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Marina View School
Sabbatical Report
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Investigate opportunities to enhance educational practice by exploring how to develop educationally powerful connections with parents and whānau to lift student achievement.

Acknowledgements

Schools have become increasingly complex communities and organisations. Marina View is a large, diverse and very busy place to be. Often, the day to day demands of leading and managing this school, takes priority over spending quality time thinking through, reading about and reflecting upon, curriculum and pedagogical issues which I am passionate about.

Being given the opportunity to engage with ideas, with other principals in discussions about innovative practices and to share and reflect on my own experiences and practices, has enhanced my own professional leadership. It I believe will in turn assist my Board of Trustees, school leadership team and all staff members in achieving the vision we have for our school.

My thanks to the Ministry of Education and NZEI for their combined foresight and wisdom in establishing this award as part of the Principals' Collective Agreement.

Thanks for the support offered to me by the Board of Trustees of Marina View School which enabled me to accept this opportunity to enhance my practice.

Thanks also my Deputy Principal's Cara Bergin-Stuart and Jill Dyet and the leadership team who led the school so capably during my time away. It's a great supportive team we have.

He waka eke noa.

Purpose

The purpose of the sabbatical was to develop a fuller understanding of educationally powerful connections, the conditions that create such connections, the current state of connections at Marina View and how we can strategically plan further developments and enhancements to what we do.

Rationale and Background Information

I have had interest in the area of developing partnerships between home and school for a number of years. It extends my thinking and our school's developments that followed my sabbatical study in 2011 when I had an opportunity to investigate *'how schools can maximise the potential of students reporting on their progress and achievement in ways that can enhance learning and strengthen the learning partnership between home and school'*.

My interest was further stimulated when reading the Education Review Office Report 'Educationally Powerful Connections with Parents and Whānau' (2015). Poignant to me was the statement: "Parents, families and whānau want their children to feel they belong at school and experience success. They want to be involved in their child's learning – to understand what is expected and to know how they can contribute" (ERO, 2015: 5).

Looking further at home and school connections I came across the following statement. "Parents and whānau are the primary and ongoing influence on the development, learning, wellbeing and self-efficacy of their children. So it is important that schools engage with them and involve them in school activities, particularly those that are focused on learning" (ERO, 2016: 16)

Both statements ring true. I reflected on how my own school creates a climate where we both support parents to be engaged with their children's learning and how we develop partnerships between home and school that support enhanced outcomes for students.

I felt that we have put a lot of effort as a school into establishing strong and positive relationships with our community and I felt confident that there is a positive and supportive partnership between home and school. I was not so sure however, how strategically we had created systems and structures in our school that involve parents as partners so they feel able to support their children in ways that will enhance their child's learning. It is this area of developing not just positive, but inclusive, educationally powerful connections that I wished to explore to support our school's continuing growth.

I believe that the potential of home and school partnerships is under-realised and that learnings in this area of practice have the ability to impact, not just Marina View School, but the wider New Zealand educational sector.

Activities Undertaken

The sabbatical gave me a valuable resource, the resource of time. Time without the intense interactions that constantly take place within the day to day of school life. Having this resource I was able to read widely and deeply, to discuss the concept of educationally powerful partnerships with colleagues, to reflect on practice and possibilities for enhancing outcomes for my school community (students, family and whānau and teachers). This allowed me to develop clarity about next steps for the

school to support the ongoing development of a strong and productive partnership between home and school.

Findings

Current literature about powerful home and school partnerships

Educationally powerful partnerships are relationships between; schools, parents, whānau and communities that improve outcomes for students (ERO, 2015).

There is a growing pool of information and research regarding the impact of home and school partnerships on student achievement. There is increasing evidence demonstrating that genuine collaboration and engagement between school and home can significantly lift children's academic achievement (Alton-Lee et al., 2009). In fact the New Zealand Ministry of Education currently states that there is unequivocal evidence that this is so (MOE, 2018).

New Zealand schools have had a long tradition of friendly and supportive relationships with parents and whānau but this does not in turn mean that they have been educationally powerful and therefore had optimal impact on outcomes for learners (ERO, 2015).

