Abstract

Schools in New Zealand subscribe to a national curriculum. That document specifies the direction for teaching and learning in English-medium New Zealand schools. While all schools must align with the intent of that document they have considerable flexibility when determining its detail. This paper represents a case study of a small New Zealand primary school as it begins to make decisions about how to give effect to the national curriculum in ways that best address the particular needs, interests, and circumstances of the school’s students and community. The school’s principal initiated a research project with partners from the local university to track this development. The research team has worked alongside staff, students and parents of the school’s community to monitor and evaluate the 2020Vision development during 2008. Data shared in this paper are reports on the initial phase of the project. This includes interview data, observations of staff meetings, a survey and an extensive analysis of school documents to highlight the shared understandings of the emerging vision, the processes of consultation and the effects of this development on student engagement and achievement. Findings from our initial phase reveal some preliminary steps towards answering questions such as what knowledge and skills do the school’s learners need for life in 2020, what will be needed to ensure that the children get these and what short term goals will help this vision to be realised in practice?

Introduction

Each New Zealand primary school is currently finding ways to address the challenge of designing its own local curriculum to satisfy the mandate of the revised New Zealand Curriculum (2007). Schools are expected to consult widely with their communities to develop a local curriculum that is connected, coherent and balanced reflecting the particular needs and interests of the school’s students and community. Despite earlier work on community consultation (Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Marriott and Poskitt, 1993), this issue remains problematic even fifteen years later, with Bull, Brooking and Campbell (2008) reminding us how little we really know about the effectiveness of home-school partnerships as strategies for reducing disparity and/or developing successful 21st century learners and of the need to find out more about exactly what sort of home-school partnerships are beneficial, how they are beneficial, and to whom (p.2). Our case study provides data from one school and its parents to reveal the benefits and challenges faced. Such data complements the international and national case studies in the Bull et al report to improve our understandings of the key elements of successful home-school partnerships and how they operate in different school settings. Our paper will explore the role of consultation in curriculum development, the steps taken, challenges faced and next steps envisaged at the case study school.

The role of community consultation in curriculum development

Placing community consultation at the centre of the curriculum development requires a balance between the community’s ideas about curriculum and the school’s ‘professional curriculum’ informed by educational theory and teacher practice. If community consultation just informs parents rather than invites contributions then little real effect will be made on the nature and practice of curriculum in schools. Our case study school is one school which is serious about putting the rhetoric of community consultation into meaningful practice. In fact it has gone a step further by planning and implementing a process which involves the school, its community and university researchers as partners in developing a curriculum which will reflect the unique needs and
aspirations of the school’s community. This practice is not the preferred way of working at other schools.

Conversations with school principals at curriculum and leadership development seminars and meetings during 2008 have indicated that most schools are beginning the work of implementing the New Zealand Curriculum with either the key competencies or by reviewing vision, values and principles and working almost exclusively with the teaching staff, maybe seeking some student and parental input from time to time.

The 2020Vision at the case study school is more ambitious with its deliberate invitations for parents to join conversations about the school’s learning programmes in order to inform and guide future work. This process is on-going and reciprocal with ideas from all partners contributing to subsequent iterations. Other schools have opted for a less complicated and time-consuming approach. Just which option will have the most lasting benefits remains unknown at this stage but one thing we have already realised is that curriculum design requires careful planning for it to be realised and accepted in practice.

2020Vision

The case study school has called its curriculum development project the 2020Vision. This name was inspired by the knowledge that the new entrant cohort in 2007 would reach the end of their formal schooling (year 13) in 2020. The aim of this school-based curriculum development project is to provide an environment and curriculum which will prepare today’s young children for life as young adults in the 2020s and beyond. The 2020Vision is expected to have far-reaching effects on the school-community partnership and on student engagement and achievement. It is much broader than curriculum knowledge and skills.

Our case study is of interest for several reasons. The school has a history of being innovative; it has a new principal who is committed to developing a full partnership with the school’s community which involves active participation rather than parents merely responding to information; and university researchers who have acted as mentors and researchers of the project since its inception. The case study school is a decile 9 school set in a rural community on the outskirts of a large New Zealand city for 117 families.

