



Leading me to lead my learning

Taihape Area School

Research Report by Jason Fellingham

“Relationship Centred Education”

Russell Bishop (2012) stated “It’s relationship centred education ... also based upon the notion of relationships being paramount to the educational performance, we term it caring and learning relationships”

A culturally responsive pedagogy of relations <https://vimeo.com/49992994>

Purpose:

Based on the above quote by Russell Bishop my focus is to research how New Zealand Area School students and key teachers regard relationships of learning within their schools.

Acknowledgements

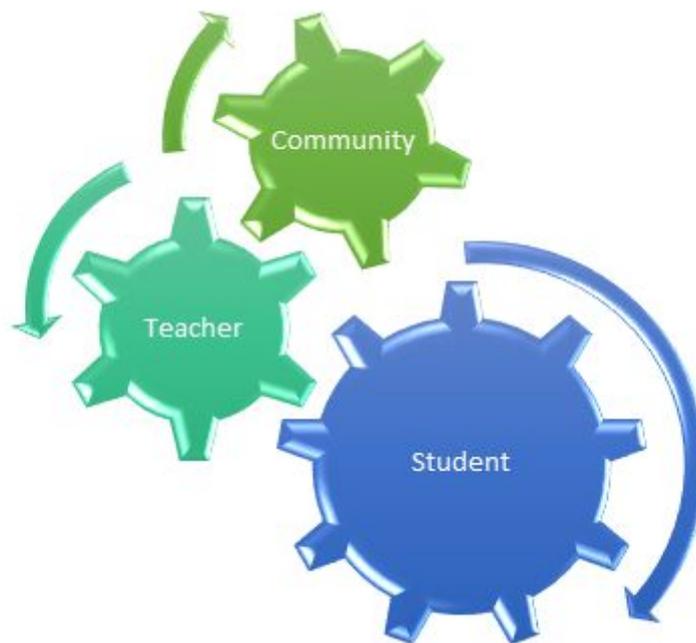
It is with much appreciation that I thank the ten Central North Island Area Schools and their students for their time and contributions to this research. I especially thank the principals who took time to discuss aspects of this research and the importance of whakawhanaungatanga / relationships for educational success.

I also express my appreciation to the Taihape Area School senior management team and Board of Trustees for supporting my sabbatical, in allowing me to undertake this research.

Executive summary

Are we reaching our potential in student achievement? Area schools have the unique opportunity to make stronger connections with students through establishing integral relationships / partnerships between school and communities.

Each cog depicts the requirements to produce performance. Each tooth on the cog represents the connections needed to produce torque. The greater the torque, the better the performance.



Improved connections/partnerships = Improved learning = Higher achievement

This report investigates elements that will help our students to produce a higher level of learning that is meaningful and ultimately, help them to be self-reliant.

Key points researched:

1. Key elements that students need to help them learn best and improve their achievement.

2. Strategies used by management teams that have a positive effect on relationships with staff, students, whānau and community groups.
3. Key elements of maintaining positive relationships with community groups and how this enhances student achievement.

Rationale and background information

Educational organisations and educators have the power to make a difference in preparing our youth with a kete of skills that will enable them to take advantage of the best learning options and pathways available to them. Are we empowering our students with the skills needed to excel in the 21st Century?

Methodology

In order to gain evidence of how important relationships are to student learning performance, it was essential to gain student voice, as students are our clientele. To gain student voice I visited ten Central North Island Area Schools enabling me to survey, in total, over one hundred students, giving me an understanding of what they value most in their schooling life. A rubric was created in which students prioritized what they deemed most important to least important. The survey was specifically aimed at Year 10 and Year 12 students to see if there would be a difference in data between the two groups. Students were given the opportunity to name teachers who demonstrated key aspects they thought were important in their learning and attributed to fostering high educational performance, as well as identifying other influential people that motivated them in their educational success. The identified sixty teachers / mentors were then emailed questions about what they thought was the most important contributing factors to improve educational performance and success.

