Community Conversations

Changing relationships through changing conversations

Catholic Education Office
Archdiocese of Melbourne

Community Conversations are a communication strategy for all school communities.

This document provides schools and school leaders with an overview of the approach, and sets out how the practice of Community Conversations can lead to improved understanding and connectedness for whole school communities, and improved learning outcomes for students.

The work has emerged from the Catholic Education Office Melbourne Family School Partnerships initiative (2010 – 2013) with the support of Dr George Otero from the Centre for Relational Learning in New Mexico. Dr Otero's experience in this work provided a basis for the development of an approach to Community Conversations suitable for an Australian context.

The Family School Partnerships initiative was developed and informed by evidence from Australia and overseas. Amongst other findings, this research emphasises the importance of engaging families in learning, building social capital, and strengthening relationships between all members of the school community. A Community Conversations approach can provide a process to enable such relationship building.

This resource identifies the key characteristics of Community Conversations. It outlines where, when and how such conversations can be supported, and the skills, attitudes and processes essential for the successful implementation of a Community Conversations approach within a school community.

FSP
Family School Partnerships

Background and Acknowledgements

The Catholic Education Office Melbourne's (CEOM) Family School Partnership (FSP) initiative was formulated in 2009 as part of the Smarter Schools National Partnership for Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) School Communities. The focus and form of the initiative drew on the CEOM's experience and the body of research on effective family-school-community relationships. It also acknowledged the CEOM's positioning of family-school-community partnerships within its strategic education and school improvement frameworks.

From its beginnings in 2010, the FSP initiative sought to strengthen school capacity for establishing and maintaining family school partnerships to support improved student learning and wellbeing outcomes in participating schools.

Dr George Otero of the Centre for RelationaLearning (New Mexico) worked with Family School Partnership Convenors (FSPCs) across the four years and, in the first year, focussed much of his professional learning work on 'relationships'. He introduced the concept and practice of Community Conversations to the FSP Team, drawing on his experience in conducting Community Conversations internationally, and on the research and evidence in this area. Understanding the different types of conversations and their importance was central to this work.

Dr Otero introduced and modelled the practice of Community Conversations in FSP schools and communities. His approach was always to build the capacity of CEOM staff and school leaders to lead Community Conversations themselves.

Family School Partnership Convenors worked with Dr Otero to facilitate Community Conversations in school and community settings. They undertook to compile the evidence and case studies that inform this resource.

Key terms used in this document

Family school partnerships
A multi-faceted approach used to build strong and effective relationships between schools, families and their communities to support learning. Through the CEOM's work in this area a number of dimensions of family school partnerships have been identified, including family engagement in learning; family involvement and connectedness; community partnerships and connectedness; and school culture.

Family School Partnerships (FSP) initiative
The CEOM, from 2010 to 2013, implemented the FSP initiative as part of the federal government's Smarter Schools National Partnerships reform agenda. The purpose of the initiative was to support 35 Catholic schools in low socio-economic communities to build effective partnerships with families and communities to improve student learning and life opportunities.

FSP schools
Schools involved in the CEOM FSP initiative.

Family School Partnerships Convenor (FSPC)
Family School Partnership Convenors (FSPCs) were employed by the CEOM to work with clusters of up to four FSP schools. Their role was to lead school change by working alongside leaders, staff, families and communities to strengthen family school partnerships to enhance student learning.

Parent
The primary caregiver/s in a child's life. While engagement of the broader family has a significant and positive impact on the development of children and young people, this term is used at times to recognise the fundamental role that parents or primary caregivers play in maximising learning outcomes.

Family
Parents as well as other significant people identified by children or young people as belonging to their family. This may include members of the household, siblings, grandparents, cousins and other relatives.

What Are Community Conversations?

A conversation between people is the starting point for improved understanding. Within the community of a school, such conversations occur between all members of that community, about any areas of common interest: the family, the child, learning, growing, the ways in which the school operates, the community, its priorities and hopes.

Community Conversations provide a process that extends and develops those informal moments, and builds and changes relationships within the community. The process involves having intentional and inclusive conversations between members of the community, in which participants **listen** to each other, in order to **understand** and **explore** what is important to and **valued** by that community.

... intentional conversations where people listen in order to understand...

Facilitated Process
The process outlined here for holding a Community Conversation is a formal, facilitated one. It aims to develop and build respectful relationships within the school community through interactions in which listening is as important as talking. These Community Conversations can involve and be initiated by any members of the school community.

Key Characteristics
Community Conversations have five key characteristics:
- members of the community are **invited** to sit down together and talk;
- the occasion provides a **safe** place to share views;
- the occasion of coming together and talking is **enjoyable**;
- participants share what is **valuable** and **positive** about the community; and
- the talk is facilitated to **explore** viewpoints and ideas.