The 2020Vision was initiated by the principal in a series of conversations with staff and Board of Trustee members and then broadened to include groups of interested parents who formed a parent focus group. Involvement by parents is welcomed at a variety of levels. These follow the five levels of parental involvement as advocated by the former Department of Education (1989) following extensive work on community consultation by Ramsay, Hawk, Harold, Marriott and Poskitt.

<table>
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<th>Being Informed. Parents are informed about the school and its programme and they are encouraged to give the school information. They are not asked for their views or opinions</th>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Taking part in activities. Parents are involved in activities, but in a limited way</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Being involved through dialogue and an exchange of views</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Helping to make decisions. Parents help to decide on the content and emphasis of school programmes</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Having responsibility to act. Parents make decisions in partnership with the school</td>
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The presence and naming of these five levels of involvement highlights a need for schools to recognise that parents need to feel they can contribute at a range of levels according to their availability, willingness to participate and their knowledge of educational practices. Parental input is not taken for granted at the case study school. Parental input is varied, dynamic, responsive and reciprocal through such actions as parent focus groups, regular newsletters to families, participation in planning days with teachers, learning conferences, and regular events at the classroom, school and community levels.

Our 2020Vision case study has taken the challenge of curriculum design directly to its community. The project’s three research questions emphasise this inclusive partnership approach:

- how is a school and its community designing and implementing a local curriculum in response to the expectations of the New Zealand curriculum?
- what effect does a local curriculum have upon student engagement and achievement?
- how effective is ongoing consultation in transforming the relationship between a school and its community?

The 2020VISION is therefore a process of trial and error; of experimenting with diverse forms of community engagement and taking a step outside traditional roles and expectations. The case study school has welcomed the arrival of the revised curriculum document as an opportunity to rekindle interest in the school and its programmes rather than serve as a mere compliance task about which the community is informed rather than actively involved in shaping. Underpinning the 2020Vision is a belief that the revised New Zealand Curriculum reaffirms the home-school partnership which was central to the Tomorrow’s Schools (1989) reforms.

The vanishing school

In emphasising the importance of a strong home-school partnership, the principal has realised that if this were taken to an extreme position it could be likened to a ‘vanishing school’ where the boundaries of home and schooling might appear more blurred rather than distinct. The principal has made mention of the vanishing school concept in communications to parents and staff to highlight the potential of drawing parents into the learning environment as active participants and decision makers. This process has the potential to shift the traditional power balance between home and school in new ways. It is also an approach which requires tremendous energy, patience, respect and mediation of its many voices. So far its only evidence is through the parent focus group and the few parents who have participated in the two full 2020Vision development days. It should be noted that their participation has been invited and structured around key questions set by the principal and senior staff rather than self-initiated. Nevertheless their contributions have been important in shaping directions and signal a willingness by at least some parents that they wish to have a fuller learning partnership with the school.

The partnership model at the case study school

In researching the design and implementation of the 2020Vision we spent time interviewing the school staff and the parent groups (eg the parent focus group, and two groups of active and inactive parents). There were three purposes for the interviews. We wanted to find out what each participant understood the 2020Vision to be, the extent to which they owned the vision and felt connected to it and the roles they had played in its development. It was not surprising to find that the 2020Vision development was being led by the school’s principal in this initial phase. This finding is congruent with that of the Normal School Study on key competencies (Boyd & Watson, 2006) where the six case study principals were all involved in setting the direction yet worked collaboratively with staff encouraging them to take leadership roles where appropriate. We asked our case study school’s
principal to prepare a diagram to illustrate his ideal partnership model. This is portrayed in Figure 1.

Interestingly this model has included a place for partnerships beyond the parents to include regulatory agencies and other groups. The principal considered that each of these groups has the potential to influence the shaping of the 2020Vision in which the consultation and construction of the 2020Vision could be two-directional. It should be noted that this ideal partnership model has placed all partners in concentric circles of equal width, signifying equal contributions/leadership roles.

