English-medium schools engaging whānau

Building relationships, creating spaces

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KEY POINTS

The experiences of professional learning and development facilitators suggest that the following approaches can help school leaders and teachers to strengthen whānau engagement:

- use a variety of ways to draw whānau into school, providing physical and cultural spaces to enable this
- use a variety of ways to take school to whānau, such as student–whānau inquiry and building a te reo Māori digital community
- demystify achievement data with whānau
- try various modes of communicating with whānau, until an agreed medium of communication is established
- as part of building respectful relationships, learn who their school's whānau are and where they are from.

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English-medium schools' inclusion of whānau Māori aspirations for their children has been identified as a critical factor in the wellbeing of Māori students. What can teachers and school leaders in English-medium schools do to include whānau aspirations and strengthen whānau engagement in Māori students' learning and wellbeing? A group of professional learning and development project leaders and regional facilitators reported strategies they had supported schools to use with this goal in mind. Most approaches had positive effects on strengthening school–whānau partnerships, with unforeseen challenges emerging in one case. Some of the reported approaches and their effects are incorporated into five fictionalised narratives that teachers and school leaders can reflect on when they review their practices for engaging whānau.

Whānau engagement in the education policy landscape

Recent policy recommendations in Aotearoa New Zealand (e.g., New Zealand House of Representatives, 2014; Office of the Auditor-General, 2015) increasingly have underscored the importance of engaging whānau, family, and communities in improving outcomes for Māori learners. *Ka Hikitia: Key Evidence* (Ministry of Education, 2008) summarises research and evaluation in order to provide specific evidence-based strategies to support the Ministry's plan for "Māori enjoying education success as Māori" (p. 8). Ka Hikitia repositions how Māori students are perceived, away from previous deficit models that framed Māori learners inequitably, to a focus on capitalising on opportunities to increase their education success by creating system-wide changes in order to benefit diverse Māori students and whānau. A growing literature has discussed what the concept of "Māori enjoying and achieving education success as Māori" (Durie, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2008, 2011, 2013), might mean to Māori. A key point is that a more holistic view of success, rather than a focus on academic achievement alone, is likely to be valued by whānau (see Hutchings et al., 2012). Understanding "success" as holistic was one of the elements that improved English-medium schools' responsiveness to Māori educational issues (Barnes, Hutchings, Taupo & Bright, 2012). In their research into the issues facing diverse whānau in Māori education, Barnes et al. identified that the following elements also improved schools' responsiveness:

- developing values-based education
- increasing Māori teacher numbers
- encouraging greater whānau–school engagement.

Another important point is the need to re-frame power relationships so that, for instance, Māori parents' engagement in their children's education is valued by more teachers and school leaders. In their report on schools' progress in promoting success for Māori students, the Education Review Office (ERO) (2010) observed that in the most effective schools:

> parents and whānau were actively involved in the school and in students' learning. Whānau had a sense of connectedness and had a voice in determining the long-term direction of the school. The school ensured that ongoing opportunities for this partnership were encouraged, in order to find out and respond to the aspirations and expectations of parents and whānau. (p. 18)

More recently, ERO's (2012) *Māori Success: Complementary Evaluation Framework* described their approach for evaluating educational success for Māori that set out to include Māori world views. ERO were also interested in helping "schools to develop partnerships with Māori communities" (p. 1).

The majority (87 percent) of Māori students are enrolled in English-medium schools and have 50 percent or less of their instruction in te reo Māori (Education Counts, 2014). Findings from the New Zealand Council for Educational Research's most recent survey of English-medium primary and intermediate schools (Wylie & Bonne, 2014) indicated that although 51 percent of principals reported that Māori student performance levels at their

school stayed high or improved, raising Māori student achievement was seen as a major challenge by around 30 percent of teachers, trustees, and principals. Similar proportions (33 percent of teachers, 34 percent of trustees, and 28 percent of principals) thought that their school faced a major challenge in increasing parent support for their children's learning.

Half of primary and intermediate school principals indicated they were unable to readily access the external expertise or knowledge their school needed to enable better engagement with whānau about student learning at school and at home (Wylie & Bonne, 2014). This was an issue for 60 percent of principals of schools with high proportions of Māori students, compared with 36 percent of principals whose schools had low proportions of Māori students (Bright & Wylie, 2015).

Alton-Lee, Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd (2009) reported on a meta-analysis of data from 37 studies and syntheses relating to school–community relationships. Across this body of work, the three approaches identified as having the highest positive effects on student outcomes were: joint parent/whānau and teaching intervention (overall effect size: 1.81); teacher-designed interactive homework with parents (effect size: 1.38); and accessing family/whānau or community funds of knowledge (effect size: .93). These findings underscore the potential value for improving students' academic outcomes of strengthening whānau engagement around students' learning.

