Families and Communities Engagement in Education

Project 2—Notions of partnership

Working Paper No. 1

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2009

Background

In recent years, there has been an increasing emphasis on engaging families and communities in education. *The New Zealand Curriculum* includes "community engagement" as one of eight principles that "should underpin all school decision making" (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9). In New Zealand, as well as overseas, schools are being encouraged to work "in partnership" with families. The underlying assumption, both in New Zealand and overseas, seems to be that parental involvement in education is a good thing, and the more it happens, the better it will be for student outcomes. However, our work at the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER), and our reading of the international research literature, has made it clear to us that the *purpose* of engaging families and communities in education is often not obvious. There seem to be two quite different rationales put forward in discussions of parent involvement/engagement/participation/partnerships.[1] In the first of these rationales, home–school partnerships are seen as an important way to bring schools and their communities closer together, and to facilitate democratic participation by communities in debates about the future focus and purpose of schooling. In the second view, partnerships are seen as useful strategies for lifting student achievement.

Given the current emphasis on family and community engagement in education, in a context in which the empirical evidence supporting the efficacy of "home–school partnership" initiatives in raising student achievement is, at best, patchy,[2] we think it is important for school leaders to think carefully about *why* and *how* they should promote closer home–school relationships. There are many examples in the research literature, including our own research, that suggest that home–school partnerships, in their usual form, are unlikely to result in equitable, strengths-based partnerships if they are not accompanied by support for teachers (and others) to think clearly about the *purpose* of the

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[1] These terms are used interchangeably in the literature, which further confuses the matter.
[2] This lack of robust data does not mean that home–school partnerships are not a good thing, just that studies in this area have not, as yet, been designed to show clear effects on student achievement.

partnerships. For example, if the organisers of a school parent evening think that their aim is to encourage families to incorporate school-like practices into their homes, the focus of the session will be quite different from, for example, a session designed to allow families and schools to bring their respective skills and expertise together to optimise students' learning opportunities. If the intention is to develop strengths-based partnerships, both parties need, at the very least, a shared understanding of the purpose of the interaction, and their respective roles in it.

In 2008–2009 we carried out a small exploratory research project that aimed to find out what some parents and teachers thought about community engagement. We were interested in how they saw their roles; in what they thought students should learn in schools; and their views on who should decide how learning—and schooling in general—should be organised. This working paper describes what we found.

What we did

In the 2008–2009 study we interviewed the principal, some teachers and some parents in four schools. Two were urban primary schools (one decile 10, one decile 1), and two were urban secondary schools (one decile 9, one decile 8). The teachers we interviewed were selected by the principals of the schools involved, and the parents were contacted through the schools. The interviews with principals and teachers were all done face to face in the school setting. Some parent interviews were done face to face, while others were by phone. Twelve parents involved with one secondary school were interviewed, while three connected with the other were interviewed. Four parents were interviewed at each of the primary schools.[3] In addition, we collected examples of newsletters and other information produced by the schools for parents. We collated all this information and wrote reports for each school, summarising the main ideas from the interviews and raising questions to think about.

What we found out

All parents interviewed said that they were happy with their current level of involvement in their children's education. Nearly all said they were *not* currently very involved in the school, and nor did they want to be.

The views of teachers and parents about what was important in education were closely aligned. Parents and teachers in all four schools agreed that a strong "sense of self" and a love of learning were important outcomes of education. Most said that functional literacy and numeracy were essential.[4] At both secondary schools, teachers and parents both thought that gaining academic qualifications was important; however, they also felt that students needed to be exposed to a broad curriculum.

Parents and teachers also had similar views about the role of teachers. Teachers were seen largely as "facilitators" of learning. Both teachers and parents said the teacher's role was to "implement the

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[3] These numbers are obviously small, and it is possible that these parents' views are not representative of those in their communities. Examples of the questions we asked are included in the appendix.

[4] At one secondary school this was not mentioned; however, it cannot be concluded that this group doesn't think literacy and numeracy are important—they just didn't mention it.

curriculum" and to ensure that *all* students had effective learning programmes. "Nurturing" was considered important for teachers of younger students, and both parents and teachers of secondary-age students thought it was essential that teachers were passionate about their subject areas, and that they were good role models.

Teachers, both primary and secondary, thought that a critical aspect of the parental role was to talk to their children about what they were doing at school. Parents, on the other hand, had a range of views about their roles in relation to their children's education. Some thought that they were primarily responsible for their children's education and that the school only played a minor role, while others saw the school as being totally responsible for their children's education. All parents talked about the importance of providing resources for their children to support learning. They also thought it was important to show their children that they valued education. Several parents, particularly at the secondary level, talked about their role as being advocates for their children. Also at the secondary level, several parents said it was important to take a more "hands-off" approach as their teenage children learnt to be more responsible for themselves. (Interestingly, some secondary teachers felt parents gave their children too much responsibility too soon.)

