

Avalon Intermediate School

Sabbatical Report

‘To find successful strategies in which to engage with Pasifika Communities and families in Intermediate schools in the belief that successful engagement and consultation with families alongside quality teaching will improve student learning’

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May – August 2014.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the following people who supported me to carry out my sabbatical.

- The Board of Trustees of Avalon Intermediate School.
- The Senior leadership Team at AIS in particular Deputy Principal Ariana Silao who stepped up to Acting Principal while I was away.
- The principals and staff of the schools that I visited. In particular Titahi Bay Intermediate, Papatoetoe Intermediate, Pomare School, Manurewa Intermediate and Holy Family School (Porirua)
- The Pasifika parents I spoke to from the AIS parental community, our contributing schools and local college.
- The Avalon Intermediate Parent community and wider educational community for their support during my sabbatical.

Purpose / Rationale

‘To find successful strategies in which to engage with Pasifika Communities and families in Intermediate schools in the belief that successful engagement and consultation with families alongside quality teaching will improve student learning’

Avalon Intermediate School is a decile 2 urban intermediate with a high number of Pasifika students. We draw from four traditional primary schools of which three have high Pasifika numbers. The two year intermediate window has over time made me realise that it is critical to have built a relationship with incoming families if we want to maximize the learning opportunity for students. It is also critical that the send off to college has clarity for all parties in regard to learning expectations and communication. In the two years we have students I felt we needed to look more closely at how we were engaging with Pasifika families, how could we improve what we do and what might this look like in the future.

Activities Undertaken.

I visited a number of schools with high numbers of Pasifika students and talked to Principals as well as staff working with Pasifika students. This included individual teachers as well as senior staff and teams. These discussions gave me a clear picture of what different schools were doing around engagement with both students and community. I also read a number of articles about engaging Pasifika students and parents and these have given me a greater insight into how we can better engage with our Pasifika community and students to improve learning outcomes.

Findings.

One of the first things that became very clear to me was that we have many very skilled, passionate principals and teachers who have been working alongside Pasifika families for many years positively engaging them, both around learning and school engagement. They have also been engaging with Pasifika communities meaningfully and successfully, making them a part of the school community.

I also found that when engaging with family and community four areas that may help make community engagement successful with Pasifika families include (1) Cultural celebrations, (2) A Principal address that outlines vision for parents, (3) Acknowledging achievement success and (4) Quality food! These four delivered together are a foundation to ensure Pasifika communities engage with school.

They above are not everything but they are important when dealing with Pasifika families. School charters also should have a section that will give priority to improving outcomes for Pasifika students, actions in the charter could include, “programmes and practices that foster positive cultural recognition and understanding” and “analysing and reporting Pasifika student achievement information to set specific targets” (Education Review Office, 2012).

It also became very apparent that in order to teach our Pasifika students we need to know them, (Delpit 2001, Allen, Taleni and Robertson 2008). This knowing must include having an understanding of what shapes students learning. This could include prior learning, social interactions and cultural needs. To support this in an intermediate context with short transition points we need to give students the opportunity to bring their own knowledge and ways into the classroom, students need to be able to share these with teachers and their peers from the very beginning of year 7. There is also the opportunity to start building the relationship while students are in year 6 and this can be done through relevant parent information meetings, school visits that incorporate what you are doing for Pasifika students and at cultural, arts and sports events. This early building of a relationship helps maximize the learning time as well as support the transition of students. In an intermediate context this is important with two transition points in a two year window; you cannot afford to not maximize the 80 weeks. The focus is very much on accelerating literacy and numeracy achievement (Pasifika Education Plan 2013-17) to put students in a position to gain NCEA 2 as a stepping stone to further education and employment.

Teachers also need to be aware of what “culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2000) is, and what it looks like to support Pasifika students in their learning. What does this mean? What does this look like? What are some of the key elements of culturally responsive teaching? I list some important areas to include when thinking about this and in delivering culturally responsive teaching.

1. School Environment

- Ensuring that there are meaningful displays around the school that represent the school cultures. Pasifika students work is displayed in a Pasifika context.
- Ensure that Pasifika books are available throughout the school and the library contains a collection labelled according to which Pasifika Culture.
- If possible employ good teachers of Pacific Island descent so that their experiences can be shared with Pasifika students. This also includes teacher aides of Pacific descent.

2. Interpersonal Relationships

- Know the students well, build positive relationships with them.
- Know the names of parents / caregivers so that you greet them positively.
- If possible use some Pasifika language in some way when greeting parents.
- Find out how well students can speak their first language; use these students to help and support others who may require help with English.

3. Cultural Knowledge

- Learn what the cultural values are of the students.
- Learn about their different island nations; as a teacher have some cultural background knowledge that will show students you know about their island, their culture, where they come from.

4. Understanding Achievement Information

- Be very clear about what the student data is telling you and be able to share this with Pasifika parents in a way that is meaningful and helpful to supporting students.

- Analyse the data, especially in literacy and numeracy. As a staff unpack this data and find ways to ensure that students and parents understand what is required re next steps.

5. Transition (at year 7 and 9)

- At the year 7 transition find out as much as you can about the student and family prior to them coming to intermediate school.
- Meet with families prior to school starting, outline the schools picture for Pasifika learning, find out about the families, get to know them, make parents and families feel welcome in your school.
- Ensure that transition to college is structured so that Pasifika students and families are supported and clear about what to expect when their children get to Year 9.