Whānau and community need to have opportunities to discuss and debate what they consider "success" is, according to findings from Smith's (2012) study. Smith explored the experiences of students and whānau at a school marae in an English-medium secondary school, and reported educational, social, and cultural benefits for participants of their marae experiences. Smith differentiated the physical and cultural spaces of the marae, in which Māori were encouraged to develop their views about what constitutes educational success. Aligned with this, Pohio (2014) urged that such "a school culture or kaupapa where communication and connection between families, students, and school is viewed as 'just the way we do things around here' should be a goal for all schools" (p. 242). Pohio highlighted that a kaupapa like this did not just happen as a result of good intentions—increasing whānau engagement needs to be planned for, strongly led, have staff buy-in, and involve students. A clearly expressed purpose should be developed with involvement of whānau, students and staff, and re-visited on an ongoing basis. Sufficient resources also need to be committed to support the development of such a kaupapa.

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Building whānau engagement is always context specific

In this article, the following description of "engagement" from ERO's (2008) report, *Partners in Learning: School's Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities*, is adopted:

> a meaningful, respectful partnership between schools and their parents, whānau, and communities that focusses on improving the educational experiences and successes for each child. (p. 1)

What is presented here is not intended as an exhaustive list of practical ideas for boosting whānau engagement that will be universally successful; rather, it is intended to provide starting points for teachers and principals to think and talk about what might be appropriate for their particular context. As stated in the recent report from the Office of the Auditor-General (2015):

> there is no 'one way' or 'best way' for schools and Māori communities to engage with each other. It is clear, however, that the balance of responsibility resides with the schools and the stance they adopt in communicating with whānau, hapū, and on occasions, iwi. (p. 4)

Before considering how the engagement of whānau might be developed, a school needs to work with whānau to learn more about who their Māori whānau are, where they are from, and how the school can effectively resource whānau, or members of a Māori community, to be involved in school decision-making processes. Respectful relationships between those working in schools and whānau are central to encouraging greater involvement, and like all relationships, are continually evolving. Indeed, international evidence on sustaining professional learning and development (PLD) emphasises

that creating safe learning environments, where actions engender trust and build relationships with all school stakeholders, is critical (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Covey, 2006). This includes modelling a high degree of learning capability, which involves facilitators listening, inquiring, advocating, exploring perspectives, testing assumptions, building common ground, and planning for action (Dalton, 2011).

Although the nature of school–whānau partnerships will vary, "[a] productive partnership starts with the understanding that Māori children and students are connected to whānau and should not be viewed or treated as separate, isolated or disconnected" (Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 17). In practice, this means that the whānau contexts of Māori students need to be understood. Bishop and Berryman (2010) identified English-medium schools' inclusion of whānau Māori aspirations for their children as a critical factor in the wellbeing of Māori students. In most situations, whānau Māori are just as diverse as their educational aspirations, so schools must continue to gauge what these aspirations are, and how they link in with school-wide values (see Ministry of Education, n.d.). In some school contexts, teachers and leaders may also need to work towards increasing the expectations whānau have for students. At times this may include working with whānau to explore the pathways their tamariki or mokopuna have the potential to take.

Our project

The experiences of English-medium project leaders and regional facilitators of various PLD contracts encompassed by a consortium of PLD providers are at the heart of this article. An inquiry into whānau engagement was part of the consortium's ongoing self-evaluation. This particular formative evaluation was undertaken in response to results from regular surveys of facilitators and was captured in milestone reporting to the Ministry of Education.

Data were collected using a focus-group method and a thematic analysis was undertaken. At a hui, a group of researchers (including the second author) asked a group of 22 PLD English-medium project leaders and facilitators to think about the approaches they had helped schools to implement to strengthen the engagement of whānau Māori in students' learning. More specifically, participants responded to the following questions:

- What works? What is good practice?
- What are the challenges now?
- How do you know what you're doing is working?
- Give one practical example (it doesn't matter if it's a very small action).

Each person spent one minute talking about their response to each question with a different partner, before taking 5 minutes to tell their whole "story" to a group of five or six colleagues. The project leaders and facilitators reported many strategies they employed had made a positive difference to students' wellbeing and learning. Approaches that proved less effective were also shared.

