

Home-School-Community Partnerships

Findings from a 10 Week Secondary Senior Managers' Sabbatical

Shelley Power Katikati College

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Executive Summary

How can school leaders engage effectively with their communities to support the learning and success of their students?

Many home school partnership programmes in New Zealand and overseas which have been found to be effective have all or some of the following features:

Empowering parents to take on a more constructive role in the education of their children;
Making learning at home a focus for development rather than school based programmes;
Mutually respectful relationships;
The use of community facilitators;
Deliberate planning for parent/ community involvement;
The formation of support networks for parents and schools

However, the wider social and political context may affect schools' willingness and/or ability to engage with parents and the wider community. Findings from a review of the literature and a study tour of schools and communities in South Africa and England have led me to believe that while many or most schools acknowledge the need for greater community and parental involvement in the learning of their students there may be external pressures which can, in effect, cause schools to focus inwards rather than reaching out to their community. The following present elements of an achievable approach for many schools within the current New Zealand context:

1. Build community within our schools – encourage collaborative practices and trusting relationships;
2. Build social, emotional and professional capital within our schools and across schools;

3. Focus on building respectful and trusting relationships with parents and the community;
4. Provide PLD for teachers on engaging with parents and their role as leaders of their child's learning;
5. Find opportunities to invite parents into the school (NOT just parent–teacher interviews!);
6. Seek ways to provide for learning within the community;
7. Learn from and with other schools in your community;
8. Provide and support opportunities for sharing with other agencies and groups with an interest in the young people in your community.

Purpose, Background and Rationale

One of our key areas of focus in 2012 as a school was the development of productive learning relationships with students. It became more and more obvious that the natural progression from this was productive learning relationships with parents and whanau. In terms of student achievement, school – home partnership is an area that we need to develop if we are to make the most of each student's potential. In 2012 I led a project linked to one of our annual goals of raising the achievement and retention of our Maaori students. Our Year 10 Maaori students were mentored by a range of teaching staff who undertook considerable PLD to support their role. As part of the initial phase of the project I contacted each student's whanau/ family to ask for their input into the programme in terms of what they would like to see happen rather than telling them what we thought their children needed. The initial results of this contact and of the early stages of the mentoring was improved engagement for both students and whanau.

Through my learning and experiences during the sabbatical I intend to extend and develop this project based on my findings. This will, I believe, result in stronger relationships between the College and its community. It is my intention to share a range of ideas and strategies for working with communities seen during a study tour of schools in South Africa and England and to continue to implement changes which will result in improved community engagement with school

Methodology

In early 2013 I began study towards my Masters in Educational Leadership. During my sabbatical I continued my course of study with two more papers, one of which was a seminar paper exploring an area of my own personal interest, supported by the study tour of South Africa and England. The topic for the seminar paper was the engagement of community and home school partnerships for the improvement of the achievement of young people at school. The seminar paper provided the basis for the sabbatical. Requirements were a literature review of my topic and then the presentation of a seminar on the findings to the principals who were my colleagues on the study tour. The findings related to my observations of the effectiveness of

home school partnerships in both South Africa and England, my impressions from informal, anecdotal and more formal interviews with Principals and Senior Leaders in both countries as well as my observations from visits to schools in both countries. **It is important to note here that the findings from the study tour are based on my personal observations and perceptions rather than hard data. They are based on insights gained and assumptions made in a very short timeframe.**

Findings

a) Literature Review Findings

In the New Zealand context, Wylie, Thompson and Lythe (1999), in their work on the Competent Children Study lent an insight into the distinction between the types of parental involvement that may lead to improved student outcomes. More recent literature such as the Biddulph & Biddulph (2003) Best Evidence Synthesis on 'The Complexity of Community and Family Influences on Children's Achievement in New Zealand' has laid the groundwork for further exploration of home-school partnerships. Gorinsky and Fraser's (2006) Literature Review on the Effective Engagement of Pasifika Parents and Communities in Education focussed on the difficulties associated with a monocultural paradigm in education for parents of ethnic minorities, drawing on a limited field of literature in New Zealand and a wider body of international writing. Bull, Brooking and Campbell's (2008) report on Successful Home-School Partnerships and their discussion of the case studies of seven schools provides an overview of the emerging body of evidence of how effective home school partnerships are enacted in a New Zealand setting. In the last ten years the New Zealand Ministry of Education has commissioned a series of reports evaluating the success of a number of initiatives such as Tu Tangata, the Flaxmere Project and the Home-School Partnership Literacy Programme. This is accompanied by a 2008 series of ERO National Reports detailing their findings in a large number of New Zealand schools and culminating in the publication of a 'Partners in Learning' guide to good practice.

