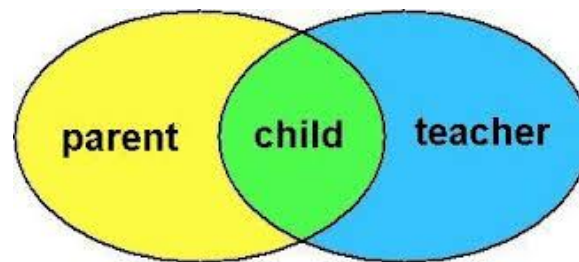


Engaging Parents, Whānau and Communities in Educationally Powerful Connections



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Introduction:

It was mid January of 2016 during the summer holidays when I found myself trudging off to the local swimming pool to monitor my young children swimming in the heat of summer. School was looming nearer. At this point in time I felt our school already had good systems and interventions in place aimed at accelerating educational outcomes for children in need of a boost. However, I was still searching for something new and original, but more importantly, something genuinely useful at reducing inequalities and disparities at our school. With that desire I set about reading various educational articles and ideas at the poolside. I was fully committed in seeking an intervention that would accelerate the progress of children being underserved in core subjects.

I had several Education Review Office Publications, a Gazette and other bits and pieces of educational literature in my bag. Amongst those publications was the Education Review Office (ERO) publication of Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau, (EPC) November 2015.

What started as a half interested skim read quickly become a read of intense interest and engagement. The reading quickly and clearly illustrated to myself that we as a school have fabulous community relationships that on the whole serve the school and community well. However, the reading also illustrated that although we had strong community relationships, we could improve dramatically in this area and be more deliberate in our approach in order to create educational powerful connections as described by ERO 2015. The EPC concept lends itself to multiple aligned learning opportunities between home and school, which was not a totally original idea, but original in the sense we had not trialled such an intervention. It was also at that moment that I realised the difference between general good community connections and the connections that can be coined educationally powerful connections.

What are 'Educationally Powerful Connections or Relationships?

Many schools have friendly well-intended relationships with the school community. This is evident by frequent parent attendance at school events, strong Home and School groups and through parents being available to support education outside of the classroom experiences and sports teams. These relationships in many cases serve the school well and provide additional resourcing to man various school events. Parents frequently manage sports teams, coach sports teams, man sausage sizzles amongst other useful activities to support the school. However, although these relationships are essential for a school, many would not be regarded as learning focused educationally powerful connections as defined through ERO's EPC Publication November 2015.

There are points of difference between good school community connections and educationally powerful connections. "Educationally powerful connections are relationships between schools, parents, whānau and communities that improve educational outcomes for students" (ERO, 2015, cited in EPC&Rs, p.5). More

specifically key findings illustrate that EPCs “.... involves two way collaborative working relationships that reflect the concept of mahi tahi – working together towards the specific goal of supporting a young person’s success.” (ERO, 2015, cited in EPC&Rs, p.5). Good examples of EPC are when school and teachers share resources and strategies that parents and children can do together at home (ERO, 2015, cited in EPC&Rs). For an educationally powerful connection to in fact be an educational powerful relationship, the relationships needs to specifically ‘extend the learning opportunities between school and home’ in such a way that a student has multiple and aligned opportunities to learn and practise (ERO, 2015, cited in EPC&Rs, p.5).

ERO (2015, cited in EPC&Rs) continues to explain that the best examples of EPCs is when learning is centred on a student and there is strong, frequent and deliberate collaboration between the student, their teacher/s and parents and whānau which specifically focuses on the student’s learning and progress. This deliberate collaboration forms a whānau like context in which all involved parties understand their rights, obligations, responsibilities and commitments to help the student succeed. Teachers and schools that understand the concept of ‘extending the learning opportunities between school and home in an educationally powerful way’ develop relationships in the following way.

- They know about, value and build from one learning opportunity to the next and remove the separation between home and the classroom learning.
- There is a shared language developed between teacher, student and whānau in regards to the students learning and achievement.
- Are genuinely interested in the child and their whānau and value the child’s wellbeing.
- Design initiatives that are ‘learning focussed’ with parents and children and co-evaluate the impact of these on the child.
- Value and foster the two way sharing from home and school that embraces and uses expertise and cultural differences

(ERO, 2015, cited in EPC&Rs).

In essence, educationally powerful relationships or connections are generally formed when a school identifies a child who is at risk of underachievement or from being underserved. The key difference between an EPC and another remedial intervention is the school or teacher goes about forming and strengthening a relationship with the parent or whānau where specific details, support, strategies, ideas and resources are shared to improve learning outcomes for that child by allowing multiple aligned learning opportunities within the home and school environment. The contact between school is frequent, on going and enduring as opposed to a one off notice aimed at informing a parent of an intervention. All three parties are heavily involved in the learning leading to a shared responsibility and respectful educationally based powerful relationships. The same principles can also apply to specific groups of people within a

community where the relationship is formed and maintained through regular ongoing consultation and request for input. The work between the group and school is collaborative work, which improves connections and outcomes for the children of that specific group by implementing the co-developed ideas into the school environment.