With participants' informed consent, audio recordings were made of their stories. These are the basis for the fictionalised scenarios in this article, which combine experiences described by different facilitators into single narratives. Details have been altered to protect identities of schools, principals, project leaders, and facilitators. All school names are pseudonyms. The management group that guides the PLD work also reviewed and approved the content of the article.

None of the English-medium schools described in this article has a marae on-site. However, the different approaches described can be thought of as focusing on the creation of physical and cultural spaces, whereby schools and whānau became more comfortable engaging with one another around students' learning. The focus is on two approaches that schools used to better work with whānau: first, drawing whānau into the school; and secondly, drawing the school towards whānau.

In this article, *cultural spaces* are spaces "where values, rights and cultures are created; and a discursive space for differing perspectives and forms of expression, where there is room for dialogue, confrontation … deliberation and critical thinking, where children and others can speak and be heard" (Moss, 2003, p. 8). In other words, cultural spaces create the possibility of cultural practices to be acknowledged, respected and enacted by groups of people. The demarcation of different cultural spaces within an environment—in this case, a school—can be enabled by the provision of dedicated *physical* spaces.

The majority of Māori students are taught by non-Māori teachers in schools led by non-Māori principals. The project leaders and regional facilitators who shared their reflections on school and whānau engagement were primarily non-Māori. It is important to acknowledge that Māori-medium colleagues and kaupapa Māori educationalists generally continue to offer practical and innovative approaches to working with whānau (see Pihama, Smith, Taki, & Lee, 2004; Tākao, Grennell, McKegg & Wehipeihana, 2010).

Fictionalised narratives that draw together various approaches described by participants are presented next to illustrate a range of approaches to strengthening whānau–school relationships.

Drawing whānau into the school

Creating spaces for whānau

> What worked was the opening the door and providing the space for the conversation. What became the challenge was how they made use of that and what positive outcomes came from it. (Facilitator's comment)

The staff at Kāingarua primary were looking for ways to increase whānau engagement in the life of the school, as they believed this would benefit students, whānau, and the whole school community. A PLD facilitator working in the school noticed that a number of whānau were arriving well before the end of the school day, milling around while they waited to pick up their children—and not just whānau of the school's youngest students. She chatted with the assistant principal about whether this whānau presence might be an opportunity on which the school could build. The assistant principal talked with some of the whānau to see if they were interested in having a physical space in the school where they could meet—a sort of "whānau hub".

There was an empty classroom in their school, and the staff and whānau set this up as a space where whānau and parents could meet during the school day, especially those parents who arrived before the end of the day to meet their children. The room was not lavish; it included facilities for making a hot drink, a few old couches, and at first was fairly stark. Teachers and students got behind the initiative by creating artworks to make the room more welcoming.

As more whānau started to use the room, it became a popular meeting place. Subsequently, the principal thought it would be a good idea for a board of trustees member to join whānau occasionally. However, the member's presence seemed to make whānau wary and numbers began to dwindle. The principal realised what was happening and she asked the board member to stop visiting. Several days after this, she had a conversation with whānau about the space being for *their* use. Whānau valued the principal's openness and gradually returned to the space.

Most staff were enthusiastic about the school adopting a policy of whānau being welcome to join their children's classes for the last half-hour each day. Some teachers adjusted their programmes to genuinely include whānau in what the classes were doing. A few teachers saw this as an opportunity to draw on whānau knowledge of te reo me ngā tikanga Māori, and so whānau became important teaching resources to include in class. Teachers and students found that the inclusion of mātauranga Māori in classes improved their own cultural knowledge. Other teachers continued with their usual programme, and included whānau when whānau expressed they would like to be involved, or when teachers thought that whānau might be able to contribute in some way.

Teachers and students found that the inclusion of mātauranga Māori in classes improved their own cultural knowledge. Other teachers continued with their usual programme, and included whānau when whānau expressed they would like to be involved, or when teachers thought that whānau might be able to contribute in some way.

The school also held regular school-wide events, largely abandoning their traditional approach which had been for such occasions to be organised by year level or syndicate. Whānau were invited to come and share kai at school, after which siblings helped watch the younger children while sisters or brothers took mums and dads to talk with their respective teachers. For whānau who found it difficult to come to such occasions, the school provided additional ways to engage with school events, especially via digital media.

In this school, initially the physical space was provided without a lot of thought. Over time, through relationship building and including whānau in the earliest stages, and through negotiation and discussion, whānau gradually shared greater responsibility for creating a cultural space where they felt genuinely encouraged to engage with their children's learning.

