

Sabbatical Report

TOPIC:

*The importance of parent engagement in the development of students, as learners.
How are strong parent connections being developed in our schools?*

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Purpose

The involvement of parents in their children's learning is a crucial factor in their development. Low student achievement is often directly related to low levels of engagement between family, school and students. Our challenge as educators is to strengthen this connection.

My inquiry focuses on current thinking related to parent engagement in their child's learning and investigating ways that family/school connections can be developed and strengthened to ensure that all students can reach their full potential as learners. I will explore some successful programmes and initiatives which are promoting parent engagement in our schools.

Rationale

'A student's level of well-being at school is indicated by their satisfaction with life at school, their engagement with learning and their social-emotional behaviour. It is enhanced when evidence-informed practices are adopted by schools in partnership with families and community' (Noble et al, 2008, P30.)

Background Information

In 2013 Onekawa School adopted a catchphrase, '85 by 015.' This relates to our strategic aim; '85% of our learners will be achieving at or above the National Standards in Reading, Writing and Mathematics by the end of 2015.'

This aim was in response to our achievement data which showed that between 20 and 25 per cent of our students were achieving below or well below National Standards in the 3 key curriculum areas. What could we do to address this?

We set five key steps under our initiative 'Step Higher to Achieve.' Step 5 has been of special interest to me:

Step 5: 'We need all parents and whanau to be highly connected to their child's learning and well-being.'

In 2014 our school was involved in the Ministry of Education's 'Student Achievement Function (SAF).' Of the five dimensions that were assessed by our facilitator, dimension 2 was identified as one for us to develop.

Our Goal was set:

'To raise the achievement of identified children through strong connections with parents, family and whanau who will be actively involved and aware of the impact they have on their children's learning.'

This statement from ERO's 'School Evaluation Indicators' supports our goal:

Domain 3 (Process Indicator)

In New Zealand we have a growing body of research showing the impact of educationally powerful connections and relationships on student outcomes in a range of contexts. This research identifies that establishing educationally powerful connections and relationships with parents, families, whanau and communities provides access to a greater range and depth of resources to support the education endeavour; enhances outcomes for all students, in particular those who have been underserved or who are at risk; and achieves large positive effects in terms of student academic and social outcomes.

In addition, Kahikitia describes two critical factors for success for Maori students.

1. *Quality provision, leadership, teaching and learning, supported by effective governance.*
2. *Strong engagement and contribution from students and those who are best placed to support them, parents, families and whanau, hapu, iwi, communities and businesses.*

In our case the identified children are those in the lower 20/25% achievement band. Many schools can identify with this group.

From this experience, two key questions emerged:

Question 1: How can we develop confidence, competence and commitment from our parents to enable them to effectively engage with the school and with their child's learning?

In their publication 'School Evaluation Indicators, 2015,' ERO lists four evaluation indicators under Domain 3 (*'educationally powerful connections and relationships with parents, families, whanau and communities.'*)

These indicators are very relevant to my inquiry. They are as follows.

Evaluation Indicator 1:

'Learner centred relationships effectively engage and involves the school community.'

The document provides an example of effective practice related to this indicator

Parents, families, whanau and the community are welcomed and involved in school activities as respected and valued partners in learning.

We can ask ourselves:

How comfortable do your parents feel in your school environment? Are strong interpersonal relationships evident across your school community?

Do parents feel welcome when they visit their school?

Are all staff members warm, welcoming, courteous and helpful?

Does my child's teacher show a genuine interest in my child's development? Does he/she really care about my child?

Are the school's values reflected in the day to day operations of the school?

Are the contributions made by parents valued by staff?

Evaluation Indicator 2

'Communication supports and strengthens reciprocal, learning centred relationships'

Effective Practice examples:

a. A range of appropriate and effective communication strategies are used to communicate with and engage parents, families, whanau and community.

b. Students, parents, families, whanau and teachers work together to identify strengths, learning needs, set goals and plan responsive learning strategies and activities.