Purpose:

Background information and rational:

On top of searching for an intervention to support children at risk of being underserved my memory as a child, both at primary and high school, indicates many schools largely went about the business of educating children in relative isolation from home. In very general terms schools and teachers had very little cultural background understanding or an understanding of home circumstances when educating children pre 1990s and even beyond. The contact my parents had with school was limited and categorised within three main themes. First was to visit the school for teacher parent interviews. Second was to attend a school wide play, assembly or fete. And the third reason being I had been involved in something significant which led to contact from the school. Those three themes stand true for my siblings and most other adults I have spoken to who attended school at similar time frame to myself. This is certainly not a criticism, just an observation and a note to illustrate quality education today involves so much more collaboration and input from the whānau than what was previously acceptable or requested in the past.

As a beginning classroom teacher starting my education career early this millennium there was a focus to meet children's learning needs and plan accordingly. I have no recollection of there being any significant academic focus at Teachers College on connecting with parents to form educational powerful connections. Neither do I have any memory of University led professional development or staff meetings lending themselves to encouraging us as teachers to connect with parents in an educational powerful way.

As a school in my beginning teaching career we had 3 way conferences twice a year, which was a new method of interviewing, as the interview now included the children's voice. We also sent home school reports twice a year. These two events largely made up the home/school relationships along with information evenings to inform parents of how schools teach math in the 21st century, or some other subject, for example. Various school assemblies and the need for support for school camps and home and school groups also brought parents into the school environment, but more as a resource to manage children, fundraise, or be an audience and spectate. Outside of these events contact with parents was largely absent unless there was a problem of some description or the need for input into a survey.

As a past teaching principal of a two teacher rural school and now as a principal of a small urban school, while working under the National Standards regime, there has been

an intensification of schools being asked, “What they are doing about children or groups of children who are not achieving at National Standards?” Evidence of interventions along with the measure of the impact of interventions is regarded as good practice in today’s education system. Examples of practice being implemented in order to accelerating student progress and reduce disparities in educational outcomes are ideal and an expectation. Notably, the plight of reducing educational disparity has been a 130-year odd aim in New Zealand. Olseen (1992) explains, “The provision of State Education in New Zealand developed from ideas about democratic and progressive education in the late nineteenth century. The creation of an education system that aimed to reduce inequalities and enable social mobility was an important goal for New Zealand's early educational reformists.” (Cited in *The History of New Zealand Education*, 2018). Clearly the goal of reducing disparity and educational inequality is persistent and as prevalent now as in the past. With that said, one of the latest interventions to improve outcomes for those underachieving or being underserved from my research is the concept of educationally powerful connections.

Regardless of how one may view National Standards, or the researched and documented influence of socio economics on inequalities on the educational outcomes of children, the idea of a school doing what it can to realistically influence and reduce inequality and disparity is worthy of investigation. As Hattie (2015) describes, “....a critical starting point, and the mantra needs to be, ‘I can make a profound positive difference to every person who crosses the school gate into my class or school regardless of their background.’” (*The Politics of Distraction*, p.6). Further, one of ERO’s 6 dimensions of a successful school is to engage communities, which links perfectly to the notion of forming educationally powerful connections.

During the 2016 and 2017 school years our schoolwide professional development was to implement the intervention of creating educational powerful connections with families to improve outcomes for children.

With all of that thought out, the purpose of this sabbatical therefore becomes three fold.

1. Embark on a limited and containable educational literature review to gain an understanding of the importance and purpose of community connections and educationally powerful connections from within NZ and abroad.
 - 1a From the literature review develop a clearer understanding of educationally powerful connections and community engagement to understanding what constitutes an educational powerful connection with parents and whānau and what is just good community engagement.
2. Interview the children; parents and teachers in relation to the educationally powerful connections interventions we undertook at Netherby School in 2016

and 2017. Analyse the survey results of the stakeholders to ascertain their perception of the usefulness and success of the intervention.

3. Interview various principals to learn of their ideas and work around the concept of educationally powerful connections and record novel ideas leading to the building of a 'kite' to improve my knowledge, skill, ideas and understanding in this area as well as providing links for other interested school personnel.

Executive Summary:

If you ask any parent, regardless of their personal circumstances, their position in society, their experiences from school, you will almost always find that parents or caregivers wish for their children to do well at school. And in most cases parents and caregivers wish for their children to do better than what they did themselves in the school environment. Within that wish of parents wanting their children to do well they want for their children to feel they belong at school and many want to know what they can do to help their children succeed in school.

The EPC if implemented as described, provides a vehicle where parents can connect with school and form a partnership aimed at providing multiple aligned learning opportunities between home and school. EPCs are a grand opportunity for parents to understand and know what they can do to help their child perform and improve academically. The child, parent and teacher can work in unison with the relationship built around the academic needs of the child first and foremost. Within that, it is vitally important whānau voice, ideas and culture is respected and incorporated into the learning equation.

It is also clear that principals and teachers are the holders of the power in the first instance and are the personnel that need to reach out and create EPCs to facilitate the breaking down of barriers between home and school. The formation of partnerships between home and school that are academically based needs to be led and driven by the principal. This drive must be followed up and continued through the teaching staff to enable successful and enduring EPCs to afford those children at risk of being underserved the best opportunity to close gaps and make academic gain.

What is also clear is that all schools I had the privilege of speaking with have from what I can ascertain, fantastic community relationships. The good community relationship concept is a common thread and standard approach amongst the many schools as detailed by the principals I have spoken to not just during this sabbatical period but also from ongoing conversations over the course of time I have been involved in education. New Zealand schools appear to be very effective at creating and inviting community engagement.

