

Community involvement in raising student achievement

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Abstract

Tamaki Achievement Pathway (TAP) is a New Zealand schooling improvement initiative aimed at raising the achievement of students in ten participating schools. All schools are located in a low socio-economic area of Auckland. Most students attending the schools are either indigenous students or students from the Pacific Islands.

The TAP schools' theory for improvement identified the engagement of parents as partners as critical to raising student achievement. This paper explores the process by which the schools sought to engage parents as partners in raising the achievement of students. The paper discusses how the schools implemented home and school partnerships that focused on community leaders providing support and guidance to parents in engaging their children in learning activities in the home. The paper further explores the impact of a weekly television programme broadcast on a local network that celebrated student and school successes and showcased effective strategies parents could use to engage their children in learning.

What does the literature tell us about the connection between improving educational outcomes for children and parental involvement?

The ultimate purpose of schooling improvement in New Zealand is to positively impact on the learning of children. While it is well understood that teachers and their practices have the greatest effect on children's learning (Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, 2003) it is accepted that learning does not happen solely in the isolation of the classroom and that parents also play a critical role in ensuring high quality outcomes for children's learning (Biddulph, Biddulph and Biddulph, 2003).

The process of schooling improvement is complex, particularly the challenges involved in implementation, sustainability, and measurement of change. Research carried out by Taylor, Pearson, Peterson and Rodriguez (2005) cite six factors present in high performing schools in high poverty areas. The six factors are:

- 1. Improved student achievement as the overriding priority - There is a sense of urgency. Senior leaders, teachers, other staff members and parents all worked collaboratively to raise achievement. Successful schools had a well planned strategy to raise achievement.*
- 2. Strong leadership – This includes principals redirecting people's time and energy to core activities, accessing quality professional development, developing a shared sense of direction.*
- 3. Strong staff collaboration – In successful schools teachers plan and teach together with a view to raising student achievement. Professional talk becomes the norm including talking across as well as within grade levels.*
- 4. Ongoing professional development – Professional development is sustained and seen as important. Professional development provides opportunity for teachers to learn together and collaborate to improve their practice.*

5. *Systematic sharing of student achievement data – Teachers share their achievement data in order to critique their own practice and problem solve ways to meet students’ needs.*
6. *A commitment to reaching out to parents – Effective schools work to build parent trust through the establishment of partnerships to support each other in raising the achievement of students.*

Partnership has been characterised by a sense of shared purpose, mutual respect, and a willingness to negotiate (Pugh, 1989, cited in Bastiani, 1993:104). Wolfendale (1989, cited in Bastiani, 1993) articulates partnerships as entailing involvement in decision making, each partner being perceived as having equal strengths and equivalent expertise and a shared responsibility, so that parents and professionals are accountable to each other. Bastiani (1993) defines partnership in relation to overlapping and distinctive emphases. An effective partnership will involve a sharing of power, responsibility and ownership. A degree of mutuality is necessary. Mutuality is characterised by a process of listening to each other and incorporates responsive dialogue. Responsive dialogue implies that action occurs as a result of dialogue. *Shared goals and a commitment to joint action in which parents, students and professionals work together provide a sound foundation for effective partnership* (Bastiani, 1993:105). However, perhaps it is more helpful to see partnership as a process, a stage in a process or something to work towards rather than something that is a fixed state or readily achievable (Bastiani, 1993).

Ramsay et al. (1993) further develop this concept in their definition of consultation. They identify five levels of consultation.

- Level One –to be informed
 - Level Two –to take part in activities
 - Level Three – to be involved through dialogue
 - Level Four – to help make decisions
 - Level Five – to have responsibility to act
- (Ramsay et al., 1993: 17).

Research by Ramsay et al. (1993) provides some insight into how partnerships might be forged. They argue that before collaboration can take place careful planning, adequate resources and adequate opportunities for ‘quality reflection’ must be seen as part of the very important groundwork. They further argue that it is necessary to adapt rather than adopt new ideas and strategies to the needs of the school and its community.

