

How to build partnerships with families from different cultural backgrounds

Parental involvement is beneficial for student of all cultural groups. Across all ethnic groups, including families with little formal education or English language, research finds that parents and families are able to support their children to make achievement gains. Families' cultural background influences to some degree the nature of partnership, and lower involvement in school activities tends to be related to minority cultural backgrounds and lower socioeconomic status. When schools find out about, acknowledge and utilise families' community knowledge and practices, it can help to minimise the challenges in developing effective partnerships where there are differences between the home and school environments. Research suggests that minority cultural groups in New Zealand are least involved in school activities and less likely to talk with teachers about their child's work, discuss the curriculum or programme, or volunteer in the classroom. Parents with English as a second language communicate less frequently with the teacher, so a focus on strengthening partnerships with culturally diverse families is very important.

Tips and suggestions for improving partnership with culturally diverse families

Broaden your ideas of family involvement

- **Define parent involvement broadly** to include involvement at home rather than just at school, and relate it to families' experiences and actions in their communities.
- **Develop teachers' models of practices** so that they are sufficiently open to account for culturally diverse practices. Acknowledge a plurality of culturally valuable actions and behaviours.
- **Emphasise alternative family activities** such as eating meals together or discussing books, media experiences, and political and social events and issues, all of which are identified as effective parent involvement strategies.
- **Ensure there are a wide range of options** for participation in the school setting that allow culturally diverse families to find a meaningful role that suits them.

Build relationships

- **Make the first move in building trust.** Trust is essential, especially for families that have had bad experiences with school or for any other reason feel alienated from the school.
- **Establish positive relationships** before focusing on tasks such as tackling academic achievement or attendance.
- **Make personal invitations,** and utilise telephone calls and face-to-face interactions rather than letters or emails, which may present a major barrier for parents with low literacy or limited English.
- **Adjust communication strategies** by learning about appropriate ways of communicating with different cultural groups and any protocols related to informal and formal meetings.
- **Be aware** that families for whom English is a second language have unequal access to the meanings and understandings of common school procedures, which is disempowering for them.

- **Provide a first person of contact** for culturally diverse families, who focuses on developing a relationship with families, building trust, advocating for families at the school and facilitating the development of relationships within the school, especially with teachers.
- **Use a mediator** to help immigrant families settle into school, and organise a comprehensive induction process and many meetings with parents over the first two or three months after their child's entry into school, in order to build effective relationships and communication with parents.
- **Be honest** in acknowledging the work that needs to be done to improve partnerships and make them effective for all and don't cover up difficulties.

Listen to families

- **Base partnership on open dialogue and shared agendas.** Value and encourage genuine collaboration, and provide equitable opportunities for families to contribute to conversations in order to construct families as competent and valued partners.
- **Find out what culturally diverse families value** in terms of engagement activities and outcomes.
- **Give consideration to culturally diverse families' beliefs, goals, and interests,** and value ethnic and indigenous perspectives, rather than focusing on how to support culturally diverse students to master the educational requirements of the dominant group.
- **Avoid giving advice,** or providing an 'expert' view of children's competencies and abilities, which constructs the family as passive partners and may overlook family knowledge and skills. Instead, make information-sharing more about negotiating or discussing issues with families than just telling them.
- **Avoid being overly professional and business-like,** which may be off-putting or alienating for some culturally diverse families.
- **Provide sufficient time for parent-teacher conferences.** Their formality and time restrictions may be too limiting for some culturally diverse parents, who want to be given time and feel listened to.
- **Use interpreters** to help you build partnership with families where English is a second language, or use your ESL teacher as the primary contact for these relationships.
- **Acknowledge the conversational strengths and resources of each family.** If you rely on a set of prescribed communication practices, you may unintentionally block families' attempts at communication, preventing them from offering strategies, stories or knowledge about their children. Attend carefully to families' subtle body language and facial expressions, provide wait time in conversation, and use attentive listening techniques to clarify your understanding.
- **Use focus groups** rather than surveys where possible as they tend to be more effective, particularly where there are language differences. Arrange to meet with parents who are currently uninvolved in partnership activities, and allow several meetings to give participants time to get to know and trust you. Consider using a facilitator who shares a similar cultural background and who is not connected to the school.