However, what can also be deduced from these conversations is that some schools, but not too many, have programmes or interventions, which would constitute EPCs as described through the various literature and particularly the ERO publication of *Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau 2015*. The EPCs concept as precisely detailed by ERO 2015, though not entirely new, is not as 'widely understood or employed' as I expected at this point in time.

I can also deduce from the literature review, BES, ERO and examples of EPC practice in schools, that many of the EPC are formed with either Māori or Pasifika communities to

improve outcomes. EPC are after all an intervention aimed at accelerating progress for children who are arguably being underserved by New Zealand's education system. Nationwide results and data illustrate and have done so for many years, our Māori and Pasifika school populations are not achieving as high as our Pakeha children. Therefore, it is logical that the schools, which have made deliberate efforts in forming EPCs, are those schools aiming to reduce the disparity in achievement outcomes with these populations in general terms. Within that, the EPC intervention encourages and fosters parental and cultural input aimed at creating a mahi tahi relationship that aims to reduce academic achievement disparity.

From the surveys conducted with our own school community, it is also clear there is an enormous positive gain for the children and parents when involved in an EPC.

The challenges for the teachers appear to be time, feedback and or response from some parents, particularly at the tail end of the intervention. From my own observations and from listening to feedback from teachers the time needed to form and maintain quality EPC with five families is quite significant and demanding, but well worth it.

In summary EPC is a form of community engagement but with a more detailed and precise approach aimed at creating an enduring educational partnership with the parent, child and teacher over a period of time that focuses specifically on the achievement of the child. A quality EPC will provide ideas, supports and resources as well as being co-developed and collaborative in nature. Both parents and teachers will communicate frequently to co-develop the ideas and resources to support and meet the child's learning needs by providing multiple-aligned learning opportunities between home and school. All parties need to buy in to the concept and honour it through committing to the intervention for its entirety. From the survey results EPC are worth it and pay dividends for all three parties. However, the main challenges to sustaining an EPC is the time required and needed to give it the best chance of success from both busy parents and teachers.

Literature Review – (Purpose 1 and 1a)

One does not have to look far to understand the notion of community connections and engagement is well documented and regarded as one of the best practice principles in 21st century education here in Aotearoa and abroad including the United Kingdom and the United States of America.

NZC 2007

The New Zealand Curriculum Document 2007 clearly outlines that a school curriculum should embody the principle of community engagement. Further, the principles should underpin all school decision-making. The community engagement notion within the document, though broad, clearly describes the need for a curriculum to have meaning

for students, connect with their lives and one, which engages the support of families, whānau and communities. (New Zealand Curriculum, 2007, p.9). The key wording to suggest an EPC is “...connect with their lives and one, which engages the support of families, whānau and communities.” (NZC, 2007, p.9). I suggest the ERO 2015 EPC&Rs is an expansion of this idea in more definite and real life terms through bringing the concept alive through real examples and an expanded definition of engaging families in a meaningful and academic way.

The Māori Achievement Collaborations (MACS)

While in attendance at a New Zealand Principal's Conference I was made aware of Te ara hou, The Māori Achievement Collaborations or commonly known as (MACS). Further research into this initiative outlines that MACS is a professional learning and development pathway by principals for principals focussed on changing education outcomes for Māori students. I make reference to MACs as its purpose is to improve outcomes for children being underserved. The MACs framework outlines and clearly believes that the underlying premise is schools will not change unless the principal does (MACS, 2016). Therefore, the focus of MACs is to change ‘...the hearts and minds of principals through a process of deep learning, mentoring, coaching, critical conscientization and collaboration. In this way the belief is that change will become sustainable and enduring and will impact on all members of a school community, staff, students, parents, whānau. (MACS 2016, p.1).

Through a MACs PowerPoint presentation at the New Zealand Principal's Federation conference in Queenstown 2017; it was clear that a large part of the MACs framework involves principals and schools engaging communities, and in this case the Māori Community, in order to improve outcomes for children who identify as Māori.

Within engaging communities there are key links to developing educational powerful connections, which is the subject of interest for this sabbatical study. The MACs initiative for change highlights educational powerful connections through the following amongst other developments.

- Sharing leadership with whānau, hāpu and iwi – being willing to be led in terms of engaging whānau.
- Talking to families about their identity and what they want for their tamariki.
- MACs principals gave authority (mana) to Māori students and their whānau to initiate school-wide change.
- Curriculum hui teaching parents how to help their students with maths and reading (tikanga integrated).
- Respectful and reciprocal relationships are paramount in MACs initiative.
- The principles of the Te Tiriti o Waitangi were operationalised, that is, Māori identity, culture and worldview was protected, whānau, hāpu iwi partnerships

were valued and whānau Māori were given opportunities to genuinely participate in decision-making about their children's education.

Clearly within the MACs initiative one of the main focuses is building relationships with whānau. The initiatives on how to build relationship in the above bullet points have educationally powerful connections and relationship written all over them. The building of relationships in this way with whānau will lead to manaakitanga and mahitahi, working together as one towards the specific goal of supporting a young person's success.

Unsurprisingly at this stage of the literature review, the idea of community connection that involves working together for the child in a way where the relationships between home and school is connected, seamless and collaborative and a dual responsibility, is ideal and best. The MACs initiative has also clearly stated that it is the principal who needs to change and lead the way in forming the relationships, which are in my view from the description of the MACs initiatives, educationally powerful.

The MACs initiative to date is credited with improved academic gain, an increase in Māori student cultural pride and sense of identity, improved engagement from Māori students, whānau, hapu, iwi and the wider community member in the everyday activity of the school. There is also a noted improved attendance from students during school time and whānau at school events and in particular three-way conferences.