Timperley, Robinson and Bullard (1999) and Timperley and Robinson (2002) provide further insight into the conditions necessary for what they describe as a “mutually educative partnership” within the reporting process. Timperley et al. (1999, 2002) argue that in order for educative partnerships within the reporting context to be in place, four conditions apply.

The first condition is that the report must be an accurate description of the child’s current achievement and it must be written in a way that is easily interpreted by parents. This is a simple statement, but the reality is much more complex.

The second condition relates to having a shared understanding of what is desirable so that each partner can detect gaps between the current reality of the child’s achievement and his or her expectations for future achievement. This condition implies identification of standards against

which the child's performance can be measured. Timperley et al. (1999, 2002) do not advocate any particular standard but rather that whatever standard a school identifies should be understood and valued by both partners (parents/school) and that it provides a genuine educative interaction about what each partner believes to be important. What Timperley et al. imply is that the standard is set by the schools and agreed to and understood by both parents and school. The question must be asked, to what extent should parents also have input into what standards are desirable? What are the academic goals held by parents for their children (Taylor, 2004)?

The third condition relates to a shared responsibility for the child's learning. Each partner (parents and school) understands their role in supporting the child to achieve the next step in their learning. Without this condition Timperley et al. (1999, 2002) argue that it becomes inevitable that one partner will blame the other partner for any shortfall in the child reaching desired standards.

The fourth and final condition for an educative partnership lies in reviewing the student's progress towards desired standards and to hold each other accountable for agreed actions and contributions to that progress (Timperley et al., 1999).

Bastiani (1993:113) states *that partnership is easy to talk about but much harder to achieve*. Too often the partnership between home and school is seen as teachers 'liasing' with parents. This denotes a one-way communication system. Parents are rarely encouraged to liaise with teachers. With this approach and imbalance in the teacher-parent relationship there is little scope for developing a shared systemic exploration of the factors that may affect a child's learning (Dawson & McHugh, 2000).

Biddulph et al. (2003) argue that there are various forms of educational partnerships operating in schools, not all of which are effective. Those partnerships which are poorly designed, based on deficit views, and not responsive to the needs of families can be ineffective and even counterproductive. *Programmes that are effective respect parents and children, are socially responsible, and are responsive to families and the social conditions that shape their lives* (Biddulph et al., 2003:172).

Waller and Waller (1998) refer to the ideal parent-teacher relationship as being a sharing of expertise; that is a full sharing of knowledge, skills and experience between teacher and parent. Dawson and McHugh (2000) develop this concept further by arguing that a genuine curiosity about how a child learns and develops both socially and emotionally, if explored by teachers and parents together, would enrich the educational experience for everyone. However, this can only be achieved if a number of considerations are acknowledged. Firstly, teachers must have access to information in which they can have confidence and which identifies meaningful criteria about what is important to learning and achievement. Secondly, there must be a prevailing belief that a student's learning will be enhanced by the participation of parents in the assessment process and that parents have an undeniable right to access information that results from that assessment process.

Including students and parents in the learning process is of critical importance if change is to be long term. The teacher-student-parent relationship can be best described as the 'power of three' (Coleman, 1998, cited in MacBeath, 2000: 143). MacBeath (2000) describes this power of three as a triangle with student, parent and teacher at each apex. Each of the sides of the triangle is represented by a plus or minus which denotes the positive or negative nature of the relationship. If more than one of the sides is denoted with a minus sign the power of the educational

relationship diminishes almost entirely (MacBeath, 2000:143). The key issue is how parents, other adults and siblings mediate learning. They can help structure meaning for children and give quality support to their children which will guide them through childhood, secure in the knowledge there is a supporting hand behind them (MacBeath, 2000:144).

Biddulph et al. (2003) argue that such constructive partnerships empower those involved by fostering autonomy and self reliance within families, schools and communities, building on the strong aspirations and motivation that most parents have for their children's development and by adding to (not undermining) the values, experiences and competencies of parents and children. *The evidence is that teachers can do much to initiate such constructive partnerships* (Biddulph et al. 2003: 172).

