

Developing Learning Centred Partnerships with Whanau

Sabbatical Report of:

Lisa Cavanagh

Silverstream School

Term 3

2019

Acknowledgements

First and foremost I appreciate and value the willingness of our two new Deputy Principals to step into the Acting Principal role in my absence. Having complete confidence in their abilities and knowing they were well supported by our leadership team and staff, has meant I have been able to embark on this sabbatical with complete peace of mind.

To the Principals of the 13 schools I visited, thank you for opening your doors, your hearts and your minds to the conversations we had. It is one thing to read research reports and theories, and quite another to talk through these in the context of real examples. I value and appreciate the honesty and clarity with which you shared your successes, challenges and next steps with me. It truly is an honour to be part of a community of professionals such as we have here in New Zealand.

I am fortunate to work with a Board of Trustees group who value the ongoing professional learning and wellbeing of their leader, and who supported me in this application. While I acknowledge the professional gains for both myself and our wider school community, the personal wellbeing element of this sabbatical has been significant and I thank my Board for recognising the importance of this, alongside the professional components.

Finally, I would like to thank the Ministry of Education for providing sabbaticals for principals in New Zealand. I value this model of professional learning and reflection, not only for the professional learning and the obvious benefits to our schools afterwards, but also for the opportunity to refresh and rejuvenate for the benefit of principal wellbeing. I strongly encourage the 'powers that be' to make sabbaticals something that principals are entitled to 'as of right' after every 5 years in the job, as is the case in other countries.

Thank you all.

Purpose

In my 8 years as a primary school principal it has become increasingly apparent that partnerships between school and home need to go deeper than traditional 'consultation' or one way information sharing with families.

'Partnerships' are a feature of the Silverstream School charter and annual plan. We know that focusing on culturally responsive pedagogies and increased reciprocal learning centred partnerships between whanau and school will continue to be a goal in our future annual plans. My aim in completing this sabbatical is to gather a range of ideas and practical solutions to support Silverstream School in strengthening our partnerships with whānau to support learning centred, reciprocal relationships between students, their families and our school staff.

Rationale and Background Information

Several years ago while participating in the Seaview Learning and Change Network (LCN), my previous school undertook a 'gap analysis' in an effort to identify if there were any significant factors that separated our high achieving students from our low achievers. After extensive review of a wide range of factors, the only significant difference between our high achievers, and our low achievers, was the level of engagement of their parents. Since then, I have been keen to explore practical ideas to foster stronger partnerships and engagement of families in their children's learning.

In addition to my own experience undertaking the LCN, a number of research studies have proven the link between Whanau engagement in learning, and student achievement. Some of the more frequently cited include:

- The OECD Report back in 2010 on the nature of learning recognises home-school partnerships as one of the 7 building blocks of innovative learning environments; *"The home is our first, and highly influential, learning environment so that building connections between home and school is vital to learner success."*
- ERO has published several research based articles outlining the increasing evidence that genuine collaboration and engagement between school and home can significantly lift children's academic achievement.
- The deep learning project that we have recently embarked upon has learning partnerships as one of it's foundation quadrants. The model calls for a more comprehensive learning design and correspondingly new roles for students, families, teachers and school leaders: *"Building clarity and shared language between and among students, families and educators mobilises commitment and action to develop the competencies that allow all students to flourish."*

In the three years since my arrival at Silverstream, the school has been through significant changes, In addition to an entirely new Senior leadership team, increasingly challenging learning behaviours are being noticed not just in our school, but throughout society, and the levels of support for teachers from outside the school has been eroded away.

Discussions with colleagues about workload over the course of recent pay negotiations lead to a general consensus that one of the biggest impacts on workload has been the increased accessibility of parents to teachers, and the expectations that teachers will engage parents in the learning process. With all of the best intentions 'parent/whanau engagement' has become something that school staff (both teachers and leaders) 'do' to parents, therefore it is our staff that carry the increased workload that goes with this degree of communication and information sharing.

During a cluster wide parent survey last year, it became apparent that the work our staff were doing to build these partnerships, was not hitting the mark, and a proportion of our parents felt disconnected from their child's learning. While we have made immediate changes to systems and procedures to support improvements in this area, there is further work to do in strengthening the culture of the school, so that learning centred relationships between home and school become part of 'what we do around here' and are embedded in systems, rather than adding additional workload.

