East Tamaki School
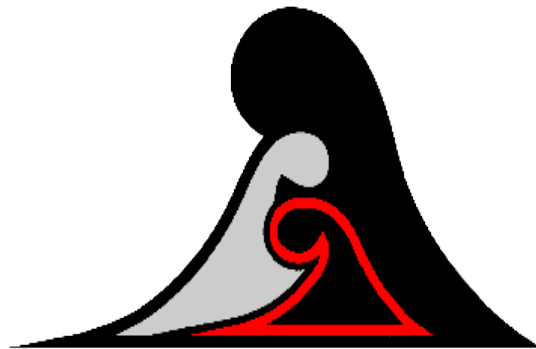

Pasifika Parent Learning Groups

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Sabbatical Report   **Sarah Mirams**

Introduction

The achievement of Pasifika learners is a priority for the Ministry of Education and therefore for schools with Pasifika students. Pasifika learners as with all learners have support from their parents, families and communities. It is this support that is the focus of this study. In particular this study investigates how the concept of a learning community could be applied to Pasifika parent involvement in a school setting. This is with the aim of improving outcomes for students particularly in literacy and numeracy.

This report sets out the purpose of the study and then reviews the literature in regard to parent-school relationships, Pasifika processes and group interactions. The report includes a synthesis of discussions with parents and principals in regard to Pasifika learning. This is followed by an outline of a model for Pasifika parent groups to engage parents and schools in an equitable way.

Purpose

East Tamaki School is in South Auckland with a predominantly Pasifika roll. Pasifika children make up 73% of the roll with Samoan children being the largest group – 37% of the roll. We have a focus on increasing parent involvement in students' learning to improve student achievement levels.

We are currently utilising a number of ways to achieve this, including parent meetings, focus groups which involve parents in school review processes and surveys, and curriculum evenings. However, I would now like to take parent involvement to a more indepth level and utilise a more personalised approach which could result in developing more robust and active relationships with parents. The outcome of this investigation is to foster active involvement of parents through a learning partnership with the ultimate aim of improving student outcomes.

Literature Review

The positive influence parents can have in enhancing student achievement is well recognised.

There is a large body of research outlining the success for students when there is a strong relationship between the home and school. As Beveridge (2004, p.3) stated "parents and teachers…[have] complementary roles in relation to children's education and….that children benefit when the home – school partnership is characterised by reciprocity, trust and respect". Epstein (1992) has also recognised the vital importance of home – school partnerships for the three parties involved – school, students and families. Hattie (2009) in his metasynthesis concludes that the effect size of parent involvement is .55. Therefore parent involvement can have a significant positive effect on student outcomes.

There are many examples of ways schools involve parents in children's learning. These include parent meetings, focus groups, curriculum evenings and parent teacher interviews or conferences. However such involvement can be generic rather

than focussed on children's individual needs. The type of involvement determines its success.

A study by Clark (1983), cited in Okpala, Okpala, & Smith (2011) showed that when children from low income backgrounds are exposed to an emotionally supportive home environment where academic success is affirmed, their learning improved significantly.

Mara (1998) has summarised the key elements needed to ensure school and parent involvement is successful. These include:

- raising parent expectations through communication and information
- using parent workshops which focus on curriculum and learning
- developing home-school relationships that respect cultural diversity
- developing parent leadership skills.
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Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez and Bloom (1993) earlier also identified emerging principles relating to providing parent education to support children's learning. These principles for developing successful partnerships include:

- Being genuinely non-judgemental about families and their circumstances, and recognising that families are an important resource in the educational process. Viewing school staff as professionals and parents as non-professional is not helpful.
- Working with parents in the climate of equality to identify, understand and build on their strengths and experiences.
- Providing support while also recognising parents' competencies, values, beliefs and expectations about learning. This support should enhance these, not undermine them.
- Realising that parents' initial responses are likely to be determined by their own educational experiences and cultural backgrounds.
- Implementing new initiatives to support parents on a small scale initially.

