



# Partnerships with families from diverse cultural backgrounds



School resources

Home-school partnerships are beneficial for students of all cultural and ethnic groups. For children with immigrant backgrounds, home-school partnerships are especially important. Even when families have little formal education or English language, research finds that they can support their children to make achievement gains. However, families from minority cultural groups, particularly those with immigrant backgrounds, tend to be less involved in school activities. For example, research in New Zealand suggests that parents from minority cultural groups are not usually consulted about their own ideas or aspirations for their children's education, and they are less likely to talk with teachers about their child's work, discuss the curriculum or programme, or volunteer in the classroom. This does not mean that they do not want to be involved. On the contrary, research shows that they strongly wish to engage in partnerships, but face complex barriers in terms of language, uneven power dynamics, stereotyping, and cultural differences. Schools should aim to minimise barriers to involvement by finding out about, acknowledging, and utilising these families' community knowledge and practices.

## Tips and suggestions for improving partnership with culturally diverse families

Research indicates the following approaches can be particularly valuable when working with families from cultural backgrounds that are different from your own.

### 1. Foster a positive and inclusive mindset.

Parents report that teachers' and principals' positive attitudes encourage them to get involved in their child's education. A positive attitude means seeing all families as a resource for their children's learning, having respect and high personal regard for them, believing in their ability and desire to fulfil their responsibilities and put children's interests first.

Reflect on your attitudes towards parents whose cultural background differs from your own. Use the following questions as starting points for ensuring equal opportunities for engagement:

- Is there a part of you that believes these families are not interested in involvement?
- Are you considering some families as hard to reach? Is it possible that, from their perspective, your school might be hard to reach?
- How equitable and flexible are your partnership practices?
- Are parent engagement activities aimed at a relatively homogeneous group of parents and students?
- Are you focusing on complex activities which might be out of reach for some families?
- What are the barriers that families might be facing? (Consider long working hours, lack of access to a computer or low computer literacy, limited data and calling plans on phones, lack of confidence in the school, language barriers, letters from school not being delivered by the student, and so on).

### 2. Broaden your ideas of family involvement. Teachers and leaders can:

- 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 their thinking and practice 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.
- Initiate contact rather than waiting for families to initiate, as uneven power dynamics may make them feel as if they can't or shouldn't contact the school.

### 3. Build relationships. It is helpful to:

- Make the first move in building trust with a personal invitation. Trust is essential, especially for families who feel alienated by teachers or have had bad experiences with schools.
- Establish positive relationships before focusing on tasks such as tackling academic achievement or attendance.
- Find out the family's preferred way of communicating with you. Parents with lower literacy may prefer telephone calls and face-to-face interactions, while those with limited English may prefer emails to allow additional processing time or the use of online translation tools.
- Adjust communication strategies by learning about appropriate ways of communicating with different cultural groups and any protocols related to informal and formal meetings. For example, 'talanoa' is a Tongan concept for informal, free-flowing conversation where speakers can share stories, disagree without fear of reprisals, and trust each other to be open and respectful.
- 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 one main contact person for culturally diverse families. This person should focus on developing a relationship with the families, as well as facilitating relationships between them and school staff. They should build trust and advocate for families at the school.
- Use a mediator to help immigrant families settle into school. The mediator should organise a comprehensive induction process and regularly meet with parents over the first two or three months after their child's entry into school.
- Be honest in acknowledging the work that needs to be done to improve partnerships. Don't cover up difficulties.

### 4. Listen to families. It is valuable to:

- Base partnership on open dialogue and shared agendas. Value and encourage genuine collaboration, and provide equitable opportunities for families to contribute to conversations. For example, if families cannot attend in-person meetings, they might still be able to offer their thoughts via a phone call.
- Find out what culturally diverse families value in terms of engagement activities and outcomes.
- Give consideration to culturally diverse families' beliefs, goals, and interests. 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. Advice-giving 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.
- Avoid being overly professional and business-like, which may be off-putting or alienating for some culturally diverse families.
- Allocate extra time for parent-teacher conferences, particularly for families who don't speak English as a first language.
- Use interpreters to help you build partnership with families where English is a second language, or use your ESOL 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 thinking pauses in conversations, and use attentive listening techniques to clarify your understanding.
- Use focus groups rather than surveys. 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.