Although there are various goals and directives within the MACs it is clear the relationship building and inviting of whānau to set educational direction through actions that fit within the umbrella of educational powerful connection is one of the key components leading to the success of the initiative.

Best Evidence Synthesis (BES)

BES brings together research about what works for all diverse learners in education (BES, 2003, Insight into what works 11, p.257). Different BES consistently promote that initiatives need to be responsive to learner's specific context. In order to ensure a responsive intervention one should ideally use inquiry and a knowledge-building tool to design a collaborative approach to improvement that is genuinely responsive to learners. BES illustrates through a study case that building an educationally powerful connection with learners and the learner's culture can have a profoundly positive impact. In this example as described through BES the results after the EPC intervention doubled the achievement levels of the senior Pasifika learners from a low socio economic background.

BES credits the accelerated progress through the teacher making strong links between the social studies topic and comparison to the senior children's cultural and religious backgrounds. Direct comparisons were not highlighted at school as this activity was left

for home. The home discussions created the connection between the school learning and the home environment while enabling clarity of thinking and the forming of understanding between the topic being learned through assimilating similarities between home and the topic. The home dialogue became rehearsals for the children's discussions at school with the home discussions credited with helping the students clarify their thinking on the subject being learned at school with parent/s or relatives. The purposeful home connection was culturally responsive as in parallels between the content and home cultural were used as a vehicle in which to make comparisons and contrasts to learn and understand new material that was originally unfamiliar. This connection also created home interest and support. The connections created alignment between home and school while also providing multiple opportunities to think, critique and discuss the learning.

The educationally powerful connection through this case study was a resounding success. Prior to this intervention there has been limited success with this focus group of students. Once the connection had been made with home and students, the school was able to draw upon family input, both culturally and in general. The intervention enabled this group of children to gain Yr.12 senior school qualifications. BES (11, p.257) explains though this example is in the context of Yr.12 students, the principles of creating educationally powerful connections with learners' cultures, families and communities is relevant for any school with focus group of students.

What is evident here is the concept of educational powerful connections feature in BES in several examples through my readings. The EPC concept is credited with turning achievement around for this group of children, who had in the past been relatively unsuccessful with prior interventions. Most importantly the concept is transferable to any age group, albeit, techniques, resources and ideas would need to be skilfully modified.

Casey A, 2007 Connecting Schools, Families and Communities.

Casey (2007) explains "Evidence continues to mount in favour of the notion that when "schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more." (Connecting Schools, Families and Communities, p.1). Casey (2007) continues to explain in order to have well-connected schools to communities and families, principals need to be leaders in this area of work. Casey (2007) further explains that there is not an expectation for principals to instigate and perform this work in solo, rather, to act as the key player in forming the relationships and sharing the expertise with teachers in order to enable and support staff in building parent and community relationships.

Based on this notion of principals being leaders of this area of work I can suggest it is paramount that professional development for school leaders includes ideas, tools and techniques on how to engage families and communities in productive partnerships with

the school. Notably too, in Casey (2007) the key idea of building community engagement or powerful educational connections with families needs to be led by the principal. This belief is also shared within the MACs initiative as previously described.

Casey (2007) continues to explain staff development that improves the learning of all students provides educators with the knowledge and skills to involve families and stakeholders appropriately (p1). Casey (2007, p.1) continues to argue “...education is at its best for children when the school, families and community are in partnership. Within the partnership it is vitally important that school leaders demonstrate the capacity to convey authentic interest in the perspective of others, to listen deeply and honor others’ points of view, and to identify areas of common interest.”

Casey (2007) explains within The National Policy for Educational Administration there are five key and broad shifts in the knowledge and skills required from school leaders today. Two of these five changes in my view clearly illustrate the contemporary skills needed by a leader today over a traditional knowledge base in order to be capable of forming strong community connections or educationally powerful connections.

Contemporary practice today requires leaders to move;

- from technical skills to interpersonal skills
- from campus administrator to integrator of school and community services

I would argue that interpersonal skills and the integration of school community and stakeholders voice is at the heart of forming educationally powerful connections.

Casey (2007) further explains that the shifts in skills needed have evolved as a result of school leaders needing to be outward looking, which has influenced school leaders away from an inward looking content dominated format. Further, school principals need to be skilled in actively engaging the school community creating a shared responsibility for student learning. Staff also need to develop and be skilled in involving families and other stakeholders appropriately.

At this stage the theme from the literature review clearly argue strong community engagement and the honouring of voice from stakeholders are the foundation to building strong connections which serve the purpose of improving educational outcomes for our students. All cited literature to this point supports the notion that education is at its best when there is a partnership between school and home. Further, the leader of the school needs to be the one leading in this area by embracing, nurturing and reaching out to form and foster these relationships.

Building on from the theme of the leader of the school needing to lead by embracing, nurturing and reaching out to form relationships, Melaville and Blank (cited in Casey

2007, p.3) expresses in order to create successful community connections schools leaders need to do the following.

- Make your story their story by letting partners know that you need and want their involvement
- Build relationships by convincing that your success is in fact their success.
- As a leader suspend judgement. If you think you have an answer to a problem or concern, first stop, and listen to parents, teachers and students, while keeping in mind you as the leader do not have all the answers, and are not the only one in the room with knowledge.
- Also as leader ensure you know what you want the community school efforts to achieve and have criteria to determine which activities support those results.
- Lead from behind. This means delegate the day-to-day responsibility of a program or intervention, but continue to monitor and support the intervention by providing funding, time and resource.

