

Sabbatical Report

How schools build effective learning focused partnerships
with Māori whānau to accelerate learning and improve student outcomes



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Executive summary

This report reviews how schools build effective learning focused partnerships in meaningful and sustainable ways with Māori whānau to improve outcomes for priority learners. It looks at both the research and experience of school leaders to identify how schools structure and lead change to build partnership, and concludes with advice from colleagues about strategies they employ to engage with and raise student achievement through effective home-school partnerships.

Purpose

Schools operate in increasingly complex environments with students, staff and whānau facing competing and challenging demands that affect their ability to achieve desired outcomes for learners.

Point Primary as part of its strategic vision and direction has been reviewing partnership models and ways of engaging with the whānau of priority learners to support the acceleration of student learning. The school has worked with staff to develop a 'connecting education and community' model to build partnership to improve student outcomes.

The purpose of this research is to:

- extend professional learning in this area with a view to more effectively leading the development of our school's learning focused partnership with whānau and community;
- identify schools and organisations who have been successful with this work;
- determine strategies, structures and models that these kura have employed; and
- provide recommendations to the sector.

Background and Rationale

Pleasant Point Primary School is a medium sized provincial school in rural South Canterbury. Celebrating this year the 150th anniversary of public education in Pleasant Point, the school has developed a rich history since its establishment in 1868.

Over the past six years the school's Māori student population has risen to 16%, which in conjunction with the overall roll growth has seen the number of Māori students increase to 48 learners.

Review data shows that Māori students feel well supported and cared for at school, and achieve well in relation to national expectations and at similar rates to non-Māori students.

However schools are continually trying to improve the ways they engage students in their learning. Research also recognises that certain types of school-family partnerships can have significant effects on the academic and social outcomes of students, particularly priority learners.

One of Point's strategic goals is to build strong and meaningful school community partnerships to support student engagement and learning, and as part of this goal to increase our engagement with Māori whānau.

The leadership team at Point has been reviewing partnership models and ways of engaging with the whānau of priority learners. The school has begun work on developing a 'connecting education and community' model and while we are still developing our pedagogy around effective partnership, it is recognised that there is significant potential for improving the involvement of priority learners' whānau in the acceleration of student learning.

Identifying how we are currently doing and improving our practice through a deeper understanding of current research and best practice models is an intended outcome of this research with a view to making a positive and sustainable difference for learners at our school.

Methodology

The methodology used for this study was a mix of both qualitative and quantitative.

Learning activities included:

- Professional Reading (see Reference List)
- A survey of Māori whānau within our school
- School visits within Auckland and Canterbury
- A visit to the University of Auckland Centre for Educational Leadership
- Reflection time

Looking for patterns in our school's data and in what the literature and colleagues shared guided my findings, and has also given clarity regarding next steps.

Literature Review

There is a significant body of evidence available – research, case study examples, self review templates and opinion about how and why schools should connect with families and community. From the range of literature available, the following were the most helpful for informing my within school research and discussions with colleagues.

Best Evidence Synthesis

The Ministry of Education's Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) programme is internationally recognised for its consistency and rigour, and provides well researched New Zealand data about what makes a difference for student achievement.

The *School Leadership and Student Outcomes BES* published in 2009 was overseen by Dr Adrienne Alton Lee and found that the most effective home school partnerships are those in which:

- parents and teachers are involved together in children's learning
- teachers make connections to students' lives
- family and community knowledge is incorporated into the curriculum and teaching practices.

Published in 2003, *The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children's Achievement in New Zealand BES* found that the most effective partnerships:

- treat families with dignity and respect and add to family practices, experiences, values, and competencies (rather than undermining them)
- build on the strong aspirations and motivation that most parents have for their children's development
- offer structured and specific suggestions rather than general advice
- provide group opportunities as well as opportunities for one-to-one contact (especially informal contact)
- empower those involved by fostering autonomy and self-reliance within families, schools, and communities.

Education Review Office

In June 2008 the Education Review Office produced the evaluation report *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities*. In this report ERO recognised the weight of evidence supporting how effective partnerships between schools and parents, whānau and communities can result in better outcomes for students.

ERO gathered evidence for this evaluation from 233 school reviews undertaken in Terms 1 and 2, 2007.

Parents told ERO as part of the Office's investigation that they want to make a valued contribution to their child's education and expect schools to enable them to do this.

ERO noted that the more successful the engagement, the greater the impact on student learning. However ERO also acknowledged that there were many challenges associated with successful engagement. The most challenging group were families that were 'hard to reach' or difficult to involve in school projects. Another challenge was the time required of schools and being able to sustain the engagement.

