

Developing Partnerships for Improving Student Outcomes

Nicky Knight, Natalie Kirton and Sally McCaulay
Otago: The Learning Community, Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

This paper examines schooling improvement partnerships in 13 low socio-economic schools in the Otago: The Learning Community (OTLC) cluster. Recent successes in raising student achievement in reading and writing have been attributed to the partnerships that have developed between the schools (teachers, principals and parent communities) and partner organizations such as The University of Auckland, The Woolf Fisher Research Centre, government and privately funded education consultants, The Ministry of Education, The Otago Boards' Forum consisting of representative school governors, and local businesses. The paper suggests that schooling improvement partnerships need to be carefully considered before embarking on a joint exercise. The key elements that lead to successful partnerships include organizational visions that are aligned, regular contact between partners, power-sharing between partners and a clear focus on the collective goal of raising student achievement. Challenges include the coordination of multiple agendas and managing the partnership personnel, processes and relationships, the capacity of schools to undertake more complex data management tasks themselves (a financial decision) and on-going funding.

Introduction

Otago: The Learning Community (OTLC), a schooling improvement partnership has been established in 13 low socio-economic schools in South Auckland. The learning community consists of three clusters; OTLC Literacy focusing on reading and writing, OTLC Numeracy focusing on the acquisition of number knowledge and strategies and OTLC Parents as Reading Tutors (PART) which supports parents to work with lower achieving readers within schools and homes.

The schools' populations are almost exclusively indigenous (Maori) and ethnic minority (Pasifika) students. The focus has been to raise student achievement in an area that has traditionally had high rates of underachievement and transience. Recent successes in raising student achievement in reading and writing have been attributed to the multiple partnerships that have developed between the schools and organizations such as the schools' Boards of Trustees¹, The University of Auckland, The Woolf Fisher Research Centre, government and privately funded education consultants, The Ministry of Education(MOE), The Otago Boards' Forum (OBF) consisting of representative school governors, and local businesses.

Internationally, partnerships with schools vary according to policy contexts and political climates. Annan (2007) noted that schooling improvement projects in literacy and numeracy in England were framed within tight central control, applying pressure and support on schools by setting challenging achievement targets, unifying the bureaucracy and making everyone including the public aware of progress.

¹ Each New Zealand school is governed by its own parent elected Board of Trustees. Each Board of Trustees comprises the principal, five or more community members, a staff representative and in secondary schools, a student.

Monitoring mechanisms provided further reasons for schools to rigidly adhere to the initiative goals. Opportunities for developing partnerships were therefore limited.

In contrast, The United States, through its Comprehensive School Reform programmes, for example, developed a more devolved multiple partner approach to schooling improvement. Federal government developed a:

direct contractual relationship with school districts and schools and an indirect contractual relationship with the researcher-developers of the programmes...Most school districts developed contractual relationships with the research and development community to work out what to do. That was because the developers within the research and development community had designed the programmes that met the criteria (Annan, 2007, p. 38).

Thus the boundaries between federal and research and development communities became blurred with a complex mix of collaborations to raise national standards of achievement.

Partnerships have been a feature of a number of schooling improvement initiatives in New Zealand. Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otarā (SEMO) in the late 1990s involved multiple partners including the Ministry of Education as the major change agent. Through a collaborative but challenging working relationship, schools began the task of addressing years of student under achievement.

The most widely researched curriculum improvement initiative in New Zealand is the Numeracy Development Project aimed at improving student outcomes in Number and Algebra. The project began in 2000 and has been a very successful collaboration between the schools, MOE and the research teams. Research teams continue to inform the developers of the NDP and classroom practitioners through publications, conferences and online resources. The Literacy Professional Development Project is part of the Ministry of Education's literacy strategy aimed at increasing the effectiveness of literacy practices in schools either in reading comprehension or writing for students in years 1–8 (grades 2-9). The project works towards four outcomes:

- Evidence of improved student achievement
- Evidence of improved teacher content knowledge
- Evidence of improved transfer of understanding of literacy pedagogy to practice
- Evidence of professional learning communities

MOE (2006, p. 1) indicated that results show “a mean stanine shift of 0.56 across all stanines and all year groups. This represents an effect size for the whole cohort of 0.87. The result for the students who were in the lowest 23% the first time they were tested (at Time 1) were even better: they had an average mean shift of 1.1, reflecting an effect size of 1.97.”

What should partnerships look like?