(Melaville and Blank, cited in Casey, 2007, p.3).

USA - PTA

The USA based National PTA describes the expectation for parent/family involvement in schools through a set of standards. All of these standards have strands, which support the notion of school-home partnership and a dual responsibility to educate the children of today.

- Standard 1: Welcoming all families into the school community—Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.
- Standard 2: Communicating effectively—Families and school staff engage in regular, meaningful communication about student learning.
- Standard 3: Supporting student success—Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school, and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.
- Standard 4: Speaking up for every child—Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.
- Standard 5: Sharing power - Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs.
- Standard 6: Collaborating with community - Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.

(National PTA, p.1).

The standards clearly illustrate and promote the educationally powerful connections concept. Statement 3 and 5 really captures the essence of an educational powerful connection by phrasing families collaborate with schools about their children's learning to support learning, and strengthen knowledge and skills from school at home, and that the power is shared. Although the statement is powerful and clearly articulates an ideal EPC to improve outcomes through forming strong connections at home to support children's learning, it must still require the 'active participation' of parents and the teacher to enable this to be successful. Also as a note of caution and to be mindful there is a difference between community engagement and a community engagement that could be regarded as a useful educationally powerful connection. As stated by ERO (2015 in EPC&R, p.9) "...it was possible for schools to invest considerable time, energy and resources into engaging with families and communities in ways that have little, or even negative impacts on student outcomes."

In summary to the literature, the conditions needed to form educational powerful connections are well summed up with the following. Casey (2007, p.3) defines parent involvement as "The participation of parents in regular, two way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities." That exact same message resonates as paramount to successfully enable building educational powerful connections through the concept of mahi-tahi and whanaungatanga as previously described from ERO (2015, cited in EPC&Rs, p.5). Foley (cited in Casey 2007) also explains if school are characterised by families, students, principals, teacher and neighbourhood residents, who decide together how to support student learning then they can be considered one model for collaborative leadership. It is the collaboration and the joint ownership of supporting the learning, which in my view certainly provides the potential to form educationally powerful connections.

Background

At Ashburton Netherby School we embarked on developing educationally powerful connections with families whose children would benefit from a boost in either the area of reading or writing during the academic years of 2016 and 2017. Professional development in the area of EPC&R was delivered during bi weekly staff meetings. The stimulus to provoke thought, ideas, healthy debate and direction in EPC was mainly led through the Education Review Office Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau, November 2015. The entire edition was read over the course of several terms. Readings were aimed at providing ideas to stimulate the creation of our own EPC direction along with fostering staff buy in through the reading of many positive EPC examples of success.

Teachers in each year of 2016 and 2017 were required to target 5 children and their families to form educationally powerful connections. Documents of various kinds were created or modified by myself as principal to set expectations and the recording of the EPC journey. Teachers were also free to create their own documents to serve the same

purpose of recording and documenting their EPC journey. The documents created enabled us to ask for background information from the families, record the nature of discussion between parents and teacher as well as the frequency in which contact was made. The method of contact between teacher and parent was set by the teacher giving parents the power to choose the best form of contact to suit their individual personal circumstances. Contact methods included face-to-face conversations, phone calls, text, email and a home book. The development of EPC also became a school wide goal and was subsequently included in our appraisal documentation.

Purpose 2:

Interview the children; parents and teachers in relation to the educationally powerful connections interventions we undertook at Netherby School in 2016 and 2017. Analyse the survey results of the stakeholders to ascertain their perception of the usefulness and success of the intervention.

School Survey Methodology:

It was made clear to all participants that they were free to pull out of the survey at any time they wished and that all information gathered would remain anonymous. With that said all participants fully participated and were very forthcoming with the information I requested.

I created three surveys to gather information from the three core stakeholders, children, parents and teachers. The questions, though set, were used as guiding questions with myself exercising considerable flexibility and adaptability during the interview to ensure I captured the experience of the participant if there was little information forthcoming from the original question. Exact copies of the questions are obtainable on request.

Children's Feedback:

It was clear the younger the child, the less feedback and recollection of specifics were told during the survey in regards to them understanding they were part of an intervention to build EPC and accelerated progress. For the purposes of collation I have used the older children's information from the EPC intervention in 2016. I have not collated the information into percentages for questions 1, 2 and 4 as they required a more general narrative answer. Narrative also followed each yes/no question, which has been most useful in measuring and analysing the success of the EPC intervention to date.

Children's Survey Questions

Q:2A) Were you aware the teacher was talking often to your parent about your learning?

50% of children were aware of this and 50% were not. Clearly, this lack of understanding from half of the students surveyed indicates children would benefit from being better informed of the relationship the teacher has with the parent during this intervention period.

3.) Who helped you at home to get better in the area of learning?

Mum (50% of the time)
Dad (25% of the time)
Aunty
Sibling
Caregiver
Other (25% of the time).

Mum was the preferred or most available tutor for the child and was the parent most communicated to by the teacher.

5.) Do you feel you got better in the area of learning because of the help you got from both home and the school working together for and with you?

100% of the children in the intervention who were aware the school and parents were working together felt they improved in their learning as a result of the EPC relationship.