From the range of ways that schools employ to involve and communicate with parents and families, six key factors emerged as critical to enhancing and strengthening engagement:

1. Leadership.
2. Relationships in the school community.

3. School culture.
4. Partnerships with parents and families.
5. Community networks.
6. Communication.



Successful engagement between schools and parents, whānau and communities was influenced by the extent to which partnerships were valued by schools, and by the awareness and responsiveness of each school to its community.

In schools with well-developed partnerships, ERO reported several benefits for parents, whānau and families. These included:

- being well informed about their child's learning and the curriculum, assessment, and teaching programmes;
- having shared expectations for learning and achievement;
- strengthening relationships with their children and changed conversations about learning at home;
- enjoying and celebrating their children's developing talents and skills;
- feeling they were making a valuable contribution to their children's learning and to the school;
- being more confident about coming into the school and approaching their child's teacher;
- having opportunities to meet other parents and talking together in a trusting and safe environment;
- receiving support in their role as parents, whānau and families; and
- having a sense of pride and achievement in their child.

Where partnerships between families and schools were working well the benefits for students included:

- having their successes and achievements noticed and celebrated by their parents, whānau and communities;
- feeling more motivated and engaged at school;
- talking about their school work at home;
- feeling more confident about their school work;
- finding transitions easier between schools.

In the second half of 2014 the Education Review Office reviewed a further 256 schools and evaluated how well they worked with parents, families, and whānau in their response to students at risk of underachievement. The resulting report *Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau* (November 2015) found that two-way collaborative working relationships that reflected the concept of *mahi tahi* were more likely to lead to educationally powerful connections that improved academic and social outcomes for students.

In the best examples of working together teachers and whānau shared solutions and listened to each other's perspectives as they worked collaboratively towards the specific goal of supporting a student's educational success.

ERO found that schools who were most successful in forming educationally powerful relationships (relationships that improve education outcomes for students) were systematic and intentional about:

- knowing who their students were, in the wider context of school and home, in order to develop holistic and authentic learning goals;
- had a whole-school focus on involving parents and whānau;

- involved parents and whānau in designing and implementing solutions to underachievement, and extended learning across home and school by designing and implementing multiple and aligned learning opportunities;
- evaluated the impact of those multiple opportunities to learn, to know what worked for whom and why;
- were persistent in sustaining what worked about the relationships for the students involved, changing and improving what did not work, and transferring what worked to more students and their parents, families and whānau; and
- recognised that the focus and complexity of the collaboration changed as students got older.

Ka Hikitia

Ka Hikitia – meaning to ‘step up, lift up, or lengthen one’s stride’– is the Ministry of Education’s education strategy launched in 2008 for stepping up the performance of the education system to ensure that all Māori students have the opportunity to realise their potential.

Ka Hikitia - Managing for Success: The Māori Education Strategy 2008 – 2012 was the first phase of this strategy, and based on the evidence of what works it included valuable information on what families, whānau, iwi, educators and educational leaders had to say about the required shift in thinking and behaviour regarding the home-school partnership.

Students shared feedback regarding partnership that supported their learning such as:

"Hold regular parent teacher meetings. That way teachers can inform our parents from a similar viewpoint about all the things their children are involved in."

"I reckon it’s very important for our parents to get involved with schoolwork that the kids have been doing, because then we can talk about it at home, so it’s learning at school and at home."

"Give them regular updates on your learning or notes home and not just negative. Anything that encourages whānau participation."

Teachers voices were in alignment with the finding of the BES programme and ERO’s recommendations:

"We have got to stop thinking we know what whānau want and just ask. They will tell us. And it is what we do next that’s important."

"We can get a whole new perspective on things when we get to know and understand the whānau and the child a bit better."

"It's about the opportunities we provide for whānau to be safe, in terms of responding openly, honestly and frankly about what we can do together."

Whānau also recognised the importance of partnership with comments such as:

"For me, it’s a link into my daughter’s education because I can see the strategies that the teachers are using and when she comes home I know where she is at."

"Every parent wants their children to be successful, Māori parents are no exception."

"You have to have a relationship with the teacher and the school so you can help."