Focusing specifically on involvement of Pacific parents, a New Zealand study shows that Pacific parents are becoming increasingly involved in children's learning. "There is growing recognition [by Pacific parents] that both school and family have joint responsibility for children's education." Ministry of Education (2003) (p163).

ERO (2012) has developed a list of next steps for improving the way schools respond to Pacific students. This includes strengthening "links with Pacific parents and communities to facilitate communication, and build mutual understanding about the best ways to support student learning". Ministry of Education (2003) (p3).

In relation to Pacific parents, ERO further states that their research indicates that schools that "had succeeded in raising Pacific student achievement typically had close links with parents, families and communities". Ministry of Education (2003) (p5).

One approach to strengthening links with Pacific parents is to develop a parent learning community model. This could draw appropriate elements from professional learning communities. These communities can be defined as stated by Toole and Louis (2002) as a group of people sharing and critically analysing their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative and growth promoting way and according to King and Newmann (2001) operating as a collective group.

The model must be culturally appropriate to prevent a disconnect between home and school.

Friend & Cook (1992) suggest a collaborative Pacific Island school community parent model for Pacific parent engagement in education. The emphasis should be on a 'family' approach to support the concept of aiga (extended family).

The appropriate protocols should be negotiated so that the school "empowers its community through seeking its advice and assistance, and in which communities in turn empower the school". This requires the school to develop a model which is collaborative and in which the power and control is shared.

Improving education outcomes for Pasifika learners from low socio-economic backgrounds is part of the Ministry of Education first priority in education at present.

The Pasifika Education Plan 2013-2017 (PEP) has Pasifika learners, their parents, families and communities at the centre. This indicates the significance of parents in children's education. The focus for parents in the PEP is "more informed and demanding parents, families and communities supporting and championing their children's learning and achievement" (p5). Further, the PEP states that the targets for achieving this focus include:

- improving the provision of information to Pasifika parents, families and communities
- using existing and prospective communities, venues and networks to support learners, parents, families and communities in their well-being and learning
- strengthening partnerships to ensure parents, families and communities are engaged in their children's learning
- strengthening partnerships to support Pasifika identities, languages and cultures.

In achieving these targets it is essential that appropriate processes and knowledge of each Pasifika culture are included. For example fa'asamoa (the Samoan way) encompasses the interwoven threads of family, church, village and respect.

Therefore educators need to include a cultural perspective throughout all processes of educational achievement. As stated by the Ministry of Education, "Pasifika knowledge and practices [must be seen] as valued and valid (2013b, p7). Pasifika values and knowledge should interact with the values and knowledge of other cultures in a school and this "presents opportunities for the creation of new knowledge". (2013b, p7).

Synthesis of Discussions

For the purposes of this report I spoke with a number of Pasifika parents and principals of schools where there were significant numbers of Pasifika students. Following is a synthesis of these discussions.

Pasifika Parents

I spoke with Samoan, Tongan, Cook Island and Niuean parents. There was a mix of genders.

Several themes emerged from these discussions.

All the parents were very keen to be involved with their children's learning and the school. Many of them were already participating in school activities such as trips, volunteering in classrooms and being members of the Board. However for the vast majority of parents this involvement was based at school and there was little crossover with how the parents helped their children at home. Most parents made sure that someone in the family listened to the child reading their home reader. The parents found it difficult to identify other ways that they could specifically support their children's learning.

The parents said that their own parents did very little, if anything, specific to support their own learning when they were at school.

There was a real willingness to be involved in education but the parents interviewed felt that they did not have the knowledge or resources to do more. Very clear and specific guidance and support from the school were the two factors that parents would appreciate most. They suggested that this should be targeted for their child and the current stage their child was with their achievement.

The parents were very grateful for what the schools did for their children but they were aware that parental input would contribute to higher achievement. The parents suggested that working in small parent groups which were not too formal would be an appropriate forum.

Principals

I spoke with principals who had a significant number of Pasifika children on the roll.

The principals had a variety of ways for involving Pasifika parents in their children's learning. The common processes were evening sessions on a variety of topics – some schools involved interpreters, parent-teacher reporting interviews, open days and an 'open door policy'.