Activities Undertaken

Through this sabbatical I investigated current research and best practice examples of learning centred relationships with families. This included reading recent New Zealand based publications on the topic, watching videos outlining school stories and then visiting schools in Auckland, Blenheim and Christchurch to look closely at examples of good practice.

Particular examples of questions I investigated during the time of the sabbatical:

- What are the features of successful home-school partnerships that impact positively on children's learning?
- What steps have other schools taken to build partnerships with parent communities that are meaningful and focused on learning?
- What are the specific challenges associated with building partnerships in high decile schools, and how have other schools overcome these challenges?
- How does what I have learnt connect with recognised research in this area?
- What will this mean for Silverstream School and our community moving forward?

I also followed up with a parent engagement survey previously designed by the Upper Hutt Cluster, but relevant to this topic, to get an updated perspective on how our parents at Silverstream see the relationship between themselves and school. This was given to families to complete while waiting for learning conferences at the beginning of the Term.

Findings

Common Themes across visits and readings:

When combining my notes from the range of activities undertaken over the course of my sabbatical, I have identified 4 themes to consider and reflect on when reviewing the quality of learning centred partnerships at Silverstream School. Each comes with its own challenges and different approaches and success stories that are unique to individual school environments:

Culture counts

I saw some wonderful examples of school wide philosophies of Manaakitanga (care) for everyone, and shared ownership of 'our' place while honouring our bicultural heritage. To be effective in truly knowing our learners, enabling us to demonstrate genuine manaakitanga, we must also understand their 'backstory' (family context). This means building strong relationships not only with our students, but also with their families.

These school environments where welcoming, valued the diverse make-up of their communities and a strong sense of belonging was evident for students, families and staff.

Common challenges faced by schools I visited in relation to 'Culture Counts' relate to the diverse nature of many communities leading to differing value sets and a lack of time to be able to truly explore and understand individual family 'backstories.' Without exception, those schools whose teachers invested time into the whanau relationship agreed it paid off in terms of support at home and positive/effective conflict resolution when required.

Schools that had effectively overcoming these challenges had invested considerable time in building the cultural competencies of teachers, and had built systems and processes into the school timetable to allow time for staff to interact with students and their families in a range of positive ways. Several of these schools also rely heavily on groups of parents to make connections with other parents and support a sense of shared ownership. The result is a school culture where all parties, regardless of their own backstory, have a strong sense of belonging and ownership within the school and wider community.

Transition/Induction

Transition and induction processes for new families and staff that go beyond the surface features of what happens at school, to being the foundation of positive future relationships were recognised as being the foundation of future learning centred partnerships. Schools that were effective in this area, carefully managed and planned for transitions both within and between schools.

Common challenges faced by schools I visited in relation to 'Transition and Induction' included the lack of time by both members of staff and parents to dedicate to the induction process. In some cases previous tension between staff and parents, and the increase in 'helicopter' parenting styles have created an 'us versus them' mindset between teachers and parents. Effective transition and induction programmes were deliberately planned and consistently used to build relationships first and foremost and to prevent these sorts of mindsets from taking hold.

Schools with successful transition and induction programmes go beyond just transitioning students and their families on first entry to school, and at the beginning of each school year, but also plan for the transition and induction of families when introducing new initiatives and changes of practice. They also value, and provide time to induct new staff into the philosophy and approach of the school, including the value the school places on the home school partnership and expectations of all parties in the partnership.

Simple Learning Models

Many of the schools I visited had simplified their models of learning and had presented them in ways that enabled students and families to understand learning processes and expectations. Having a shared language and understanding of the learning process meant that learning was able to be shared, communicated and celebrated with students and whanau on a regular basis, helping to demystify the work happening in and beyond classrooms.