Kedro (2004) advocates that schooling improvement partnerships should be based on shared philosophies and be mutually beneficial. A collaborative approach allows the development of the core goals of the partnership which then become part of the culture at all levels of the participating groups. A set of “seamless academic strategies” (Kedro, 2004, p. 101) need to be established to ensure that the cluster's educational purpose is aligned with the partnership activities, and these need to be regularly reviewed to check progress towards objectives and outcomes.

Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung (in press), in the *Best Evidence Synthesis on Professional Learning and Links to Student Achievement*², suggest that partnerships are one of a number of factors that contribute to improved student outcomes. The engagement of external expertise, often researchers, was a feature of nearly all high impact core studies in the synthesis. She also noted that teachers needed extended opportunities to learn over time.

Effective professional communities were characterised by two conditions. Firstly, participants were supported to process new understandings and their implications for teaching. Sometimes this involved challenging problematic beliefs and testing the efficacy of competing ideas. Expertise external to the group brought new perspectives and assisted in challenging prevailing dialogical norms.

Secondly, the focus was on analyzing the impact of teaching on student learning. This focus was assisted by grounding discussions in artefacts representing student learning and by teachers having high but realistic expectations of students and believing they could make a difference. Norms of collective responsibility for student learning replace those of individualism and autonomy, focused on teachers (Timperley et al., in press, p. xxxii).

The international and national literature highlights the need for further debate and analysis of the enactment of multiple partnerships within the practical reality of schooling improvement initiatives.

Background – New Zealand

The 1989 educational reforms in New Zealand devolved a highly regulated system for administering New Zealand schools to a Board of Trustees making them self governing. Under this model, the board, comprising a majority of locally elected parent trustees, the principal and a staff representative was given the responsibility of governance of the school. Under this system, the schools in South Auckland were essentially left to fend for themselves. In 1996, the Education Review Office³ (ERO) published a highly critical evaluation of schooling in Mangere and Otara. “As well as alleging widespread governance failure, the report raised questions about the appropriateness of the lay trustee model in communities where it was difficult to elect or co-opt sufficient financial and professional expertise, and where cultural norms conflicted with the requirement that boards act as the employer and appraiser of the principal” (Robinson & Timperley, 2004, p. ix-x).

Schooling improvement initiatives SEMO and then subsequently AUSAD (Analysis and Use of Student Achievement Data) and OTLC followed, funded extensively by the Ministry of Education. These initiatives provided a platform for multiple organizations to be involved in supporting the schools. Robinson and Timperley (2004) noted that since 1996, schools started to develop their own solutions to problems highlighted in the ERO report.

In New Zealand there is no system of national testing with national comparative data being made available as in England and the United States. There is also no requirement for primary or elementary

² Best Evidence Synthesis. The purpose of the synthesis is to consolidate the international and New Zealand evidence around the emerging knowledge base about how to promote teacher learning in ways that impact on outcomes for the diversity of students in New Zealand classrooms.

³ The Education Review Office is a government department whose purpose is to evaluate and report publicly on the education and care of students in schools and early childhood services. Schools and early childhood services are reviewed on average once every three years. ERO also publishes national reports on specific education issues using evidence from its reviews.

schools to use specific tests. On international tests such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS⁴) (2001) coordinated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, the mean reading score for New Zealand Year 5 students was 529, significantly higher than the international average of 500. However, according to Caygill and Chamberlain (2005) in their New Zealand summary of the international report, the range of scores for New Zealand was wider than the range for most other countries with a relatively large proportion of our students achieving within the international lower quartile (bottom 25%) benchmark. They also noted that the mean scores for Māori (481) and Pasifika (481) students were significantly lower than the international mean (500). Just over five percent of Māori students reached the international top 10% benchmark of 615. Less than half of Māori and Pasifika students achieved a score above the international mean. Of particular concern to New Zealand is the large “tail” of under achievement by Maori and Pasifika students. It is interesting to note that a higher portion of New Zealand students reported speaking a language other than English in the home in 2001 than in 1990, with this increase statistically significant.⁵

In the New Zealand National Education Monitoring Project⁶ in writing (Flockton & Crooks, 2006), there was a useful reduction in disparities for year eight Maori students compared to New Zealand European (Pakeha) students and strongly reduced disparities of performance for Pasifika students compared to Pakeha students, compared with the results in 2002.

What are the partnerships and what do they do?

The multiple partnerships between the schools and their partner organizations in OTLC have arisen to meet specific needs required by the learning community. The Otago Boards' Forum, an incorporated society representing Otago schools' Boards of Trustees, coordinate the strategic vision for the Otago community, administer and monitor the funding, raise funds for community initiatives, provide parent education programmes and operate a Ministry of Education funded district truancy service. They have a high profile within the Otago community and have a key focus on raising student achievement. The OBF coordinate an annual Otago Literacy Day which involves bringing the community together to highlight and celebrate the importance of literacy through their motto “Every Day Counts”.