Introduction to Tamaki Achievement Pathway

TAP is a partnership schooling improvement project between the Tamaki-Glen Innes area schools, their communities and the Ministry of Education (MoE).

In 1999, the TAP schools presented a proposal to the Ministry of Education which sought to work collaboratively to address issues that were relevant for all schools in the area, and develop "a connected education track" that offered families in the community the opportunity to receive high quality education. The original concerns in Tamaki area related to two key issues. The first being the low numbers of students achieving at or above national expectations and gaining nationally recognised academic qualifications; the second being the large number of children who left the Tamaki area to access their education. All schools were fully committed to work together to solve these issues so that students in Tamaki could journey along the Tamaki Pathway to fulfill their education.

Through developing a culture of success in each school and working collaboratively to create a learning community, TAP schools were determined to create a successful learning pathway that supported the students in their learning transition, from early childhood education to primary and secondary schools to tertiary education or employment, thus enabling all students to reach their educational potential through local schools. The three goals set at the initiation of TAP and captured in previous strategic plans were:

1. To improve educational achievement of children
2. To strengthen the role of Boards of Trustees in decision making in our schools
3. To improve how communities see and support our schools

In order to achieve these goals a comprehensive strategic plan involving a number of strands was developed. The strategic plan was based on a theory for improvement informed by a programme logic based on relevant research (see Appendix One).

This paper presents one strand of the intervention that currently operates in the TAP schools. That is the strand that relates to involving communities in the education of the young people of Tamaki-Glen Innes. This strand of intervention has come directly from the initiative's theory for improvement. That is:

Common Understanding at all levels

We need our children, staff, parents, managers and governors to have a strong, coherent understanding of what we are trying to achieve and how we are trying to achieve it. We need

effective communication strategies and thoughtful professional development at all layers of school operation.

Partnership with Community

We need to foster more positive perception of the schools in our community. We need to build capacity of parents to engage with their children in the education journey. We need to develop effective strategies and parent capacity to engage with curriculum and learning.¹

The Intervention: Home School Partnership and Schools Inc

Home–School Partnership (HSP) programme was part of the Government's national Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

The HSP programme aims to raise student achievement, in the context of the New Zealand Curriculum, by training teams of teachers and parents to deliver sessions for parents and families that will empower them to help their children to develop their language and learning skills. All members of the school community are kept informed and are involved with the programme. This helps to develop a mutually beneficial partnership between home and school.

The teachers learn about the children's language and culture and how to incorporate this prior learning in school programmes. The parents learn the culture of the school, its processes and its expectations.

The TAP cluster of schools engaged with an external facilitator who ran workshops for parent and teachers. As a result of the training parents and lead teachers ran workshops for parents each term in literacy.

During the programme:

- the facilitator ran four full-day workshops to train the lead teams
- the lead teams delivered a series of six sessions for the parents and families
- the schools supported the parents and families by providing resources that were used in the homes as they helped their children develop literacy and language skills.

Schools Inc was a fortnightly television programme that aired on a local television network. HSP workshops were filmed and segments aired. The programme also contained film clips of participating schools' events and learning programmes. Children from the schools played key roles in filming, editing and fronting the programme. While there was initial funding support by the MoE the schools now fund this programme themselves. The purpose of the programme is to provide additional support and information to parents from both the HSP programme and classroom programmes.

¹ Source: Tamaki Achievement Pathway Strategic Plan 2007-2010

Key Findings and Outcomes

The attendance at HSP parent meetings increased over the two years the programme operated. Critical to achieving this was the training of parents who represented the various ethnic groups of each community. Parents participated more enthusiastically when engaging with a parent from their own ethnic group than when working with a parent from other ethnic groups. They reported feeling more able to question the parent about things they were unsure of if that parent spoke their own home language. Parents also appreciated being able to view aspects of the workshops on Schools Inc with their children as this reinforced strategies shared at parent meetings.

While numbers increased over the two years a challenge to all schools was ensuring the timing of meetings was appropriate. That is in the first year meetings held late in the year yielded a lower attendance rate than meetings held earlier in the year.