There is more information if we expand the definition of successful partnerships to include; a shared commitment between home and school, a shared understanding of the purpose and roles of the partnership, and where the partners are positive about the perceived benefits to students learning from a partnership (Buck et al., 2008). Recent research and (New Zealand) case studies provide insights into the conditions and strategies that support and enhance outcomes for students (ERO, 2015).

The research outlines a number of characteristics that have been identified as underpinning home and school partnerships that impact positively on valued student outcomes.

Genuine learning partnerships

Successful home-school partnerships are goal orientated and focused on learning (Buck et al., 2008). They genuinely involve all; parents, children, teachers and value the input of each and have clear expectations of each.

The partnership needs to go beyond schools' communicating one-way and just informing parents, where the school is in control of the information and the decisions regarding students learning. The current predominance of one way transference of information between school and home needs to shift to a more two way process (Redding, 2000). "In some schools, working with parents and whānau needs to shift from the view of 'teachers know best' or 'parents don't have the time' to one of mahi tahi – deliberate two-way collaborative relationships focused on providing students with extended learning opportunities and increasing their educational success." (ERO, 2015: 8).

There needs to be more movement to partnerships that are collaborative and mutually respectful, where control and power is shared in the decision making process

(Biddulph and Biddulph, 2003; Buck et al 2008; ERO, 2015; ERO, 2018) and where there is a climate of openness and trust that is supported by appropriate communication strategies. (Bull et al, 2008; ERO, 2015, 2018; MOE, 2018).

Parents' ideas need to be listened to and valued. "Parents and whānau are children's first and most important teachers" (ERO, 2015: 9). Engagement between schools and parents, whānau, and communities is strongly influenced by the extent to which school personnel and parents believe in and value partnerships that share responsibility for children's learning and well-being. Developing common understanding and expectations of the benefits of engagement and the challenges involved is integral to successful partnerships.

Whakawhānaungatanga is central to successful partnerships. Making connections and building relationships develops a sense of community and the relational trust that is crucial to successful outcomes for our students and schools (Berryman 2014). Schools need to take time to ensure parents feel valued as partners through listening more to parents and inviting and involving parents in ongoing developments for the school community.

Schools need to not just be open to the voice of the community, but they also need to be prepared to act upon that voice. They need to be prepared to do this even when the community may see differing needs for themselves and their children. "If schools genuinely allow whānau to be self-determining, then they need to be open to the possibility that Māori communities might not necessarily want what the school is offering" (Berryman, 2014: 16).

Accessibility and proactive visibility is important. The concepts of 'he kanohi kitea' (the seen face) along with 'kanohi ki kanohi' (face to face) are reminders for the school to be amongst the community and that it is important to interact with the community in an ongoing manner. Such presence will help the development of relational trust throughout the school community. The earlier that relational trust is established the more secure both teachers and families feel about sharing information. It is important therefore that strong partnership based relationships with families and whānau need to be established early, right from the time children start at school.

In powerful learning partnerships questions from parents were not perceived as a challenge to the teacher or school's capability, but rather as assisting ongoing and healthy collaboration to achieve enhanced outcomes for students.

Involving parents in their child's learning

Successful partnerships with family and whānau involve parents in their child's learning and where parents develop knowledge and understanding of what is happening at school. Schools need to value parents as children's first teachers and as partners (ERO, 2018).

Strategies that promoted parents involvement in their child's learning included

- Face to face learning conversations that included parents, teacher(s) and student
- Regular and honest sharing of achievement and progress information

- Parents developing a greater understanding of their child's goals/learning and next steps
- Valuing parental voice in developing a greater understanding of students as learners and people
- Schools supporting parents to develop a deeper understanding new teaching practices
- The use of technology to give more 'real time' and authentic, evidence based, feedback on students' progress and achievement
- Parents being asked for feedback on a regular basis, and this feedback being valued and acted upon
- Encouragement of greater parental presence at school so they feel welcomed as part of the school community and develop a fuller understanding of what happens at school
- Parents being fully informed about, and included in, specific interventions targeted at accelerating students' progress
- Comprehensive information shared between school and home to enable parents to support their child's learning at home

(ERO 2015, ERO 2018)

An evaluation in 2007 of two hundred schools in New Zealand by the Education Review Office found that where partnerships between home and school needed strengthening, parents suggested that schools could start by:

- Improving the timeliness and regularity of feedback and information, especially in relation to children's progress and achievement
- Providing more opportunities for participation and involvement
- Supporting and promoting the culture of students through dance, music, sports, and language programs and activities
- Providing information about how to become involved in the school
- Offering sufficient time for interviews/conferences
- Reporting on children's progress in language that can be easily understood
- Being open and listening to parents' views
- Finding ways for parents, families, and whānau to lead activities and events, especially for other parents and their children
- Having high expectations for all children

(Mutch and Collins, 2012)

The value of differentiated approaches

It is important to have differentiated approaches to working with parents (Biddulph and Biddulph, 2003; ERO, 2018). Successful home-school relationships are multidimensional and responsive to community needs (Buck et al., 2008). Parental engagement in their children's learning can be limited when there is a narrow focus in home and school interactions (MOE, 2018). Currently, information sharing in many schools is constrained by the requirement to report twice a year in writing. This can limit meaningful joint decision making about how to increase and enrich the opportunities for learning at home, and at school. (MOE, 2018). Connection and partnerships should grow from developing ongoing and authentic opportunities to share and engage around students learning.

Differentiated approaches to engagement may include;

- Partnerships with the whole school community
- Partnerships with specific/targeted groups of parents (using a specific learning goal as context adds to the power of the engagement to assist in enhancing student outcomes).
- Contact can be made through both face to face interaction and the use of Technology.
- Teachers working closely with parents of students who needed to accelerate their progress
- Inviting parents into the classroom to see learning in action
- Informing parents of resources to support learning that can be utilised at home
- Sharing information and resources with parents

Partnerships with the wider community (Iwi / Hapu)

All schools have a social contract and a duty to promote the principles of the partnership, protection and participation in serving their community and developing strong and productive partnerships with iwi, hapu and whānau.

Research noted that schools need to work closer with Māori whānau and to support them to be actively involved in the decision making processes (Bonne & Hotere-Barnes, 2015). There is a need for schools to work alongside Māori whānau to develop partnerships that are based on mutual respect, understanding and shared aspirations. Researchers have identified four principles that are important when engaging with Māori communities: identify who you are, build relational trust, listen to communities, and respond accordingly, and undertake relationships in a culturally responsive manner (Berryman, 2014).

The *Ka Hikitia* strategy (Accelerating Success 2013–2017) articulates that productive partnerships can develop through a range of strategies including:

Ako – a two-way teaching and learning process. Ako is a dynamic form of learning where the educator and the student learn from each other in an interactive way. Ako is grounded in the principle of reciprocity and recognises that the student and whānau cannot be separated.

Understanding that identity, language and culture count. Students do better in education when what and how they learn builds on what is familiar to them, and reflects and positively reinforces where they come from, what they value and what they already know. Māori students are more likely to achieve when they see themselves, their parents, whānau, hapū, iwi and community reflected in learning and teaching.

Successful Partnerships are embedded in school development plans

Successful partnerships do not just materialise. They develop from careful planning and commitment to see goals realised. Specific initiatives to enhance students' educational outcomes need to be identified and then implemented in an explicit and strategic manner.

- Schools need to develop deliberate and strategic plans to develop educationally powerful partnerships (ERO 2015, 2018).

- Possible barriers to developing powerful partnerships need to be identified and actions undertaken to overcome these barriers
- To be successful development plans and actions need to be well resourced and regularly reviewed (Buck et al., 2008).
- Like many development strategies growing powerful partnerships takes time and commitment (Buck et al., 2008)

Reflection and Review of current practice

Our school currently has a wide range of ways that we communicate and engage with families and whānau. We meet with parents face to face and we utilise technology to try and connect and inform in increasingly authentic ways. There is a lot of communication and engagement between school and families and whānau. All this helps to build a healthy and productive partnership between home and school. This is a strong base for further development.

Over the twelve months prior to my sabbatical our school collected a range of data that I was able to take time to analyse carefully to develop an understanding of where we are at regarding our partnership with our community, family and whānau.

Data included:

- Community consultation survey of whānau
- Teachers, home and school communication survey
- Student wellbeing survey
- Māori whānau meetings
- Korean family meetings
- Chinese family meetings
- Individual teams surveying parents about best ways to communicate
- Individual teams surveying students
- Education Review Office external review (June 2018)

Strategic Planning

The school has started to include engagement between school and whānau in the school's Charter and Strategic Planning. In the 2018 Annual Plan there is a stated strategic goal to 'Develop educationally powerful connections with parents and whānau'. There is however no stated long term strategic goal outlining this strategy. To have a clearly stated long term strategic goal would support the school undertaking long term planned developments that can then be monitored, reviewed and enhanced.