... five key characteristics: invitational; safe; enjoyable; positive; inquisitive

Enabling
In themselves, Community Conversations do not plan action or reach agreement. However, successful Community Conversations **enable** school communities to build their next steps. They create opportunities for on-going conversations and for successfully adopting other tools and processes to meet their needs.

Changed Relationships
Community Conversations require schools to change the nature of the relationship between the school and its community. They place all participants as equals within those conversations, with important views and ideas to be contributed and heard.

... the changing nature of relationships can be confronting for some...

Not any or every dialogue is a Community Conversation. Community Conversations are not meetings for reaching agreements, or ways of informing parents, nor are they forums for informing others. While these other forms of discussion may aim to achieve valuable ends, they do not have the characteristics of a Community Conversation.

It is important to respect the principles involved and what distinguishes a Community Conversation from other approaches, and to initiate and develop conversations within your community appropriate to its needs.

Why Community Conversations?

Family-School-Community Partnerships

The Catholic Education Office Melbourne Family School Partnerships initiative (2010–2013) has highlighted the importance of family engagement in learning in improving a broad range of student outcomes. Such engagement relies on strong and trusting relationships between key players in schools. Where schools have successfully changed and built those relationships, research has shown that school outcomes improve.

Research shows that parents and teachers build partnerships that help children succeed when they:

1. Engage together in meaningful dialogue

2. Show mutual respect

3. Actively listen to one another

4. Collaborate on issues that affect student learning

5. Empathise with one another

6. Open themselves to learning from each other

7. Involve students as responsible collaborators in their own learning.

(Price-Mitchell)

When parents and school staff work together to support learning, students:

• Earn higher grades and test scores

• Enrol in higher level programs

• Be promoted and earn credits

• Adapt well to school and attend regularly

• Have better social skills and behaviour

• Graduate and go on to higher education

(Mapp 2004)

Intentions of Community Conversations

Community Conversations aim to build strong, safe and trusting relationships within school communities, through changing the ways in which dialogue occurs between the school and its community. They do this by aiming to:

... the intention is to listen...

• provide forums for parents, carers and school staff to participate in structured opportunities to **listen** to each other's thoughts and opinions and share ideas about the community, education and the school
• build **positive shared experiences** between parents, carers and school staff that reflect – and reflect on – the importance of schools and families working together to support children and young peoples' learning
• build the **confidence** and **capacity** of school staff and families to engage in productive two-way communication with each other

Community Conversations place community members, family members, students and staff as equal contributors to the dialogue. This changes the style, substance and power of the relationships within the school community.

... and through listening, relationships are changed

When To Have a Community Conversation?

A school community should initiate a Community Conversation:

- to build relationships between school staff and parents and carers
- to listen to and hear a variety of ideas, views and experiences that exist within the community
- to evolve a process of respectful dialogue around issues of common interest
- to explore issues together, without an assumption that answers are already known

Different types of conversation

George Otero (2003) asserts there are three kinds of conversation – interactions that you can lead, organise, catalyse, participate in yourself – which, in our experience, will produce immediate change:

1. Instructional conversation. This is the one we see most often in the classroom. It is to do with a relationship in which our discussion is about acquiring skill, extra knowledge, perhaps career guidance material – something external to ourselves – a skill or ability.

2. Learning conversation. A learning conversation is closer to one in which our mutual growth is the end result. It matters greatly because it parallels dialogue, and dialogue is a conversation that you enter without knowing the outcome when you begin.

3. Community Conversation. Community conversation is a vehicle for people to express and share the diverse views that they hold; to negotiate and reaffirm directions and vision. (p. 2)

Think of Community Conversations as more like a verb than a noun. It is about the act of engaging. It is a process – to bring people together, to get everybody heard, with benefits for the learning of all concerned – rather than an end in itself. By discussing what we are educating for, we can build common but varied understandings. By doing so, we deepen our sense of community, or even create one, in some cases.

A Community Conversation is not a Community Conversation if you come to it with an outcome in mind; then it's a meeting.

Many interactions within schools are one-directional: they are about information giving. Such interactions are not Community Conversations. Nor are Community Conversations meetings directed towards achieving pre-arranged outcomes, or for instructing others.