Demystifying achievement data with whānau

At Nicolson School, the staff had worked with their PLD facilitator to review how they used students' achievement data in conversations about learning that they had with whānau. After considering their own understandings about achievement data, and identifying areas for development, teachers reflected on their beliefs about appropriate power relationships between teachers and whānau. This involved some difficult conversations that challenged some deficit thinking about parents' ability to understand data. The outcome was that the staff decided that students' learning would benefit if staff strengthened their relationships with

whānau and drew whānau into participating more in decisions about their children's learning.

The school invited whānau to a meeting where teachers shared student achievement data for each syndicate. One of their aims was to de-mystify data for whānau and parents, so teachers illustrated what the data represented. For example, teachers in a Year 3–4 syndicate invited whānau and parents to come and discuss the syndicate's mathematics learning. Graphs of children's performance in number were presented. Teachers then role-played a Year 3 student explaining to her teacher the strategies she used to solve a multiplication problem. A direct relationship was drawn between this child's strategy use and the graphed data. After whānau and teachers had looked at the data together, they broke into smaller groups in which teachers and whānau worked together, drawing on their collective knowledge of a particular child, to develop approaches to improve the child's learning. This process combined teachers' knowledge of learning progressions and pedagogy with whānau aspirations for their children, to map out next learning steps.

Alongside this process, the school changed its reporting to parents by sending students' reports home before getting together with whānau. This provided whānau with the time needed to read and think about the report, to formulate questions, and then raise these with teachers. Parents now had an active role at the meetings, opening the way for them to discuss their aspirations for their children's education. These discussions helped teachers to understand their students as connected to their wider whānau. In this way teachers became more culturally responsive to students. When there is a school-wide emphasis on collecting evidence that is relevant to whānau, data-analysis processes can interrupt status quo thinking of school leaders and teachers, while also being a tool for critical thinking and problem solving (Earl & Katz, 2006).

Student–whānau inquiry

Whatukura secondary school had been finding it difficult to engage some of their community—several invitations from the board of trustees and principal to school events had drawn no response. Taking an alternative approach to the school's usual 2-yearly surveying of whānau and parents, students at the school developed their own questions to find out their whānau views of how the school was doing and used these to interview their whānau. Students brought the responses back to school, and created displays of what whānau had told them. Whānau were then invited to see the display and talk about it with students, who later worked in groups to report their interpretations of the results. There was a much more positive response to this invitation which the school attributed to the role of students in the inquiry. As a follow-up to students' inquiry, whānau had input into the development of a plan to realise some of the suggestions made.

A PLD project leader also talked about how the school learnt the value of persevering with their whānau-specific invitations to school events, even when they perceived a poor response from the community. Later, the staff had learned that people had valued receiving communications from the school. Whānau talked about how they understood these communications as a sign of the school's commitment to, and respect for, the local community. This opened a conversation about whānau's preferred means of communication to ensure a more timely two-way flow of information between school and whānau, and highlighted the importance of schools exploring multiple means of communicating with whānau (phone calls, written notices, emails, texts, and messages from students themselves).

Drawing the *school* towards *whānau*

> One of the challenges is, with some of the people I'm working with, they say there's a sense that school is the centre of the universe and whānau should definitely come to them and their role is around supporting the students and maybe coming to sports days, things like that, so one of the challenges is shifting that mindset and taking them on that journey to really engage with whānau. (PLD project leader's comment)

Students telling their whānau stories

Stonebridge School also had limited success with bringing whānau Māori into school and had decided that they needed to take a different approach: they wanted to explore possibilities for taking students' learning out to whānau, moving beyond the physical space of the school. To do this, the school needed to know more about who their whānau were.

Teachers at the school planned an integrated programme that focused on whānau and storytelling. A key element was for students to develop digital stories by taking digital devices (in this case, iPads) out of the school to capture interviews with people in their whānau. During the learning process, some students visited their kaumātua in their homes to show them their developing digital stories. Students talked about how they benefitted from kaumātua encouragement and support. Teachers helped students organise themselves into groups of two or three for learning, with each group including one Māori student. Positioning the Māori students as lead

storytellers in their groups contributed to their positive identity as Māori.

A website was set up to showcase students' written and visual art work. The students also created short videos, uploaded to YouTube. They showed these to their whānau on the digital devices they were able to take home. Having access to digital technology in their homes—in some cases, for the first time—meant whānau members learnt alongside students about how such devices could be used. Over time, parents reported that they became more confident users of such technologies in their day-to-day lives.

The culmination of students' work was an early evening gathering at which students hosted their whānau and families, and presented parts of their whānau stories. As part of the preparation for this evening, students role-played how they would look after the invited guests in a respectful way. The "success" of this work for students took various forms: for some, the development of their presentation skills was a major achievement, while other students' sense of identity in relation to their whānau was strengthened. For the school community, there were opportunities to learn more about students and their whānau.

