

Sabbatical Report Term II 2017

A study of the ways in which schools and Communities of Learning in New Zealand are developing educationally powerful relationships with parents, families and whanau.

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“A school striving for family involvement often leads with its mouth—identifying projects, needs, and goals and then telling parents how they can contribute. A school striving for parent engagement, on the other hand, tends to lead with its ears—listening to what parents think, dream, and worry about. The goal of family engagement is not to serve clients but to gain partners.”

Ferlazzo, (2011).

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Executive summary

This report is on a study of the ways in which schools and COLs, develop and sustain educationally powerful relationships with parents, families and whānau to improve student achievement. The study involved visiting individual schools and COLs in New Zealand.

A particular focus of the study was to investigate ways in which schools support parents and whānau, to support students, through designing learning opportunities which can be used at home. (Page 6, ERO Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau, 2015). A further focus was the ways in which student, teacher, parent/whānau relationships to improve learning are evaluated.

There is an appetite among teachers, school leaders and COLs to strengthen engagement with parents and considerable effort being made. Schools and COLs are using a wide range of strategies to engage parents in learning (Robinson, 2011). Schools and COLs interpret 'engaging parents' differently and this leads to different approaches. This study found evidence of leaders and teachers finding ways to move from telling parents about their child to collaborating with parents about learning.

There is an opportunity to be more systematic about parent/whānau engagement and to strengthen the evaluation of these efforts. We need to grow our understanding and look for ways to strengthen leadership of effective engagement of parents/whānau in learning.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to strengthen understanding of the ways in which schools and COLs are developing 'learning-centred collaborations between students, their teachers and their parents and whānau' (Page 5, ERO Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau, 2015).

Background and rationale

This sabbatical study responds to New Zealand wide research and priorities; research and goals at Northcote College; the goals of the Northcote Community of Learning; and my belief in the importance of home-school connections focussed on learning.

I am professionally committed to strengthening home-school connections focussed on learning. These connections have the potential to improve outcomes for learners who are currently less successful or are at risk of being less successful.

This sabbatical project links directly to the Northcote College Charter and Annual Plan. The school's vision is *success for all* and as a school we have committed to all staff developing educationally powerful connections and relationships with parents, families and whānau. Two key strategies used at Northcote College which are relevant to this sabbatical project

are the Northcote College Home School Partnership Project and the school's involvement in the Northcote Community of Learning.

Home School Partnership Project at Northcote College

The Home School Partnership Project aims to raise student achievement in Mathematics and English by engaging parents effectively in student learning in these areas. This is a Teacher Led Innovation Fund (TLIF) project which builds on international research and the theses of two Northcote College teachers.

Northcote Community of Learning

The Northcote Community of Learning has agreed that strengthening parental engagement in learning is important. We have a hunch that aligning the approach to parental engagement in the learning of children in our community from early childhood through schools has the potential to improve outcomes, particularly for those most at risk of not succeeding or under-succeeding.

Current secondary school sector priorities

This sabbatical project aimed to contribute to student success through a study which involves two key current New Zealand school sector priorities:

1. Engaging parents and whānau in learning *and*
2. The development of Communities of Learning

Engaging parents and whānau in learning

New Zealand wide research and goals suggest the importance of educationally powerful relationships with parents and whānau. These are articulated in two recent Education Review Office publications; School Evaluation Indicators (2015) and Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau (2015):

'Effective schools proactively identify and draw on community resources and expertise to improve learning opportunities and student achievement and wellbeing' (Page 29, ERO School Evaluation Indicators, 2015)

'Responsive curriculum effectively incorporates connections to students' lives, prior understandings and experiences, out-of-school, drawing on, and adding to, the funds of knowledge and practices of parents, families, whānau and the community.' (Page 31, ERO School Evaluation Indicators, 2015)

The best examples of educationally powerful relationships which help students accelerate their progress and achieve success are 'learning-centred collaborations between students, their teachers and their parents and whānau'. (Page 5, ERO Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau, 2015).

'...the purpose of these relationships was to extend learning across home and school. Students then experience multiple and aligned opportunities to learn and

practise’. (Page 5, *ERO Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau, 2015*).