Some affirming supportive narrative:

- *Yes. Because they helped me more to do more writing. I used to do short writing pieces now I do bigger and bigger writing.*
- *Nods...yes. Because I did more writing at home. Different writing at home. Some of it was my last year's book that I did not finish.*
- *Yes I got better at writing because I love writing a lot because I got better at writing.*

6.) Did you enjoy the extra help you got from school? Why?

100% of children surveyed enjoyed the help. This is a pleasing result given more learning in an area a child is deficit in is not necessarily better. Clearly the teachers concerned supported the child in such a way which led to enjoyment of the additional learning and tutiton.

Some affirming supportive narrative:

- *Yes. Because I could ask more questions and did not interrupt another group if she was doing writing with someone else.*
- *Yes I liked it. It made me get higher grades. I liked the things I wrote about. I liked getting extra time from the teacher.*

- *Yes. Because I could be better at writing. I enjoyed it so I can get higher. I liked the writing topics.*

7.) Did you enjoy the extra help you got from home? Why?

100% of children surveyed enjoyed the help. This result is evidence to suggest the parent tutors concerned supported the child in such a way which led to enjoyment of the additional learning and tuition.

Some affirming supportive narrative:

- *Yes. It did the same thing that my teacher would have done. I liked spending the time with mum and dad.*
- *Yes. Because I have help at school and more help at home, which means I will get way better at writing.*

8.) Do you still do extra work at home now that your teacher and parent have stopped talking so much about your learning?

75% of those surveyed are not involved in extra learning at home now the intervention is completed with 25% still involved in some form of extra learning, but not as much as when the intervention was officially being implemented.

The hard data for this group of children who were originally a group of 29, falling to 21 who were fully assessed due to transience illustrates the following improvement in reading/writing. All of these children were close to achieving or below National Standards at the start of the intervention. It is important to note extra tuition was normally received in class as well as an EPC being formed enabling quality home support for these children.

Results from the 20 week EPC intervention:

3 children gained 1 sub level (1/3 of a literacy progression level) = no acceleration

4 children gained 2 sub levels (2/3 of a literacy progression level) = slight acceleration

8 children gained 3 sub levels (1 full literacy progression level) = acceleration

6 children gained 4 sub levels (more than 1 full literacy progression) = acceleration

Of the 21 children who completed the intervention leading to assessment, 18 had more success than they had previously prior to the EPC intervention and additional classroom support. I regard this as a success. I also think it is worth noting it is difficult to separate the impact of additional class support from the EPC success following the home support and tuition. The teacher working closely with the child enables them to provide the necessary tips for parents to provide authentic and multiple aligned opportunities to practise and learn within the home environment. The additional class support and EPC are hard to separate and in our case belong together hand in hand.

Parent's feedback from the EPC survey:

There were 8 questions in the survey for parents, which have enabled me to analyse the success of the intervention. The key findings in my view pertain to question 6. A Copy of the questionnaire is available upon request.

Q6.) Did you see an improvement in outcomes for the child in the area of focus in your view both from a gain in understanding and a gain in motivation of attitude to the area of learning?

100% of the parents interviewed said, "Yes" to question 6.

Some affirming narrative:

- *Yes, better attitude, more confidence and there seems to be a gain the year after. More of a love for reading now as a result of the intervention.*
- *Yes, willingness to do it - more motivation in writing. She writes better now, it has more meaning behind it.*
- *Yes, he will now get a pen and write without thinking, before he would never have done that. Before it would have been just to draw a picture. XXXXX loves writing now and this is because he has learned how to write.*
- *It helped him like reading more. In the afternoon he would say, "Mummy I will read my book." I would also say to him if you want to understand English more, read the books and that can also help you with spelling.*
- *Yes, an extreme yes. Motivation - he wanted to do it, he could not wait, it was his favourite part of school, this was what he was talking about on the way to school, he was thinking about it and what he was going to do next. He was self-motivated. He has learned more and he will now take risks. He used to stop because he could not spell, but now he writes and tries phonetically, taking the risk in writing. Instead of stopping because he got stuck on a word he could not spell. XXXXX always had the ability to tell stories, but could not get them on paper. He tells stories with great detail. I used to get him to draw pictures and get him to talk to the picture.*
- *It excited him so much that I knew how to do his homework. We now have a set time after school everyday. He remembers what time and how long and looks forward to it. He is excited to be learning with me as mum. Prior to this we did not think much about homework.*

I was extremely pleased by the high level of positive feedback and the positive impact the EPC intervention had on the parents who were involved. When speaking to the involved parents most were quite animated and passionate about their experience while emanating a genuine sense of gratitude for having been involved in the intervention.

Teacher's feedback from the EPC survey:

As with all interventions they need to be accepted by teachers and regarded as useful and consequently implemented in order to bring the idea alive within a school. Often too, teachers are busy in a role that is complex and demanding. Adding in one more idea or intervention may seem small and insignificant, but coupled with all of the various demands on teaching staff, this can be one of the reasons an idea is not fully employed within the school setting. I have analysed teacher's questions 3 through to 6 to gain an understanding of the success, barriers and challenges they encountered with this intervention. The full survey questions are available upon request.

3.) How frequently did you make contact with the parent?

From the 6 teachers interviewed it was clear that there was quite a significant range in the frequency in which the teachers contacted parents. Some teachers aimed for weekly contact, others once every 3 or 4 weeks. What is also apparent in the survey was the frequency of contact never increased, but decreased as parents or teachers got too busy to keep the contact meaningful and or focussed. The interview process also indicated some teachers genuinely bought into the intervention and tried immensely hard to employ the idea with the aim and belief the intervention might make a difference. The interview also indicated and confirmed some suspicion that the intervention in some cases had not been given the time and commitment required to implement the intervention with quality.