Summarising the Findings from the Literature Review

- Partnership between home and school should be student learning and well-being focused. Listen to what families/whānau want developed and nurture respect for diversity.
- Have high aspirations for Māori learners and encourage positive learning focused relationships between teachers and students.
- Provide regular updates on learning achievement and feedback both formal and informal, and involve whānau when designing and implementing plans to address underachievement.
- Schools need to lead in involving families/whānau, including providing a range of opportunities to meet/talk with whānau, and guidelines on how whānau can contribute.
- Investigate ways to involve 'hard to reach' families/whānau.
- Ensure that culture is valued and acknowledged through use of Māori protocols e.g. mihi, karakia, and if possible there is Māori representation on the Board of Trustees.
- Have clear processes for parents if they want to raise concerns.
- Acknowledge what learners bring to their learning – know their history, tikanga and worldview. When developing school curriculum draw on contexts and themes relevant to them.
- The school leadership team (principal, senior management group) need to be approachable and accessible, and build a culture of respect, engagement, partnership and understanding of the diverse needs of each student.

Findings from the survey of Māori whānau within our school

In conjunction with our school's Connecting Education and Community liaison a base survey designed by Pam King for her 2012 sabbatical research on engaging Māori and Pasifika was modified for our context at Point Primary. 29 whānau representing 48 students were surveyed with a 33% return rate achieved.

Results:

Theme 1: Leadership	Not Sure	At Times	Mostly	Very Well
1 Do you feel that your child is valued at our school?		10%	30%	60%
2 Do you feel we value the parents/whānau of our children?		10%	20%	70%
3 Do you feel that we promote and practice the values and beliefs that you want for your child?		10%	20%	70%
4 Do you think that we let parents/whānau know what our vision for the school is and we plan to do?		10%	20%	70%

What do you think we could we do better to help with our parents / whānau feel valued at our school?

- Have more get-togethers.
- I think you are doing a great job.
- Opportunities for uniqueness to be celebrated and made visible.



Theme 2: Relationships	Not Sure	At Times	Mostly	Very Well
1 Do you feel that PPPS values the relationship between home and school?		10%	10%	80%
2 Do you feel we welcome parents/whānau at our school?		10%		90%
3 Do you feel like part of our school community?		10%	30%	60%
4 Do you feel that we provide appropriate opportunities for you to be involved in the school?			30%	70%

What do you think we could we do better to improve relationships between school, parents / whānau?

- Dojo is a good initiative. Hold Hui at Marae.

Theme 3: School Culture	Not Sure	At Times	Mostly	Very Well
1 Do you feel at ease when coming to the school?			30%	70%
2 Do you find that you have easy access to all school personnel? (including Board, Principal, Senior Staff, Teachers, Support Staff)		10%	30%	60%
3 Do you think the school shows that we are inclusive of diversity and value your child's culture?			40%	60%
4 Do you feel that you and your child have a good sense of belonging to the school?			30%	70%

What do you think we could we do better to improve the school culture for all our parents / whānau?

- I think you are doing a good job at the moment.
- Perhaps showcase a different culture each term to build more awareness.
- Inclusion of increased speakers of te reo, increased focus i.e. optional classes.

Theme 4: Partnerships	Not Sure	At Times	Mostly	Very Well
1 Do you feel well informed about your child's learning and achievement?			30%	60%
2 Do you find written reports about your child's achievement accurate, reliable and useful?		20%	30%	50%
3 Do you feel that you are involved in your child's learning goals?		10%	30%	60%
4 Do you feel the school involves parents, whānau and families in decisions that affect your child's learning and well-being?		10%	40%	50%

What do you think could we do better to improve partnerships with our parents / whānau at our school?

- Not enough Hui for Māori.

Theme 5: Community Networks	Not Sure	At Times	Mostly	Very Well
1 Do you feel that we seek and value the perspectives and expertise of parents / whānau?		10%	40%	50%
2 Do you feel we promote networking within our school valuing key people from our community?		20%	20%	60%
3 Do you think we make it easy for you to feel that you can help at our school?			30%	70%
4 Do you feel that we celebrate your child/ren's success at our school?		10%	30%	60%

What do you think we could we do better to improve our community networks at our school?

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Theme 6: Communication	Not Sure	At Times	Mostly	Very Well
1 Do you think we communicate effectively with you about what is going on at school?			40%	60%
2 Do you think we communicate effectively with you about your child?			60%	40%
3 Do you feel that we give you the opportunity to communicate with the school if have you have something to say?		10%	40%	50%
4 Do you feel the school communicates effectively about how your child can succeed?			80%	20%
5 Do you feel that you get honest and open communication from the school?		20%	20%	60%

What ways do you think we could we improve communication with our parents / whānau at our school?