Differentiating Community Conversations from other meeting styles

	Instructional Dialogue	Formal Meeting	Informal Meeting or Conversation	Community Conversation
Who initiates	Usually the school or someone in administrative power	Usually the school or someone in administrative power	Anyone, either with the intent of an individual or randomly	A facilitator at the behest of other parties
Purpose or intention	Tell or educate others; present a reason or recommendation for action; perhaps feedback to the teacher	Address an issue or concern; solve a problem; make a collective decision	Air a concern; communicate views, concerns, hopes; make an individual decision; influence an outcome	Explore issues and views; listen to each other's ideas and views; develop relationships
Participants: who and status	Those who need to teach or know about the issue; the instructors have the knowledge and use strategies to inform	Representatives of groups within the school – each brings knowledge and power accordingly	Those involved in the issue. Theoretically all have equal status, but in practice this differs	Range of individuals within the school: parents/carers, students, teachers, school leaders etc. All participants have equal status and knowledge within the Community Conversation
The agenda	Set by the person/s doing the instructing	Usually set by whoever calls the meeting	Usually set by whoever initiates the meeting or informally by the participants	Set by the facilitator (perhaps in discussion with some participants)
Style and process	Formal and focused style; one-way communication of information by one party; the other party can question	Formal and procedural; process is set by whoever controls the agenda: who gets to speak, about what	Casual and natural. Both parties take a role to listen and speak; informal power relations determine who speaks, who listens and about what. The process can vary from one-way communication to shared dialogue	Natural; slow, with opportunities to think; messy at times. The facilitator controls the process to ensure that all participants contribute to the conversation as equals; sets rules
Outcome, actions and follow up	Determined by the person/s doing the instructing; to tell or transfer information. A plan is developed with set actions to be carried out as designated and directed	The purposes, agenda and process usually determine the outcomes; these are usually formalised through an action plan	Determined by one party (the initiator) or by agreement; depends on informal power relationships; often no written agreement	All parties have control over the outcomes. Anyone can choose to act on issues that they have some power over. Action depends on the level of interest and commitment to the ideas or suggestions within the group/s eg. school leaders may hear something that they haven't heard before, that they may then want to consider action in relation to

(Drawing on Wheatley 2002 and Duncan 2006)

Characteristics of Community Conversations

A Community Conversation draws on five key principles:

1: Invitational

In a Community Conversation, participants (parents, carers, teachers, students and other school staff) are **invited** to attend and participate as equals.

Similarly, the Community Conversation process models the principle that questions are an **invitation** to participate and everyone is free to pass or participate. The contribution of each participant is acknowledged equally and none is given more weight or legitimacy than any other.

> *... participants are invited to attend and participate as equals...*

This establishes an open and welcoming climate, enabling a deeper dialogue (Wheatley 2002). The conversation is then cooperative and focused on understanding each other's points of view. All participants bring an 'open heart and mind' to the conversation. All have a non-manipulative intent for the conversation.

This point is significant. By being invitational and voluntary, Community Conversations move away from the idea of a planned agenda that aims to "gain control over others through their support of a dominant agenda and subjugating alternative points of view (Colby & Ehrlich)."

2: Safe

A Community Conversation establishes a space that is **safe** for all participants, in which they feel safe and confident to participate, to contribute, and to listen. The conduct of the Community Conversation provides an atmosphere of trust, in which all participants have confidence that their views and ideas will be respected.

That means that the Community Conversation is light on judgement, and therefore light on responses to contributions. While contributions are acknowledged and welcomed, they are otherwise not commented upon. It is expected that there will be diverse points of view expressed, and even disagreement. However, a safe and trusting space enables these to be freely expressed.

> *"Trust is the 'connective tissue' that holds improving schools together … Although power in schools, as in most institutions, is not distributed evenly … all parties are ultimately dependent on each other to succeed … On a daily basis, trust is raised or diminished depending on whether the way we act – and why – is consistent with the expectations we have agreed to…"*
>
> (Bryk, AS & Schneider, B 2003)

"Steer away from debating differences of opinion or differences of priority concerns; the intent is to listen and discover intersections of common concern (Haupt 2012)." That means overtly welcoming diverse views and reinforcing the commonalities in what is heard rather than differences.

3. Enjoyable

The facilitation of a Community Conversation is purposefully done in a way that is enjoyable. Such conversations are 'serious fun' and involve activities that make participants comfortable. These approaches have been referred to as being 'playful'.

Playful or enjoyable approaches reinforce the invitational nature of Community Conversations. They allow the process to be fluid: participants are invited to play, take turns to talk or decide to 'pass'. Playfulness also stresses that all participants are equal and that all contributions are important; it frees people up mentally to participate at a level they feel is comfortable.

> *The new atmosphere has three qualities:*
> *• we find we are suspending judgement;*
> *• there is a quality of playfulness; and*
> *• there is a quality of imagination – we are getting to play with ideas, our thoughts, our feelings, we're being surprised.*
>
> (Otero, G 2003)

Playful interaction implies a state of surrender. It involves being open, and embracing unexpected directions or results. Being playful has positive effects on the body and the brain. Recent insights into the way the brain works, indicate that participants' problem solving ability increases after a person has spent some time laughing. Laughing turns off the posterior hypothalamus and allows the cerebral cortex to focus on a given task (Sortino & Wiltse 2012).

