

Community engagement and *The New Zealand Curriculum*

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In this article, we draw on current research to argue that there is a need to think carefully about what community engagement might mean in a future-focused curriculum. This is important if schools are to lay the foundations now for tomorrow's interactions with community. The main projects the data are drawn from are briefly described below:

- 2009 New Zealand Council for Educational Research (NZCER) National Survey of Secondary Schools. Data from this survey are currently being analysed. This is the latest in a series of regular surveys that began with primary schools in 1989, focusing on the impact of educational reforms. In 2003, secondary schools were added to the survey series. The surveys are funded under NZCER's purchase agreement with the Ministry of Education.
http://www.nzcer.org.nz/default.php?cPath=76&products_id=124
- Families' and Communities' Engagement in Education (FACE). In 2008–9 the FACE programme consisted of three linked projects. Project 1 (led by Keren Brooking) sought to survey the range of home–school partnerships and to look at different ideas about partnership that have emerged. Project 2 (led by Ally Bull) explored the processes four different schools used to engage their communities, and how people thought about community engagement. Project 3 (led by Rachel Bolstad and Josie Roberts) involved a small group of students at two secondary schools. The goal of this project was to pilot a process designed to support these students to participate as equals in the development of their school's learning community. This programme of work is also funded under NZCER's purchase agreement with the Ministry of Education.
http://www.nzcer.org.nz/default.php?cPath=343_76&products_id=2386
- Curriculum Implementation Exploratory Studies (CIES). This Ministry of Education-funded research project was jointly carried out by NZCER and the University of Waikato in 2008–9. Reports can be accessed at:
<http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/curriculum/57760/4>
- Monitoring and Evaluating Curriculum Implementation (MECI). This is a national evaluation of the implementation of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). It is being undertaken by researchers at the Faculty of Education, The University of Auckland, for the Ministry of Education.
<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/News/MECI-project-May-2009-milestone-executive-summary>

- *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities*. The Education Review Office (ERO) undertook this evaluation in Terms 1 and 2, 2007. ERO gathered evidence for the evaluation from 233 school education reviews. <http://ero.govt.nz/ero/publishing.nsf/Content/pil-schls-engmnt-may08#Executive%20Summary>
- *Successful Home–School Partnerships*. This research project, funded by the Ministry of Education, and carried out by New Zealand Council for Educational Research, was designed to improve understanding of the key elements of successful home–school partnerships and how they operate in some different school settings. The project included a review of evidence and an empirical research component. <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/schooling/28415/28416>

Community engagement: What is it?

The New Zealand Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2007) emphasises community engagement but does not clearly define what is meant by the term. The community engagement principle states: “The curriculum has meaning for students, connects with their wider lives, and engages the support of their families, whānau and communities” (p. 10). This statement could be interpreted in a range of ways. If we consider the different interpretations as being spread along a continuum, at one end “community engagement” could be taken to mean the school informing parents about what is happening at school. At the other end, it could mean the community being provided with skills, information, authority and resources to make decisions about what happens in school (see, for example, this South Australian model of [community engagement](#)).

Somewhere in between these positions “community engagement” could be interpreted as involving the two-way exchange of information between school and parents/whānau so that both “partners” can better support student learning. Community engagement could mean parents/whānau taking an interest in their individual children’s learning, or it could mean the wider community being involved in decisions about learning in school in general.

Current New Zealand research about community engagement suggests that most schools are operating nearer the “inform” end of the continuum, and the emphasis is on individual students’ learning. However, many schools do see community as a resource, drawing on the skills and knowledge of families and others in the community in an attempt to embed students’ learning in authentic contexts. The first phase of the [CIES](#) project, for example, found that most schools were operating predominantly at the “inform” level of community engagement. The [MECI](#) project 2009 milestone summary also states that there is a need for supporting and developing educators’ understanding of how “partnerships extend beyond informing and consulting parents to include collaboration with parents/whānau and the wider community”.

In the [2009 NZCER National Survey of Secondary Schools](#), 96 percent of teachers said they valued making connections with students’ lives outside school, but just under half of teachers

thought parent or community input into curriculum was either very or somewhat important. There was very high support (91 percent) for parents having opportunities to discuss their child's progress and future options, but only 72 percent support for parents having opportunities to be involved in decisions about learning in general at school. The parents' views were similar to the teachers' views on these questions. When parents were asked "Do you think the school genuinely consults you about new directions/issues", responses were split almost evenly between "yes", "no" and "not sure".