#### **5. Include families' cultural strengths in teaching, decision making, and partnership activities.**

Teachers can:

- Use culturally relevant materials in class and incorporate students' languages, histories, and community 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. It also increases parents' sense of self-efficacy and trust in teachers.
- Learn to understand and appreciate each family's strengths in order to create equitable power relations. For example, you can use the Māori emphasis on consensus-building as a positive tool in decision-making and planning. You may also draw on the Chinese emphasis on collectivism to frame academic success as a family achievement rather than the student's individual achievement, and include the whole family in learning activities.
- Create teams focused on the education of particular cultural groups of students. Invite families and students to discuss what has been happening over the month or term in meetings specifically for their cultural group.

#### **6. Build capacity.** Teachers and leaders can:

- Emphasise the importance of families' engagement, 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. These could include 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, attempting to help families address their basic needs at the same time as supporting students in their education.

#### **7. Involve communities.** Schools can:

- Make a significant effort to understand the local community, in order to 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.
- Identify committed parents in each cultural group, who may be able to advise the principal and liaise with the community.
- 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 can benefit from strong home-school partnership following the discontinuity, stress, and disruption of their immigration.

#### **8. Avoid assumptions.** It is important that teachers:

- 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, the purpose parents' involvement activities, or how they might support children. Explain the reason for and benefits of each partnership activity.
- 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. The rhetoric of home-school partnership often reflects dominant values for organising and networking, which might be incompatible with families from diverse cultural backgrounds.

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

Māori take a holistic perspective, which means they do not see school and home as separate. They understand learning to continue across both contexts, value co-constructed activities, and seek highly authentic relationships with schools. Effective approaches for engaging whānau Māori therefore require a deep engagement in Māori culture. Conventional approaches determined by the school, on the other hand, may not be effective or appropriate for engaging whānau, as they tend to operate at a superficial level and may not be based on genuine relationships<sup>1</sup>.

Māori cultural values should guide relationship-building with whānau Māori. This might mean telling parents a bit more about yourself as an act of whanaungatanga (building relationships based on things held in common, such as birthplace or shared interests), sharing tea or food as an act of manaakitanga (caring for one another), or even hugging parents as an act of aroha and awhi (compassion and touch)<sup>2</sup>.

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

- Offer a range of occasions for informal contacts to become more approachable. Relationships with teachers are highly significant for Māori and Pasifika whānau.
- Use face-to-face communication.
- Consider appointing a 'so'ataga' (Samoan for connection), a coordinator who can visit families at home or in the community for more effective knowledge-sharing and relationship-building.
- 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 view the marae or whare as a place where 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 engagement. There may be significant work to be done to develop trust. Whānau Māori may distrust teachers due to a perceived lack of knowledge of Māori culture.
- Enable whānau Māori 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 collaboratively generating ideas, rather than trying to impart your own fixed idea or 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.
- 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.
- Traditionally, Pasifika culture ascribes lineage and culture to the family domains, and education to the schools. Ensure that parental involvement is supported by community and church leaders, who 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.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Berryman, M., & Ford, T. (2017). Culturally responsive relationships promoting partnerships between schools and indigenous Māori families and communities. In: Rachel McNae BC, ed. *Realising Innovative Partnerships in Educational Research. Theories and Methodologies for Collaboration*. Rotterdam: SensePublishers: 147-156.
- 2 Lammers, M. (2012). Toward cultural safety: Experiences of a non-Māori therapist working with Māori clients - part II. *Psychology Aoteroa*, 4(1):19-23.



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