![Figure 1: The Ideal Consultation Model](image)

However, analysis of data gathered from interviews with the key players featured in Figure 1 revealed a different representation. Figure 2 signifies the actual partnership model showing that the 2020Vision development is being driven by the principal, who has the greatest leadership role at this initial development phase. It is for this reason that in Figure 2, the circle depicting the principal’s leadership is larger than it appeared in Figure 1. This was discussed with the principal and together we agreed that this was to be expected in the initial development. Nevertheless we would anticipate that some of the named groups would take greater leadership over time and that the model would change again for this reason. For example, the increasing contributions and impact of a newly appointed deputy principal could decrease the dominance of the principal’s leadership role and perhaps might increase the confidence and contributions from the teachers. There is the potential (and a necessity at certain phases of the 2020Vision) for different partners to take a greater or lesser role which is why the concentric circles may start to show unequal widths.

![Figure 2: The January-July 2008 phase of the 2020Vision development](image)
**2020Vision steps taken**

To date the development of the 2020Vision has occurred through a series of meetings which have included different combinations of people from the staff and parent groups. The 2020 vision day in July 2007 marked the beginnings of teachers working closely with Board of Trustee members and groups of parents about the school’s curriculum and its delivery. This day was held at an off-site venue which in itself was a signal of something new and special. Focus areas for the day included discussions and presentations from staff on the school’s vision, mission, values and key characteristics (the why); the learning programmes and what they might look like in the future; and suggestions on how to make it happen through property and finance, relationships and organisation. A 2020Vision matrix prioritising the proposals and outcomes of the 2020Vision day was developed by the staff, parents and BOT members at a couple of meetings after the July day. The parents and BOT were very active in the process of sifting and sorting the actions. The matrix included post-it note entries which were shifted and added to over the succeeding months as dates of 2008, 2010, 2012 and 2020 were put alongside the various actions. This display became a focal point on the staffroom wall for the 2020Vision to which parents and visitors to the school were taken.
A community meeting with parents in early 2008 was another 2020Vision event. At this meeting the principal introduced the research team to the parents, the researchers made a short presentation and interested parents were invited to ask questions of the researchers. The notion of university researchers tracking the 2020Vision progress was indeed something novel for the parents to contemplate and helped to convey the importance of the project. The principal continued to capitalise on the presence and actions of the research team in the weekly school newsletters to indicate our interview schedules and to invite parental participation. Increasingly parents came to see the research team as partners in the project.

The school’s principal has continued to maintain the momentum of the 2020Vision by profiling its work each week in the school’s newsletter. Short cameos have served as catalysts for discussion in homes about the nature of the school’s learning activities and usually accompanied with questions for the parents to consider. The invitational tone of these inserts in the newsletters has appealed to parents and resulted in a two-way dialogue as the parents have responded to the principal’s musings and thinking aloud.

In addition to the teacher development days, data collection by the research team has contributed to the impact and future direction of the 2020Vision work. For example, interview questions asked of the parents without the principal present, have revealed that many parents remain uncertain about the meaning of the 2020Vision despite its constant mention. This finding is indicative of the need for further clarification, ownership and involvement in the 2020Vision from the parent group. It has also showed that while the principal wants to achieve a full partnership with the parents it will require more time and energy to be realised in practice. Nevertheless there was overwhelming support for the principal’s efforts to include parents in the life of the school.

A further 2020 day was held in October 2008 to which teachers, Board of Trustee members and parents were invited. A small group of students also participated in this day by making presentations on their learning experiences at the school. These were followed by investigations of other curriculum models to stimulate discussions about the need for perhaps a radically different curriculum to emerge. Those present were asked to work in small groups to design a model of a 2020Curriculum.

Challenges

Perhaps the biggest challenge has been adjusting the pace of the 2020Vision development. The departure of three staff at the end of 2007 who had been involved in the 2020Vision since its launch meant that the new staff could not be expected to sustain the momentum for the development and implementation of the 2020Vision. The appointment of three beginning teachers made this even more difficult as their immediate priorities were to settle into their classroom teaching roles rather than contribute to the wider work of the school and its 2020Vision development. The principal therefore needed to concentrate on building a cohesive team and slow the pace of the 2020Vision work. This necessary diversion was further complicated by the departure of the deputy principal in Term 2, 2008 and a new deputy principal joining the project. Staff turnover has continued to be a challenge with a further senior teacher moving to a new position at the end of the 2008 year.
Given the reality of staff turnover, it is even more important that the 2020Vision work be extended beyond the realm of school’s principal. Other staff will need to take more active roles in its development if it is to continue. While the principal regards a climate of distributed leadership as a central feature of the 2020Vision this intent has been difficult to apply in the early stages of the project because of these staffing changes.