Evidence from the survey also suggests the contact with parents remained more frequent in the junior and lower middle area of the school as parents were naturally more inclined to be within the school setting than those parents with older children. This obviously led to more opportunity for the junior teachers to easily remain in contact with the parents.

4.) What were the benefits to forming the educational powerful relationship from your perspective for the child concerned?

- *The child felt valued and the children liked I really cared. They felt they could be capable and a good learner. It helped build a confidence in them, and it shows. Definitely improved reading, writing and oral language.*
- *Depending on the child. So you got to learn their background. For example, one kid needed a throat ear operation, which was delaying his speech because he could not hear. The barrier to the learning was real and the operation to rectify the problem was the first step to improving outcomes for him. But from here I was able to cater better for him. There were extra things we tried to help them learn and accelerate. Things trialled with him was then used for other children. I built a repertoire of ideas to support learners. Home life understanding was also obtained.*

- *Their learning. When the parent was engaged, then the learning in class was obviously progressing quicker. It meant I could give extra learning at home, in reading or writing. The child gained more confidence. They felt their learning was more valuable because the parents were interested. A lot of the home activities were games based so opportunity to have fun with children in the learning was present. I also got the children to learn how to play the game so they could teach their siblings if mum or dad was busy.*
- *Two children got excited as the parents commented in their learning books. The children were eager to learn. The children who I grouped together with similar needs were good. The children gained confidence from the experience and still are more confident as a result of the EPCs. The extra experience to fill the gaps made a big difference. I found it was good to hear about how the child learned from the parent, which meant I could consider that when teaching or when I remembered. The progress and confidence has carried on, children now try to write more.*
- *Child knew what they were doing was important so they felt privileged to be part of the programme. They knew the parent and teacher were making a big deal of it.*
- *I think the children were more motivated when they knew their parents were interested in their work or they would see their work at home. For the parents that actually looked at the work there was a gain if they did the extra work at home.*

In summary it would appear if the parents were genuinely interested and supportive of the intervention through providing additional tuition time with the child at home it led to more motivation and success for the child concerned. This evidence resonates with the idea that parents are the first and the most important teachers of the children.

4a.) What were the benefits to forming the educational powerful relationship for the parent concerned?

- *They felt they could come in and be part of a class. They really learned what their child was doing and feedback from portfolios indicated the parent knew what the child's work was about. Parent's felt more confident and would now ask questions in relation to their child's learning.*
- *They knew the child was getting extra support and they often liked that making them less stressed. Most parents were aware that their child needed a boost. Sometimes I was able to teach them what to do at home to help the child learn. I also sent home notes so parents knew how to teach using a strategy.*

- *I think it gave the parents some confidence that they were doing the right thing in reading or writing, particularly with ESOL parents. They would check and then get more confidence from talking to me about the learning. For example, I taught an ESOL parent to not get too obsessed with the spelling and encourage her daughter to express her ideas as opposed to worry about every spelling mistake. Definitely more parents are now here in school and all are a lot more confident to be here. There has been a confidence gained from the whole community. The intervention also enabled the parents to see I value their cultural input and ideas in the education of their children.*
- *The parents that communicated the most were happy to see the school and teacher take an interest in their child, which got them excited and encouraged them to get excited and motivated about the child's learning. Just the fact the teacher shows an extra interest in their child has been good for parents to see.*
- *Feeling more involved in their children's learning, and knowing what they were capable of and knowing what supports they needed.*
- *I guess it gave them an opportunity to ask questions. If it was one on one they enjoyed hearing about how their child was going as well as being able to ask questions.*

The teacher's perspective of the gain for the parents is similar in nature to the parent's perspective of what they gained from being involved in the EPC. The key gains for the parents are a newfound confidence and a gain of knowledge about what their children are learning and how they can specifically help with this learning in the home environment. The key difference through EPC is parents should be given specific strategies and tools to support and deliberately teach their child at home to back up the learning occurring in the school environment creating multiple aligned learning opportunities between home and school. I am not entirely sure this has been the case with all EPC, but I have seen some good examples of this occurring from listening to children, parents and teachers through the surveys conducted. Compounding the overall challenge of implementing the intervention is the teacher's ability to convey the required techniques, skills and ideas to be taught at home along with the parent's ability to comprehend and employ the ideas from the teacher in solo within the home environment.

5.) Did you see improved outcomes for the child in the area of focus in your view?

All teachers saw an improvement in the children's motivation, attitude and engagement for the subject they were involved in with the EPC. In most cases teachers also saw the EPC intervention fostered a love for the subject particularly if the parents were deeply involved through providing additional home support for their children. All teachers

commented the more capable the child became, the more they consequently enjoyed the subject.

6.) What were the barriers, if any, to forming / sustaining the relationship?