A recent, small, exploratory NZCER project ([FACE](#)) aimed to find out what some teachers and parents in four different schools thought about community engagement. Nearly all the parents said they were not currently very involved in school, nor did they want to be. What the parents did want were clear and easy channels of communication with the school, accurate information about their children's progress and information about school programmes in general. Everyone interviewed (both teachers and parents) thought the decisions about curriculum and teaching practices were best made by teachers, although they were also clear that the views of parents should be sought and listened to. Several parents thought community decision making was impractical. In short, the parents and teachers interviewed were happy with the "status quo".

The [2009 NZCER National Survey of Secondary Schools](#) also suggests many parents are happy with the "status quo". The majority of parents/caregivers were positive about their youngest child's secondary schooling,¹ and 86 percent said they were satisfied with the information they received about their children's learning. Parents also said the community trusts the school (66 percent) and the school and community value similar things (64 percent).

Reframing community engagement for the future

Future-focused literature, however, suggests that the world has changed, and that if we are to continue to develop and prosper as a nation, more of the same is not sufficient. We need to think differently about schools and what they do, and also about how and why our public services in general should be provided.² Through this lens, "community engagement" involves much more than informing or consulting with parents—it involves community participation in debate about how education contributes to the public good (Reid, 2007). What should students learn at school, why is this important and who should decide? Thinking about community engagement in these terms requires a major shift in the way most of us think about school, so it is hardly surprising that most schools appear to be interpreting "community engagement" more conservatively. This sort of transformative change takes time.

¹ 76 percent felt their child's learning needs were being met, 67 percent felt teachers were aware of their child's strengths and weaknesses, 64 percent agreed that teachers responded to any concerns they had, 73 percent said they felt welcome when they went into school and 79 percent said their child felt they belonged at school.

² 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).

It is perhaps useful, then, to think about how schools might begin to lay the foundations now for tomorrow's interactions, if the intent of *The New Zealand Curriculum* is this more future-focused interpretation of community engagement. Some useful initial steps³ for schools to take to build the platform for more collaborative decision making between schools and their communities could include developing multidirectional communication, involving the wider community and provisionally trying out new roles. It would also seem important to ensure the whole school community has adequate information about how schools work now and is exposed to ideas about 21st century learning and how schools might need to change.

Multidirectional communication

Although multidirectional communication needs to be the aim for a future-focused view of community engagement, an important first step to opening the lines of communication is to send regular information out to parents. Successful communication strategies can be quite diverse. They include incidental face-to-face communication that occurs when parents drop off or pick up children from school; using the children to convey information; newsletters (including those written in community languages); the school website; texting; and using a range of other media, such as the local radio, to advertise school news ([Successful Home–School Partnerships](#)).

According to the parents in the [NZCER National Survey of Secondary Schools \(2009\)](#), newsletters were their most common source of information, although a third of respondents also said they went to the school website occasionally.

Some schools are attempting to enhance communication with parents through putting energy into developing a shared language. For example, the [Successful Home–School Partnerships](#) project describes a primary school that was focusing on developing a shared understanding of the “language of learning” with parents and students, so that everyone (home and school) was on the “same page”. The language used by schools about achievement, progress and assessment was being explicitly taught and explained to both students and parents and used consistently throughout the school in all learning conversations. Three-way conferences were held, with everyone using language such as *success criteria* and understanding what it means.

In a recent paper, a group of researchers from the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Warren, Hoong, Leung Rubin & Sychitkokhong Uy, 2009) suggest that a collaborative approach to community engagement should focus not only on building relationships between parents and educators but building relationships *among* parents as well. The case study below illustrates how a New Zealand school is using this strategy to meet the specific needs of their community.

³ These were derived from findings from the Successful Home–School Partnerships project, ERO's evaluation *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities*, and the literature on transformative learning (see, for example, Mezirow & Associates, 2000).

School D is a brand-new decile 10 contributing school in a newly developing suburb in a provincial city. In 2007 the land had been farm land, so, at the end of 2008, the roll of about 200 students had mainly come from the new houses built at the same time as the school. Parents were invited to work with the school from the very beginning to develop a partnership that had a unique purpose. Everyone realised they needed to build a community in this suburb because there wasn't one, and it was decided to use the school as the nucleus to do this. All the families were new in the area and didn't know each other, and the school became the main conduit for relationship building and community building.

The new principal saw this as an opportunity to build partnerships with parents, and decided to begin with informal strategies based around a sense of fun, food and getting to know each other. He organised potluck dinners and information evenings at the school even before it opened, so that parents and students could meet teachers and find out more about the school's programme in a relaxed setting. From this informal start, he then introduced a formal strategy of forming an active group of parents into a "Friends of the School" group. This group then took over the role of community building, and registered as a charitable trust so they could independently fund their activities and projects.