Attendance at parent-teacher interviews increased across all schools with some schools reporting a 50% increase in attendance. Parents also reported feeling more confident to ask about their child's learning needs. Most teachers became proactive in sending work and ideas home to assist parents. Some resources were developed in various languages to further support parents. This was an ongoing process and required input and support from the parents. Parents reported appreciating the commitment by schools to provide support in their home language.

The intervention had the greatest impact in three schools where HSP was combined with the use of a community liaison worker². The community liaison worker visited homes and followed up on the parent workshops to ensure families felt supported. Parents in these schools reported feeling much more confident to support their children in the acquisition of reading and writing skills. Parents reported reading to their children more often. Attendance at pre school facilities also increased in these schools. While the key role of the liaison worker was to follow up on parent meetings she was also able to identify families with children almost about to start school and provide support for those families in ensuring the children attended pre-school.

Achievement was accelerated in most schools and more markedly in schools that employed not only HSP but also a community liaison worker. The use of a nationally normed assessment tool (asTTle)³ in reading determined that in these schools the acceleration achieved was between 1.6 and 3.8 times greater than the typically expected shift. It must be noted that none of the schools had achieved the nationally typical achievement levels for each year group but did achieve acceleration. Schools continue to strive to meet national expectations by setting targets of achievement based on continuing the acceleration.

² The community liaison worker's key role was to establish positive links between home and school. The Ministry of Education as part of its Pasifika Education strategy to raise student achievement provided funding for the community liaison worker.

³ AsTTle is a norm referenced assessment tool that has been developed to assess student achievement in reading, writing and mathematics. It has been produced both in English and Maori medium. The tool assesses achievement from Level 2 – 4 of the curriculum. Analysis can be carried out for year groups, individual classrooms, schools and the cluster as a whole.

Table 1 indicates the amount of shift in reading scores of individual schools and the cluster between August 2006 and August 2007 compared with the national typical shift for Year 5 and 6.

Table 1: Shift in reading scores of individual schools and the cluster between August 2006 and August 2007 compared with the national typical shift for Year 5 and 6