- *Time from their perspective. I always made time for this...it was important. Illness, children moving away, transport as in children not getting to school.*
- *Work is a big thing, night shift or day shift. Parents are just busy like everyone else, washing to do, life. Initially confidence from some parents, but once confident not so. Lack of response from texts.*
- *The only barriers were with parents who were absent from the school and then getting in touch with them proved difficult. Some parents would not answer phone calls or respond to text. But when the parents were in school their children's willingness to learn, be organised with equipment and wanting to write at home and school vastly improved. If the parent was clearly interested in the child's work then the child was more likely to try harder and be more successful.*
- *For one parent, availability to them was a barrier. But now I know what they went through, there was a reason for it. Aside from that nothing.*
- *No response even when you asked for preferred methods of communication. Some parents just did not make themselves available. Depends on the parents there is a host of reasons that are not even school related as to why they do not respond.*
- *Illness.*
- *Some parent's circumstances changed and they had less time to give to the relationship. Sometimes parents were super enthusiastic about the idea and after a while the stuff sent home to be done on top of was not done. They tired of it.*
- *Parents present at school. Lack of response to phone call or text.*
- *Over time the novelty wore off and the whole thing became an irritation to them. I felt like I was hassling them on the phone, or I would stop getting texts back from a message sent.*
- *Lack of response, as people get busy. Depending on the time of the year teachers get overloaded with paperwork like reports, assessment, management duties, or despondent from lack of response from parents.*

These are interesting but not surprising responses to the barriers and challenges present for teachers when forming and maintaining the EPC over the intervention period. Despite the real barriers teachers encountered to forming and maintaining the relationships, all parents surveyed really appreciated the input and opportunity to gain a better understanding of their child's learning and what they could do at home to collaboratively support the learning. The evidence indicates that some parents tired of the required effort needed on their behalf to support the EPC relationship overtime. This barrier suggests the timeframe in which the intervention is implemented may be better reduced to just one intensive 10-week period, or term. With that said, we as educators would hope the EPC fosters an ongoing relationship where parents continuously provide home tuition beyond the timeframe of the intervention. The survey from the children indicates this rarely happens and if so not at the level of intensity during the official intervention period.

Conclusion

It would appear that New Zealand schools in general terms have well-intentioned and well-developed community engagement and relationships, which serve the school and children well at various levels. Many of these relationships provide extra sporting tuition, fundraising potential and general support to enable the school to do more for the children.

However, the concept of educationally powerful relationships as described through ERO (2015) is not as widely employed or understood as I first thought. That is not say there are not elements within community engagement that are similar or in alignment with EPCs. Clearly, from listening to various educational leaders the community connections formed in various forms obviously make a positive difference for the children and school.

Without question the NZC 2007, various literature from within New Zealand and abroad resoundingly indicate education is at it's best when there is a strong home school relationship, which focuses on the child's learning. The relationships if designed well can be collaborative while providing multiple aligned learning opportunities to extend and support the child's learning between school and within the home environment. With this happening in an ongoing manner we get the conditions that constitute an educationally powerful connection, which is specific, well aligned, respectful and a partnership between the three parties of child, teacher and whānau. The relationship formed specifically focuses on the child's academic needs with the input coming frequently from both teacher and parents in unison. Contact needs to be regular and meaningful with supports, ideas, resources and input coming from all committed parties.

The benefits of EPCs can be significant and conducive to improving educational outcomes as evidenced through the efforts from our school, the MACs programme, Reading Together and other initiatives as detailed in this report.

There will certainly be a variety of interventions that employ the concept of an EPC. Depending on the EPC design, one of the challenges as detailed through the surveys is the ongoing communication and continued enthusiasm and buy in from both teaching staff and parents.

Useful ideas and leads for creating Educational Powerful Connections:

1. Whānau Hui Group

As illustrated in the literature review, school community engagement is most successful and at its best if the school leader is active in fostering connections and in this case educationally powerful connections. As principal of the school I set about forming educationally powerful connections with our school Māori community for multiple reasons. The first and main reason being I genuinely wished for more authentic voice from our tangata whenua in our school to co-set direction and ultimately improve learning conditions and outcomes for our children who identify as Māori. The second reason, along with being interested in implementing the ideals described through the ERO resource, was I wished to lead from the front. I wanted to illustrate to staff that we as a group are in the journey together with myself as principal having an active role in creating EPC with a sector of our school community.

From these actions a whānau hui group was formed leading to regular and frequent meetings. The meetings led to a co-set of actions with strong directional voice and input coming from our Māori families who attend these meetings on a regular basis. The actions we have implemented were co- set and collaborative in nature leading to changes which in the perception of our Māori Community been most important for the tamariki of our school. The relationship has in my view generated trust, authentic voice and on-going meaningful input into how we can aim to lengthen our stride to improve outcomes for students who identify as Māori.

Further details of the EPC work our Whānau Hui group is available on request.

2. MACs initiative as detailed previously. (See web link in bibliography).

3. The 'Reading Together Programme' as a programme that foster EPCs (<https://www.readingtogether.net.nz/>)

4. Implementing the Pasifika Educational Plan (PEP) along with forming a Pasifika consultation group leads to EPC. (<https://www.education.govt.nz/ministry-of-education/overall-strategies-and-policies/pasifika-education-plan-2013-2017/>)

5. *Staff targeting cohorts of children and forming EPC with the families of the children in the cohort (Refer to this report).*
6. *ERO Publication 2015 – Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whanau (A must read if you intend to implement the EPC idea).*
7. *Mutukaroa programme (<http://blog.core-ed.org/blog/2014/06/mutukaroa-a-fresh-approach-to-home-school-partnership-and-engaging-parents.html>)*
8. *Manaiakalani Programme (<http://www.manaiakalani.org/>)*
9. *Pause, Prompt, Praise (<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Principles/Community-engagement/Resources/Pause-prompt-praise>)*

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