The University of Auckland provides research capability through the Woolf Fisher Research Centre and also provides government funded literacy consultants through its teacher support services. These groups bring local and international expertise in developing teacher content and pedagogical knowledge and research methodology along with a pragmatic approach to effective classroom practice. In addition teachers have the opportunity to complete university papers which are directly linked to work programmes in Otago. Courses were offered on school sites. The Ministry of Education maintains an overview of the learning community within a national framework. They offer support and critique of key elements of the OTLC work programmes.

Local businesses have worked alongside some OTLC schools for a number of years providing managerial and financial advice and support. Rongomai School, for example, has links with the city's airport and a local bank and Bairds Mainfreight Primary has support from a national freight company.

⁴ PIRLS is an international four yearly cycle of assessment designed to measure trends in reading achievement at the middle primary level (year five/grade 4) students in New Zealand.

⁵ The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

⁶ The New Zealand National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP) assesses a selected sample of year four and year eight students across a range of curriculum areas over a four year cycle. The information is published in nationally available reports and available on line.

Outcomes

Prior to the OTLC being established, students on average were not achieving maturational gains in either reading or writing. OTLC used the nationally normed Supplementary Test of Achievement in Reading⁷ (STAR) to assess students in years four to eight students (grades three to seven) in reading comprehension. Four sub tests assess word recognition, sentence comprehension, paragraph comprehension, and vocabulary range. Students receive an overall stanine from one to nine for the STAR test. After three years involvement in the learning community, the mean score of students who were present for all samples, has improved significantly from a below average band mean reading stanine of 3.21 in February 2004 to an average band mean reading stanine 4.00 in November 2005. Students scoring four or above are deemed to be average or above average.

Data for writing indicates a higher percentage of students are now making maturational gains within a year. Longitudinal data shows the median writing level within a year group cohort is improving over time. This is greater than maturational gains. Through the OTLC PART programme, which involves intensive one to one coaching for students in reading with an adult at least three days a week, students made an average gain of thirteen months over the fifteen week programme.

In 2007, writing for students in years four to eight was assessed using a nationally referenced “Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning” (asTTle) tool. Prior to this (2005-2006), achievement in writing was assessed through local standards based on the New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars⁸. As a consequence, only one year’s data is available using a nationally referenced tool. Earlier data (2005-2006) based on the exemplars indicated, students made maturational gains whereas previously this was not the case.

In their research of the OTLC writing project, Limbrick, Kirton, Knight, McCaulay, Funaki and Evans (2004, p. 21) noted:

a deepening of understanding about what constitutes ‘a good piece of writing’ emerged as a strong theme throughout the focus group discussions. ... Greater confidence and knowledge about writing appeared to be influencing classroom practice. For example, teachers commented on how they were using knowledge of key language terms and features, introduced by the facilitators and clarified during the moderation process, when working with children. This, they noted, was assisting them to make writing instruction more explicit for their students through increased awareness of what they and students need to know.

An additional outcome was a greater familiarity with nationally referenced assessment tools. Through using the New Zealand Curriculum Exemplars in writing, teachers “have developed a meta-language for writing” resulting in “a greater shared understanding of what constitutes writing indicative of an achievement level” (Limbrick, Knight, McCaulay, Kirton, Funaki and Evans, 2005, p. 18).

Another important outcome of the learning community is the building of effective networks between and within schools. In 2007, a number of schools chose to examine their individual school writing data

⁷ Supplementary Test of Achievement in Reading (STAR) has been developed by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research for assessing reading comprehension.

⁸ Samples of authentic student work annotated to illustrate learning, achievement, and quality in relation to levels one to five in the ‘English in the New Zealand Curriculum’. Samples are assessed against a matrix of indicators at each level.

with another school and to identify classes with the greatest achievement gains. This led to a consideration of the practice which may have contributed to the gains. Teachers are also visiting other schools to observe this classroom practice.

Results: How were these outcomes achieved?