Community Conversations use various approaches to make sure they are enjoyable and playful. For example, a Community Conversation could include prizes and games to support and encourage sharing and gives a greater sense of joy in being part of the process.

4. Positive
Community Conversations use strengths-based methods that focus on **what works**.

The questions asked will largely determine the focus. The traditional approach to change and discussion is often deficit-focused. It comes from the belief that organisations are problems that need to be solved: we need to identify the root cause of failure and then develop and implement solutions to close the gap.

Community Conversations, however, propose that sustainable change requires positive approaches. Sentiments such as hope, excitement, inspiration, camaraderie and joy increase creativity, openness to new ideas and people, and cognitive flexibility. They also promote the strong connections and relationships between people that are required for collective inquiry and change.

Rather than focusing on: 'what are the problems?', Community Conversations purposefully explore and enhance what gives life to the organisation when it is performing at its best. They therefore ask: "what is important about this community?" and "what is working well?"

5. Inquisitive
To inquire or to question means to explore and discover, in order to better understand and to be open to new possibilities.

The purpose of inquiry is to stimulate ideas, stories and images that generate new possibilities for action. The words and topics chosen for the inquiry have an impact beyond the words themselves – they invoke sentiments, understandings and meanings that can inspire the best in participants.

Community Conversations invite participants to explore and question what could be. They are a method for "studying and changing social systems (groups, organisations, communities) that advocates collective inquiry into the best of what is, in order to imagine what could be" (Bushe 2013). They are therefore open-ended and focused upon possibilities.

Together, these latter two principles reflect an Appreciative Inquiry approach. (See Appendix 1 for more details.)

How to Develop a Community Conversation

A Community Conversation doesn't just happen. It needs to be planned and facilitated. While Community Conversations will vary according to the nature and needs of each community, there are some common elements in their development.

Start by being clear about the intention of the Community Conversation. This intention will drive the style and processes.

... the intention of the Community Conversation drives its style...

The Invitation
Consider whose participation could enhance the Community Conversation, and decide who could be involved. This could be a whole school community or part of it; it could involve all teachers and parents or some. Reflecting this, personal invitations are sent to those to be involved.

Make the **intention clear** in the invitation: Community Conversations are not about solving problems but have a clear intention of establishing a dialogue and a new way of communicating within the school community.

Make the time and place clear in the invitation: advertise both a starting time and a finishing time – and stick to them. Let invitees know about food, interpreters and childcare.

The Set-Up
Choose an appropriate location for the Community Conversation. This might be in the school, or in a location in the community. Set up this space in advance in a way that facilitates the conversation.

The nature of the space and the arrangement of chairs will have an impact on the way the conversation develops. Make sure the space is large enough to accommodate all participants, but not so big that participants feel 'lost' within the space. Make sure participants are able to hear and respond.

It is useful to have participants sit in a circle so they can see and talk with each other. However, if a large number of people is participating, plan to start in a whole group then break into smaller conversation circles.

Pay attention to other welcoming and inviting aspects of the session: childcare, provision of interpreters, food and drink. The session could start with an informal meal together.

It may also be valuable for all members of the Community Conversation to share a practical understanding of the context for the conversation. One way to do this could be to start with a 'learning walk' together to see children's learning, then bring participants back together and invite comments and questions.

The Facilitator
A Community Conversation provides an opportunity to celebrate strengths and pride in the school, neighbourhood and community, but also to identify issues and concerns. Careful facilitation of this opportunity is vital, so that the session does not become instructional or one-sided. The facilitator should understand the purpose of the Community Conversation, and the processes involved.

Potentially, anyone within the community can play this role. However facilitation is sometimes made more difficult by other roles this person may have. For example, a school leader can facilitate a Community Conversation, but may be seen as having certain interests and outcomes in mind – which constrains the conversation. Equally, a parent can be a facilitator, but this person may also bring strong preconceptions to the conversation, which may be limiting. It is important that the facilitator does not comment on statements, contributions and issues raised by participants. Sometimes this is difficult for school leaders to resist.

Facilitation is a particular skill. It requires a commitment to process. Communities may consider bringing in an external facilitator to assist the Community Conversation.

Facilitators need to:
- be clear and strong on process
- give all participants an opportunity to speak
- be skilled in redirecting attempts to solve problems, answer questions or justify statements
- be comfortable with silences and with messy problems.