Include families' cultural strengths in teaching, decision making, and partnership activities

- **See parents as a means to understand children's backgrounds.**
- **Use culturally relevant materials** in class and incorporate students' cultures, communities and experiences in the curriculum. This gives culturally diverse students the same advantages as children of the dominant group, draws on the cultural richness of the community, and elevates families as 'expert' sources of knowledge.
- **Learn to understand and appreciate each family's strengths** in order to create equitable power relations.
- **Base partnership on the aspirations of the families** as well as the school, as research in New Zealand suggests that parents are not usually consulted about their own ideas or aspirations for their children's education.
- **Empower families with a say in decision-making** about their child.
- **Create teams focused on the education of particular cultural groups of students** within the school and invite both families and students to join meetings to discuss what has been happening with particular groups of students over the month/term.

Build capacity

- **Emphasise the importance of families' participation** in the activities of school and education of their children, and how strongly the school desires partnership with them. Parents' beliefs about their role in their child's education can be influenced by their perception of the school's desire for their involvement, and invitations to participate from the school.
- **Help families to develop personal self-efficacy beliefs** by being encouraging and offering many different, less threatening ways for them to participate such as culturally-related activities and events.
- **Ask families to share their knowledge of their children**, and respond to families' suggestions: this helps to establish the value of families' expertise about their children.
- **Take an active role in ensuring that parents feel prepared to help their children**, and ensure you provide high quality information about how to support children's learning and attainment. Be specific and check for parents' understanding, offering as much information and/or demonstration as parents require.
- **Offer workshops on the school system** and ways to interact with teachers and schools in families' home languages, where possible. This has been found to increase parent-initiated contact with schools among culturally diverse families.
- **Consider an integrated approach** for families in low socioeconomic areas which attempts to help families address their basic needs at the same time as supporting students in their education.

Involve communities

- **Make a significant effort to understand the local community**, so that you can provide different strategies to secure the engagement of the greatest number of families.
- **Use 'outreach workers'** or home-school liaison people who share the same cultural background as families, and have expertise or status within the community to act as intermediaries between school and home. Outreach workers have been found to play an important role in establishing home-school partnerships where families' language and culture are different to those of teachers.
- **Participate in networks** comprised of teachers, parents and community residents who can support new families of different ethnic groups to settle into the community. Students whose families are recent immigrants benefit from strong home-school partnership following the discontinuity, stress and disruption of their immigration.

Avoid assumptions

- **Don't misinterpret a lack of communication** or visible parent involvement in school-based activities from a family as disinterest. Research shows that teacher perceptions of family involvement are distinctly different from parental reports of involvement. Many studies show that culturally diverse families strongly value education and their children's success in school, and they support their children's learning at home.
- **Don't assume a shared understanding of expectations** for partnership activities but explain the reason for and benefits of each partnership activity. Often culturally diverse families do not share the same understanding of the purpose of involvement activities or how they might support children.
- **Don't assume that adolescent students prefer their families not to be involved** in their education. Adolescents like having their parents involved in certain ways, such as making subject choices and helping with homework. Research finds that over three-quarters of adolescents surveyed were willing to show their parents what they learned or what they had done well on, and ask parents for ideas for projects.
- **Don't make assumptions about families' time and other commitments**, which may not fit unproblematically with those of school. The rhetoric of home-school partnership often reflects the dominant values for organising and networking that might be incompatible with families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Additional suggestions for home-school partnership with Māori and Pasifika families

Māori families take a holistic perspective, which means they do not see school and home as separate and understand learning to continue across both contexts, but effective approaches for engaging Māori families still require a deep engagement in Māori culture and co-constructed activities and relationships to enable highly authentic interactions between whānau and schools. Conventional approaches to involving families determined by the school tend to operate at a superficial level and may not be based on genuine relationship, so they are not effective or appropriate for engaging Māori.

