



GUEST EDITORIAL

Working together effectively and consistently

Children do not exist in isolation; their lives are embedded in families, communities and societies. Nested within these communities are the schools and early childhood education (ECE) services children attend.

When I was a child, my experience was of little interaction between schools and their communities. Looking back, this seems due to the culture of practice within schools, more than the school gates. In the intervening years, writers like Bronfenbrenner¹ have drawn our attention to the complex influences of environments – both immediate and more remote – on development and the value of creating meaningful reciprocal connections between the different groups and settings that children are part of.

Today we see attention to the role of communities reflected in our curriculum documents. “Family and Community/Whānau Tangata” is one of the principles of the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*, along with the expectation that each ECE service will use the curriculum “as a basis for weaving with children, parents and whānau its own local curriculum of valued learning, taking into consideration also the aspirations and learning priorities of hapū, iwi and community”.

For kura and schools, *Te Marautanga* notes that for learners to succeed, the school, the home, hapū, iwi and community must work together effectively and consistently, while a central principle of the *New Zealand Curriculum* is “Community Engagement”, connecting with the students’ wider lives and gaining support of families, whānau and communities. The importance of community weaves through each document, with important implications for pedagogy.

Teachers often take the lead in initiating connections and building communities for learning. In a Centre of Innovation research project², teachers at Mangere Bridge Kindergarten



1. e.g. Bronfenbrenner, U. & Morris, P. A. (1997). *The ecology of developmental processes*. In W. Damon & R. M. Lerner (Eds.) *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. 1. Theoretical models of human development (5th ed., pp. 993-1029)*. New York: John Wiley.
2. Hartley, C., Rogers, P., Smith, J., Peters, S. & Carr, M. (2012). *Crossing the border: a community negotiates the transition from early childhood to primary school*. Wellington: NZCER.
3. Peters, S., Paki, V. & Davis, K. (2015). *Learning journeys from early childhood into school*. *Teaching and Learning Research Initiative final report*.
4. Superu (2018). *Bridging cultural perspectives*. Wellington: *Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit*.

documented their steps in creating a community approach to starting school. They found that projects and activities were a foundation for collaboration, and that the most successful projects – those that brought more people on board – were “mutually interesting”. Over time, momentum increased, and strategic community partners were drawn in. At first, the ECE teachers initiated each activity, but eventually other members of the community began to propose and lead projects.

Working together on meaningful projects was also a feature of the *Learning journeys from early childhood into school* project³. Teachers collaboratively planned, implemented and evaluated a range of action research “mini projects”, providing opportunities for shared reflections on practice and a collective approach to supporting children’s learning. Rather than attempting to find a “one-size-fits-all” formula, the process of trying “what works here” was key. Powerful benefits came from spiralling between action and evaluation, which often sparked a new direction or more nuanced approach.

The idea of “negotiated spaces” helps with the sometimes challenging work of bringing together different and sometimes conflicting world views. A recent report, *Bridging Cultural Perspectives*, expands on this idea and provides steps to implement “respectful and negotiated conversations”⁴.

Working together effectively across different sectors and with family, whānau and other groups to enhance children’s learning may require courage and persistence, but as many teachers have found, a community approach can have valuable benefits for learners and learning.

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