National Council of Women of New Zealand
Te Kaunihera
Wahine O Aotearoa

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Submission to the Education and Science Select Committee:
Inquiry into Engaging Parents in the Education of their Children

The National Council of Women of New Zealand (NCWNZ) is an umbrella organisation representing 30 organisations affiliated at national level and a further 40 organisations affiliated at branch level. It has 22 branches throughout the country attended by representatives of these organisations, as well as individual members. NCWNZ's function is to represent and promote the interests of New Zealand women through research, discussion and action. This submission has been prepared by the NCWNZ Education Standing Committee and the Parliamentary Watch Committee after consultation with the membership of NCWNZ.

Introduction

This submission is in response to the Education and Science Committee's Inquiry into Engaging Parents in their Children's Education, with the terms of reference being:

> to investigate the elements of an effective strategy for engaging parents, families, whānau, 'aiga, and communities in education; to identify the best practice examples of approaches, locally and internationally, that support parents and communities to encourage their children's learning; and to identify ways to leverage the strength of communities to lift the educational achievement of children and young people in their community.

This topic generated a lot of interest from the members. There were many suggestions and opinions, with strong themes evident and a minimum of contradictory views. The main points can be summarised as:

- Building community, including taking a strengths-based view of families and the usefulness of Adult Community Education.
- Communication and Technology, including the importance of multi-modal, frequent and timely communication, and the potential to make more use of new IT tools.
- Teachers and Educational Leaders, including the need for diversity in teacher backgrounds and culture, and the importance of strong leadership.
- Environment, including the impact that the physical environment can have on engagement, and the need families and whānau to feel welcomed.
- The impact of wider context features including poverty, employment, and the valuing of unpaid contributions to the community.

Within Education Institutions

Building Community

Effective strategies are those that contribute to building a sense of community, encouraging interaction not just with the school or educational institution, but also between whānau[1], with community groups[2] and businesses, and including all generations in the learning community. Education becomes the responsibility of the whole community. As one member put it:

> *In my experience the best way to engage parents in education is through a strong community. I believe that no man is an island, as the saying goes, and that we each need to feel that we belong to something greater and larger than say our own nucleus family. A strong community which encourages participation and supports its members provides people with a sense of belonging and purpose.*

Playcentre was mentioned by a number of responses as being an example of community-building in action, through the involvement of parents and whānau in decision making and active participation in the education of their children. The importance of educational institutions in rural communities was mentioned in a few responses, for example the mobile kindergartens, and the devastating effect that closing small schools can have on communities.

The role of schools and early childhood centres in community hubs was mentioned in a number of responses, such as the Victory School community hub in Nelson and the proposed Naenae College health community hub in Lower Hutt[3], with the consensus that the community hub approach was a particularly effective strategy.

Community building strategies take a respectful, strengths-based view of whānau, and avoid an interventionist, deficit-based model which tries to 'fix' whānau and align them with the educational institute's objectives and goals. Many respondents noted the importance of involving whānau in decision making and goal setting, and a few noted that the narrowing of focus of compulsory education in recent years (e.g. National Standards, and emphasis on literacy and numeracy to the exclusion of other subjects) did not necessarily reflect what whānau wanted for their children.

One member commented that "*[parents] need to be invited so they feel welcome and there needs to be explicit requests for help so parents can work to their strengths and know the contribution they're making to the school is necessary.*" The idea of respectful and reciprocal relationships with the community is based on meaningful interactions that have purpose and outcomes, rather than simply meeting the criteria set by monitoring agencies.

The role of Adult Community Education (ACE) was highlighted in various ways as being important to community building. Sometimes in order to participate in their children's education, parents and whānau need support to understand the content that their children are learning (mathematics and computing were two subjects often mentioned), and/or the processes of the school, or simply to gain confidence within educational settings in

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[1] To acknowledge a diversity of family forms, the words 'families' and 'whānau' are used interchangeably in this submission, with the intention that either word refers to the full range of families, whānau and 'aiga.

[2] See http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/local-papers/hutt-news/7426656/Call-to-parents-lets-grow-Epuni

[3] See http://www.stuff.co.nz/dominion-post/news/9232197/School-health-centre-hubs-will-help-fight-poverty

Aotearoa/New Zealand. NCWNZ has definite policy on the value of ACE, with a resolution passed in 2005 stating "that NCWNZ recognises the value of adult community education as a social, personal and economic good." We see government support for ACE as being connected with effective strategies for involving parents through building of community.