Communities of Learning

Significant time, energy and resources are being used to support inter-school professional learning communities in New Zealand. Improving Educational Success (IES) is the driver of COLs. COLs aim to improve outcomes for priority learners by providing a structure and resources to enhance the sharing of expertise across schools and within schools.

Methodology - activities undertaken

The study involved visiting individual schools and COLs. The schools and COLs were selected because they had a stated aim in relation to developing and sustaining educationally powerful relationships with parents, families and whānau in their Shared Achievement Challenge Plan.

Contact was made with COL leaders/principals by email. The email stated that the project was around understanding of the ways in which schools and Communities of Learning are developing ‘learning-centred collaborations between students, their teachers and their parents and whānau’ (*Page 5, ERO Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau, 2015*) with a particular focus on the ways in which schools support parents and whānau to support students through designing learning opportunities which can be used at home. (*Page 6, ERO Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau, 2015*) and the ways in which student, teacher, parent/whānau relationships to improve learning are evaluated.

Visits were made to schools in four Communities of Learning/Kahui Ako:

Manaiakalani Kāhui Ako
Whānau ki te Ako COL
Rotorua Central COL
Piritahi Kahui Ako (Blenheim)

Each of these visits involved interviews with Principals and/or COL leaders and other key staff.

Interviews were based on the following questions:

- What do you understand by the phrase ‘meaningful parental involvement’?
- In what ways do you support parents and whānau to support students’ learning at home? (*Page 6, ERO Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau, 2015*)
- What are the key things you have supported parents to know and do ‘at home’ to support learning?
- Typically, what proportion of parents are/get involved? Any differences over time? At different year levels?

- What is the key to getting parents involved?
- What has been successful and why? How do you know? How do you evaluate it?
- What has been *unsuccessful* and why?
- Can you think of any examples of parental involvement in learning at home that had negative outcomes for the learner?
- What do you plan to keep doing, stop doing, start doing?

Notes were taken during each visit. These notes were reviewed after the visit. Answers to questions were considered, ideas and patterns noted.

Findings

It was not difficult to find schools and COLs making deliberate changes to achieve greater parent/family whānau engagement in learning. Each visit revealed a rich tapestry of ideas and activities in this space. I was impressed by the enthusiasm and effort being made by individual teachers and leaders. Not surprisingly, because the visits were to schools and COLs with stated aims in this area, there is clear agreement that this work is important because it has the potential to improve outcomes for students.

The schools and COLs visited described using a variety of methods and events in their efforts to engage parents/whānau. Examples included:

Maths mornings

Literacy mornings

Art week

'Hot topic' meetings

Whānau training workshops

One-to-one parent meetings

New entrant parent meeting (parents and grandparents)

Pre-school visits

Reading Together

<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/System-of-support-incl.-PLD/School-initiated-supports/Reading-Together>

A Whānau Trainer

Curriculum evenings

Academic Reviews

Academic discussions

While most of the methods and events listed above would seem to the casual observer to be business as usual for schools, there was a change detected in *how* parents were being engaged in some schools/COLs. There was evidence of a move towards a co-constructed partnership between schools and parents/whānau. At these events efforts were made to find out what parents/whānau wanted to know and learn. There was a focus on building capacity to help improve learning. Interestingly, the difference between the events focussed on co-construction and partnership and more traditional parent involvement was not obvious from the label given to the event. It was only revealed when the event was described in detail.

A number of schools/COLs were working to strengthen parent/whānau ability to talk to their children about their learning. They did this in two ways:

1. Clearly sharing with parents/whānau (often electronically) *what* students are learning.
2. Developing parents/whānau ability to ask their children questions about the learning.

Systematic evaluation of the impact of the efforts being made to engage parents/family whānau in learning seemed less well established. A minority of leaders in this study felt confident about their evaluation processes. The strongest evidence of systematic evaluation was found where the spiral of inquiry was used by leaders in relation to their parent/whānau engagement efforts.

Schools and COLs reported good attendance rates from parents/whānau for parent/teacher interviews about their child. However, they are working harder to engage parents in other events related to curriculum and learning reporting times when staff members outnumbered parents and concern that parents are more likely to come to events related to sport, culture and the arts:

“We get five times more parents to sports events than to any curriculum evening.”

“Parents like a chance to talk about their child.”