In a recent parent survey at Onekawa School parents were asked: 'What is the relationship between strong school/family connections and your child reaching his/her full potential as a learner? Responses included:

'Everyone needs to be on the same page. There needs to be good communication.'

'We (teachers and parents) all need to know our child's abilities, strengths and weaknesses. We need to be prepared to share this knowledge.'

What forms of communication take place in your school?

Do teachers make themselves available for informal discussions with parents before and after school?

What opportunities are available for parents to arrange a time to discuss matters or concerns with their child's teacher?

What written communication takes place in your school?

Does your school embrace electronic communication with families via email, text messaging, etc.

Are three way conferences a key part of your reporting process. Who can attend these conferences?

Evaluation Indicator 3

'Student learning at home is actively promoted through the provision of relevant learning opportunities, resources and support.'

Effective practice examples:

Parents, families and whanau receive information and participate in individual and group learning opportunities that enable them to support and promote their children's learning.

Learning Support Programmes

Schools are involved in a range of learning support programmes. Reading Recovery, ALL and Alim are examples of these. An important component of each programme is regular communication with parents. Parents need to be aware of the content of the programme, the school's expectations and ways they can support their child with their learning.

Evaluation Indicator 4

Community collaboration and partnerships extend and enrich opportunities for students to become confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners

Effective practice example:

Teachers and parents, family, whanau and community engage in joint activities and interventions to improve learning and/or behaviour.

In what ways do you connect with the school? (from our questionnaire)

Responses:

'By doing my best to get involved with everything I can: school trips, sport and after school activities.'

'I help out where I can. Last year I helped a teacher in her classroom. Laminating, book repairs, etc.'

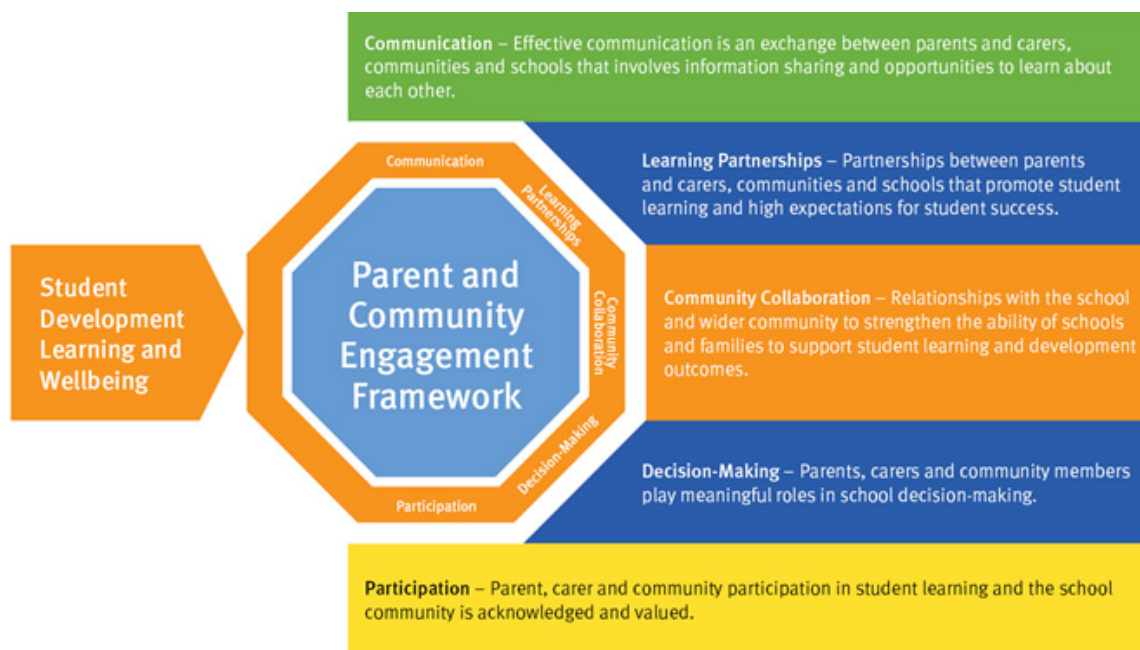
The following is a comment on the welcome page on an Australian school's website. For me, it embraces the intent of Domain 3 of ERO's School Evaluation Indicators.