Parents’ interpretations of the processes used to engage them in the 2020Vision and their understandings of their roles in the development and implementation of the vision have made it necessary to maintain a top-down leadership approach from the principal. Despite strategies to promote consultation, parents have generally taken a somewhat passive role in the process. They have responded to requests and received information but not looked for ways in which they might determine their own contributions to the 2020Vision development. Similarly while parents have welcomed having their voices heard, they have expected the principal to take the main leadership role. They have expected the principal to keep them informed about the 2020Vision and for them to offer help when requested. We noted a tension between the principal’s desire for more distributed leadership and active involvement of the various partners and how this might work for the parents. The move towards parents becoming more collaborative partners with the principal and teaching staff is not one which the parents have experienced in their previous contacts with the school and is therefore problematic. It is noted that some parents are more active than others in the process.

The principal’s unique leadership style has encouraged parents and the broader community to participate in school-related activities. Generally parents and the broader community have reported a sense of commitment to the principal and wanted to show their support by contributing when asked. Even the less involved parents have felt some pressure to respond to calls for assistance. Whether parents can continue to respond to so many requests for help is debatable. While all parents might be willing to participate on some level, constant requests for help will be difficult to satisfy and will often be limited by other commitments rather than a reluctance to engage in school activities. This may make progress towards a fuller partnership difficult.

Clearly the 2020Vision work requires energy and commitment to extend beyond the principal and teaching staff so that the parents can assume greater ownership and voice in its development. A start has been made on distributing the load with the work of the parent focus group. In time it is expected that this group might move into initiating ideas rather than just responding to topics introduced by the principal. It might also be a filter for ideas from other parents rather than all parent communications being directed to the principal. Also, as previously mentioned, as the new staff settle into the school, they should be expected to assume more responsibility for the work of the 2020Vision. Leadership needs to extend beyond the principal to include the new deputy principal and the more experienced staff.

**Next steps**

We envisage that points of interest for the next phase of the 2020Vision will centre on leadership of the project, a review of the initial goals and timeframes, involvement of the students and engagement of the teachers in research activities.
Leadership

Further evidence of distributed leadership will be a goal for the next phase of the 2020Vision. For example we expect to see increasingly visible leadership from the deputy principal. It is hoped that her previous record of strong home-school partnerships will be transferred to the case study school because of her identified strengths in literacy, theoretical background and experience working with the Maori community. This will also require a readjustment from the principal as the filter and sole leader of the 2020Vision. We are aware that the momentum for this ambitious project cannot be sustained without a further distribution of leadership amongst the teaching staff and parent groups.

An adjustment to the initial goals and timeframe

Schools face constant pressures to keep up to date with current developments. We are aware that people need time to absorb change and that it requires considerable energy. The principal will need to remain sensitive to staff changes, a changing parent population and the needs of the children as the 2020Vision work moves from talk to action. Timeframes will need to be flexible to respond to the fluctuating energy and capacity levels of all participants.

Similarly as new staff and parents join the school, there will be a need for the newcomers to become connected to the 2020Vision. This may require revision of the initial goals and new priorities to be set.

Involvement by students

To date the student contribution to the 2020Vision development has been haphazard and somewhat limited in scope. Three examples of student involvement are noted. Firstly, a focus group of ex-students has provided some feedback about learning experiences at the school and their transition process between primary and secondary school. Secondly, all students have answered a survey providing data on their levels of engagement with a range of aspects of the school and their learning. Thirdly, a smaller group of students contributed to the 2008 Vision Day highlighting the potential benefits of including the student voices in deliberations about the future curriculum and its delivery.

Each of these initial steps has served to indicate that more could be done to involve the students in discussions about their future learning opportunities and those participating in previous events have noted the value of their contributions.

Engagement of the teachers in the research process

Currently it is only the principal who is working closely with members of the research team. The principal would now like to see the teachers involved in planning the ongoing research activities, analysing the data and disseminating findings to other schools, conference presentations and publications. A goal is to develop a reflexive practice model through a deepening relationship between the researchers and the school.
References