Another strong theme was the impact of parents' emotional responses to the schools as being a barrier to their involvement. These emotional responses were seen to be based on their own prior experiences with the educational system, or conversely, with a different (international) educational system, or simply a lack of experience; or responses based on cultural differences, different language abilities, or (lack of) financial resources. Any effective strategy to involve whānau was seen to require awareness and acknowledgement of such responses.

Communication and Technology

Good communication was seen by all members to be a key aspect of any strategy for involving parents, whānau, 'aiga, and the community in education. Communication was seen to be most effective when it used a variety of media (e.g. IT-based, paper-based, face-to-face), gave plenty of advance notice of events, was frequent, and allowed for reciprocity. Flexibility was seen to be important to involving parents, to meet the variety of whānau circumstances. Establishing a strong sense of community was seen to improve the quality of communication, and in a positive spiralling effect, the quality of communication contributed to a sense of community.

The influence of culture on communication was frequently noted by members. Knowledge and awareness of the different cultural backgrounds present in the community was seen as a necessary precursor for good communication. The difficulties that English-language learners face were highlighted by many members as a barrier to greater involvement for these whānau. The Manawatu Multicultural Society delegate to the NCW Manawatu branch consulted with the students in her migrant English classes, and made some relevant suggestions that are worth quoting as they echo many comments made by others nationally:

- *Some whose English is not as good as they would like, say that they are too embarrassed for their children and don't want to go to the school. Resultantly they rely on their children to relay any information.*

- *Suggest that the school find out all the languages that parents use and see if any of the parents who speak good English, could translate for the parents who have difficulty. This might be good for networking, as sometimes parents might not know of other parents of the same nationality.*

- *Any school meetings maybe could be arranged at different times. For example in the morning or afternoons, even on a weekend morning. Send out or ask the students to find out from their parents. Make it part of homework.*

- *Give the children some of the responsibility of helping their parents with a new language. Start by suggesting they talk to their parents in English as well as their native language for a specific amount of time per day.*

- *Have more councillors, public health nurses, social workers in schools that are visible in the schools and that the students get to know, and are not changed around.*

- *Make sure that the parents are visited in their own homes, and not only seen at the school.*

- *Invite the parents to come to the school for meetings, socials etc., but have the invitations written in their own language.*

The role of modern information technology (IT) in communication was seen as necessary, but needing to be treated with caution. On one hand the view was expressed by the large majority of respondents that the flexibility and effectiveness of using IT for communication was a good thing, with some responses commenting that there is much potential in IT methods that has yet to be explored. On the other hand, almost all respondents commented that not every family has access to IT, that it is expensive to keep up-to-date in order to use IT methods, and computer literacy in a fast-paced and changing IT world is a challenge, particularly for the older generation. Power dynamics within families, such as who has access to computers, and who holds the knowledge about computers, can also create tensions. It was for these types of reasons that most respondents advocated maintaining mixed methods of communication between educational institutions and whānau, and not relying on IT alone.

Teachers and Educational Leaders

The key role of teachers in any effective strategy to involve parents was noted in a majority of responses. The willingness of teachers to engage in dialogue rather than being seen as unquestionable experts was seen as important, and their current hard work in implementing current strategies was mentioned with appreciation. Having a diverse range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds within the teaching staff as a whole was seen as beneficial to engaging the community as there was more potential for shared understanding than when the teaching staff are almost all of a different cultural or socio-economic background to the community in which they teach.

One retired school principal suggested that there is a "*need for teachers in schools to be from diverse ethnic backgrounds so parents can identify with them and see them as people with whom they can interact more easily. … There is still a need for targeted teacher recruitment and exploration of different ways to gain career training. University education is often unaffordable.*"

The value of educational leadership was recognised in many responses. Examples were given of schools in Otara and Taita where the strong improvement in performance was directly attributed to leadership by the Principals. The ideal was seen as a community of learning that included everyone involved with the school – children, whānau, leadership, and teachers – and included on-going professional development.

Environment

The visual impact of the educational institution's environment was seen as important. Some respondents felt that locks and fences represented a safe place to be, others felt that such things gave the message that the community was to stay away. Respondents were in agreement, however, that in order to engage with whānau the environment had to be welcoming. This was both in terms of visually symbols and in terms of the interactions whānau had with the institution. Evidence of cultural diversity in the institution's environment was seen as important to create a welcoming environment for all.