'We encourage parents to maintain regular contact with the school through the class teacher and the Principal. Regular two way communication is vital. The partnership between the school and the home should be a very strong one in order that our children are happy and

successful at school. Successful teaching and learning occurs when parents, teachers and children work together.'

Question 2: What programmes and initiatives are schools using to encourage parents to become actively involved in their child's learning?

Schools are involved in a wide range of activities to promote strong parent connections with their child's learning. Some schools operate a very prescriptive programme guided by their own policies or, as in parts of Australia and Canada are guided by state or national guidelines.



Other schools develop their own processes based on their own needs. They often rely on their own creative and innovative ideas.

'Queensland has a diverse range of communities and it is important to acknowledge that each school has its own contexts to which they respond. A range of contexts apply, including remote locations, high proportions of working parents, high proportions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, recent disasters and other community events. For this reason, it is essential that schools individualise their engagement strategies to suit their particular needs and those of their parents and communities.'

Here are some examples of programmes and initiatives that I have encountered.

Transition to School Programmes

From conversations with colleagues it would seem that a priority for all schools is to ensure that an effective process is in place to successfully transition children who are about to start their schooling.

'Starting school is an important time in a child's life. Rather than a one off event, transition is a process where children settle into learning. Children and parents experience it in their own time and in their own way.'

'Helping children to have positive and rewarding experiences as they move from early childhood education to school sets them confidently on a continuous pathway of learning.'

From 'Continuity of Learning,' ERO National Report 2015

Schools are guided by the knowledge that:

- They need to provide an environment tailored to new children. This environment will be sensitive to the needs of children from a wide range of cultures in order to develop a sense of belonging for all.
- An understanding of an individual's pre-school experience is essential.
- Seeing children in their familiar early childhood environment helps to establish a close relationship between child and teacher.
- Two way visits between teachers can help them understand what teaching and learning looks like in each place and how they can connect these experiences for children starting school.
- Time is needed to establish relationships with each other and with parents and whanau of children moving to school.

Mutukaraoa

Mutukaraoa is an innovative School and Community partnership which has been developed at Sylvia Park School in Auckland. Mutukaraoa was developed to strengthen the relationship between teachers and parents and to work together to support student achievement at the year 1, 2 and 3 levels.

The Mutukaraoa programme is a process that fosters the active engagement of parents and whanau in learning partnerships and provides them with the tools and knowledge necessary to support the development of core skills in their children.

The process is guided by these key ideas:

- It has a personalised approach which aims to grow honest, robust and vigorous relationships with parents (Previously, traditional meetings were poorly attended and parents were reluctant to participate)
- It builds a relationship of respect and understanding between school and parents. Teachers respect the unique role of parents.
- There is a focus on data. Parents become familiar with terminology, where children are at and where they are heading. There is an emphasis on reducing the jargon.
- There is flexibility in terms of meeting times and places. This includes in home contact as well as in the Parent Centre based at the school.

Matariki Celebration, Onekawa School, 2014

'To raise the achievement of identified children through strong connections with parents, family and whanau who will be actively involved and aware of the impact they have on children's learning'

Our staff decided to base a whole school community focus on the celebration of Matariki. We could see this was a context that was relevant to all of our community members and was one which would contribute towards achieving our goal.

A considerable amount of planning was required for the celebration and this involved staff, parents and other community members. Cross curricular learning experiences were provided for children at all levels, many based on the work of the Te Waka trust, a local group which provides sailing experiences on a traditional twin hulled waka. Their adventures around the Pacific using traditional Maori navigation were of high interest to all children as were the associated stories and legends of the stars and Matariki.

The highlight was our Matariki evening. On a clear and crisp winter evening 500 community members gathered at our 'outdoor auditorium.' They were treated to music, dance, stories, legends and information about the stars. A delicious supper followed in the school hall.

