NEW ZEALAND COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

TE RŪNANGA O AOTEAROA MŌ TE RANGAHAU I TE MĀTAURANGA

From *community* engagement *in* education to *public* engagement *with* education

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In recent years, policy documents both in New Zealand and internationally,[1] have emphasised strengthening the links between schools and the communities they serve as a way of improving the quality of public education. However, exactly *how* such interactions are intended to improve educational outcomes is often not clear, and, to complicate matters further, terms such as "parental participation", "involvement", "community engagement" and "home–school partnerships" are used interchangeably in the literature (Bull, Brooking, & Campbell, 2008).

It is important to be clear about exactly what "problem" increased school community interactions are aiming to address, because the way the problem is formulated determines how the community needs to be involved, and to some extent who counts as community. If the problem is conceived as a need for students (or groups of students) to do better within the current system, then the role of the community is to *support* schools, and "community" is likely to be defined largely as those with direct links to a particular school, especially parents/whānau of students currently enrolled in that school. However, if the problem is conceived as a need to reinvent schools to better cater for the needs of *all* students in the 21st century, then "community" will mean the general public and the task will be to work *with* schools to create something new. To differentiate between the different purposes, in this paper, initiatives that are aimed at reinventing schools are described as "*public* engagement *with* education" and the term "*community* engagement *in* education" is reserved for initiatives aimed at lifting achievement within the current system.

Most current school–community initiatives in New Zealand (and overseas) belong to the family of "community engagement in education" initiatives; that is, they are concerned with the improved performance of individual students (or particular groups of students) within the current system. Different initiatives attempt to address the "problem" in different ways. Many initiatives aim to raise achievement through increasing *home–school alignment*. These initiatives (often referred to as home–school partnerships) usually focus (at least initially) on strengthening the communication between schools and families. Sometimes the main activity is the school simply giving information about qualifications, student achievement, curriculum developments, school programmes etc. to families. Such initiatives, though, also often involve the school encouraging families to include school-type activities (for example, maths games, reading together, study time) into their home lives. They can also involve teachers learning about students' home lives so that teachers can create more "culturally responsive learning" environments at school. Such

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[1] For example *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) has *community engagement* as one of the eight principles that are supposed to underpin all school decision making. In the United States, the "No Child Left Behind" Act of 2001 at federal level included parental involvement in education as one of six targeted areas of reform (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007). In England, the 1997 White Paper "Excellence in Schools" identified providing parents with information, giving parents a voice and encouraging parental partnerships with schools as important strategies (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003).

programmes often target particular groups (for example, Māori, Pasifika or new immigrant families). Schools consulting with their communities to design a curriculum that meets the community's needs (as required by *The New Zealand Curriculum* [Ministry of Education, 2007]) could also be considered a form of home–school alignment.

Other initiatives aim to make *improvements in the students' social contexts* so that the students are better able to learn. These initiatives involve the development of "wrap around" or "integrated" services where education, health and social and community services converge.[2] Yet another type of school and community engagement involves schools making use of *resources in the community* to enrich students' learning. These two models differ from the home–school alignment model in *how* they aim to provide improved educational outcomes and also in *who* is meant by community. However, they, too, attempt to lift achievement within the current system.

Although the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) has done a significant amount of work in this area, we know of few examples[3] of schools and the wider community *working together* to *rethink* what schools are for, and/or how public education can best be provided (that is, initiatives that would come under the umbrella of "public engagement with education").

Table 1 shows the different types of community engagement.

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2 Victory Village in Nelson is an example of this sort of community engagement.

3 Possible exceptions are kura kaupapa Māori and some alternative schools.

Table 1 **Types of engagement**

	Community engagement in education	Public engagement with education
What is the "problem"?	Too many students are not succeeding within the current school system. The students need "fixing".	The current school system is not designed to prepare students for today's world. The system needs "fixing".
Who is community?	Those directly involved with a particular school, especially parents/whānau of students currently enrolled in the school.	The general public.
What is the community's role?	Supporting the school.	Working with schools to create something new.
What does it look like?	There is a wide range of approaches: • ***Home–school alignment*** For example: improving communication between home and school; building relationships between teachers and families; encouraging families to include "school"-type activities into their homes; community input into relevant teaching contexts for their children etc. • ***Improving students' social contexts*** For example: wrap-around or integrated services where education, health, social and community services converge. • ***The community as a resource*** For example: retired people coming into schools to read with students; work experience placements in the community; programmes run by museums, zoos etc.	Very few existing documented examples of this type of engagement.

According to the literature about "21st century education", rethinking what schools are for is an important task if we are going to continue to develop as a nation. Commentators[4] in the field argue that traditional schooling no longer meets the needs of society. In today's society, the

[4] See, for example, Bereiter (2002); Claxton (2008); Gilbert (2005); Leadbeater (2011).

argument goes, it is no longer sufficient for students to simply know things. They have to be able to *use* their knowledge. People need to be able to collaborate with others to produce new knowledge and ideas. Building learning capacity and developing learning dispositions are also seen as important. Learning needs to be a personalised rather than a standardised experience and should take place in a variety of settings. Learning needs to be seen as an "engaged and participative activity". These ideas challenge much of what has been valued in education in the past, and it seems unrealistic to expect schools to make changes on their own. Leadbeater (2001) argues that:

> One way to see the future of innovation in education is to see the task as creating a social movement of professionals, politicians, parents and children who are bound by a broadly shared ideology of learning as an engaged and participative activity, which in turn gives rise to new practices, platforms and organizations which embody this shared practice and eventually dislodge an entrenched approach.