A few schools had developed Pasifika fono. These tended to involve large groups of parents grouped according to ethnicity. Principals reported that they believed these were successful but the fono were not targeted at individual children.

One school had had a staff member go to the children's homes to speak with parents about learning in a positive way focuses on each child. However the school found this process very time consuming and little if any shift in children's achievement levels. The school did not sustain this initiative.

All principals spoke of the parents' willingness to be involved but there was a need to better link this involvement to children's specific learning needs.

Principals realise the significant impact parents can have on learning. They know that there is a huge amount of untapped potential to increase achievement levels through focussed parent engagement.

The Model

The parent engagement must be planned for and embedded in the school. The planning cycle would include a comprehensive needs analysis, developing mutual priorities, ongoing evaluation of the parent engagement and the need to commit to the plan. The needs analysis should allow for parents needs to be identified in order to support their children's learning and taking account of parents cultural backgrounds, prior school experience and language.

The engagement needs to also ensure that genuine value is given to parents' contributions and have the aim of empowering parents.

The Parent Engagement Model

The first part of the process to engage parents is to identify a group of parents. Ideally this would be six to eight parents. The process for identification could be the school identifying particular parents, parents self selecting or a combination of both.

A key element of the group is to encompass the element of aiga-extended family throughout. School can be seen as an extension of aiga.

This involves a collective responsibility for achieving the group's purpose.

Initially it would be preferable to include in the group parents of children who are finding learning a challenge. However there would be many benefits of from also including parents whose children are achieving at a high level. These benefits include the parents of high achieving students being able to share how they support their child's learning. Parents are more likely to participate if they perceive a direct impact on their own child as a consequence of their involvement (Goodall, p38).

It is envisaged that the principal would instigate the group establishment with input from staff and community members as appropriate. However the final composition of the group should include a majority of parents rather than school or community members.

Once the group is established it would then be important at the first meeting to establish group protocols including expected attendance at meetings, frequency of meetings, suitable meeting times and confidentiality of discussions. It would also be

appropriate at an early stage to gather the aspirations of the parents and the group as a whole. Then the common themes could be identified which would contribute to an overarching vision to encapsulate the main ideas. From this an action plan could be developed.

The focus of the action plan would be to improve the achievement levels for the students of the parents in the group especially in literacy and numeracy.

Focussed group discussions could cover such areas as:

- specific techniques for helping a child read their home reader at home not just listen to them read
- specific techniques for helping a child learn such things as the basic facts
- ways to praise children when learning at home
- developing questions parents can ask when speaking with teachers about learning, thus developing proactive parents
- taking parents into classrooms to observe teaching. A staff member could talk to parents through the teaching process during the observation
- discussion and development with parents and staff of school expectations for parents
- outside agencies could talk with the group about issues which impact on children's learning, such as the public health nurse
- discussion on achievement data
- reading and discussing relevant publications such as those produced by the Education Review Office and the Ministry of Education
- observing a reading recovery session.

A challenge in establishing such a group would be sustainability. In particular there would need to be high levels of commitment from school staff and the parents.

The ultimate aim would be to empower parents to take a leadership role in the ongoing sustainability of the partnership.

Another challenge would be the likely difficulty of reaching and involving parents who do not engage with the school nor do they engage with their children's learning. Engaged parents may be able to assist with this.

Obviously there would be other possible challenges arising, such as finding mutually convenient meeting times, language barriers and transience of parents.

Barriers such as these can all be overcome and in doing this could in fact strengthen the group and indicate a real commitment to success.

Conclusion

Parents can and do make a difference to their children's achievement. Engaging with parents in a focussed approach is likely to enhance this achievement. The partnership must be genuine with a commitment from all those involved to want to make a difference.

At East Tamaki School we will start with one group which will be carefully developed. The hope would then be to expand the number of groups so as many parents as possible could be engaged in this process.

It is envisaged that the participants in the initial group will lead the expansion process.

A true partnership with parents and families is a very powerful aspect in student achievement. The hope is that implementing the model outlined in this paper will have a direct benefit on this achievement.

Acknowledgements

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