Here are some approaches and strategies that may be particularly pertinent for Māori and Pasifika whānau:

- **Offer a range of occasions for informal contacts** which are important for making teachers more approachable. Relationships with teachers are highly significant for Māori and Pasifika whānau.
- **Use face to face communication**, which is preferred by Māori to notes and telephone calls.
- **Emphasise welcoming rituals.** If there is a marae or whare on the school premises, emphasise its use as a focal point for the whole school to demonstrate the high value placed upon Māori culture. Māori families view the marae or whare as a place in which school staff step into a Māori world and way of doing things, which increases the possibilities of equal power-sharing relationships and interactions.
- **Place relationships first and foremost**, and find out which aspects of the school setting prevent working in traditional ways. There may be significant work to be done to develop trust. Māori families may distrust teachers due to a perceived lack of knowledge of Māori culture.
- **Enable Māori whanau to engage in co-construction** of the purpose and agenda of partnership. Allow relationships to unfold rather than trying to control the process and taking a linear approach based on predetermined expectations. Focus on generating ideas in relationships, rather than coming to partnership with fixed ideas or focusing on a particular agenda.
- **Enable equal, shared and reciprocal interactions** by avoiding teacher-dominated discussions of student achievement – these are likely to leave whānau feeling powerless or resentful. Find ways in which to enable reciprocal learning and ways that engage families as partners.
- **Develop taumahi-ā-whānau, or whānau homework**, in which whānau work together to develop something to represent their knowledge and understanding around a particular topic or kaupapa.

- **Ensure that parental involvement is supported by community and church leaders**, because traditionally Pasifika culture ascribes lineage and culture to the family domains, and education to the schools. Involving church and community leaders can encourage families to follow their example.
- **Reflect respect for the community in school environments**, such as through the inclusion of lei, tapa, flowers and music to represent Pasifika communities.

Further Reading

Daniel, G. (2015). Patterns of parent involvement: A longitudinal analysis of family-school relationships in the early years of school in Australia. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 40 (1), 119-28.

Hindle, R., Hynds, A., Averill, R., Meyer, L., & Faircloth, S. (2016). An ontological perspective on the development of home-school relationships with indigenous communities. *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 46 (1), 92-103.

Kim, Y. (2009). Minority parental involvement and school barriers: Moving the focus away from deficiencies of parents. *Educational Research Review*, 4, 80-102.

References

- Adams, K.S., & Christenson, S.L. (2000). Trust and the family–school relationship: Examination of parent–teacher differences in elementary and secondary grades. *Journal of School Psychology*, 38(5), 477-497.
- Anderson, K.J., & Minke, K.M. (2007) Parent involvement in education: Toward an understanding of parents' decision making. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 100(5), 311-323, doi: [10.3200/JOER.100.5.311-323](https://doi.org/10.3200/JOER.100.5.311-323)
- Berthelsen, D., & Walker, S. (2008). Parents' involvement in their children's education. *Family Matters*, 79, 34-41.
- Biddulph, F., Biddulph, C., & Biddulph, J. (2003). *The complexity of community and family influences on children's achievement in New Zealand: Best evidence synthesis*. Wellington, NZ: Ministry of Education.
- Bull, A., Brooking, K., & Campbell, R. (2008). *Successful home-school partnerships: Report to the Ministry of Education*. Wellington, NZ: New Zealand Council for Educational Research/Ministry of Education.
- Coco, A., Goos, M., & Kostogriz, A. (2007). Tutor and teacher timescapes: Lessons from a home-school partnership. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 34 (1), 73-87.
- Desforges, C., & Abouchar, A. (2003). *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievements and adjustment: A literature review*. London, UK: Department of Education and Skills.
- Harper, S.N., & Pelletier, J. (2010). Parent involvement in early childhood: a comparison of English language learners and English first language families. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 18(2), 123-141.
- Hindin, A., & Mueller, M. (2016). *Getting parents on board: Partnering to increase math and literacy achievement, K–5*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K.V., & Sandler, H.M. (1997). Why do parents become involved in their children's education? *Review of Educational Research*, 67(1), 3-42.
- Hornby, G. (2011). *Parental involvement in childhood education: Building effective school-family partnerships*. New York, NY: Springer.
- Kroeger, J., & Lash, M. (2011). Asking, listening, and learning: Toward a more thorough method of inquiry in home–school relations. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(2), 268-277.
- Vazquez-Nuttall, E., Li, C., & Kaplan, J.P. (2006). Home-School Partnerships with culturally diverse families: Challenges and solutions for school personnel. *Journal of Applied School Psychology*, 22(2), 81-102.