Common challenges in the schools I visited in relation to 'Simple Learning Models' is the reality of representing complex systems using simple frameworks. Traditional models of inquiry involve multiple stages of learning, combined with the complexity of meeting curriculum objectives, addressing a range of learning styles and needs and parents whose primary understanding of education is the schooling they received 20+ years prior

Schools that have done a good job in this are often have visuals and key words that support students knowledge and understandings of the learning models and dispositions expected at the school. They regularly share philosophies of learning and rationale for different learning approaches with families, and deliberately plan for this through induction/transition processes. Learning is celebrated regularly, and while the teachers coordinate the opportunities for celebration/sharing, it is the students who take responsibility for sharing and celebrating the progress they are making in their learning. The result is parents who feel comfortable being involved and trust the learning process, and students who have a strong sense of ownership over their own learning.

Quality Reporting

All schools I visited agreed that quality reporting systems and processes help to improve transparency and builds trust and confidence in learning.

Common challenges in the schools I visited in relation to 'Quality Reporting' included the range of diverse views over what is valued when it comes to success. This requires balancing traditional need for Reading/Writing/Maths for tracking and reporting academic progress, with tracking and reporting of growth in relation to learning dispositions. Several schools also mentioned the challenge that has come with tracking and reporting progress in 'soft skills' in a post National Standards era where the experiences of teachers lie entirely in reporting on academics.

Schools who appear to be hitting the mark in relation to quality reporting, were not following traditional reporting models to achieve their purposes. They are reporting across the range of skills (academic, social, values and learning dispositions). Student voice is a critical factor in the reporting process, and reporting happens alongside the learning (generally supported by specific digital tools that are personalised to the nature of the learning model and values of the school).

Findings related to Parent Engagement Survey:

Our recent parent engagement survey has shown that we have made significant improvements in the areas surveyed over the past 12 months, with 27.6% more parents indicating that teachers use their knowledge as a parent to support their child's learning, and 38.3% more parents indicating that they have a clear idea about their child's learning and progress. There were also 95.3% of respondents who feel confident talking to their child's teacher about learning and the challenges their child faces (an improvement of 13.9% over the past year).

These results are really pleasing and show that changes we have made to reporting processes and our focus on relationships have made a difference. There is, of course, always room for improvement. Reoccurring themes in the comments relating to this area, is the desire parents have for more face to face contact with teachers, along with an indication that parents would like to know more about what is happening in classrooms on a day to day basis so that they can help at home.

While comments in the survey reflect the strong desire our parents have to support their children and help with the learning process, some parents do not know how to go about providing the support their children need. It could be inferred from other comments that this is because they either don't know what is happening in the classroom, or they don't have an accurate idea of their children's learning needs and next steps.

The need for improvements identified in this survey can all be met through reviewing and modifying our school systems and processes in relation to the 4 themes outlined above.

Implications for Silverstream School

A clear message that I took from the range of school visits was the need to personalise approaches to building learning centred partnerships. Most successful schools incorporated parents themselves to design solutions to meet their needs.

There are a number of practical ideas and strategies listed under each of the 4 themes in the accompanying appendix. My intention on returning to school will be to engage a focus group (possibly the 'Silverstream Connex' group that already exists) to review our practices and design improvements in each of the 4 theme areas.

In addition to this, our work on the NPDL (New Pedagogies for Deeper Learning) initiative should enable us to refine our learning model, this will need to be considered and simplified in student and parent speak, taking into account our school values, learning dispositions and competencies outlined in the NPDL framework and the New Zealand Curriculum. This should help us to better communicate our Graduate Profile and Learning Framework with students and their families.

Conclusions

I believe that learning centred partnerships between home and school help to build a strong school culture, and enhance student achievement.

Having had the ability to think deeply around this area of practice and return to school refreshed, has given me a renewed insight and enthusiasm for the work we do together. Visiting other schools while away from my own school for an extended period is a privilege and an honour. It has allowed me to reflect in deeper ways on our own practices at Silverstream School, and has given me the perspective needed to 'see the wood for the trees' in an area where focus and direction is much needed.

I'm excited to return to school to share a range of ideas with staff, students and families so that we can co-construct actions to improve our partnerships. I look forward to making decisions and changes alongside those who will most benefit from them, our tamariki, their families and our hardworking teachers.

He waka eke noa - We're all in this together!

References

Education Review Office (2018) *Building Genuine Learning Partnerships with Parents: Teaching Approaches and Strategies that Work*. Wellington: Education Review Office.

Fullan, M., Quinn, J. & McEachen, J (2018) *Deep Learning: Engage the World, Change the World*. California: Corwin Education Group.