At two of the schools (one primary school and one secondary school), the parents said they relied on talking to their children to find out about what they were learning at school. In general, parents wanted clear and easy channels of communication with the school, accurate information about their children's progress and information about school programmes in general.

Everyone we interviewed thought that decisions about curriculum and teaching practices were best made by teachers (because that is their area of professional expertise). However, they were also clear that the views of parents should be sought and listened to. Many interviewees (both parents and teachers) said that teachers should be able to justify the decisions they made, and be able to communicate these effectively to parents. At two schools, teachers thought that their role was to decide on the concepts to be taught, but the community could play an important role in suggesting suitable, locally relevant contexts to develop these concepts.

Several parents thought community decision making was impractical. At two schools, both parents and staff said that there was a choice of schools in the area, and if parents did not like the way things were done at the school they could move their children to another school. Some parents, however, thought it would be good to have more input into "noncurriculum" decisions ("healthy food" policies and the school ball were two of the examples given). At three of the four schools, parents said that the elected members of the board of trustees were supposed to represent their views when decisions were being made, but, as they saw it, this didn't happen in practice (however, they weren't particularly concerned about this).

To summarise then: this small study of teachers' and parents' views of community engagement shows that, in the communities studied, teachers and parents appear to have similar views of the purpose of education, and their respective roles in this. Parents were generally happy with their current, relatively passive, involvement in their children's formal education. Staff and parents agreed that decisions

about teaching and learning should be made by staff, but that the views of parents should be considered and the reasons behind decisions should be made explicit to parents. In short, the parents and teachers we interviewed were happy with the "status quo".

Things to ponder further

The academic literature in this area suggests that, if we are to continue to develop and prosper as a nation, we need to think differently about schools and what they do, but also about how and why our public services in general should be provided.[5] Some commentators in the field (for example, Reid, 2007) argue that community participation in debates about the ways in which education contributes to the public good is an important part of democratic life. If we accept this, then, given the findings of the project described here, it would seem that it is important to put time and effort into working with teachers, parents and the wider community to think differently about education and to think differently about the roles of each of these groups in bringing about change. These groups need opportunities to access, think about and debate ideas about education and democracy and the relationship between them in 21st century society.

Reid (2007) suggests that a capabilities-based approach to curriculum makes it possible for communities to discuss the basic capacities needed by all citizens, while at the same time leaving decisions about how, and through what "knowledge contexts", these are best developed to professional educators. While this is the approach taken in *The New Zealand Curriculum*'s emphasis on "key competencies" (Ministry of Education, 2007), it seems unlikely that these signals will, on their own, be enough to reshape the relationship between schools and their communities. Doing this would require deeper thinking by all involved about questions such as: Why do we have a state-funded education system? How is (or isn't) the current system meeting our collective needs? What might need to change and why?[6] In the project described here, some teachers told us they felt inadequately prepared to work with parents, and certainly none of the parents expressed a view that they wanted to take an active role in shaping the curriculum.

The challenge, then, is how to go about engaging schools and their communities in these discussions. We know from previous research that parents are often more willing to engage in discussion about education when they can see how it relates to their individual children.[7] Could this be a starting point for involving families in educational debate? What "levers" might encourage all members of the school community (teachers, parents and the wider community) to think differently about education? How can we get communities talking about what is important in education? Who are the best people

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[5] See, for example, *Re-imagining Government: Putting People at the Heart of New Zealand's Public Sector*, by Simon Parker and Duncan O'Leary (2006).

[6] Teachers in another recent project were surprised at how little they had previously thought about the purpose of a state-funded education, even though they worked within the system. See Bull (2009) for more details.

[7] See, for example, Bull, Brooking and Campbell (2008).

to facilitate these discussions? What sort of input is necessary? These are all questions that we need to explore further if we seriously want to reduce disparity *and* develop successful 21st century learners.

References

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Appendix

Interview schedule for parents

Contextual information about family

1. Can you tell me a bit about your family?

   - How many children have you got? How old are they?
   - What schools do they go to? How did you decide where to send them to school?

What do you want for your child from school?

2. What are the most important things you want your child to get out of school?

3. How well do you feel the school knows your child?

4. Does the school value the same things that you do?

5. What would success at school look like for your child? Is this the same for all children? All ages?

Whose responsibility is education?

6. How do you see your role in your child's education?

7. What is the role of the teachers/ school?

8. Who should make the decisions about what happens at school? Who should decide what students learn?

Current involvement

9. Do you talk with teachers or other school staff about what your child is learning and why it is important? Do you think it is important to talk to staff? Why/why not?

10. How are you currently involved in your child's school?

    - Volunteering, parent information evenings, parent/teacher interviews, watching sports/ productions etc, Board of Trustees, PTA, read newsletters etc

Changing views of education

11. How has society changed since you were at school?

12. How does your child's schooling compare with your own?

13. What do you think the purpose of education should be?

14. How well does our current education system achieve this? Why do you think this?