Findings

Student voice Year 10's

Question 1: How do I learn best?

The following are the top two results that students choose as being the most important for them in their learning. 88.3% of students selected "When learning is personalised to meet my needs". This was followed closely by 76.6% of students choosing "When I know my teacher cares about my learning".

It is also interesting to note that 25% of students selected "Reading about things" as the least important aspect to learning in the matrix.

Question 2: What helps me to achieve my best?

The following top three results show that students believe "Attitude towards learning" (88.3%), "Teachers know how to relate to me and my needs to help me achieve my best" (71.6%), and "It is important for teachers to have a good foundation of knowledge about their subjects" (68.3%), as the most important.

At the other end of the scale 26.6% of students selected "Teachers have good classroom management practices" as being least important in the matrix.

Question 3: What is the most empowering thing your teacher does for you?

The top ranked score was 81.6% of students who said that "When the teacher allows me to make mistakes and work out how to problem solve". Ranked second equal is 65% of students who identified "When teachers listen to me" and "allows me to experiment".

23.3% of students selected "Learning intentions written on the board and follows a plan" as being the least important strategy to achieving their full potential.

Student voice Year 12's

Question 1: How do I learn best?

The top three results for this question show 90% of students believe they learn best “When learning is personalised to meet my needs”. This was followed by 70% of students selecting the “Teacher has good classroom management strategies” and 65% of students saying “When I know my teacher cares about my learning”.

33.3% of Year 12 students surveyed said the least important aspect of the matrix was “Parents/caregivers are interested in my learning”.

Question 2: What helps me to achieve my best?

The top three results show 86.6% of students say their “Attitude toward learning” followed by 75% of student who said that “When the teacher can relate to my needs to help me achieve my best”. 68.5% of students identified that “When teachers have a good foundation of knowledge about their subject”.

36.6% of Year 12 students identified the least important factor was “Having good classroom management practices”.

Question 3: What is the most empowering thing your teacher does for you?

80% of students said “When teachers listen to my concerns” making it the top ranked score. 68.3% of students chose “When the teacher allows me to experiment”. This was followed closely by 65% of students who selected “To allow me to make mistakes and work out how to problem solve”.

The least important factor chosen by the Year 12 students was again “The learning intentions written on the board and follows a plan”.

Effective kaiako/teachers

70% percent of kaiako believe that the most important factor for effective learning is ensuring good relationships are formed with the learners.

The second most important factor kaiako identified was teacher and student attitude. This was also supported with environmental influences, and students leading their learning.

The third most important factor was a mutual respect, a willingness to change approaches and making learning real and fun.

From the above responses 80% of kaiako believe that these factors apply to high achievement.

However, 20% disagreed, suggesting that as educators, we need to challenge our own thinking and understanding in order to provide the best learning experiences for our learners.

Kaiako were asked “What are the three most empowering things you do for your students?” responses varied with the most common themes being:

- Listen to students
- Take time to get to know students
- Show interest in other aspects of their achievement
- Show genuine care and respect

The next question asked is “What empowers our effective teachers?”. The responses established common themes that say 40% of kaiako believe senior management having a high trust model and belief in them empowers them to be effective. While another 30% of kaiako believe that seeing the students excel is rewarding in itself.

Community relations

Through visiting and discussing community relations with different Area Schools it is interesting to note the schools who had projects involving community groups and businesses.

Some schools visited are employing local tangata whenua - some of which were volunteers - which included ex-students, and other community members from all walks of life, to help further their educational development while assisting students with their learning. Two of the schools that were visited placed high importance on local iwi contributing to the governance of the school. This emphasised a common vision within the school and wider community.

Implications

The evidence shows that relationships is the number one key to many of our ākongā achieving their potential. Why then, is it so difficult for many kaiako to grasp this concept? Is it because educational traditions are so embedded that it will take a decade to move away from? With effective learning strategies continually evolving in order to keep up with the “Modern Learning Environment” and “21st Century Learners”, it appears difficult for some teachers to adapt to new teaching styles.