The facilitator should focus on:
- participants feeling welcome and valued
- participants feeling safe to contribute
- reinforcing that all voices are of equal value
- ensuring that all contributions are acknowledged

The Processes

When a Community Conversation occurs, there are some key steps in achieving its goals:

The welcome and introduction

The facilitator **welcomes** everyone and does not acknowledge any person as having more status within the group. The ground rules are set out, and everyone advised about what will happen and how it will happen. The set finishing time is mentioned and participants assured that the Community Conversation will conclude at that time. The **purposes** of the Community Conversation are outlined.

The welcome may also include an **introduction to the environment**: a formal welcome to the school, 'housekeeping' information about toilets, refreshments etc. When working with language interpreters, it will be important to make sure they are introduced and have time to translate what is being said – both ways.

The next stage is for the facilitator to invite people to introduce themselves. This is an opportunity to learn something simple about each participant. It allows each person to participate in a non-threatening way and to learn the rules of the circle: take turns to speak; one person speaks at a time; people are allowed to speak without interruption and without comment except acknowledgement from the facilitator; anyone may pass.

For example, the facilitator might start by saying: "In a minute I am going to ask all people to introduce themselves and then tell us something ... a favourite colour, food, childhood game, childhood pet." Choose games and invitations that are appropriate to the participants so that they feel safe and encouraged to take part. (See Appendix 2 for some other games)

When the conversation proceeds to the next stage it is important that the facilitator maintains the welcoming environment and takes responsibility to ensure that all participants are affirmed.

In the introduction, it might be useful to explain that a Community Conversation is a dialogue with a particular process rather than a fixed agenda. The facilitator outlines the guidelines for conducting the Community Conversation:
- speak one at a time;
- value each others' experience and contributions
- be open to the views of others
- respect other and listen
- be aware of time limits when responding or contributing

The conversation: Listening, exploring, sharing

The facilitated discussion should then flow naturally around the group. Some conversation starters that have been used at schools, and might be useful:

• What did school look like for us?
• What is the biggest difference between when and where we went to school and our children's school experience?
• What do you think this school does really well?
• How could this school support you (parent) as a partner in your child's learning?

Depending on the time set aside, and the size of the group, limit the discussion to a small number of questions so that the discussion is manageable and the session finishes on time.

Further examples are provided from page 13.

Reflection and summary

The facilitator may then summarise the discussion or ask participants to reflect on the conversation. There are many different ways to do this. For example, asking question:

• What did we learn about our community? About ourselves?
• What insights emerged from our conversation?
• How will these insights influence our thinking and action?

Participants could be asked to share any 'ah-ha' moments or they could be invited to express an appreciation for the process in one or two words. Participants could be asked if there is anything else they wish to add.

Next steps

Finally, the facilitator thanks the participants and next steps are summarised. If a further Community Conversation is planned, notice is given of this and participants are invited to take part.

Outcomes of a Community Conversation

This section draws on feedback from primary and secondary school communities where Community Conversations have been conducted.

Overall, participants in Community Conversations report substantial changes to relationships between families, communities and school staff.

For School Leadership
Through participation in Community Conversations, school leaders have grown in their understanding of the differences between such sessions and information provision meetings. Schools have used Community Conversation approaches as part of 'meet and greet' sessions in the development of school vision statements and to enable parent voices to inform the development of School Improvement Plans.

School leaders acknowledge that Community Conversations have contributed to improved understandings of their communities and cultures. Changes in thinking around what families want, an awareness of how committed families are to their children's learning, an understanding of parents as a resource, and greater awareness of possibilities for students as leaders have been noted. Leaders have felt more able to be responsive to parent and family questions.

For School Staff
One of the important outcomes of Community Conversations has been increased staff capacity and confidence to develop strong working relationships with families.

By increasing two-way dialogue between families and school staff, this approach has had an impact on the planning and operation of many school activities and events.

For the Parent Community
Participation in Community Conversations has empowered parents to have a stronger role within schools. It has increased parents' understanding of school processes and an awareness of their own value within the formal and informal education process. It has increased parents' capacity to contribute, and have confidence that schools value their perspectives and involvement.

For Students
The establishment of better relationships between school staff and parents and carers has been shown to improve learning outcomes for students . Where students have participated in Community Conversations, they have found this as one way to have a voice within their school.

Practice Examples : What do they look like?