Many studies over the years have found it difficult to quantify the exact nature of how parent and community engagement impacts positively on children's learning. It is generally acknowledged that parental involvement improves attitudes to learning, attendance and behaviour in the classroom but the link between this and achievement remains elusive. Desforges and Abouchar (2003) compare this to Newton's knowledge of physics in the 16th century and add that "What we seem to lack is the 'engineering' science that helps us put our knowledge into practice." (p.90). They call for urgent action rather than waiting for 300 years to explore a field that has such potential for the improvement of children's achievement at school. However, this still remains a challenge. More recent literature such as Bull, Brooking & Campbell, (2008) acknowledges the difficulty in establishing a direct connection, "...even if data were available it would be difficult to make causal claims, given the complexity of the school context and the myriad of initiatives and strategies operating at

any particular time and possibly contributing to any measured improvement in achievement." (p.10).

In spite of this, there is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that outcomes for students are improved when parents, communities and schools work together.

In exploring the issue of home, community and school partnerships within the New Zealand context, much of the literature focuses on engaging with the parents of Maaori, Pasifika and low SES students. The evidence reveals the need to reject deficit theorising in favour of a culturally inclusive approach which treats these parents as real partners in their children's learning while empowering them to be competent in this role.

Much of the literature also identifies the need for programmes of professional learning for teachers in order to challenge preconceptions about parental engagement and avoid deficit theorising. The success of the Te Kotahitanga Professional Learning programme in shifting teacher's perceptions about their students and the resulting improvements in student achievement give weight to professional learning as an important strategy for moving forward. But this is not a new call. In the USA, Epstein & Sanders (2006) made the observation that "Despite persistent calls for new directions in teacher and administrator education to include courses on parent education, parent involvement, school and family partnerships, and community relations, most colleges and universities need to do more to prepare teachers and administrators to understand and work with students' families and communities." (p. 82)

Although there is now more evidence to support the link between parental engagement and student achievement at school there is still a largely unexplored field of study which is to do with how parental engagement can be influenced and supported by the community around them. A number of international studies have touched on the notion of the networks which are formed when parents are given the opportunity to participate in learning with other parents and how these networks can work to improve outcomes for students. The work of Epstein in the US has given a clearer focus to the nature of successful partnerships with the community but the challenge is to explore how this might be enacted in a New Zealand setting.

b) Study Tour Findings

South Africa Community Context

According to the South African Department of Basic Education General Household Survey in 2011 19% of the adult population in South Africa was illiterate – in 2009 33% of the illiterate were women. In 2011, 7% of learners attending schools were orphans – an increase from 3% in 2002. Twenty - three percent of learners had experienced violence at school. The majority (92%) had experienced corporal punishment by teachers.

In 2011, “lack of books” (6%) was reported as being the biggest problem experienced at school. Other problems cited included, classes too large/too many learners (5%), fees too high (5%), facilities in bad condition (4%), lack of teachers (3%), and poor quality teaching (3%).
(Source: DBE General Household Survey 2011)

It is not, perhaps, surprising that from my observations of schools and communities during my study tour I concluded that the South African context was characterised by extreme disparities in communities – the most notable contrast observed being between urban and rural. There also seemed to be extreme disparity between schools in terms of resourcing and facilities eg. 1700 schools without water and 700 with no toilets (Source: South African Action Plan for Education to 2014)

I also found that there was an entrenched lack of educational opportunity in black/rural communities accompanied by systems which seemed to reinforce the status quo. Examples of this were a compulsory fees system for (high) quintile 4 and 5 schools which is voted into place and set by parents, ‘top’ schools’ ability to source funding through ‘Old Boys/Girls’ associations reinforcing differences in educational opportunity. In rural areas development is also significantly hampered by a lack of infrastructure such as electricity and water to support it.