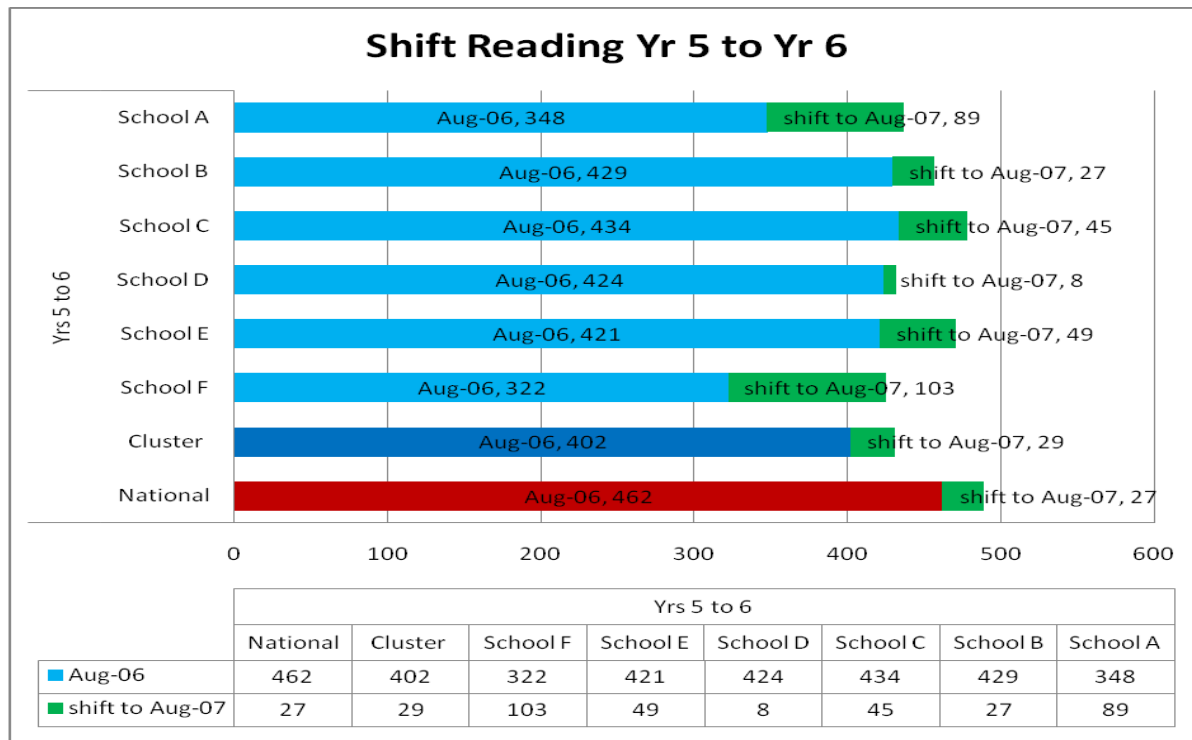


Table 1 indicates that with the exception of School B and D all schools achieved a greater than typical expected shift in achievement. The shifts are not solely attributable to the HSP programme, however when analysed in conjunction with the positive gains in parent participation and engagement with schools and viewed alongside relevant research suggesting positive outcomes for children these results indicate promising results.

A greater link can be made between the HSP programme, the employment of a community liaison worker and the raised entry levels of children starting school for the first time. Data was collected on children starting school prior to the intervention and during the intervention. Data collected included identifying children’s ability to recognise alphabet, their understanding of concepts about print and their word recognition. It was found that achievement levels of children starting school increased. Significant gains of alphabet knowledge and books were noted. The three schools (A, E and F) employing a community liaison worker showed the greatest shifts.

In order for Schools Inc to be of real value as a learning tool it was critical to ensure that as many parents as possible watched the programme regularly and preferably with their children. In a survey of parents carried out at the end of 2006 it was found that 64% of families watched Schools Inc regularly and all of these families watched the programme with their children. Eighty seven percent of these parents indicated that watching Schools Inc helped them see the importance of learning and 73% indicated that watching Schools Inc helped their children to learn.

Conclusion

The engagement of communities in the education of children has positive impacts. The positive impact of this intervention has included parents feeling welcome in schools and more confident to share in their children's learning.

The use of parents was crucial to the success of the HSP programme. The parents were fluent in their home language and this was a key factor in engaging many parents as this meant they could ask questions confidently knowing their question would be understood and responded to in a way that was understandable to them.

There has been an increase in the number of parents attending parent-teacher interviews and as a result they indicated that they had a better understanding of their children's learning needs and more importantly they had more confidence to help their children.

Attendance at pre-school has increased in schools where there has been the employment of a community liaison worker. While the key role of the liaison worker was to follow up on parent meetings she was also able to identify families with children almost about to start school and provide support for those families in ensuring the children attended pre-school.

Tentative findings suggest that there has been a positive outcome with respect to student achievement. However, these results must be viewed alongside all of the interventions that have occurred within the TAP initiative. As indicated earlier in this paper schooling improvement is complex and to attribute success to any one intervention would be inappropriate. It is the view of the TAP schools that *the whole is greater than the sum of the parts*.