The "Friends" group has now taken ownership and meet with the senior management team to discuss initiatives. Some of the strategies the group have put in place are creating "meet and greet" networks of people to welcome all newcomers to the school; organising various social school events, such as a disco that parents and students attended, an Olympic sports day, sausage sizzles and a family day; producing a printed calendar of children's art work; and organising a Funky Monkey concert. One of their success stories is "Guess who's coming to dinner?", an event the school has held several times to mix up parents so they get to know a wider circle. Parents pay a fee (to cover the dinner) and on the day are given an address where they will have dinner with a host that they don't know.

In order to ensure the "Friends" group doesn't become exclusive, all parents are invited to join it when they enrol students at the school, as a way of meeting other parents and helping the school in any way they can. This ensures a variety of expertise is always on hand for the school to draw on, as well as including as many parents as possible in the partnership. This strategy has been extremely successful, according to parents and school staff, but some parents feel that, as the school grows larger, it will become more difficult to retain the community spirit that has developed. (Brooking, forthcoming report from the [FACE](#) programme)

Some New Zealand secondary schools are using the "[World Café](#)" approach to facilitating discussion between parents. One of the key factors in determining the success of this approach is the quality of ideas to which participants have access.

Exposure to ideas

It is important to put time into developing shared understandings about the purpose of community engagement in education. There are many examples in the research literature⁴ that suggest initiatives to encourage community engagement are unlikely to result in equitable, strengths-based partnerships if they are not accompanied by support for teachers and communities to think clearly about the purposes of the partnerships.

If the purpose of community engagement is for the community to engage collaboratively with schools in decisions about curriculum, and if we want schools to have a 21st century curriculum, it is important that the wider school community has the opportunity to engage with future-focused ideas about education. Some schools have attempted to do this by inviting outside speakers to come and talk at parent evenings. Below is a case study of how one school used this strategy.

School A is a decile 10, mid-sized contributing school in a large city, that has been developing a partnership with parents over the last three years, as a result of the new curriculum being introduced. The principal used the opportunity of involving parents in contributing to the local school curriculum, mandated by *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007), to begin the process of thinking about students' needs in the 21st century and the teaching and learning changes that need to occur.

The key strategy that he used to begin this process was to call in an expert on 21st educational thinking to talk to parents at an evening meeting. His decision to use an outsider was quite deliberate, as he felt it needed to be someone who didn't have "everyday relationships with parents", but who could present powerful ideas, research and arguments. He wanted to "unsettle" and "shake up" parents' present-day ideas about education, and to alert them to good reasons for change, because, without this, he believed there would not be buy-in to the notion of parental input. His strategy seemed to pay off. After the well-attended meeting, he said parents came out of the hall saying, with a sense of urgency: "We've got to do something. When are we going to start?"

According to this principal, creating an all-round understanding of the urgent need for change was the necessary first step in the process. It then became much easier to involve and engage parents and staff in dialoguing and co-constructing their vision, values and future direction. This has involved a huge shift in thinking about education for both staff and the community. One of the challenges for parents has been that they have never been expected to contribute in this way in education before, and for some it has been difficult to think about education and learning in new ways. Many have found they have been entrenched in their own experiences of schooling and thinking differently has been a challenge. The principal has continued to invite a series of

⁴ See, for example, the Successful Home-School Partnerships project and *Partners in Learning: Schools' Engagement with Parents, Whānau and Communities*.

speakers to speak to the whole school community to reinforce new 21st century ideas, and as a result there has been a groundswell of support for the need for change. After the initial scaffolding provided by the principal, parents have begun to run with the idea. Focus-group dialogue sessions with parents have been the main vehicle for discussion, shared thinking and co-construction of ideas, and parents are starting to take more ownership of these sessions.

Sustaining the momentum of change, and drawing a larger group of parents into this process have been the two main issues staff have had to think about. They decided the most important parents to work with in the future were the parents of new-entrant children, so their energy has focused on this new target group. This strategy has the advantage of assisting new parents to the school to make relationships with other parents, and also of inducting them into the new thinking agenda the school is developing. Over the next few years this will mean all parents will be aware of the school's vision and values, as well as its changing ideas about learning and teaching. (Brooking, forthcoming report from the [FACE](#) programme)

The principal at this case study school was very positive about this approach to providing the community with opportunities to engage with 21st century ideas about learning. However, there is a question about sustainability if this approach is to be used by large numbers of schools. Where, for instance, would all the necessary "expert" speakers come from? Some schools are experimenting with using video clips from sources such as "TED talks" at parent evenings.