Partners linked through strategically aligned goals

Partners are linked through strategically aligned goals and similar organizational visions. This includes a collective goal of raising student achievement and a fundamental concern and commitment to the young people in Otara. Kedro (2004) suggests that partnerships should be based on shared philosophies and be mutually beneficial. A collaborative approach allows the development of the core goals of the partnership which then become part of the culture at all levels of the participating groups. A set of “seamless academic strategies” (Kedro, 2004, p. 101) need to be established to ensure that the cluster’s educational purpose is aligned with the partnership’s activities, and these need to be regularly reviewed to check progress towards these objectives and outcomes. The partners and schools think strategically and develop capacity within the cluster to be self sustaining in the medium and longer term. Newmann, Smith, Allensworth and Bryk (2001, p. 301) also highlighted the importance of aligned goals stating “...research on organisations and effective management indicates that professionals who work together on integrated activities aimed at clear goals produce higher quality goods and services.” Robinson (2007, p. 17) claimed that it wasn’t necessarily the nature of the professional learning activity that made a difference to student outcomes, rather it was the “alignment of purpose and activity, provision of a variety of activities, opportunities for negotiation of the meaning of key concepts and a strong focus on the impact of teaching on the student.”

High expectations of students

All partners have high expectations for students which are shared collectively within cluster of schools. Cluster wide expectations are set annually based on national norms which are shared and discussed within the partner organisations. In her Best Evidence Synthesis, Alton-Lee (2003, p. 89) noted that:

Quality teaching has a central focus on raising student achievement for diverse learners. New Zealand educators need to break a pattern of inappropriately low expectations for some students, particularly Maori and Pacific learners and learners from low socio-economic status families. Research on quality teaching signals the importance of high expectations both for the standards that can be reached, and the pace at which learning should proceed.

Challenging student achievement targets are developed collectively within the cluster with the expectation that students can and will achieve at or above national norms. These are monitored twice yearly at a cluster, school and class level.

A focus on evidence to inform practice

Schools and partners maintain a focus on evidence to inform practice. This involves discussions on analyzing and interpreting data and the implications of that data for practice. Monthly meetings with literacy and numeracy leaders provide opportunities to discuss and analyse student achievement data. The Woolf Fisher Research Trust and The University of Auckland provide aggregated data with discussions of its statistical and practical significance. They further support schools to extend teacher knowledge and the data is used to inform teaching and learning. McNaughton, Lei, MacDonald Farry (2004, p. 194) claimed the process of “critical discussion and analysis of data within the school cluster

was based on previous research suggesting that the critical examination of practice in collaborative groups can be effective in creating meaningful and sustainable changes in practice.” Lai and McNaughton (in press, p.1) illustrated how “evidence based conversations contributed to improving student achievement,” and how these conversations supported school leaders and teachers to identify changes that needed to be made to teaching programmes in order to better meet student needs. Researchers in the New Zealand Numeracy Development Project have confirmed this also. Thomas and Tagg (2005, cited in Higgins, Thomas, Trinick & Young-Loveridge, 2005, p. 21) found that “the schools who reported extensive use of numeracy achievement data appeared to raise the achievement of their students more than schools with a lower reported use of achievement.”

Professional learning opportunities

A wide variety of professional learning opportunities are provided by the partners to develop teacher pedagogical and content knowledge and to challenge teachers beliefs. These include teacher professional learning sessions with lead teachers and classroom teachers, in-class support, cluster wide writing moderation⁹ sessions, cluster wide professional learning sessions and leadership training. The content of professional learning opportunities included a mixture of theory and activities that related to classroom practice. Timperley et al (in press, p.168) in the Best Evidence Synthesis linking teacher professional learning activities to student outcomes, has identified that “instruction was accompanied by multiple opportunities for teachers to construct meaning, to develop a deeper understanding of theory/practice links, and to compare new and existing theories.” The follow up in-class support further helps teachers to translate the theory into classroom practice.

Regular contact between partners

Another feature of the partnership is the regular contact between partners. One or two lead teacher meetings are scheduled each month with a focus on professional learning and minimal time spent on administration. In addition, consultants facilitate the meetings and provide expertise. Consultants are also assigned to specific schools and negotiate annual development plans which are implemented in an ongoing way throughout the year.

Researchers from The University of Auckland and MOE personnel are also involved with the lead teacher groups. Their role is to support and challenge teacher thinking and bring an important theoretical perspective to discussions of practice. University researchers are actively involved in researching and monitoring the projects. Ongoing feedback from this group informs decisions made by the cluster. In 2008, two more research projects begin. The first is a National Pasifika Schooling Improvement Project initiated by the MOE and the second is a Reading Sustainability Project entitled “Developing a Cross Context Model of Sustainability” coordinated by The University of Auckland. The OTLC coordinator reports bi-monthly to the OBF. This gives OBF members an opportunity to question cluster activities and then ask pertinent questions back in their own schools.

