

Principal Sabbatical Report:

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Whakatane

Term 3 201

Purpose:

To investigate how low decile schools with high Maori populations develop effective home school partnerships.

To identify strategies that meet with moderate to high success in home school partnerships through interviewing principals from a variety of settings around New Zealand

To determine each schools interpretation of successful partnerships and how these schools measure success.

Background:

The notion for the sabbatical topic arose from the many professional discussions the senior management, staff and Board had had over the years as we struggled with how to better engage our community, particularly our Maori parents, in our decile 2 school with an approximately 80 percent Maori roll. We were cognizant of the thinking outlined in “The Schooling Strategy”, the “Team Up” programme, “Ka Hikitia” and “Best Evidence Synthesis” and were endeavouring to implement successful strategies at our local level.

We were already utilizing a number and variety of strategies from the informal (welcome morning teas for new families) through to more formal encounters, (curriculum demonstration evenings where the children demonstrate their learning and teachers are available for discussion and explanation) but I was interested to find out what other principals were doing to reach the hard to reach and those for whom presence rather than participation was the norm. Our school has a high number of transient students at around 35 % roll turnover annually from a roll of 300, however our rates of truancy, through a concerted and coordinated pastoral care programme, had decreased significantly from 12% to around 7 % over a period of four years.

We were pleased with this progress acknowledging that presence equals achievement – if children are not at school they are not likely, without targeted teaching, to master the strategies needed for Literacy and Mathematical achievement. We had participated in a local initiative to raise awareness amongst parents that attendance at school from enrolment is critical to educational achievement. The data gathered through a national

truancy survey had indicated that absentee rates in the first two years of school were the highest of any year levels and particularly high in the Eastern Bay of Plenty. We had experienced success in getting the attendance equals achievement message across – the next step was to consider further strategies to advance student achievement, particularly that of our Maori students. With the academic achievements of many of our students below our school and national benchmarks, the aspect of Ka Hikitia with its focus on Home School partnerships had been of particular interest to us and we had worked deliberately to increase the number and type of opportunities we provided for our parents to engage in the education, particularly the academic education, of their children.

Our thinking was if we mustered a shared understanding of what home and school were each doing and striving to achieve, this might contribute to raising the academic achievements of the lowest achieving students. The current Ministry thinking included in the 'Ka Hikitia – Managing for Success' document emphasized community engagement as one of the vital four factors in enabling Maori to experience and benefit from educational success and to improving the ubiquitous tail of low Maori achievement. The feedback obtained following the extensive consultation that took place when developing the 'Schooling Strategy' resulted in several overarching themes, one of which was 'the critical importance and role of parents, family, whānau, hapu and iwi in education'. Likewise from the BES "Home-school connections are important. School leaders can build educationally powerful connections with families, whānau and communities through their approach to home learning, and by developing strong relationships with them." (Robinson et al, 2009).

A Home School partnership for the purpose of my study was any activity which principals considered promoted opportunities for parents to become actively involved in the educational process of their children.

I was keen to find out what other schools with similar demographics to ours were doing to address the issue of whānau involvement, to challenge our current practices and to implement change where appropriate.

Methodology:

I selected twenty schools with a decile rating of two and below and with the highest Maori populations in their respective areas (as listed in the NZ Schools Directory) from five distinct regions around the country – Auckland, Eastern Bay of Plenty, Wanganui, Porirua / Hutt and Dunedin South. Schools varied in size from 104 – 400+. I made appointments to visit each school to interview the principal using the same set of questions for consistency.

Common Factors:

All schools recognized that relationship building was the key factor in engaging parents in any partnership and all worked at developing this aspect from parents' first contacts with the school - preschool liaison visits, welcoming and receptive administrative staff and accessible and cordial relationships with teachers and the principal. Personnel

training was a priority for several schools as initial impressions made a significant impact on engaging parents in later initiatives. All schools had a variety of social events built into their annual calendars with an opportunity to meet the teachers early in the year a standard approach, either with an onsite event in the city schools or a 'whole school community event' in the rural areas. The purpose of these occasions is to develop the concept of whanaungatanga and to set the tone for the duration of the relationship between parents and school. The coming together for social interaction was a purpose in itself and was a significant annual event for many schools.

The range of home school partnership opportunities offered was extensive but with similar threads, in that the major areas of involvement were centred on cultural, sporting, academic or parenting initiatives. The vast majority of initiatives are instigated by the school, driven by the principal or senior management team and delivered either at syndicate or team level, or in the junior classes often by the new entrant teacher.

There has been a marked decline in the number of formal 'curriculum' opportunities provided by schools to inform parents of classroom practice or national initiatives as in general these were poorly attended and in many cases it was felt that the outcomes did not do justice to the time and effort required to host them. However many other informal opportunities were provided either during the school day or via newsletters or websites for parents to extend their knowledge if they so wished. In several schools there was a practice of invite, wait and listen. The school does not assume there is a need but rather waits to address the need should it be requested. The concept of awahi, providing support through positive relationship building, is at the centre of all the schools' approaches to encouraging and welcoming parental involvement in schools.

Principals evaluated the success of any partnership initiatives both quantitatively and qualitatively - actual numbers or percentages of families represented at meetings or forums was one measure universally considered but so too was any interaction which developed or furthered relationships, even if the actual numbers attending were low. Principals used face to face informal contact opportunities whenever possible to gauge valuable feedback information.

It was resoundingly clear that the link between effective home school partnerships and improved student achievement was considered tenuous - just one factor in a complex network of factors. However there was generally a consensus that student engagement was likely to be higher if there was support, encouragement or involvement from whanau. The more able students were likely to succeed despite the absence of these factors while in the cases of the chronic underachievers, these were likely to be contributing factors indicative of the lack of cohesion in multiple areas of the child's life. All schools indicated they would be responsive to suggestions for any initiatives which might come from their communities for a home school partnership. However these were few and far between with only three schools indicating any community instigated initiative.

