



Belief in the power of relationships drives one principal's efforts to build social capital

Michael Polities is an extraordinary man. Not only is he smart, funny, kind, and generous, he has the ability to connect with staff and students of Jindalee State School near Brisbane, Australia, and with school administrators throughout Queensland at a deep level. This is the key to Polities' success. Human connectivity is the great differentiator, the key to exponential growth, and the only sustainable edge for schools and their students. And when you think about it, who is going to provide this human connection we all crave, if not you and me?

— Susan Scott

By Deli Moussavi-Bock

At Learning Forward's Annual Conference last December, I heard Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan speak about their book, *Professional Capital* (Teachers College Press, 2012), and the importance of social capital as a critical driving force in achieving results.

Social capital is the expected collective or economic benefits derived from the preferential treatment and cooperation between individuals and groups. Hargreaves and Fullan remind us that in a school, or any organization, human capital alone can't drive long-term results. It takes social capital — cooperation among people — to achieve results.

How does an organization create social capital? A similar question struck me after hearing Damen Lopez from Turnaround Schools speak about collaboration as one of the key steps

in school turnaround. How does one create collaboration?

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

I believe most of us want to collaborate, but we don't know how. In the past decade, I've visited many schools and experienced a wealth of different school cultures. It's a thrill when I come across true camaraderie, a sense of collective responsibility and cooperation at a school. That's what happened when I visited Jindalee State School near Brisbane, Australia, to work with Principal Michael Polities. His belief in relationships as a driving force and his ability to walk his talk help him build community wherever he goes.

I first met Polities eight years ago, and his passion for the power of relationships in his school and at home was clear. What impressed me about Polities was that he was serious about taking himself on as a first step, rather

than expecting others to change.

Last November, as I anticipated visiting Polities' school, I was curious how his own learning and development had transferred to his school community. There are leaders who start something by amassing a wealth of human capital and stop there. Then there are transformative leaders who empower their own community to become the driving force of change by equipping the community with the skills to do it.

The visit to Jindalee State School exceeded my expectations. On an Australian spring day, jacaranda trees in full bloom, a colleague and I toured the school after a warm greeting from staff, amid students in yellow and royal blue uniforms. We visited classrooms, the grounds, the teachers lounge, and the playfields, and spoke with the



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In each issue of *JSD*, Susan Scott (susan@fierceinc.com) explores aspects of communication that encourage meaningful collaboration. Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success At Work & In Life, One Conversation at a Time* (Penguin, 2002) and *Fierce Leadership: A Bold Alternative to the Worst "Best" Practices of Business Today* (Broadway Business, 2009), leads Fierce Inc. (www.fierceinc.com), which helps companies around the world transform the conversations that are central to their success. Fierce in the Schools carries this work into schools and higher education.

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groundskeeper, the librarians, teachers, and students.

Except for the occasional lorikeet flying by, the school looks and feels like the elementary school I attended, which I credit with giving me the best foundation for my education. I remember having had a sense that the teachers, principal, and staff actually liked each other. That's what I sensed at Jindalee.



Michael Polities

I don't mean to idolize Michael Polities, the school, or the staff. This school has had its challenges. What I experienced was the culmination of a lot of social capital built one conversation at a time. During my visit, I found it hard to believe that a year ago, a big part of the school was all but destroyed from floods due to a severe storm. The community came together to get the school ready for students.

TEA AND COLLABORATION

I asked Polities about how his own professional development has helped him with teachers. He said, "Relationships are the most important focus of my leadership. ... I have developed my skills to have authentic conversations with people, whether problem solving, coaching, feedback, or conflict resolution. I have learned to be present with people and to diligently pursue the things that are important for our success."

The teachers we observed were capable, engaged teachers with engaged students. It's easy to talk about collaboration and good instruction; it's another thing to see it in action. In a student leadership class we visited, students created posters with words and illustrations of what leadership meant to them. The teacher was so excited about sharing the topic at hand with the students, and the posters were impressive.

We observed teachers interact with

one other during morning tea, a time for staff to connect with each other. The teachers at Jindalee create curriculum collaboratively, and it shows in the classrooms. They draw on each other's strengths and put their collective efforts to benefit students and their own working environment.

Like all principals, Polities is in demand, and his daily schedule is full. However, he's built capacity within his staff by equipping them with the same skills that he took on. He says professional learning gives him the confidence to lead collaboratively and to ensure that the decisions he makes are based on a clear perspective of the issue, the people who have a stake in the issue, and those who would be affected by the decision. "It gave me the knowledge and the confidence to lead effectively," he says.

The staff has also benefited from professional learning that developed teachers' ability to interact with one another as well as with students, parents, and other staff. Polities says, "The coaching conversation has become the basis for our professional learning conversations at teacher meetings. It has already given us a common approach, which will be further built on as we bring teacher peer coaching more deeply into the school professional development program."

These same principles have also been written into the school's student handbook and form the basis of the student leadership program.

I learned a lot during the time I spent with Michael Polities. Observing the interactions between adults, between students and teachers, and students and students, it's clear everyone owns a piece of the puzzle at this school.

THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Passionate about transforming his own relationships and results, Polities sought to help other administrators within Queensland through the

Queensland Association of State School Principals. Thanks to this association, Polities' reach has taken on a bigger life.

In a visit to the association office, I sensed camaraderie. Everyone there spoke to one another as human beings beyond roles and titles. The team believes in Polities and shares the same values.

In shadowing Polities, I saw how he promotes a culture of support and collective responsibility in his school, with his partnerships, and in the wider community. In Brisbane, Polities and I co-facilitated workshops for staff, administrators, and teachers from schools and universities around Queensland. Polities treats people in the community at large the same way he treats his staff — with an open heart, a wicked humor, and, most importantly, a desire to pass on tools that give them ownership of their own relationships.

Polities understands what is involved in supporting students, supporting teachers to support those students, and supporting school leaders. It takes relationships. Many of us assume we're good at relationships, but the truth is that almost every person I know needs continued work on it, myself included. It takes commitment, practice, and feedback, and there is no shame in feedback. It is energizing to learn together as a team, a staff, or a community.

We need others' help and cooperation to materialize our common goals. Furthermore, students are watching how we interact as adults. Isn't it unfair to expect them to do something we're not prepared to do ourselves? As Susan Scott says, relationship is our most valuable currency.

Polities' efforts aren't just about him. They're about empowering his community, and the payoff is sweet.

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