A second challenge is how to encourage more parents to attend such evenings. Research⁵ suggests parents are often more likely to attend school events when their own children are actively involved in the event. Although the [FACE](#) programme suggests that (secondary) students, given adequate support, may be able to effectively engage their families with future-focused ideas about education, there is a risk that this approach could unintentionally co-opt students into existing frames of thinking at the expense of developing their own ideas (Roberts & Bolstad, forthcoming report from the [FACE](#) programme).

Opportunities for engaging with ideas about the "bigger picture" of education may be necessary, but there is also a risk here that this will be unsettling⁶ for schools and their communities. In one school in the [FACE](#) programme, some staff, for example, talked about the challenge for the management of the school in being able to live with ambiguity and changing times while simultaneously giving a sense of stability. An intermediate school principal in the CIES project commented that in a climate where schools were competing for pupils, it could be "unsafe" for schools to be questioning their own practices. Perhaps there is an argument here for the schools within an area to work together with their wider community to develop a curriculum for the whole area.

⁵ See, for example, Successful Home-School Partnerships.

⁶ The literature on transformational learning suggests these "unsettling dilemmas" are in fact essential for this sort of learning to occur.

Involving wider community

In New Zealand there are already some examples of town-wide or district-wide forums being established to increase community engagement in education. In the next case study, a district council decided to develop an education strategy, even though education is not the responsibility of district councils.

The belief behind this initiative is that “It takes a village to raise a child.” The purpose of the initiative is to work together to strengthen the education of young people in the district by having the whole community work to support them and provide them with opportunities that schools alone cannot deliver. This initiative draws on the vast expertise and experience of the district’s well-educated retired population to work with young people in various ways to enhance their skills and overall education. Other possibilities being discussed include businesses working with young people in different ways; local iwi coming up with initiatives to work with Māori youth; the council’s broadband strategy being used to benefit youth; and the local university working more directly with schools and the council. (Brooking, forthcoming report from [FACE](#) programme)

In communities where the cultural practices and languages spoken in many homes are different from those of the teachers, successful partnerships between schools and the community are often dependent on the participation of “community outreach workers” ([Successful Home–School Partnerships](#)). Overseas research suggests that community-based organisations in diverse communities can be effective in connecting community members and educators (Warren et al., 2009).

Provisionally trying out new roles

Moving towards more collaborative forms of community engagement requires shifts in power relationships between educators, students and the wider community.

Although [CIES](#) found many schools were consulting students about curriculum implementation, just over half of the teachers in the [2009 NZCER National Survey of Secondary Schools](#) thought it was important to give students input into curriculum decisions. In the [FACE](#) programme, researchers in one project supported a small group of students in two different secondary schools to undertake small-scale research into their own and others’ views about learning and school. In this study, students initially said curriculum decisions were made by government, experts and teachers, and they did not see much of a decision-making role for themselves, their families or the wider community (Roberts & Bolstad, forthcoming report from [FACE](#) programme).

At the end of this project, students presented their research to staff and parents. Feedback from teachers in these schools was that hearing the students’ presentations of their work enhanced the

teachers' appreciation of the benefits of listening to students. Both schools involved in the initial project are now aiming to move towards more free-flowing, two-way dialogue and are exploring ways of trying to develop more shared ownership of curriculum decisions. This small example illustrates that small, nonthreatening changes in practice could be a useful catalyst for deeper change.

Summary

To sum up, then, realising a future-focused view of community engagement is unlikely to happen overnight. It is important that policy makers and educators are clear about the purpose for community engagement and that the wider community has opportunities to engage with future-focused ideas about education so that everyone can participate in informed debate about what students should learn at school and why this is important. Useful first steps could include the development of multidirectional communication, and opportunities for students, teachers and the wider community to be involved in different ways with schools. Warren et al. (2009) contrast a school-centred model of community engagement with a community-based model. Contrasting these models generates some questions that schools might usefully consider as they evaluate their strategies for community engagement. Are strategies for community engagement focused on involving individual parents or on building relationships among parents as a basis for their collective participation? Is the focus on giving information, or creating the conditions for conversations that give parents opportunities to articulate their own concerns? Are the initiatives activity based or relationship based? Who sets the agenda? Answering these questions might perhaps help clarify what really is the purpose of community engagement.

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