Ministry of Education (2019) *Leading Local Curriculum Guide: Information Sharing and Building Learning Partnerships*. Wellington: Ministry of Education.

OECD (2010) *The Nature of Learning: Using Research to Inspire Practice*. Centre for Educational Research and Innovation.

Young, M. (2018) *Investigate Opportunities to Enhance Educational Practice by Exploring How to Develop Educationally Powerful Connections With Parents and Whānau to Lift Student Achievement*. Sabbatical Report, Wellington: Ministry of Education.

Video Links to School Case Studies

<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-stories/Media-gallery/Community-engagement/Engaging-our-community-at-Sylvia-Park-School>

Sylvia Park teacher Ariana Williams explains the development of Mutukaroa, a parent centre designed to encourage and strengthen community engagement.

<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-stories/Media-gallery/Learning-to-learn/Student-led-conferences>

Fina Hallman, from Flanshaw Road School, gave this presentation at the Auckland Principals' Association conference. Fina outlines the ways she helps her students to 'learn to learn' as they prepare for running student led conferences in her new entrant classroom.

<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-stories/Media-gallery/Community-engagement/Ideas-to-engage-our-community>

Diana Tregoweth outlines some of the approaches in place at Owairaka School to encourage parent, family, whānau, and community engagement in the school.

<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-stories/Media-gallery/School-curriculum/Supporting-whānau-with-learning>

Improved teaching and learning, greater community engagement, and enhanced student achievement are just some of the outcomes of Pomaria School's journey of curriculum design and review. In this story, parents and teachers describe the way whānau are engaged at the school and the way whānau voice is used to create directions for learning. This film is the third in a series, designed to provide support and inspiration to schools that are in the process of reviewing their own school curriculum.

Appendix - Practical Ideas For Each of the Identified Themes:

Culture Counts

A school wide philosophy of Manaakitanga (care) for everyone, and shared ownership of our place while honouring our bi-cultural heritage will help us strengthen our sense of belonging and ownership within the school and wider community.

[Video Link](#)

[Photo Folder](#)

School Vision is central to everything, and everyone (teachers, students, support staff, parents) know what it is and what it means.

School Environment is a welcoming and inspiring place - reflects the cultures and community:

- Whanau Photo Walls in classrooms so teachers can quickly make connections to families and so children's identities are all valued
- Community Artworks & Sponsorship of special environmental features
- Cafes, shared spaces, drop in zones for parents to hang out (with coffee etc)
- Teachers are approachable, with relationships built through participation in school wide activities and through beginning (8:30 - 9:00) and end of the day (3:00 - 3:10) accessibility

Community members share stories/history/traditions together. Some egs:

- Year 6 leavers collaborative artworks
- Cultural nights
- Collaborative community artworks on school grounds
- Parent involvement in electives/curiosity clubs
- Competitions ("Clash of Clearview" - sports, baking, etc)
- Fundraising traditions (galas, colour runs etc)

Tricky comms always over the phone or face to face - never email.

Learning doesn't stop at the school gate, teachers welcome, acknowledge and celebrate the learning that happens at home.

Parent groups drive a lot of the parent engagement and involvement:

- Plan Maori / Pacific language weeks
- Help to translate
- Share their experiences at school
- Open mornings/coffee groups
- Welcome school tours
- Fundraising activities

Whanau groups meet once a week with Year 6 students running activities to teach values and embed student culture.

Appendix - Practical Ideas For Each of the Identified Themes:

Transition and Induction

Strengthening our transition and induction processes for new families and staff so that they go beyond the surface features of what happens at school, to being the foundation of positive future relationships.

[Video Link](#)

[Photo Folder](#)

NE Induction

- He Kakano Poem/Statement (in photo)
- Formal transition - data gathering done alongside parents - used as an opportunity to teach basic 'reading at home' skills
- Create digital books or videos that prospective parents can download or read on line with their children introducing the school (update ours) and learning programmes
- Host a morning tea for new parents as part of pre-school visits (run by other parents or senior staff)
- Connect new families with an existing families for a school tour
- 1-1 induction meetings - explicit and deliberate meetings - focus on understanding family 'backstory' but also sharing knowledge about learning programmes and how parents can help at home.