On the other hand, there are some educators who struggle to create and maintain caring relationships with students and instead fall into creating friendships. Students may see inequality between certain groups of students and educators may see colleagues blurring the lines of professional practice. This has several unprofessional implications and can breed discontent among students, hindering the learners self-reliance and personal management.

Another foreseeable implication comes when technology has many detrimental effects on relationship development. Even the very nature of learning within schools

has evolved with technology application. While it is essential to utilise and keep up with the use of digital tools used in modern society and in the classroom, it also highlights how good relationships are developed. Integration of technology with students, teachers and other learning communities has strategies that need to be facilitated and nurtured in order to develop effective relationships.

One of the key aspects selected by students in question 2 of the survey was their “Attitude towards learning”. The complexity of this is essential for student achievement and can be overwhelming for educators. Yet, establishing trusting relationships with students in their complex world, takes time and understanding. Thus, how do we as educators establish these trusting links and find time to do this within our daily school life?

Conclusions

Ākonga/Students

It is undoubtedly true for ākonga that relationships play a pivotal part in their learning, but most importantly in achieving high educational performance. Students of the 21st Century know what effective successful learning looks like. Personalised learning being the number one key factor that our students believe are most important to their learning success. This personalised learning hinges on the fact that teachers develop relationships with their students in order to cater for learning and bridge the gap between life outside of school and in school.

The next key to student learning is ensuring students feel and know that the teacher cares about their learning. Genuine caring relationships are said to help students do better in school and act more kindly toward others. Zakrzewski (2012) stated “Science has found that students who have caring relationships with teachers are academically more successful and show greater “pro-social” (or kind, helpful) behavior. A caring teacher can transform the school experience especially for students who face enormous difficulties, such as dropping out or dysfunctional home

lives. One student who faced these kinds of hardships told a researcher that the greatest thing a teacher can do is to care and to understand”.

Zakrzewski (2012) recommended four key points to building relationships:

1. “**Get to know your students and the lives they live.** Research has also shown that teachers who visit students’ homes and spend time in their communities develop a deep awareness of students’ challenges and needs and are better able to help them”.
2. “**Actively listen to your students.** A teacher who actively listens to students is listening for the meaning behind what students are saying, then checks in with them to make sure they’ve understood properly. This affirms students’ dignity and helps develop a trusting relationship between teachers and students”.
3. “**Ask students for feedback.** By considering their feedback, you are showing students that you value their opinions and experiences. It also creates a classroom culture where students feel safe to ask questions and take chances, which will help them grow academically”.
4. “**Reflect on your own experience with care.** Reflecting on how you were cared for or not cared for as a child will give insight into the kind of care you might be extending to your students, and allow you to adjust your care to fit their needs”.

The above points will also assist in helping the students gain a better attitude towards learning and enabling teachers to relate to them and their needs. Allowing students to experiment and make mistakes in a trusting safe environment empowers students in a discovery model of learning and inquiry.

It is interesting to note some of the differences in the findings of the Year 12 students, in what they selected as being most important in their learning and achievement. This highlights the fact that even though the most important aspects selected by students in questions 1 and 2 of the survey were the same results, there were also significant differences, particularly in Question 3 of the survey: What is the most empowering thing your teacher does for you? The top ranked score showed 80% of students identified “When teachers listen to their concerns,” yet 81.6% of Year 12 students also said “When the teacher allows me to make mistakes and work

out how to problem solve”. 68.3% of students said “When the teacher allows me to experiment”. This was followed closely by 65% of students who say that if the teacher allows them “To make mistakes and work out how to problem solve”, which had a different result for Year 10’s selecting “When teachers listen to me” and “Allow me to experiment”.

The least important factor chosen by the Year 12 students was “The learning intentions written on the board and follows a plan”. Year 10 students also believed this to be an ineffectual factor.