- I don't know what more you can do - you have class dojo, facebook, phone calls, emails, face to face appointments – I think communication is great.
- Social media platforms to keep everyone abreast of what's happening.

Summarising the findings from the survey of Māori whānau

From the survey responses received nine out of ten whānau felt the school valued their child and them, and they were well informed about the vision of the school and its future plans. Whānau felt welcome and at ease when coming school and that the school provided appropriate opportunities for them to be involved. All whānau felt a sense of belonging to the school and believed their child's culture and diversity was valued.

Half of the whānau who responded felt that there was room for improvement in the usefulness of the school's written reports, how involved they were in decisions that affected their child's learning, and the degree to which the school sought and valued their perspective and expertise.

The survey data suggests that Point is doing a good job of including and welcoming whānau but can do further work towards ERO's concept of mahi tahi – listening to whānau, learning from them and collaboratively working towards positive outcomes for students.

Suggestions from whānau for improvements include having more hui (including at the local Marae), looking for more opportunities to showcase and celebrate cultural diversity, and increased opportunities to learn and speak te reo.

Findings from School Visits in Auckland and Canterbury

The opportunity to visit a range of small, large, urban, rural, low and high decile schools has been a highlight of this sabbatical research project. Findings from the literature review informed conversations as I talked with colleagues about their successes and challenges in forming educationally powerful connections with whānau.

It was encouraging to hear both the creative approaches that schools had adopted, and also the similarity of challenges faced regardless of setting. The following is a synthesis of some of the key advice and feedback:

Start slowly, begin with one thing at a time, but keep the ball rolling.

Begin with parents when they first enrol their child. Relationship building is key.

Keep student learning as the focus.

A critical and first place to begin is with staff and your Board of Trustees – getting them on board regarding things Māori and the importance and 'why' of partnership.

Share key message repeatedly with staff and Board (using key documents such as Ka Hikitia to reinforce messages).

If possible immerse staff in the culture and a different experience. (One school visited took their staff to Samoa and India in the school holidays to work with schools there and gain an experience of the cultural background of some of their learners.)

Resource and bring in outside providers to provide quality professional development. From a growing understanding of culturally responsive practice and Māori te reo and tikanga, the quality, understanding and practice of partnership will improve.

Use Hautū (the Ministry of Education / NZSTA resource) to identify with your Board where your school is currently at in terms of its practice and set priorities for improvement.

Listen to whānau, use their expertise and ask them how they would like to be involved and what they think we can do to support their children.

Involve students in the process and use their cultural knowledge. Raise the mana of things Māori within your school i.e. through the strategic development and use of your Kapa Haka group. Wherever possible, make culture visible through signage, newsletters, names of classrooms etc.

Engaging with whānau of priority learners can be hard work and at times challenging. Persevere and seek to make cultural connections with students and whānau.

Think about and understand why you are connecting with whānau. What problem are you trying to solve? What is the purpose of the engagement (to inform, consult, collaborate), and tailor the opportunity appropriately.

Implications and Benefits

It is clear from the research that certain types of school-family connections can have a significant positive effect on the learning outcomes of students, and in particular priority learners.

It is also clear that parents want to engage in their children's learning and expect schools to enable them to do this. It is a school's responsibility to lead this process by creating a culture where parents, families and whānau feel welcome, valued, respected and listened to.

For Pleasant Point Primary with a growing school and Māori student roll, engaging with whānau and seeking to build educationally powerful connections is critical to ensuring that our priority learners continue to succeed alongside their peers.

Like many schools often engagement at Point is one way, on our terms. We need to reflect on the research, feedback and experience of others to be clear about the purpose of engagement and to make it manageable but more importantly meaningful for staff, students and whānau.

As a staff, leadership team and Board of Trustees, further thought is needed about successful forms of engagement that are educationally powerful and make a difference to learners.

A review of current engagement and work initiated by the 'Connecting Education and Community' team at Point is needed. Following reflection on our experience to date, the survey data from whānau, and colleagues feedback, priorities for development will need to be established.

Staff professional development should be the first step. It is vital to build a collective understanding of the importance of partnership, and what educationally powerful connections look like, before any further work is undertaken.

Beginning early with whānau from their first days and experience of school – from pre-enrolment to early learning, is critical as we work on establishing relationships and as a school being intentional about listening and setting aside assumptions about students and whānau.

Learning to share power and establishing relationships characterised by mahi tahi – deliberate two-way collaborative relationships focused on providing students with extended learning opportunities, are key goals.

Experience and research indicates that regular review will be important and also persistence to persevere in engaging whānau who will at times be difficult to engage.