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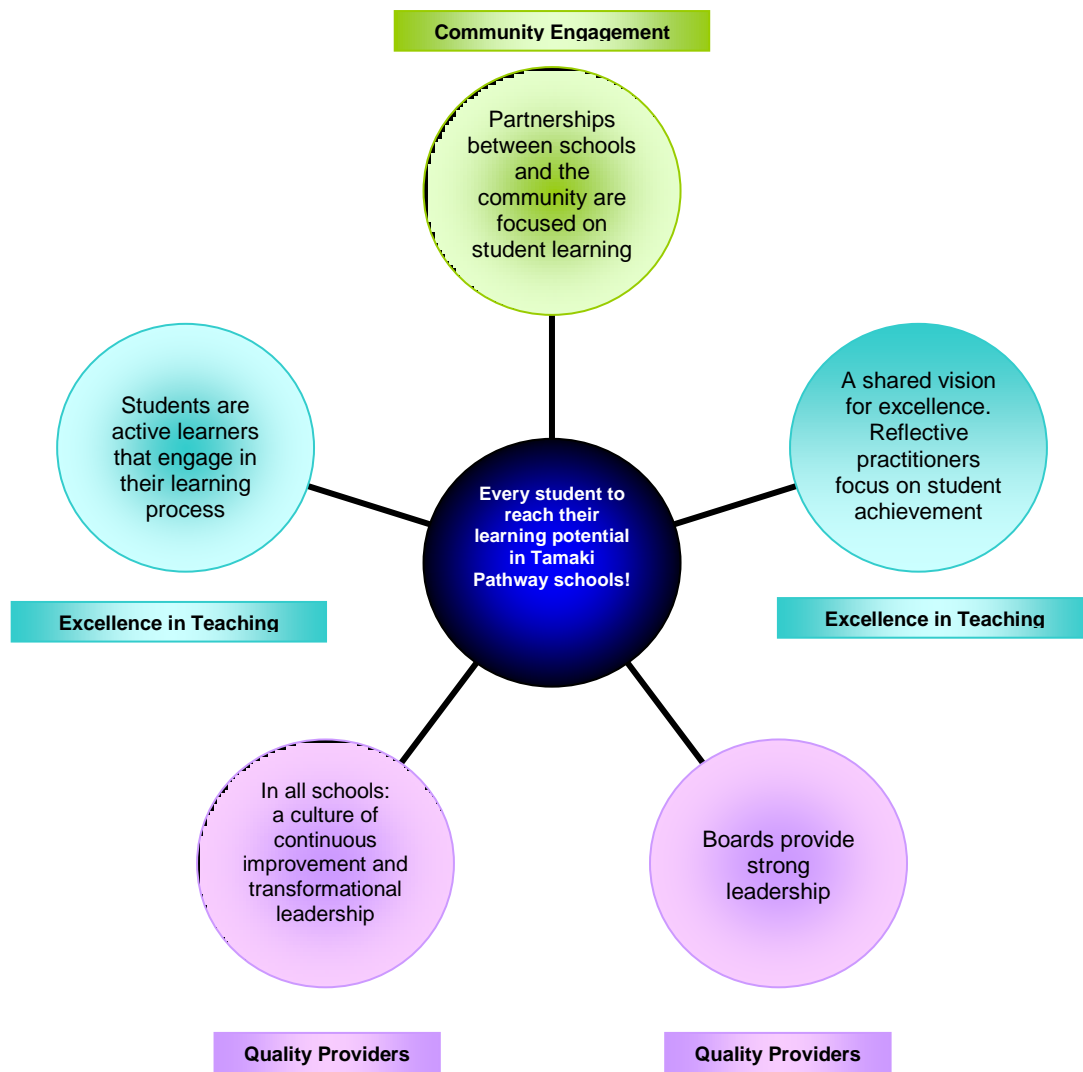
Appendix One

Program Logic

The program logic for TAP outlines the theory about the causal linkages between the various components of project.

This program logic provides a backbone for the TAP strategic and annual plans. It describes the blueprint for TAP, is underpinned by evidence based research, and provides a theory of action, along with the most appropriate measures for short and long term outcomes, which in turn monitor and evaluate the performance of the project throughout the life of the project.

The following diagram shows program logic at its macro level.



Theory for Improvement

This section summarises the relevant evidence based research that supports each area of TAP to reach their intended outcomes⁴.