Relationship and partnership development

The data which included voice from families, whānau, teachers and students shows that there is an overall sense of positivity regarding the relationship between home and school and the positive partnerships that have already been developed.

Meetings with family and whānau groups (Māori, Korean, and Chinese) have been part of the home and school interactions for a number of years now. These hui give us an opportunity to share ideas and information and over time have led to a good

bond and information sharing between the school and various groups within the community.

The information gathered through surveys gave rich information. The school and individual teachers have communicated and inquired in ways that showed they will listen to and value the views offered. All involved were open in sharing. The vast majority of parents were very confident to engage with the school and felt listened to. Parents indicated that they appreciate the way technology can be used as a quick and effective way to share information. Amongst the suggestions to enhance communication, there were a number of parents who said they would like to be better informed about the curriculum and classroom teaching. The information shared through the surveys will inform changes in practice at a macro level and micro level. I have already seen teaching teams actively reflect on feedback from parents and make adjustments to their practice. Further refinement of practice needs to be planned at a strategic school wide level.

The surveys showed that there is a real preparedness of both teachers and parents to engage. I feel that there is still, however, an uncertainty of how to engage in ways that are open, supportive, respectful, rigorous, trusting and focused on enhanced educational outcomes for students. Engagement of any kind is scary. It makes us vulnerable. In taking action we must understand and accept this vulnerability and plan actions that support both whānau and teachers to develop strong, trusting and inclusive partnerships.

Learning focused engagement

Learning is regularly shared through a digital reporting system, where both home and school can see evidence of students work and teachers comments on achievement, progress and next steps. There is great potential for this communication process to keep a shared focus on students learning progressions and the development of learning dispositions. There is further potential for students to upload evidence and evaluation of their own learning.

We currently have goal setting meetings involving; parents, students and teachers and also 3 way learning conferences mid-year. These meetings have been undertaken for a number of years now. We are however still to maximise the potential of these interactions. Further professional learning around; assessment for learning, developing student agency and relationship based learning would assist next steps. Some parents (not many, but enough) are yet to understand the rationale and potential of these meetings to collectively support learning, and have fed back that they would prefer teacher and parent meetings without student involvement. There appears a need for learning and growth for all involved (parents, students and teachers) to realise the potential of this significant area of practice. This I believe is an area to target as an immediate development initiative.

The school has been investigating (and realising) the value of Student Learner Profiles to help develop a fuller picture of our learners and help us get to know the children

better. The profiles rely on dialogue between teacher and students and they assist students to have 'voice' about themselves and their learning.

There are a number of students who have individual education plans that are constructed between teachers and parents (with support from specialist staff). Goals are monitored by teachers and parents at regular intervals.

Specific interventions such as Accelerating Learning in Literacy (ALLs) have been trialled. This intervention was found to enhance home and school engagement and enhance student outcomes. It was however very energy demanding and time intensive and because of this difficult to sustain. Variations on this initiative, looking at acceleration of learning in literacy and mathematics, have also been trialled.

Professional learning

The school has culturally responsive practice and developing student agency as priority professional learning and development goals. A leadership group of ten in 2018 collectively undertook learning through Core Education's online programme 'Te Whakamānawa – Culturally Responsive Practice in School Communities'. This has helped to gain greater insights into how to make connections with Māori whānau in our community.

All teachers participate in professional learning groups (using the spiral of inquiry format) that have understanding of their learners as central to their inquiries and together support each other to investigate ways to enhance the progress of the students who are the focus of the inquiries. One of the professional learning groups has as its focus, an inquiry into developing educationally powerful partnerships between home and school.

A greater understanding of student agency with strengthen the learning conversations and learning partnerships between home and school.

The professional learning and development undertaken so far has helped build collective teacher efficacy. This collective capacity in teachers assists with the ability to engage in open and regular communication with parents.

Relationships with iwi mana whenua

The school has made contact with iwi mana whenua and we look to growing our relationship with a focus on how we can support iwi mana whenua through our engagement. We see this as setting the foundations for a long term mutually supportive relationship.