⁹ The purpose of moderation involves reaching agreement on the standard of student work against a predetermined set of criteria. In OTLC teachers moderate samples of students’ writing at the school and cluster level.

Involvement of parents

Through the OTLC PART¹⁰ cluster activities, parents are trained as reading tutors and work with students one-on-one during the school day. These parents also use the same strategies to support their own children's learning at home. The progress of students involved in the project is monitored and shared with parents, and at local and regional conferences. Initial results indicate that students make greater than maturational gains through the programme.

Co-construction of solutions

Additional factors contribute to project outcomes. Solutions are co constructed rather than imposed between the schools and partners. Whilst this has implications for the speed with which decisions are made, the benefits of buy in and commitment outweigh any disadvantages. Organisations question and challenge schools and vice versa.

The development of a professional learning community and a culture of inquiry

A critically important factor contributing to project outcomes is the development of a professional learning community of learners that question and critique practice. Toole and Seashore Louis (2002, p. 247) describe a culture of inquiry as “a school wide culture that makes collaboration expected, inclusive, genuine, ongoing, and focused on critically examining practice to improve student outcomes.” Competition has been replaced with a high trust model of collaboration. For writing, for example, every teacher brings marked samples of their students' work to an area wide moderation process. Teachers in mixed school groups and across a variety of year levels, engage in discussion in order to reach consensus on the grade awarded to a sample of writing. Student achievement data was previously kept exclusively within schools. It is now aggregated and analyzed across the cluster and examined in a public forum in terms of implications for practice.

Discussion

This paper set out to describe the nature of the multiple partnerships involved in one schooling improvement initiative in a large, urban, low socio-economic area. The conclusions drawn in this paper would appear to be applicable and relevant to other educational settings considering a multiple partner approach to schooling improvement.

The partnerships have been successful in improving student achievement and enhancing teacher pedagogical and content knowledge in literacy and numeracy. This has been achieved through the setting of common goals and the collaborative development of plans to achieve the goals. Partners have a voice in a trust atmosphere where sharing can be open and honest and partners are seen to be equal while acknowledging their unique expertise.

The sharing of student achievement data at the area wide and individual school level was important in the development of a more collegial approach to common issues. The partnerships ultimately support the development of a teacher's ability to see the impact of their teaching on students' learning. Robinson and Lai (2006) argued that a culture of inquiry was enhanced when teachers completed research into improving their own practice. “...their research will often be done in collaboration with other teachers, professional developers, and external researchers. The latter two groups have a special role in providing

¹⁰ The OTLC PART programme is a fifteen week reading programme that teaches students strategies to attempt unknown words and gain reading mileage through daily one on one tutoring. To be eligible for inclusion in this project, students are reading one and a half to two years below their chronological age.

supervision and additional expertise and in introducing teachers to relevant published literature” (Robinson and Lai, 2006, p. 11).

The partnerships have developed over a long period of time and educational organizations considering using multiple partners need to think long term; at least five years for an effective relationship, ideally ten. This is supported by Annan (2007) but he also makes the point that a sense of urgency is paramount for effective change.

We expected challenges and at times creative solutions were needed for complex problems. Challenges included the coordination of multiple agendas and managing the partnership personnel, processes and relationships. Differing agendas meant that decision making on some occasions was protracted with vigorous debates. Sometimes personal agendas are put aside in the interests of harmony and the students. Time is needed for effective schooling improvement partnerships to develop. There are no pre-packaged programmes as learning needs are contextualized to the requirements of Otago students and their schools and communities.

Clear guidelines need to be established between schools and their partner organisations. For example, one of the MOE’s and skilled facilitator’s role is to constructively challenge and critique practice and this is expected by schools. On the other hand, lead teachers are expected to challenge and debate the views of experts.

One of the more challenging aspects of the partnerships has been the schools’ involvement in more complex data management tasks (a financial decision) without necessarily having the expertise to manage it adequately. Another important consideration is the choice of lead teacher and their ability to mandate change in schools. Currently the partnership initiatives are funded through contested government grants. In the longer term schools will need to fund partnership initiatives through their regular operations grant from the government’s educational division.

Conclusion

Schooling improvement partnerships need to be carefully considered before embarking on such partnerships. Organizational visions must be aligned and regular contact must be maintained between the schools and the partner organizations. Successful partnerships rely on schools having a right to question and critique actions by the research partners and consultants in addition to the researchers critiquing schools. The partnerships are equal with solutions being jointly constructed rather than being imposed. There is a clear focus on the collective goal of raising student achievement and thinking strategically. The next challenge is to develop capacity within the cluster to be self sustaining.

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