An Example of a Community Conversation Agenda
The following is an agenda for a Community Conversation that could be used as the starting point by many school communities:

1. Welcome – connecting together

2. Agenda clarification
Clarification about what a Community Conversations is: it's a dialogue, and we don't know where it might lead. The rules are: we speak one at a time; if we disagree, we search for common concerns beneath the surface; we value each others' experience; we're open and willing to change our minds; we speak freely but don't monopolise the conversation; we agree to disagree

3. Connect to issue at hand and purpose

Today we will decide what we want to do together and what's possible
Our aspiration is to improve things within our school community

4. Explore – listen and share

Sample questions:

- What is your passion or interest – something that you would like to do more of?
- What motivates parents to work with and connect with school?
- What do you love about this community? What makes it unique?
- What makes our community a healthy place to live, work, learn and play?
- How does each of us make a contribution?
- How would we describe our community's greatest potential?
- How can we help turn community potential into community reality?

5. Reflection: Insights – note any ah-ha's

6. Actions and changes

7. New agenda and next steps

Case Study: School A

This Community Conversation took place in a large single-sex secondary school with a culturally diverse community. It shows how to focus a Community Conversation on a specific sub-group within the school.

Purpose: The school's leadership had identified a need to engage with two separate and distinct cultural groups. The first group consisted of the most recently arrived community members, and the second was a specific cultural group who had been in the school for more than 20 years. The main focus of the strategy adopted by the school was to establish Community Conversations between the school and the two different cultural groups. This was a strategy to engage with two different groups who were not strongly connected to the staff in the school.

Invitation: For the first Community Conversation, separate invitations were sent to all families belonging to each of the two groups. Invitations were also sent to Grade 6 families whose young people would attend the school the following year. Year level coordinators from the school staff and the Principals of key local primary schools were also invited to participate.

The first Community Conversation with each group was followed up with a second session a week later. It was important to plan a process with more than one session to emphasise the ongoing nature of the conversation and to provide answers or further exploration of issues and questions that had been raised.

Setting: The sessions were made accessible and welcoming by providing childcare and interpreters, and also offering hospitality such as dinner for parents to meet each other and school staff in an informal way prior to the formal proceedings.

Facilitation: initially an external facilitator (Dr George Otero) was used to manage the process. It was important that the sessions were planned so that parents could clearly communicate their aspirations, concerns and could ask questions about the school and school life – adequate numbers of language interpreters were required.

Process: The focus of the Community Conversations was on establishing relationships and the start of an ongoing partnership between school staff and families. The first session had a structure as:

1. Welcome to the session; housekeeping: toilets, refreshments. It was emphasised that language interpreters were available, so it was important to make sure that the interpreter had time to translate what was being said – both ways.

2. Welcome to the school by the school leadership: "Education is a partnership between school and families. Families provide essential support to student success. School and family partnerships at this school are positive and strong. We want to extend and enhance this through ongoing two-way communication with families. The school is commencing an explicit strategy to engage directly with families from different cultural and linguistically diverse backgrounds."

3. Facilitated Community Conversations: Rules were outlined: Take turns speaking around the circle; one person to speak at a time; you can pass.

Conversation topics / questions were:
- Introduce ourselves
- Favourite colour/food
- What did school look like for you?
- What is the biggest difference between when/where how you went to school and your child's school experience?
- What do you think the school does really well?
- How could the school support you (parent) as a partner in your child's learning?

Sum up: participants were invited back for a second session the following week.

Follow up: The second session was focused on answering the questions and issues raised by parents in the first Community Conversation. It was also agreed that an important question for the school to ask families was: "How do you want us (the school) to communicate with you (parents/caregivers) in the future?"

In the second session, participants were asked if there were any new questions that had emerged since the last session; these were added to the list of discussion starters.

Outcomes: Both cultural groups unanimously agreed that they wanted the school to communicate with them through regular Community Conversations, based on the conversations that had occurred between families and school leadership and staff.

Leadership staff in the school said:

- "Parents want to have a voice. They were appreciative of the opportunity to raise their concerns so that issues could be addressed."
- "[There is now] more awareness of parents' hopes and dreams, which indirectly affects my interaction with students and parents."
- "[I'd tell others:] Talking breaks down barriers; to take the risk to speak with people one would not usually speak with is perception altering."
- "They are a great initiative in bridging the divide between home and school. Parents have major concerns and are appreciative of the school."
- "Community Conversations is probably the most valuable program that I have seen in any school in which I have taught … We learn more from these Conversations than we think. Just the experience of listening and watching interactions is valuable … These Conversations are enlightening and liberating."

Case Study: School B

Community Conversation B occured in a primary school with a culturally diverse community. It shows how to focus a Community Conversation on a whole school population.

Purpose: To engage parents and carers across a level (two grade levels) within a primary school). The purpose was to reinforce the importance of positive relationships between staff and families.

Invitation: The school's leadership initiated this Community Conversation. Letters were sent to all school staff and to all level 2 families, inviting families to the school to share an evening meal with staff and each other, and then to participate in a Community Conversation.

The school asked for responses from families about whether they could attend; there were daily prize draws for all return slips.