In response to reported issues such as falsification of school staffing returns and differing standards of professionalism in different areas an emerging culture of ‘accountability’ for teachers and schools is evolving. For example, a new system of required points for PLD, a 1-4 grading system for teachers, inspections and audits at short notice, teachers having to sign in and out to account for funding and so on.

In terms of the involvement of the wider community there were significant attempts made by the South African government to address disparities in school achievement such as building economic and social capital through corporate social responsibility – sponsorship and funding of schools and communities. This was not always successful; sometimes the new resources presented an unexpected financial drain on schools in terms of maintenance and infrastructure.

However, I also observed an emerging culture of higher quintile schools supporting lower quintile schools through shared PLD and resources. This was largely at the discretion of the schools but seemed to be a very promising development.

England - Community Context

While the context in England was certainly characterised by less disparity than SA there were marked still socio economic differences in communities and schools. Parents were more able to engage with education and the necessary infra structure for the maintenance and support of an education system was in place. There was also evidence of historical and continuing neo liberal policies in Education. A notable feature of the historic context was the role of Local Authorities in schooling which, to some extent, seemed to have been superseded by an emerging model of Special and Academy Schools. Funding models appeared to be very exposed to changes in government policy along with rapid education policy changes – leading to a climate of unpredictability.

In the schools we visited there appeared to be a continual refining of school targets towards external exam and test results – this was related to the public accountability of schools. Parental perceptions of good schools were often guided by results and OFSTED ratings.

There appeared to be an emerging culture and language of sport and war. For example, in reference to rapid changes of school leadership, I noted some Heads referring to themselves in terms such as as ‘football coaches’ – get results or gone. ‘Another example was ‘Top’ Heads being ‘parachuted in’ to poorly performing schools – with an expected rapid turn around in results.

There had been movement of many schools to Academy status (especially secondary schools). This was, in the schools visited, sometimes a follow on from specialist status which was associated with notable increases in funding. There appeared to be an evolving model in which academies are absorbing other schools and creating their own brand of education according to a business model. For example, an academy with two secondary schools about to set up a free school, absorb a local primary, create their own teacher training and CPD models and build their own leadership development model. This has also led to the restructuring of educational leadership as an executive role at the top of the Academy.

I visited a school in a lower socio economic community with high historical unemployment. There was a perception that parents are ‘apathetic’. This was partly because of parental response to the school's history of poor OFSTED reports and placement in special measures in terms of roll movement, which had been minimal. This was an example of a school where the Head had been ‘parachuted’ in from a successful school. The school had undergone a programme of rapid improvement over 2 ¹/₂ years. This had led to improved results and removal from special measures status. The school was now a ‘good’ school in terms of OFSTED rating.

Although there appeared to be little time to engage with the community there was a sense that in the long term this will build the social capital of the

community and they will be more able to engage with their children's education. There was, however, a strong sense of community within the school – students feel they are part of a great change and a strongly motivated staff also displayed this. There were also many of the indicators of good practice in schools in challenging circumstances. Leadership had built the sense of urgency and commitment to a shared vision to facilitate rapid change but it was very much their vision. This led me to consider whether, in a context of considerable pressure to get results a top down model of leadership translates into a top down model of engagement with the community

It was also of interest that connections between the schools in the Academy are strong – capacity building across the group through shared teacher training, CPD, staff who are enculturated into their model of successful schools.

In visiting another school which was part of the same academy I was interested to observe an awareness of the distinct characters and contexts of the schools and of the communities in which the schools exist and a notable degree of responsiveness of the model to this.

However, it is important to point out that this may not be so in other academy models. In one other visited there was a very different approach which appeared to be less responsive to the range of needs within its community.

Implications

In South Africa and England both systems are under extreme pressure to get 'results'. There is a sense of uncertainty about the shape and future landscape of education in both countries.

A top down approach from central government seems to be translated into a top down approach in schools and towards communities.

In both countries it could be said that rapid change is happening in the form of various initiatives rather than a more considered overall approach.