There were many highlights of our Matariki celebration, the greatest being the level of interest shown by the community. What was particularly gratifying was the turnout of parents whom we rarely see. Some were

specifically targeted by organisers to help with the preparation of the auditorium and assist with the supper. The majority turned up, many bringing friends and family members. It was clear to see that this group were very proud of the contribution that they had made to the celebration and to the school. They felt welcome and valued. They had a new sense of confidence and belonging. They still recall the whole experience with their children. Ultimately and most importantly this engagement has had a positive effect on their children's learning.

Reading Together

'Reading Together' is a Ministry of Education programme designed to support children's reading at home. A series of workshops is provided by a facilitator to inform parents of ways they can assist. The programme has been successfully implemented since 1982.

The workshop topics are:

How can I help at home?

How to check the difficulty of reading materials

How to help children overcome difficulties in their reading

Sharing ideas about reading, giving feedback and looking ahead

The programme has been shown to raise children's reading achievement in a sustained manner and to improve relationships between children and parents and between teachers and parents. Teachers find that the programme is practical and manageable.

The Use of Technology to Engage with Parents

As in every facet of our lives, modern communication is having an ever increasing influence on the way parents engage with their child's learning and the way teachers communicate with families.

It is now common for parents to know about their child's learning 'today.' They can refer to their child's personal blog or the class blog for his/her latest piece of published writing. You may even see a clip of her assembly presentation today, even live!

There may even be an email from the class teacher about something that has happened today, an achievement, a concern or a follow up to a Eureka moment!

The most valuable connections are those which invite parent conversations or sharing of views. Student blogs, Facebook pages and Google docs are used widely for this purpose.

Implications

Our realisation of the importance of educationally powerful connections and relationships is growing. While realisation is important, the challenge for schools is to find practical ways to hook parents into engagement. Offering a friendly environment is important but establishing powerful connections and relationships will test our powers of creative thinking and innovation in our schools.

An in depth knowledge of the community and individual families, strong leadership and a whole school commitment to engage our parents is required. A willingness for schools to share their findings and successes is also essential in maximising the benefits.

References

The Internet offers a huge amount of information about the role of parents in the development of students, as learners. The task of filtering useful and relevant references from the mass of available information can be a daunting one.

I would like to acknowledge the quality of New Zealand references that are available particularly those that are provided by the Education Review Office including:

'School Evaluation Indicators,' 2015
'Raising Achievement in Primary Schools,' June 2014
'Continuity of Learning,' 2015

(I regret that ERO's latest document 'Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whanau has only just been released.)

'Kahikitia, Accelerating Success' Ministry of Education, 2014

Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank the Ministry of Education for this opportunity. The benefits of this experience, both professionally and personally have been immeasurable.

Onekawa School Board of Trustees

My BOT fully supported my sabbatical applications and shared my enthusiasm and excitement for the programme I had planned. Sincere thanks to all members.

Dianne Groom, Deputy Principal

Dianne stepped up and did a wonderful job at the helm. Dianne's experience and wisdom shone through. She was ably assisted by her highly capable fellow leaders.

Chris Sutton, mentor for her advice and encouragement.

Rebekkah Pollard, colleague and friend who was my Australian connection.

To my wife, Bronwyn for sharing the enjoyment of this experience.

Some Snippets

When one is immersed in a project such as this there are gems of information that people share. They really make you think and have a lasting influence. They stick! They are worth sharing!

'The most useful connections I make with my child and teachers are those before or after school. I enjoy opportunities where my daughter can share with me something she has just done in class. 'An informal chat 'on the run' with her teacher is always valuable.' (Parent and Health practitioner)

Why are you encouraging even more parent contact with teachers when this aspect of our role is already so demanding? (Teacher)

'The best way for our parents to connect with their child's learning is to ensure that their child:

- Attends school each day
- Arrives at school on time.
- Has had breakfast before they leave home
- Has had a good night's sleep
- 'Leave the rest to us!'