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

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

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

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

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

The following review focuses on relevant research and theory from the following interconnected fields.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**RESEARCH ON LEARNER CENTRED EDUCATION**

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

that the provision of such a relationship enabled the student to choose and act in his or her true best interests was based on his notion of an “actualizing tendency”:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Moreover, the advocacy model was grounded in the notion that the support and encouragement of autonomy and self-direction is desirable at all levels of schooling, in all content areas and through all modes of content delivery. Clearly many teachers are unwilling to accept this notion or, if they accept it in theory, are unwilling to change their behaviour to relinquish the control with which they identify in their teacher role. Lambert and McComb (1998), Wiemar (2002) and William (1996) draw attention to this phenomenon at various levels of schooling. It was proposed that the introduction of a one-
BACKGROUNDING ADVOCACY

on one learner-centred, ‘learning management system’, at the core of which was a genuine and trusting teacher-student relationship, would have an impact on the culture of the school and extend to influencing teachers to adopt a more learner-centred approach in their classrooms.

RESEARCH ON MEETING STUDENTS’ NEEDS THROUGH LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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

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

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

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

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

**RESEARCH ON STUDENTS AT RISK: PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS**

Rutter (1987) and Pianta (1999) have summarised research on the effectiveness of specific “protective mechanisms” which impact on the academic success of children classified as at risk. This research leads to the conclusion that positive adult-child relationships, even transitory ones, are a key protective factor in enabling at risk children to become competent students. (Werner & Smith 1980; Garmezy 1994). There is persuasive evidence that the impact of successive adult-child relationships is cumulative either for better or for worse. Research within Pianta’s closeness / conflict / overdependency framework indicates that high-risk children’s and adolescents’ adjustment, success and retention at school is positively correlated with teacher-student closeness and negatively correlated with teacher-student conflict (Pianta & Walsh 1996; Baker 1999). This supports Carkhuff’s finding (1969) that “helping” relationships may be for either better or worse, and that it is the “level of functioning” of the teacher, counsellor or case-worker which determines whether the impact of the relationship is positive or negative. The relationship does not have to have any suggestion of “counselling”. Further research on at risk students has brought renewed attention to the impact of caring student-teacher relationships and a relationship focus in schooling (Baker et al 1997).

Research on adolescent resilience, focusing on successful students from high-risk environments, has provided strong evidence that positive, supportive relationships with peers, parents and other adults are a major factor accounting for their staying at school and achieving academic success (McMillan & Reed 1994; Beck 1997; Zimmerman 1999). The evidence suggests that encouraging teachers to develop friendship relationships with adolescent students, or simply increasing the time teachers spend with students out of class, provides protection against at-risk behaviour and dropping out of school. (Radwanski 1987; Lawton et al. 1988; Claudet 1995; Fashola & Slavin 1998).

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

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

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

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

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

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

If the infant’s first experience is to resonate with the stressed and anxious inner worlds of her caregivers, or if she suffers neglect or abuse in her first months, the implicit memory of these experiences will be stored in her lower brain and constantly reactivated as she goes through life. She comes to school damaged, with a deep but dysfunctional knowledge of the world of relationships. Research is showing that negative experiences, especially in early life, damage our brains. Martin Teicher and colleagues (Teicher 2002; Teicher, Tomoda, & Andersen, 2006) found that verbally abusive parents can cause lasting damage to pathways that regulate emotions and process language in their children’s brains. We have known for a long time that exposure to physical abuse and neglect causes brain damage in children. In the past decade it has become clear that that simply witnessing violence has these consequences, as do verbal, emotional and sexual abuse. Some children and adolescents come to our classes damaged. Bullying and punitive teachers reinforce the damage.

The challenge for teachers is firstly to notice, secondly to care and thirdly to respond with empathy and integrity. The care system, which – like the fear system – evolved in us to enable the species to survive, is a command system that prompts us to particular
behaviours to protect the young. The other side of this coin is the child’s need for a trustworthy and reliable adult with whom they will feel safe, and peers to whom they can become emotionally connected (Cortina & Liotti, 2010). Along with this is a sometimes ambivalent yearning for attachment (Bowlby 1982; Ogden et al 2006; Knox 2003) and a capacity to rewire her brain differently, if the opportunity is provided (Doidge2007; Schwarz & Begley 2002; Panksepp 2004).

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

REFERENCES