"often schools in difficulty are in receipt of multiple innovations; *while the cruising schools with coasting teachers who ride in the slip stream of middle class academic achievers get off scot free* (Hargreaves, 2004 p.190).

In both countries the investment in free school meals seems to be a panacea for social ills.

Both systems also seemed to share a context in which the winner or top schools (or academies?) are in competition with the rest rather than developing quality across the sector – a competitive environment rather than a co-operative one. "Schools that are performing well enjoy *earned autonomy*

while those categorised as *failing or close to failing have prescribed programmes and endlessly intrusive monitoring and inspection* (Hargreaves, 2004 p.190)."

This made it difficult to build relationships with the community which are conducive to capacity building or collaboration. This appeared to contribute to a situation where parents and communities were on the sidelines as schools struggled to cope with the political and social context.

Conclusions

In a situation of threat and uncertainty are schools withdrawing further from their communities and 'taking over' the responsibility for student achievement? Do schools have time to engage with parents in a context of rapid change and improvement? Yet the research states that "parental engagement cannot be a bolt-on extra to be successful, but has to be a central priority. Parents need to be seen as an integral part of the learning process." (Harris and Goodall, 2011, p.5)

So what does this mean for community involvement in the learning and success of its young people? Gorinski and Fraser (2006) encouraged schools to "go out to their communities rather than waiting for parents to come to them." (p.31). The empowering of a school's community was seen as a reciprocal relationship in which schools would, in turn, be empowered by their community.

However, in South Africa and England in many of the schools visited, a top down approach seems to be evident as opposed to an "outward facing strategy" (Goodall et al, 2010). A top down approach can be associated with deficit theorising. Harris and Goodall (2008) observed that "certain parents are more likely to engage in learning, while others face certain barriers, influenced by context and culture, which can be wrongly interpreted as resistance or intransigence." (p.286)

Much of the literature on effective community involvement encompasses the notion of partnership between home and school as well as the empowerment of parents as learners "While involving parents in school activities has an important social and community function, it is only the engagement of parents in learning in the home that is most likely to result in a positive difference to learning outcomes." (Harris and Goodall, 200, p.277)

However, in South Africa it seemed that the vision for the involvement of parents was more in the role of governance - the policing of schools "...when parents are not involved in overseeing the governance of a school it reduces the sense of accountability to the community among the school staff and, hence, a sense of purpose and discipline within the school" Action Plan to 2014.

In both South Africa and England in some of the schools visited, there was a sense of connection between schools and community eg. Building social capital by providing parenting courses. However, in others, some evidence of a 'circling the wagons' approach - a focus on school improvement within the context of the school with parents an external context . This led me to speculate on the notion of inward facing development in ever increasing circles?

Muijs et al in their (2010) Case Study of schools and leaders under pressure make the point that "Changes in school context and circumstances may lead schools to change emphasis somewhat (for example, a school that is put into Special Measures would be likely to start to more strongly emphasise type I elements)". Type I is a strong achievement focus. Muijs et al (2010) in an interview with a Deputy Head: "Social inclusion is about learning, because that's what our job is. We're educators, we're not social services'. This view was linked to an emphasis on social inclusion as promoting equal opportunities".

Epstein and Salinas 2004 argue for a "school learning community" which includes educators, students, parents, and community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students' learning opportunities."(p.12). With the evolution of the Academy structure in England, it is possible to speculate that eventually the benefits of improved results will permeate outwards and result in a community more empowered to engage with the education of its young people. In the wider context it is possible that it may bear fruit in terms of increasing capacity and achievement across the sector. However, it appears to be left very much to the individual Academy to determine the level of community and parental involvement.

In the New Zealand context there are some developments of concern in terms of following the direction of the UK. However, there are developments which I feel will be beneficial to the development of home school partnerships:

We still have a largely collaborative culture evolving;

There is an emerging body of evidence about good practice in parent and community engagement within the New Zealand context;

We have a parent community that will still advocate for schools and education;

Direction and leadership from a range of government and non government organisations encouraging us to connect with our parents and communities for the benefit of our students;

Research and practice such as Te Kotahitanga which encourage us to reject deficit theorising and believe that we can make a difference to student achievement and outcomes for our students and communities

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