The Wider Context

Poverty

The impact of poverty on whānau engagement with their children's education was noted by almost all respondents, and it was felt that poverty in Aotearoa/New Zealand must be addressed for strategies to involve whānau to be effective. The impact of poverty was mentioned in relation to children being hungry, lack of transport being a reason for parents non-attendance at meetings, not being able to afford computers, and being embarrassed about being at the school because of inability to pay school 'donations'.

The indirect effects of poverty were also often cited as barriers to parental involvement, such as health problems and the financial stresses leading to family violence. NCWNZ notes that the UN Committee for the Convention to Elimination of All forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) recommended that the NZ government "develop a systematic programme to ensure that parents understand the voluntary nature of payments requested by schools and monitor schools' practices regarding the collection of fees from parents" and "collect data on the real cost of education to parents"[4]. NCWNZ is unaware that such work is currently being undertaken, and would like to suggest that such data would provide useful information.

Employment

The effect of employment conditions was a strong theme in the responses. One major concern was the impact of low wages creating issues for "the working poor". In addition to the problems of poverty discussed above, the need for some parents to be working multiple jobs because of low wages reduced the time available for them to be involved in their children's education.

The need for wages to be sufficient to enable a reasonable quality of life is strongly supported by NCWNZ, as shown by the unanimous acceptance of the resolution at the recent National Executive (September 2013) "that NCWNZ supports the principle of the Living Wage."

In line with the need for realistic wages, NCWNZ notes that pay equity is an issue when considering engagement of parents in education. This is of concern because there is more responsibility placed on solo parents to be both the main income earner and the main point of contact with the educational institution. The fact that the majority of solo parents are women exacerbates the time and financial pressures placed on them, because of the well-documented gender pay gap[5]. The UN CEDAW Committee has also highlighted the NZ government's need to actively pursue policies to enhance pay equity[6].

The need for family-friendly and flexible working practices was noted by some respondents. This requires the whole community to value whānau involvement in education, not just those directly involved in educational institutions.

Valuing unpaid contributions

A corollary to the community valuing of whānau involvement in education is the need to value volunteer contributions in general, as the tension between volunteer work and paid work was mentioned in several responses. It is perhaps worth repeating the old adage "we

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[4] UN CEDAW Committee Concluding Observations for NZ, p. 8.
[5] For example, see the Ministry of Women's Affairs/NZIER report January 2013 on women's earnings.
[6] UN CEDAW Committee Concluding Observations for NZ, p. 9.

measure what we treasure" and refer to the recent census where there was a series of questions concerning paid employment but only one question on volunteer work (simply about the number of hours). This illustrates the importance we place on paid employment compared to volunteer work. In such a culture, it becomes difficult to promote volunteer engagement with educational institutions. NCWNZ would like to see the government "formally recognise the value of unpaid work as an essential ingredient for policy development"[7].

Conclusion

NCWNZ supports a holistic approach to the issue of engaging parents, whānau and 'aiga in their children's education, and commends the Select Committee for initiating this inquiry. The members who responded to this consultation gave a strong message that effective strategies for involving whānau will also be effective in building a sense of community based on trust and respect; will be reflective of the needs, wants, and cultural diversity of the community; will be based on good communication strategies including IT, although not exclusively; will have strong leadership that fosters a culture of multi-generational learning. Members also emphasised the government's role in addressing wider societal issues such as poverty and reasonable wages and working conditions.

Effective strategies need to be based on evidence and research, of which members considered there to be a lot already available. Perhaps questions now need to be asked as to why these strategies are not more widely used.

Any policy developed should also be subjected to gender impact analysis, a stance also taken by the UN CEDAW Committee, who encourages the government to "mainstream gender in all national plans"[8].

Whilst agreeing with the importance of whānau involvement in education, members also indicated that they see education as a public good and therefore the responsibility of government to adequately support through policy and resourcing. As one member dryly commented, "*A cynic might ask whether the inquiry is more to do with using the community /parents /families rather than involving them!*" We hope that this is not the case.

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[7] NCWNZ Resolution 6.7.1, passed 1993.
[8] UN CEDAW Committee Concluding Observations for NZ, p. 5.