Key Observations:

I was keen to see whether there was any correlation between strong whanau links within a school and increased participation in home school partnerships and therefore indirectly on student achievement. Interestingly many schools had no idea what iwi the students were affiliated to, what the whanau connections might be and considered this to be irrelevant. It had no bearing on the way the school was structured or operated nor on the cultural strategy the schools followed. This thinking was more prevalent in bigger city schools where it was considered that the external relationships of whanau were often accidental and was true both for schools where Maori were not the dominant ethnic group and also in a school with over 90% Maori students. In other schools there were obvious whanau connections with inter generational enrolments which provided some stability to the demographic of the school but with no apparent enhanced educational achievement.

Two factors dominated the perception principals had of the most successful ways to engage Maori parents in the school. Firstly, organise events or occasions which involve the preparation and sharing of food, and secondly, provide opportunities for their children to showcase their talents or in some way be part of the gathering—cultural events, sporting encounters, parent child conferences, father and son breakfasts etc but with overwhelming presence at sporting and cultural happenings. Student participation clearly equates with parent attendance and schools capitalize on this attendance in some novel ways, frequently using it as an opportunity to explain or promote a school practice or programme. Repeatedly principals spoke of the number of parents who would attend sporting and cultural fixtures, fundraising and food festivals but who stayed away in droves from any explanatory or curriculum related events. Parents are more likely to attend the school if their children are involved in the leading, talking or sharing of their work.

Consistently principals stated that the hardest parents to engage were Maori parents, especially in schools that had Pacifica and other ethnicities as well— several suggestions for this were proffered including urbanization difficulties – parents were ill equipped to make sense of the educational and financial landscapes, social distractions including drugs and alcohol, were so busy keeping their heads above water with multiple demands on them they were not able to fit anything else into their busy lives, some were simply disinterested, and some were disadvantaged by their own negative and unsuccessful encounters with the education system.

Pacifica families were frequently perceived to have a different cultural attitude towards education, being more inclined to be seen to be ‘doing the right thing by the school’. Many principals had firm ideas on the degree to which they should pursue and focus on those who did not want to engage – most felt more was to be gained by working with those who did want to be involved rather than expending energy on the fruitless.

Celebrations of success at individual and school wide levels were emphasized and planned for and were seen as vital and encouraging links for students and whanau. The requirement to report on Maori achievement to the community was likewise addressed in a variety of creative ways, with the focus on progress made rather than the persistent

negative message of Maori underachievement. The sharing of success stories in the community through school newsletters and parent meetings was seen as a far more productive method of empowering parents to believe their children were capable of experiencing academic success than the sharing of school achievement data which emphasized the non achievement of Maori students – this data was shared only with the Ministry of Education in some schools – it was not considered appropriate to share with the community as it reinforced the message of underachievement in Maori students. ‘Controlling the narrative’ and verbally reporting to specific groups e.g. Maori one session, Pacifica another enables more in depth discussions, explanations and exploration of future pathways to occur.

Most schools noted that the academic achievement levels of those children who entered with low oral language skills took between two and four years to meet benchmarks but that regular attendance and not parent participation in home school partnerships was the influencing factor in this success. However condoned truancy and explained but unjustified absences were an ongoing concern for many schools, especially in the first two years of schooling and the focus for pastoral care teams in many schools. Poor achievement was seen as predominantly poverty, rather than an ethnicity issue.

There were two approaches evident in how principals perceived the role of the school and the role of the parent in working collaboratively to educate their children. Several schools provided breakfast clubs, free schooling materials, Duffy Books in Homes, Fruit in Schools, low or no cost outdoor education opportunities, no charges for accompanying parents etc to enable equitable access for parents and children in the educational life of the child. Others were quite clear that the role of the school was to support not replace the obligations of the parents to meet the emotional and physiological needs of their children. To this end schools would feed the hungry at lunchtime but the onus for parenting responsibilities was put firmly back on the parents. A similar pattern became apparent in the provision of sporting and cultural coaches. While some schools took on the responsibility to coach, provide transport to Saturday sporting events, provide after school activities etc, others maintained that the role of the school was more specifically on ‘education’ and in spreading their time, energy and talents too thinly the focus on the core business was lost.

Principals used innovative ways to encourage parents to respond to consultation and other surveys, often poorly responded to, including offering grocery vouchers, paying electrical bills, mobile phone bills, lucky draws and other strategies of interest to school auditors! This inevitably raised the percentage of returns to sometimes as high as 80%. Written surveys were still used by most schools but informal conversations and ‘tell us what you think’ sheets (newsprint and marker pens with a question, suggestion or idea posed for parents to respond to) placed outside a common area were effective and anonymous ways for some schools to consult and or gain feedback.

Conclusion:

After twenty principal interviews and school visits from Auckland to Dunedin, I concluded that there is an abundance of focused energy and effort expended by principals and other staff members in schools across the country in developing and sustaining relationships with parents and whanau in the expectation that this will have a positive impact on the educational outcomes for children. The approaches used are innovative, extensive and relentless! However the more I interviewed and reflected the more I began to ask a supplementary question - Since schools cannot measure the effect that these initiatives have, apart from the anecdotal evidence that greater student engagement will surely follow from increased interest and attention from a significant other, and which in turn may lead to improved student achievement, then is this a productive use of the time and energy currently being expended? If current research is believed, that the greatest factor in raising student achievement is effective teaching, then is this energy and effort perhaps not better expended in pursuing that focus area?

But then that will have to wait for another time...

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References:

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