From the experience of schools who have and are successfully engaging in powerful connections with Māori whānau, it is clear that the benefits to students both in terms of academic and social outcomes are significant. It is hoped that the priority learners and their whānau at Point will see similar benefits as we continue to engage in this process of review and development in relation to home-school partnership.

Conclusion

This study has sought to investigate how schools build effective learning partnerships in meaningful and sustainable ways with Māori whānau to improve outcomes for priority learners. Through a review of relevant literature, visits to schools in Canterbury and Auckland, and a survey of whānau at Point professional learning in this area has been extended, and strategies, structures and models that successful schools use to make educationally powerful connections with the families of priority learners have been discussed.

From the range of research on this topic, selected summaries of key documents have been presented from the Best Evidence Synthesis series, the Education Review Office and the Ministry of Education. The opportunity to visit a selection of schools from both the South and North Islands has been a highlight of the project. A selection of their advice regarding strategies employed to establish effective home-school partnerships is included.

The study's findings provide the beginnings of a clear direction forward for the leadership team at Point as we continue to work on the involvement of priority learners' whānau in the acceleration of student learning. Further work is now needed by the wider staff team and Board of Trustees to reflect on the learning completed and strategically consider next steps.

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Leadership

- The involvement of parents, whānau and families is valued and welcomed by the principal and senior managers in the school.
- Teachers initiate and develop partnerships with parents that focus on student learning and wellbeing.
- Students have opportunities to take a lead role in activities and events that involve their parents, whānau and the wider community.
- There is a shared vision that reflects the aspirations of parents, whānau and families for their children.
- The strategic intent of the school reflects a commitment to working in partnership with parents, whānau and families.

Relationships

- Relationships between school personnel and parents, whānau and community members are valued and based on mutual respect and trust.
- Responsibility for developing and maintaining relationships is shared.
- Parents from different ethnic groups have a point of contact on the staff of the school.
- Relationships are developed in formal and informal ways, with personalised, one-to-one contact being as important as the group activities and events.

School culture

- An open, inclusive and welcoming environment invites parent participation in a wide range of non-threatening activities and events.
- Staff are approachable and accessible.
- Diversity is valued and celebrated in a variety of ways.
- The backgrounds and cultural heritage of all parents, whānau and families are respected.
- Parents, whānau and families are visible in the school in a variety of role and activities.

Partnerships with parents and families

- Contact with parents is timely and opportunities taken to share their child's successes and concerns.
- Regular formal and informal opportunities are provided to discuss student progress, achievement and well-being.
- Reporting of achievement is based on sound data, easily understood, honest and timely.
- Students have opportunities to lead conferences about their learning with their teacher and parents, whānau and families.
- Parents, whānau and families have opportunities to be involved in their children's learning, for example in goal setting and developing career pathways.
- Parents are involved in celebrations of their child's achievement.
- Parents are supported in helping their children to learn at home.
- Parents, whānau and families have opportunities to learn about teaching programmes (curriculum), assessment practices/processes, initiatives that support their child's well-being and parenting.

Partnerships focused on well-being

- Transition practices for students coming into the school include parents, whānau and families.
- Processes for managing student behaviour concerns include parents in finding positive solutions to issues.
- Parents' concerns are listened to and there is appropriate and timely follow up.
- Parents are able to share ideas and strategies to support their child's well-being at school.

- The school has established links with a range of relevant agencies and organisations in the wider community that support its own pastoral care practice.

Community networks

- The school values and makes use of the expertise and skills of parents, whānau and families in the community.
- Parents, whānau and families can contribute in a variety of ways, for example through education outside the classroom activities, working bees, helping in the classroom, and activities such as sports coaching.
- The school is involved in community activities and events.
- Cultural celebrations are supported by community groups and leaders.
- The school works with and/or employs liaison people to work with and support families.
- The school uses a variety of approaches to gauge the perspectives of parents, whānau and families on a wide range of topics.
- The views of parents, whānau and families are sought, listened to and contribute to what happens in the school.
- The school regularly evaluates how well it is engaging with its community and knows which parents are involved and which are not, what the barriers might be, and the effectiveness of the practices used to engage parents, whānau and families.

Communication

- There are various ways schools and parents, whānau and families communicate that meet the needs of all groups.
- Information communicated is useful, timely and easily understood.
- Language barriers, where they exist, are addressed through the translation of written material and the use of translators for meetings.
- Communication is two-way, with opportunities for sharing on a wide range of topics relevant for school personnel and for parents, whānau and families.