The emphasis on Māori whānau elicited comments from families from other cultural backgrounds, reminding teachers and school leaders that they needed to balance focusing on one group represented at the school, with including and respecting all the groups in the wider school community. One way teachers did this was to give similar leadership opportunities to learners from various cultural backgrounds during an integrated study of the wider school community, "Our School, Our Place", later in the year.

Building a te reo Māori digital community

At Mātai School, a small rural primary school with around 10 percent Māori students, the new principal's goal was to strengthen community partnerships and then, with the community, develop the school's future direction. The principal recognised that to achieve this goal he also needed to strengthen the relationships between whānau and school. Aligned to this, he prioritised raising the profile of te reo Māori across the school. At this time the lead reo Māori teacher had been participating in a programme of online and in-school PLD. Initially the focus was on developing her confidence in te reo Māori, and incorporating te reo Māori into her teaching.

Now in the second year of the PLD, the reo Māori teacher has started to lead the professional learning for colleagues, creating an online environment where examples of te reo Māori (written, sound, and video files) can be shared, questions asked and concerns raised, with supportive ideas provided as needed. Students and their whānau also contribute content to the site. This initiative created a virtual space for engaging whānau with a focus on their children learning te reo Māori.

As a result of the reo Māori digital community, students can now use te reo Māori confidently to introduce themselves, hold simple conversations, and ask and answer questions. The shifts in student learning have been noticeable, particularly amongst students from families which initially did not see any benefit in learning te reo Māori. One father had commented to the lead teacher at a parent evening that he "didn't see the point in learning te reo Māori". Later he attended a school assembly where his daughter confidently recited her whakapapa in te reo Māori. After this, he came back to tell the teacher how embarrassed he was for his earlier comments. He now understood and valued the language, and could see that it is part of what made his daughter uniquely Māori.

Some challenges encountered

The approaches we have described are consistent with Bevan-Brown's (2003) recommendations for a school undertaking a cultural self-review. One of the key points Bevan-Brown made, which applies equally to the approaches illustrated here, is that a sufficient commitment of time needs to be made to strengthen school–whānau partnerships beyond surface-level change.

Factors that hindered these approaches and ways these might be addressed include:

- The school having a "hidden agenda" at gatherings of whānau. To avoid this, interactions with whānau should be transparent and respectful, and purposes for meetings negotiated.
- Creating a physical space for whānau in the school was helpful, but was ultimately insufficient on its own. What proved effective was working with whānau to foster a cultural space where diverse whānau could meet and express their Māori identities through language and culture.
- Focusing on one group can have the effect of making those who belong to other groups feel excluded. While keeping a focus on strengthening whānau engagement, school leaders and teachers need to be explicit about why focusing on cultural inclusion is an important step in realising *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) and valuing the wider school community.

Reflective questions for teachers and school leaders

The approaches illustrated in these narratives can contribute to strengthening cultural and physical spaces where diverse whānau feel encouraged to increase their engagement with their children's learning. As Bevan-Brown (2003) pointed out, the provision of culturally appropriate learning environments is not on its own sufficient for students' learning—this needs to go hand-in-hand with high-quality teaching. Ensuring that Māori enjoy education success as Māori in English-medium schools should be a focus for schools' ongoing self-review.

While there are no simple answers, there are some key questions that teachers and school leaders can ask themselves in order to keep moving towards this vision:

- How can we involve whānau Māori in developing (or reinvigorating) the school's values and aspirations for students?
- What do we do to make our school an inviting space for whānau—how do our physical spaces invite and promote Māori identities, language and culture? How can we strengthen this?
- What actions do we take to build positive respectful relationships with whānau that support students' learning? What else could we be doing?
- What else can we do to take students' learning beyond the school to whānau?
- How does what is happening in our classrooms—especially at the end of the day—already involve whānau, and how could we extend this?
- What successful approaches for building whānau engagement are neighbouring schools employing, that we might adapt to engage our school's whānau?
- What do whānau engage with outside school, to which the school might be able to make links (e.g., their marae, sports clubs, kapa haka groups, or church groups)?
- How could we involve whānau in reflecting on questions about engagement?
- At the same time as working to increase whānau Māori engagement, what are we doing to also include other cultural groups in our school's community?

One further reflective question, perhaps appropriate for PLD providers as well as teachers and school leaders, is:

- What supports are available to a school that wants to start building relationships with whānau in their community, but lack the initial connections within that community?

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