Setting: The Community Conversation was held in a large room at the school. The night started with a buffet dinner. Families and school staff sat around tables to share the meal together and chat.

At the end of the meal, the children who attended with their parents were invited to watch a movie or participate in other quiet activities in another room. Childcare was provided by staff on a voluntary basis.

The school had been to a $2 shop and bought a range of bright interesting objects as prizes: coffee mugs, pens, key rings etc. Parents were invited to move their chairs into a circle with the objects on the floor in the centre of the circle.

Facilitation: The Family School Partnership Convenor facilitated the Community Conversation. She **introduced** herself and gave a brief background to the ideas of Community Conversation, Appreciative Inquiry and stressed that this evening was an invitation to play.

Process: The conversation was then facilitated around several questions. Where families needed an interpreter, one was sitting with them to translate. A small team of school staff had discussed and agreed on these questions before the night:

Round 1: What is your favourite colour?
Participants were asked to introduce themselves and tell the group their favourite colour. All persons introduced themselves and shared their favourite colour with the group. The facilitator acknowledged each person's contribution, often just by repeating the colour and nodding or smiling and thanking them for sharing. At the end, the facilitator revealed her own favourite colour and participants who had a match

were invited to select a prize.

After this, other prizes were awarded for a range of comments in order to reinforce that all were playing in the circle and that there was nothing special about having a match with the facilitator.

Round 2: What do you like about the suburb?
The aim of this question was to focus on the positive elements and experiences of the community in which the families and school staff worked and lived and sent their children to school. This was a deliberate activity to share the many positive aspects of this community, rather than portraying it as a 'dangerous' or 'undesirable' location.

Round 3: What do you love about the school?
The same process was used as for the previous two questions. Each person was listened to without interruption and with limited comment from the facilitator, except sometimes to clarify and to thank the participant for their comment.

This question was planned to focus strongly on the positives of the school. It was a rewarding professional experience for school staff who rarely had the opportunity to hear how much parents value the school and the services it provides. Family members also enjoyed the opportunity to express what they loved about the school that they had chosen for their children.

Round 4: What would you like to see to make a great school better?
Because the circle had spent a great deal of time celebrating the community and the school, this question presented as a wish for the school to be its best. It provided opportunities for both staff and parents to dream about what they would like to see. It was an opportunity to reflect and dream rather than being perceived as a criticism.

Wrap-up: Participants were thanked and asked if they would like to make any statements of appreciation about the night. Again this was an opportunity for both school staff and parents to reflect on what they appreciated about the opportunity to listen to each other. Participants were finally thanked for attending and invited to collect their children and have a safe journey home.

Case Study: School C

> **This Community Conversation took place in a primary school. It shows how to include children and parents in a Community Conversation.**

Purpose: To develop a shared parent and student voice.

Invitation: The leadership of this primary school invited families, including children, to take part in the Community Conversation.

Setting: All participants sat in a circle, with no distinction between children and adults.

Facilitation: An external facilitator, Dr George Otero (Educational Consultant, Centre for RelationaLearning, USA) was engaged to facilitate this Community Conversation.

Process: The Community Conversation started with an introductory activity: 'Who are we?' Everyone was included in the circle and asked to share:
• Name and favourite colour
• What's your favourite toy?

The next session focused on 'what's worth learning?' Participants were asked: "What do you love most about where you live?" then "What do you enjoy most about this school?" They reported that: "What's worth learning is what we like and love and enjoy."

The group then broke into small teams, each with at least one student. They were asked to draw a picture of everything participants wanted a young person to be able to learn, to do and to be, once they leave school at Grade 6. It was suggested that groups draw a picture of an outline of a child and then write up, on the picture, what they want them to be able to do. These pictures were put up on the walls, and time provided for participants to walk around the room, looking at each other's posters.

Each team then was asked to pick two skills that they wanted the school to focus on in term 2.

Responses: Some of the participants' responses were:
• "If children are hungry or not happy, the kids won't learn."
• "What helps most are healthy, happy parents. Parents are six times more influential than school and teachers. We need to find ways of working together."
• "In this one hour session, we got to know each other – and the students."

Wrap-up: The Community Conversations ended with statements of appreciation and stickers for participating. Participants were invited to sign up for various working committees, but it was stressed that people didn't have to do this.

Case Study: Cluster of schools

This Community Conversation involved staff from a cluster of primary schools. It shows how to use a Community Conversation approach with teachers from several schools.

Context: A cluster of three suburban primary schools had been working together in a Family School Community Partnership. The Community Conversation was held at one of those schools.

Purpose: The purpose of this gathering was to build relationships between the teachers from different schools and to celebrate the cluster's Family School Community Partnerships journey. It was also to recognise and share the experiences of these partnerships and to provide an opportunity for staff to connect in order to discuss ideas and partnership opportunities.