Senior Leadership open and transparent with families about changes to learning approaches or philosophies:

- Shared evenings/workshops about new programmes (visiting experts where possible)
- Breakfast workshops (instead of or as well as evenings)
- Student coaching
- Newsletter info
- Share info on line (research, school made videos or digital books)
- Principal book club (eg: Ken Robinson book)

Learning in Action Tours (for any new student)

- Intro with senior staff (learning models, philosophies, why/how school has changed, their hopes and dreams)
- Followed by learning space tour with senior students

Year to year transitions (especially for SN students) are just as important as NE transitions...

- Data sharing
- Speed dating of teachers
- School visit type transitions
- Class visits (more than one for SN students)
- Open afternoon during TOD at the beginning of the year - drop off stationary and meet the teacher

Staff induction:

- plan organised by what staff should know - within the first week, after a month, a term, a year...
- includes parent partnership expectations
- Induction morning teas once a month for new staff

Appendix - Practical Ideas For Each of the Identified Themes:

Simple Learning Models

Having a shared language and understanding of the learning process means that learning is able to be shared, communicated and celebrated with students and whānau on a regular basis, helping to demystify the work happening in and beyond classrooms.

[Video Link](#)

[Photo Folder](#)

Learning models are developed to be simple to follow and easy to understand. They are shared in a variety of ways - visuals everywhere, in and out of the classrooms, then:

- Used explicitly in planning and subsequent feedback
- Students set own goals based on features of learning model (clarity of learning matrix helps with this)
- Used to report to parents via Seesaw/Link-Ed/Spotlight
- Learning celebrations are a feature in most schools I visited (informal, student lead celebrations at the end of units - varied in a format based on the context/learning)

Inquiry/learning themes are authentic and meaningful to the students:

- Place based learning - connected to history / stories / people related to the local community
- Parents help determine inquiry themes; One school had 'focus groups', another incorporated surveys and or discussions as part of learning celebrations.
- Students have a say in learning contexts through discussions in class, the opportunity to follow passions/interests
- Environmentally relevant

Place based inquiry themes connect to local area and enables more meaningful and authentic connection to community and strengths of families. Eg:

- Piha - Arty community = arty themes
- Enviroschools work connects with Waitakere park rangers, do sustainability work

Inquiry themes have an action element that includes giving back to the family eg:

- Visit rest homes and food banks
- Sustainability work in Waitakere Ranges
- Beautification of own school environment (Inquiry concept "Transform")

Educate parents in how we work and how they can help

- Parent 'mini conference' once a year with other schools
- Clarity of learning model (displayed and mentioned regularly)
- Focused Seesaw/LinkEd/Seesaw comments (ie: they are explicit about learning intentions & goals)
- Regular emails home (some schools weekly) to involve families in learning programmes
- "Learning in Action Tours" (Once a term - like a mini open day - start with talk by senior leadership, followed by classroom tours with students)

Appendix - Practical Ideas For Each of the Identified Themes:

Quality Reporting

Quality reporting systems and processes help to improve transparency and build trust and confidence in teaching and learning, allowing parents to support learning at home.

[Video Link](#)

Clarity and simplicity of Learning Model is critical to quality reporting - Reporting links directly to the goals and outcomes previously shared with parents relating to learning models and aims.

Make extra effort to get families to learning conferences - teachers chase up to get them there (have to be made up in own time if they don't come on the set days), no shows are followed up by management.

Student led conferences - students know own learning goals and next steps, can share with families. Set up stations around classrooms with core learning areas, then finish with a quick chat with the teacher around data.

In the moment reporting (LinkEd, Spotlight, Seesaw) widely used. Different formats based on the tool itself - the ones I saw being used had clear processes linked directly to learning models and were all personalised to each child's own learning needs/goals (narrative based with data only included as back up evidence)

Explicit work done to build parent capacity to respond to reporting and engage in children's learning goals:

- Workshops for parents on how to give feedback/feedforward
- Provide parents with feedback prompts/scripts to use to respond to posts.

Transparency and honesty a feature regardless of programmes - no surprises - focus on working together to meet the child's needs.

Additional Parent hui for target students (some schools ran workshops, some met individually) to support with messages about 'how to help at home'.