Suggestions from the teachers and leaders interviewed for this study on how to get parents engaged in learning included the use of co-construction, having parents take part in learning activities that are similar to those experienced by their child/children, providing childcare, providing food, involving students, making approaches to individual parents, using key contacts in the parent community and making the learning enjoyable for parents.

Two sources of evidence to measure the success of parent/whānau engagement were most commonly mentioned; post event feedback surveys and records of numbers attending.

Implications, benefits, conclusions

School and COL leadership for engaging parents in learning is important.

ERO and the Ministry clearly encourage school leadership and teachers to engage parents/whānau in learning. Publications and online resources both make a case for this aim and state it as a requirement.

There is an appetite among teachers, school leaders and COLs to strengthen engagement with parents and considerable effort is being made.

School leaders keen to clarify their thinking and strengthen their leadership in this area might well read (or re-read) pages 133-142 of Viviane Robinson’s excellent book, *Student-Centred Leadership* (Robinson, 2011). I recommend this extract to any school leader

interested in understanding why engaging parents/whānau in learning is important and how we might strengthen our efforts in this area.

Similarly, the Leadership Best Evidence Synthesis is worth revisiting when aiming to improve engagement with parents/whānau.

What kind of connections make a difference?

- *In general, the largest positive effects were found when schools – usually in association with an external researcher – developed the capacity of parents to support the children’s learning through programmes that were designed to teach them specific skills (for example, the skills that promote reading and language development).*

- *Joint parent/whānau and teaching interventions had the highest overall effect size (1.81). These reflected interventions that were designed to help parents or other community members support children at home and school, and that simultaneously provided teachers with professional development.*

- *Professionals, family, whānau and community members are taught how to use smart tools and their learning is systematically evaluated. The evaluations help the researchers refine the tools and ensure that the accompanying processes support effective, independent use of the tools at home and at school.*

- *The success of school-whānau connections, and the learning designed to support them, is dependent on the mahi tahi (collaborative) processes that foster relational trust.*

- *Helping to propagate a supportive and collective whānau-approach to parenting - parents and teachers a deliberate focus - paralleling the children’s learning - and by creating effective models for facilitating adult learning.*

- *School leaders have an important role in aligning interventions with parents and teachers as such interventions promote the kind of home-school and community learning that enables effective educational connections.*

- *Design characteristics that appear to be important include:*

- *having learning as a primary focus*
- *providing parents with information and training (for example, modelling and reinforcing appropriate strategies) that enhance their skills in a specific curriculum area*
- *supplying materials for use at home*
- *helping families / whānau access resources such as books*

- *raising families / whānau awareness of the benefits of working with their children*
- *aligning school-home practices so that whānau and parents' actions support school learning, raising whānau and parents' expectations for their children's achievement*
- *helping to propagate a supportive and collective whānau-approach to parenting.*

Source: <https://kep.org.nz/module-8/5-key-messages-from-chapter-7-school-leadership-bes>

Implications for the Northcote Community of Learners

In 2018 the Northcote Community of Learners is prioritising engaging parents in learning. We are planning for term by term, level by level, across COL workshops for parents and teachers. The workshops will allow collaboration with parents around supporting learner success by promoting a positive disposition to learning. These workshops are designed to build an educational partnership (Robinson, 2011) through collaborative experiences which give parents and teachers new opportunities to share knowledge and influence one and others' decisions and actions. It is planned for these workshops over time to become a feature of the Northcote community.

Further research

More research is needed into the parent engagement activities undertaken by teachers, schools and COLs. There would be benefit from more NZ based research in this area. We need to grow our understanding and look for ways to strengthen leadership of effective engagement of parents/whānau in learning. It would be great to develop a New Zealand framework for effective engagement of parents/whānau in learning which could be used to strengthen and understand actions that are already embedded in our practice and develop new actions to improve outcomes for students.

It would helpful to have a national survey of parents to collect their views on effective engagement in learning. I note that there are NZCER surveys to collect student voice and teacher/school leader voices but not parent/whānau voice.

There is evidence that some teachers are personally anxious about parental engagement. Addressing this is a leadership and professional learning opportunity for school leaders and an issue for initial teacher education.

Finally, there would seem to be potential for greater use of the spiral of inquiry to be used in relation to parental engagement by individual teachers, schools and COLs.

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