Invitation: Staff from the three schools were invited to take part in the Community Conversation.

Facilitation: Facilitation was shared between several people: Dr George Otero (education consultant), a Family School Partnership Convenor, Principals from two of the schools and a Student Wellbeing Leader from one of the schools.

Process: Staff were invited to choose to participate in one of the following conversation groups:
• Transition to school (pre-school to prep)
• Transition from school (grade 6 – year 7)
• Engaging families in learning (prep – grade 2)
• Engaging families in learning (grades 3 – 6)
• Connecting with the community (being an outward facing school)
• Early years learning (eg Kinda Kinder)

Each group was initially asked to share:
• What do you do well?
• What could we do better?

Outcomes: The school staff commented that they appreciated hearing about practices in different schools and learning about others' experiences. From the improved relationships between the schools, several recommendations were then made by staff across the conversational groups:
- We should extend our current practices by sharing our experiences with each other more frequently: what worked and didn't work, resources etc;
- We should investigate what other schools and clusters are doing to engage families in learning through school visits, PLTs, conversations;
- We should identify activities of shared interest, eg. transition from primary to secondary school, on which schools in the cluster could collaborate;
- We should investigate how technology could enhance current practices for students, staff and families eg. blogging/website/email.

Appendix 1: Appreciative Inquiry

"Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is an exciting way to embrace organizational change. Its assumption is simple: Every person, every team, every school, every organization has something that works right – things that give it life when it is most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities (Cooperrider et all 2003)".

Distinctions between Appreciative Inquiry and approaches to organisational development that are not based on what supporters of Appreciative Inquiry call 'positive potential' (Cooperrider & Srivastva 1987) :

Problem Solving	Appreciative inquiry
Felt need, identification of problem(s)	Appreciating, valuing the best of what is
Analysis of causes	Envisioning what might be
Analysis of possible solutions	Engaging in dialogue about what should be
Action planning (treatment)	Innovating, what will be

 "To understand the basis of Appreciative Inquiry it is useful to look at the meaning of the two words in context.

• Appreciation means to recognise and value the contributions or attributes of things and people around us.
• Inquiry means to explore and discover, in the spirit of seeking to better understand, and being open to new possibilities.

When combined, this means that by appreciating what is good and valuable in the present situation, we can discover and learn about ways to effect positive change for the future." ('Appreciative inquiry: Solving problems by looking at what's going right',)

Appendix 2: Ideas for starting and ending conversations

Starting the Conversations:

• *What was your favourite toy as a child and why?*
In a circle ask people to share their experience. Listen to each other's experience and watch the connections and curiosity about each other grow.

• *What animal or flower/plant best describes who you are and why?*
In a circle ask people to share their experience. Listen to each other's experience and watch the connections and curiosity about each other grow.

• *Artefact sharing:*
To prepare for this activity, ask each person to bring to the group something that is meaningful to them – past or present. The artefact can be a picture or object and appropriate to share with the group. Take turns listening to each other's description of the meaning behind their artefact.

Ending the Conversations:

APPRECIATIONS are used to express gratitude or thanks for something that you have experienced or learnt.

Ending a Community Conversation with appreciations emphasises the positive nature of the Community Conversation. It is a focus on the process and an opportunity to acknowledge the experience as having real value and names and learning as vital.

The Facilitator might say something like:
Thank you all for your comments. That concludes the more formal part of the Community Conversation.
As a final activity I would like to invite anyone who would like to express what they have appreciated about tonight. Is there anyone who would like to start?

Appendix 3: Further tools, processes and resources

Community Conversations are valuable in themselves. They change relationships and lead to improved awareness and understanding within a school community. However, these outcomes of Community Conversations can also assist school communities in their ongoing planning. They provide a platform for further exploration and processes. They enable school communities to move to the next steps in taking appropriate and effective action.

There are several alternative tools, processes and resources that can be drawn upon in building upon Community Conversations. These include:

World Café   <www.theworldcafe.com/method.html>

Student Action Teams   <www.asprinworld.com/student_action_teams>

Action Research   <www.alara.net.au/aral/actionresearch>

Narrative Inquiry   <www.edu.uwo.ca/Narrative_Inquiry/faq.html>

Strength Based Practices   <www.strengthsbasedpractice.com.au>

Solutions Focused Practice   <www.solution-focused-practice.co.uk>

Appreciative Inquiry Tools   <www.appreciativeinquiry.net.au>

Other resources:

Centre for RelationaLearning   <www.relationalearning.com>

Catholic Education Office Melbourne <www.ceomelb.catholic.edu.au>

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