Quality Providers

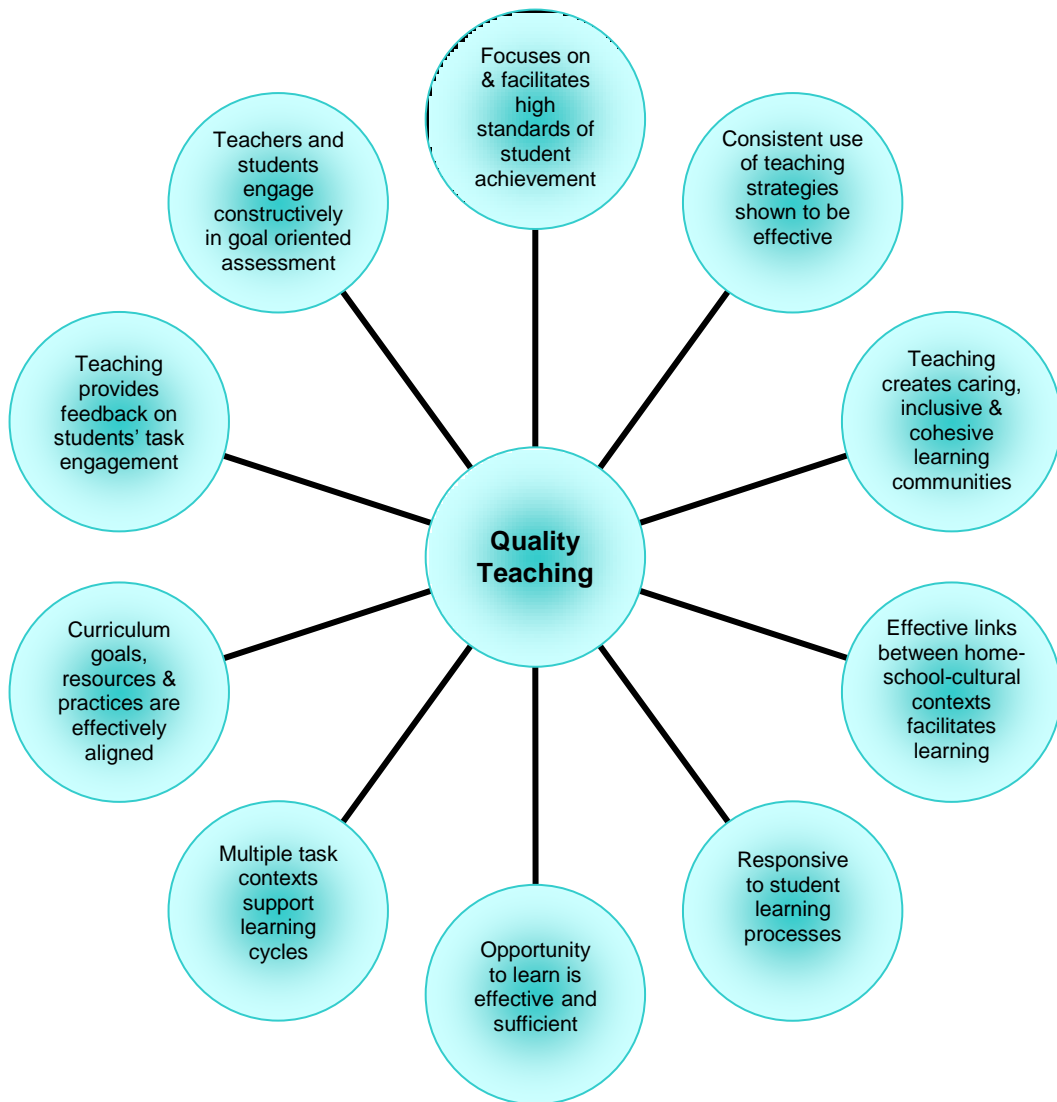
The following diagram illustrates the key characteristics of **quality providers** that enable students to reach their potential.



⁴ Also see "TAP Literature Review of Improvement Theories" by Kerry Taylor, project coordinator of TAP.