6. Teaching and Learning.

- Learn about your students interests and understand about the student's background.
- Include in your learning programme topics that will interest Pasifika students. E.g. look at the Tapa Cloth, how can I incorporate this into maths? Geometry, patterns. What else does the Tapa cloth tell me, what other subjects can I thread it into.
- Ensure that support programmes are in place to meet ELL (English Language Learners) needs.
- Ensure that teaching staff are able to network with other Pasifika teachers to discuss and observe good practice that can then be replicated in school.

7. Family.

- Build positive relationships with the family, get to know them, share your family stories with them.
- Value input from them, seek their point of view.
- Try to involve them in school by using the skills they have to offer. E.g. Cultural Celebrations, sports coaching, cultural events, boards of trustees, parent teacher associations.
- Build relationships around learning in a way that is understood by family so that support can be put in place at home that helps students. Work hard at putting families at ease with you as a teacher around learning.
- Look at opportunities to meet with families at different venues. Does it always have to be at school? Many Pasifika families are working

long hours and have church commitments therefore being flexible around meetings and venues are helpful to families.

8. Community.

- Find out who the key community people are in the students life. (family life)
- Acknowledge Pasifika Special day's e.g. Samoan Independence Celebrations – invite the community into school to celebrate with students.
- Make connections with the local Pasifika youth groups, churches and ministers.
- Ensure that important notices are sent home using first languages. E.g. translate them to ensure message is understood.
- Value school/community sharing. At cultural functions both the school and family bring food to share.
- Look at ways in which you can engage community around ICT. Schools have many computers that sit unused at night, look at ways of getting Pasifika parents and community leaders into school to work with computers alongside teachers. This builds confidence, builds the relationship and also supports the parents, who learn new skills, which in turn helps our students.

Student Voice:

Students spoken to made it clear that a positive relationship between the teacher and students was really important. They also indicated that the following were very important and would help support learning

- The teacher is interested in me, who I am, where I come from, knows my family. Knows about me!
- The teacher respects me and my culture. The teacher is able to talk to me about my culture, country. He/she has some knowledge about where I come from.
- The classroom is made welcoming to me with recognition of my culture displayed on walls.
- My name is pronounced properly and if not the teacher has talked with me to practice and get it right, this includes by surname.
- The teacher asks me and discusses with me how I like to learn.
- The classroom is a place that creates an environment that encourages and embraces culture. It has a safe and welcoming atmosphere.

Implications.

As a result of my sabbatical and discussion with staff we asked ourselves what more do we need to be doing to engage with Pasifika students and families. Greater consultation with our Pasifika communities was an obvious priority, using key people from the board, churches and community to support the meetings. Student voice was another area deemed important, with young adults in the middle years able to articulate their feelings and ideas well around learning. Comments like 'greet me each day', 'smile', 'ask about me' and 'engage me in my learning' made it obvious that student voice could be explored deeper. Ideas picked up like having classroom meetings every term where students attend but also bring mum, dad or an important person in their life to hear them talk about their learning have also been taken on board. We see these meetings as an opportunity to build bridges around learning alongside parents in a non-threatening environment which is student led. These meetings encourage families into school who want to hear their child talk about his/her learning. We have decided to make Pasifika Success a target area for professional development in 2015. This will see a whole school approach to learning more about how we engage with Pasifika students, what we do well, what we can improve on. The further unpacking the Pasifika Education Plan 2013-17 will also be part of this professional development.

Being involved in a local Polyfestival that involves our school, our contributing schools, local colleges and other schools in the wider area has been a very positive platform to focus on with Pasifika achievement. Our AIS students have worked hard each year on their performances and the opportunity to see what hard work leading to excellence delivers gives our students a platform to build in other areas of learning. They see what hard work can deliver; we as teachers and educators need to find the hook that will get them on board wanting to improve in literacy, numeracy and other learning areas.

Providing teachers with direct experience of another culture, in this case Pasifika culture is also a way of helping teachers make connections with students and families. (Wilson, 1987) suggests that "persons are more likely to learn from experience, when they are prepared for the experience, engage in educational activities, and evaluate the experience". In other words teachers will gain a great deal from actually placing themselves into an environment that is culturally different to theirs. E.g. visit Samoa and experience the Samoan way and bring that understanding back to the classroom and school. By doing this the teacher understanding of culture is better and the learning relationship becomes stronger.

Conclusions.

The information I gathered through my school visits, readings and discussions with parents have given me a greater insight into how challenging it is for some students and Pasifika families to confidently become part of a school community. We as educators need to be conscious and knowledgeable about good ways to engage families that make them feel comfortable and welcome in our schools. It requires time and effort to build meaningful

relationships that give Pasifika families the confidence to become fully engaged. Having highly skilled Pasifika teachers who have links to your school community is a huge asset. These teachers can open the door for families as well as engage meaningfully with Pasifika students because in many cases they have been where our students are. Highly skilled Pasifika teachers are also able to support non Pasifika teachers by working alongside them and upskilling them.

Being aware and involved with the wider Pasifika community through churches, youth groups and sports events is also a good way to build positive relationships that support the learning platform. Sharing achievement information meaningfully in a supportive setting, where parents are supported and student voice is part of the discussion is also seen as a positive engagement method.

Finally by being able to take the time to visit other schools, talk with Pasifika teachers, with Pasifika experts and read about the ways of growing successful engagement, I have myself grown. I have become more aware of the challenges that need to be faced and I now have more knowledge to meet those challenges and to continue to build positive learning relationships with all involved. The termly classroom meetings where students bring a parent or special person to share what they do in class have been particularly valuable as it is an opportunity to build relationships in a more informal environment. The positives gained from students sharing what they do are obvious to all who attend these meetings.

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