Another argument for the need for public engagement with education comes from political scientists[5] who argue that in today's diverse society there is a need for more participatory forms of democracy that enable diverse voices to be heard, value difference and appreciate the contested nature of public purposes. This is a very different concept of democracy from what we are used to. Public services such as education have traditionally been delivered to the public with limited consultation and involvement. The public have played a relatively passive role, and the providers of the services have been seen as the experts. The neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s were linked to an advocacy of more active forms of democracy, with citizens being viewed as consumers who could choose public services from competing providers. However, for many groups, this change simply reinforced problems of fragmentation and exclusion (Ranson, 2000). A more participatory view of democracy requires more from the public than passive support—it requires co-operative action by citizens to address collective problems in ways that contribute to the common good but also allow for difference.[6]

Encouraging the public to engage *with* education will be a difficult task. Recent New Zealand research shows that although teachers and parents support parental involvement in the education of their individual children, currently there appears to be limited support from either group for increased community input into curriculum decisions or education at a general level.[7]

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5 See, for example, Bentley (2007) who argues, "democracy in practice must mean the chance to shape our own lives, through systems which allow us to meet collective goals in a more diverse, fluid and individualized society" (p. 1).

6 See, for example, Gutmann and Thompson (2004).

7 Both parents and teachers in a small NZCER project, Notions of Partnership, said they thought curriculum decisions were best made by teachers because of their professional expertise and that community decision

Encouraging the active engagement of the general public—not just those already directly connected with a particular school—is likely to be even more difficult. Public engagement with education asks *everyone* to critically examine their existing beliefs about education, their roles in relation to schools, and also to work with others to find new ways of doing things. While this is happening, schools also have to continue to provide "business as usual" for their current students.

Given the magnitude of this task, what could be done to make a start? What conditions need to be in place to lay the foundation for this public engagement with education? An obvious prerequisite is that the general public would need to have *access* to (and support) the arguments about why schools and the relationships between them and the public need to change. This raises a question about who is best positioned to do this. Currently, some schools are putting energy into informing their parents/whānau about future-focused educational issues, but schools may not be the best vehicles for these messages. Schools often struggle to communicate with their whole school community, and their messages are unlikely to reach the wider community. Overseas research suggests that community-based organisations, especially in diverse communities, can be effective in connecting community members and educators (Warren, Hoong, Leung Rubin, & Sychitkokhong Uy, 2009). Access to ideas, though necessary, will not be sufficient to engage the public with education. Teachers, parents and the general public would also have to be *motivated* to become actively involved and, once involved, be *supported* to remain involved.

For teachers, public engagement with education involves a potential challenge to their identity. It raises questions about the role of 21st century teachers and the sort of skills, knowledge and dispositions teachers might need. For parents/whānau, this type of change is also unsettling. It involves critiquing a system their own children are currently part of. Parents are being asked to accept that the sort of education currently being provided for their children is unlikely to meet their needs as future citizens, but there is no clear picture of what the alternative could look like. The general public is also being asked to participate in new and unfamiliar ways.

All these groups will have to let go of the attitudes, values and ways of thinking that were functional in the past before they can move forward. Although this is likely to be uncomfortable, it is, according to Bridges[8] (2003), an essential part of successful transition.[9] He describes this as the *neutral zone* because it "is a nowhere between two somewheres, and because while you are in

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making about curriculum was impractical. In the 2009 NZCER National Survey of Secondary Schools, just under a half of the teachers thought parent or community input into curriculum was either very or somewhat important.

8 William Bridges is an American expert in transition management.

9 Bridges differentiates between "change" and "transition". To Bridges, change is situational, while transition is the psychological process people go through as they adapt to the new situation change brings about.

it, forward motion seems to stop while you hang suspended between *was* and *will be*" (p. 40). It is during this time that critical psychological realignments and "repatternings" take place.

Within the context of organisational change, Bridges describes several dangers presented by the neutral zone. One of these is that anxiety levels rise and motivation falls. People feel disorientated and self-doubting. Another is that the ambiguities of the neutral zone mean that it is easy for people to become polarised—some wanting to rush ahead with change, others wanting to revert to old ways.

These characteristics would seem to have likely implications for schools and the public trying to work in new ways. If teachers are experiencing feelings of self-doubt, how willing are they going to be to open their practice to the scrutiny of "outsiders"? Similarly, if parents are feeling anxious, will they doubt the quality of the education their children are receiving and think about changing schools?[10] How can the general public be supported to stay involved? If both teachers and the community are becoming more polarised in their views, how realistic is it that schools and their communities will come to some sort of consensus about what matters in education? These questions will all need addressing if public engagement with education is to become a reality.

At NZCER, a team of researchers is interested in making a start by finding out more about what ideas about education the public currently has access to, where the ideas come from, how people interact with the ideas and what processes support people to think differently about education. In 2011–12 the Changing Minds project sets out to identify key messages about education that are commonly in the public sphere and to develop resources and processes that support people to critically examine their own ideas about education and respond to "future-focused" ideas about schooling and education. We think this is an important early step toward the longer term goal of developing diverse learning communities where people can learn from each other to rebuild an education system that better meets the needs of our changing world.

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[10] In CIES, one principal spoke about the fact that local schools were competing for pupils meant that it was risky to try innovations that the community might not understand.

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