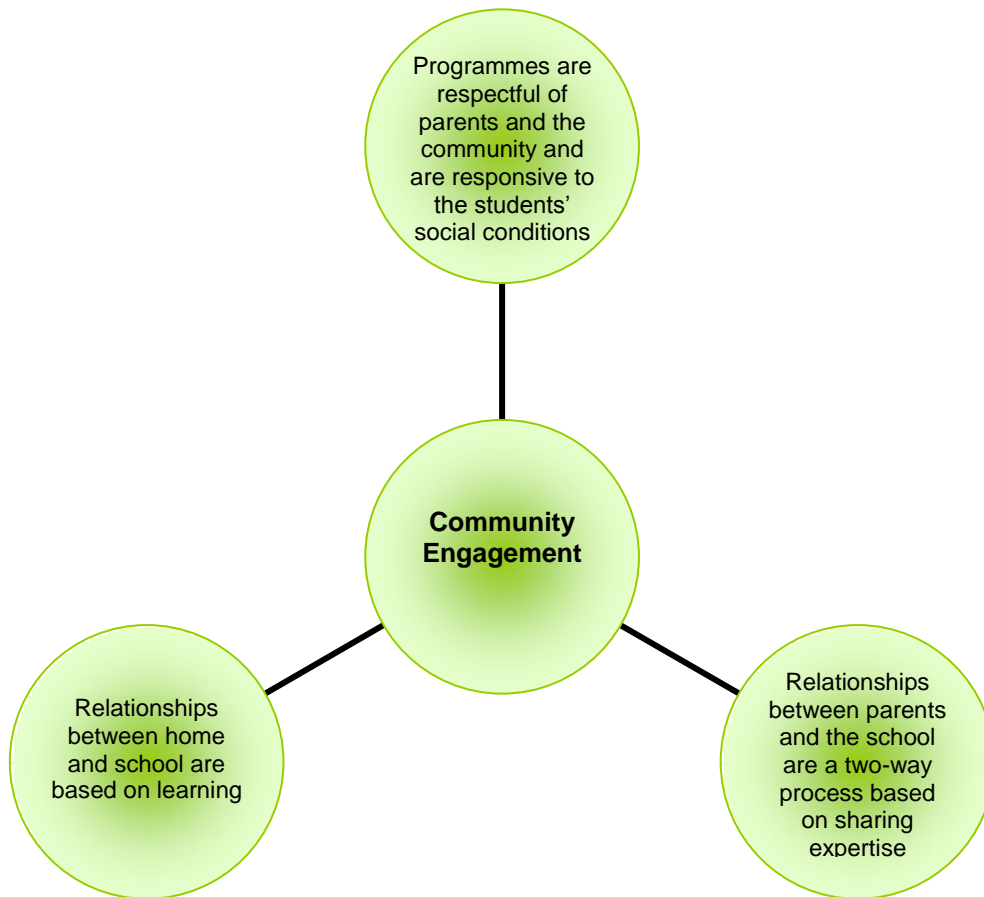
Quality Teaching

The following diagram illustrates the key characteristics of **quality teaching** that enable students to reach their potential.



Community Engagement

The following diagram illustrates the key characteristics of **community engagement** that enable students to reach their potential.



SUMMARY OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

| Practices | Theory for Improvement |
|--|--|
| Analysis and use of student achievement data | We need to have clear understanding of our students' needs and have evidence based development targeting these needs. To do this we need to build capacity at all levels of our learning networks to analyse, use and understand achievement data via professional development. |
| Identification and use of effective pedagogy | We need to be able to identify the more effective approaches using achievement data to develop pedagogy that is appropriate to the needs of our students. We then need effective facilitation to develop teacher capacity to deliver quality practice. |
| Environment of critique and challenge | We need to develop robust learning communities where the members at each level challenge and critique current performance in order to achieve subsequent gains in our core business of raising student achievement. This necessitates teacher release time for critical/analytical discussions, Quality Learning Circles & facilitated conferencing. |
| Common understandings at every level | We need our students, staff, parents, management and governors to have a strong, coherent understanding of what we are trying to achieve and how we are trying to achieve it. We need effective communication strategies and thoughtfully aligned professional development at all layers of school operation. |
| Coherent systems and leadership | We need to have effective governance and management with Boards and School Leaders having a robust understanding of their respective roles leading to strong performance. We need to provide appropriate Board and Leadership training to develop and maintain an effective education infrastructure |
| Partnership with the community | We need to foster more positive perception of the schools in our community. We need to build the capacity of parents to engage with their children in the education journey. We need to develop effective communication strategies and parent capacity to engage with curriculum and learning. |