Implications and Ongoing Actions

In reviewing the school's current practice it is clear that there are a wide variety of ways we engage with families and whānau. Many of these connections have supported the development of positive and productive partnerships and some have

specifically targeted enhanced educational outcomes. These connections are valued by both home and school. They create a foundation of relational trust that will support further connections and developments.

It is apparent that while there are many connections, what we have been doing has evolved rather than developed as part of a planned strategy for engagement.

Both parents and teachers value the multiple ways that we currently communicate and engage however they also both believe that the partnerships between home and school could be further developed and enhanced.

Parents are a valuable resource and support for teachers. As a school and as teachers we need to ensure that we have a strong shared belief that parents be seen as partners. It must be beneficial to our students learning if home and school develop a joint understanding of students' learning goals and their next learning steps.

Ways to authentically share and engage with a focus on students' learning need to be further investigated. Our school has already adopted a student management system that has the ability to engage student, teacher and whānau in, we believe, a more authentic evidence based way of communicating. It gives a digital alternative to the twice a year written report. We have still to realise the potential it has to be more real time and multi authored. This and other digital reporting options need further investigation.

Student voice and participation is an important part of developing an engagement strategy. Understanding our learners' views and needs will help build strong learning focused relationships. It also helps to make connections and build relationships with families and whānau.

Specific initiatives that we believe will have significant impact on student outcomes need to be included in the school's strategic planning then be methodically implemented and their impact reviewed.

Significant professional learning should be undertaken to support this strategic initiative. This development needs to be a long term, not a short term, strategy.

Next steps

Strategic Planning

Including the goal of 'enhancing learning partnerships with families and whānau' as part of the school's Strategic and Annual Plans so that planned initiatives and actions are undertaken and monitored.

Community Engagement Strategy

A priority next step is the development of a Community Engagement Strategy for the school so we can be strategic, and knowledgeable, about the various engagement

initiatives and activities that take place. The engagement strategy will be an overview of initiatives and actions undertaken that connect home and school. Through this tool we will clearly see what we are currently doing and target what we believe will have the most impact on developing positive and educationally powerful partnerships with family and whānau.

Specific short term initiatives

Short term initiatives to be implemented to enhance partnerships

- Enhancing digital communication around students' progress and achievement as a tool to enhance home and school communication and engagement
- Developing as a community, collective understanding of the educational value of three way goal setting and student led conferences
- Developing student agency to support and enhance the above interactions
- Teacher professional learning and development foci
 - Culturally responsive practice
 - Collaborative inquiry
 - Student agency
- Consolidating our relationship with iwi mana whenua

Ongoing review

Further development of home and school partnerships will be an ongoing and iterative process. It will require regular review and enhancement. Having the initiatives included into the strategic and annual planning process will help ensure that review will take place in a regular and considered manner.

Conclusions

Strong partnerships between home and school both sustain a positive school community and enhance students' educational outcomes. They are crucial to realising the vision of the New Zealand Curriculum and our School's Charter.

To create sustainable long term and educationally powerful partnerships between home and school there needs to be a multifaceted approach to engagement and a strong focus on shared responsibility to support students' learning. Schools need to be proactive in leading this engagement in a planned, proactive and inclusive manner.

Mahi Tahi will lead to positive outcomes for our students. It is important to develop community wide shared beliefs about the strengths of partnerships and collective efficacy about the ability to, together, positively impact on our students learning. It is important to value parents and their role in the partnership. "The way leaders and teachers valued and worked with parents is key. Teachers did not just talk to parents; they worked with parents who could then fully contribute to their child's learning" (ERO, 2018: 6)

In addition to developing powerful partnerships with parents and whānau, the development of partnerships with iwi and hapu will contribute to enhanced student

outcomes. Both schools and iwi/hapu need practical support to develop these relationships and this should become a priority strategic issue for our educational leadership groups and organisations, including the Ministry of Education. This should be seen as a treaty partnership issue and should be well resourced.

Having had the ability to think deeply around this area of practice and return to school refreshed has led to an enhanced enthusiasm and self-efficacy towards the developments required to make positive change and enhance the educational partnership between home and school.

Positive and productive school communities lead to a healthier wider community.

Naku te rourou nau te rourou ka ora ai te iwi.

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