, providing physical care.
>
> That might be a rather long-term process.
>
> (TAFE Tasmania tutor, February 2003)

Since that interview there has been some good news. In March 2003 a playgroup operating from the local school's kindergarten offered to let the students work with them for two hours a week.

The unemployed have much less access to training than people in the workforce. Even if they can fund their training, assessment contexts present trainers with a considerable challenge. In 'Windsor Park', assessment has been a factor slowing the progress of students. This may have had an effect on motivation and class attendance.

*The empowerment of learning*

The students engaged with best practice ideas in childcare in their lessons, then took their new understandings and put them to work during the holiday activities program. Other volunteers learned from them. Outcomes of this were obvious in two areas observed in September 2002. There was a heightened awareness of hygiene issues, for example in food preparation. There was also an increased awareness of options in behaviour management. Volunteers showed themselves able to work as a team to deal sensitively with the behaviour of individual children, some of whom have clinical disorders. The volunteers who were parents also took their new knowledge home, where they said it was having an effect on their own parenting practices.

All the students said they felt more confident as a result of their VET training, and that their self-esteem had increased. Four said they were more likely now to engage with other formal learning.

*Community development*

Community connections, social capital building and community development are all facilitated by the sharing of an overall culture, which may be thought of as a 'tool kit of symbols, stories, rituals and world-views that we assemble as we grow up and experience the world – a set of skills and habits' (Duncan 1999, p. 189).

> Our tool kits are shaped by what we experience in the social world, by the relationships we have and by the larger community context in which those

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> relationships occur. When we make a choice in life, we reach into our tool kit and select familiar tools so we can, to use sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's phrase, do what people 'like us' do.
>
> (Duncan 1999, pp. 189–190)

The 'Windsor Park' community development project's interaction with VET has enlarged the 'tool kits' of community members who have engaged with it. It has done so through processes of formal and informal learning, and through the formation of networks and partnerships.

> We had two Diploma of Childcare students at the holiday program on placement. One of the really good spin-offs of that was the partnership that developed between them and the volunteers. They would discuss the program and the areas they might need to tighten up on. Those sorts of partnerships that developed – it ebbed and flowed a bit, but it was a very positive collaboration.
>
> (TAFE Tasmania tutor, February 2003)
>
> There was a problem particularly with one little boy who has a behaviour problem. We worked it out that if one of us could be like his main minder, then he wouldn't be able to run from one volunteer to another giving a different story all the time. Just one of us would work with him and help him with his behaviour. This worked real good. Most of the time anyway.
>
> (Volunteer/student, January 2003)

This kind of interaction has brought degrees of empowerment to these volunteers/students and, through their improved skills in the children's holiday activities program, has benefited the community.

## 6. Conclusions

In 'Windsor Park', interaction between VET and a community development project has had a number of effects. The project's children's school holiday activities program attracted the volunteers and a project worker promoted and facilitated the link with formal training. In turn, the students are now able to make a more significant contribution to the community development process through their own developing skills, which benefit the holiday program, the homework group, and potentially the local playgroup.

Factors in this community which may impede participation in VET are related to cost, support needs which stem from educational or literacy insecurities, availability of workplace contexts for assessment purposes, and lack of childcare provision. The community development project was able to assist in some ways with all except the last.

Outcomes for individuals and for the community group of holiday activities program volunteers are positive, with individuals saying they have more confidence, some saying they are now more likely to participate in other forms of training, and the volunteer group being strengthened in skills and its networking and collaboration capacity.

The findings of this study suggest therefore that interaction between VET and community development projects in disadvantaged communities can have very encouraging outcomes. The Certificate II Community Services (Children's Services) experience in 'Windsor Park' is seen as a very positive one by participants, by project workers and by TAFE Tasmania.

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