The above results from Question 3 highlight that students in alternate year levels have different needs and that kaiako need to adapt to each class or even the individual students learning needs.

Kaiako

There is an old saying “People don’t care how much you know, until they know how much you care”. This supports Russell Bishop’s quote at the top of this report when referring to “Educational performance, we term it caring ...”

Empowering kaiako with the tools needed is no easy task, however from discussions with key personnel during Area School visits the research suggests that one of the most effective ways to empower educators is through effective appraisal systems. Systems that demonstrate the very key elements mentioned by Zakrzewski are essential to establishing and maintaining the teacher and student relationship. This model suggests that:

- **Senior management know their staff and the lives they live.**
- **Actively listen to staff member’s goals, aspirations, concerns and be a part of their learning journey.**
- **Ask staff for feedback on management performance and adapt accordingly.**

- **Reflect on your own experience with care. Empowering others empowers you.**

Community relationships

Strong community links are an integral part of sustaining and supporting our Area Schools growth and development. Schools that recognise common key links with a variety of community groups, organisations and businesses through the collaboration of projects ultimately promote the learning of all involved providing more meaningful learning contexts, higher engagement and achievement. Schools that are adaptable in timetable structures enable and strengthen community links.

In some of the rural settings, unemployment plays a huge part in the community's concerns which ultimately impacts on our tamariki.

Kington and Mleczko (2012) stated "As unemployment is one of the most serious threats to general well-being of individuals, family structure and overall condition of the neighbourhoods. The schools activities were particularly focused on this issue. Through participating in family education courses at the school, many of the participants feel that their employment opportunities have improved or been advanced" (p. 6).

Relationships between Area Schools and their communities vary considerably. The question is does this affect student outcomes? Shaari & Hung (2017) suggest three key themes for effective community interrelationships:

- Their findings showed that policy influenced the other linkages, especially the relations linkage.
- That school calendars were thought to form the basis for cohesive and coherent delivery of the district's core curriculum to all students, but were

found to serve as systems by which the central office could monitor schools. This suggests that rigid calendars constrain rather than support relationships.

- Academies that highlight the importance of well-defined and well-designed structures enable relationships between schools and external agencies. Academies help strengthen and develop other linkages by bringing partners in the relationships into a cohesive unit intended to nurture the same passion. Foundation academies provide the opportunity for a positive continuity, which is vital to learners. It links them to passionate practitioners and relevant networks, afforded them consistent interactions and uninterrupted relationships that, in turn, assisted in developing a motivated community.

This emphasizes that community ties will only enhance learning opportunities and strengthen student achievement. More importantly schools that have a flexible timetable allows for integral relationships to be established, thus broadening learning opportunities with real contexts for the benefit of rich student achievement.

Concluding remarks

The success of teaching and learning is founded on the quality of the relationship built between the teacher and the student. The teacher manages the motivational climate of the classroom to foster learning-focused relationships with students, and develop a shared ownership of and responsibility for learning. This encourages students with the maximum opportunity to build their own motivation to learn.

<http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Assessment-for-learning/Assessment-for-learning-in-practice/Learning-focused-relationships>

"Learning-focused relationships are about using the considerable potential in the relationship between teacher and student to maximise the student's engagement with learning; about enabling the student to play a meaningful role in deciding what to learn and how to learn it; and about enabling the student to become a confident, resilient, active, self-regulating learner" (Absolum, 2006, p.43).

New Zealand Area Schools have the greatest opportunity to develop integral relationships that will see our ākonga be successful in their learning pathways not only while at school but also empowering lifelong learners. The ability to have essential links with community groups, businesses and other educational providers such as early childhood centres, kohunga reo, local marae, iwi, and regional tertiary providers will certainly strengthen the learning pathways for all involved.

“It is indeed all about relationships, relationships that are professional, that are ethical” (Bishop, 2012).

Build relationships of trust!

Naku te rourou nau te rourou ka ora ai te iwi

With your basket and my basket the people will live

References

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