

# School-Community Partnerships: A Vehicle for Student Success in an Evolving World

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## Abstract

*What are the reasons for developing school-community partnerships in Aotearoa New Zealand and how are they best constructed to promote future-focused education?* School-community partnerships are collaborative relationships that exist between schools and other stakeholders within the community. These partnerships can benefit the development of students, providing them with a broad range of opportunities and experiences, access to social capital, and often auxiliary resources in addition to what schools can provide on their own. The advantages of successful partnerships can be particularly impactful for schools in challenging circumstances in terms of providing resources and support. This review discusses the research surrounding school-community partnerships, and explores the many challenges involved in establishing and maintaining effective relationships that support future-focused education in Aotearoa New Zealand. In conclusion, it is surmised that school-community partnerships can be an effective means of providing students with opportunities for learning beyond the classroom, thus strengthening academic and social development in a rapidly changing and diversifying world.

**Keywords:** *School-community partnerships, community involvement, collaborative relationships, future-focused education, social capital, active citizenry, citizenship*



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## Introduction

In the history of education, schools have often been looked to as the main providers of knowledge. While in the past, families were occasionally involved as partners in education, schools are now looking to the wider community to provide relevant and diverse resources and opportunities for their students (Sanders, 2001). School-community partnership is a term that describes the collaborative relationship between a school and entities within the school community. The relationship between these partners in education should be voluntary and deliberate, with the purpose of exchanging resources or goods that will benefit students, families, schools, and community stakeholders (Leonard, 2011). Schools can choose to collaborate with several different types of partners, including but not limited to other schools, families, universities, businesses, and service groups (Sanders, 2003; Hands, 2009). The advantages obtained through successful school-community partnerships are explored in depth later in this review. However, as a basic function, successful partnerships create pathways for schools to connect with their communities, and provides schools with access to a greater pool of resources and opportunities for students than they could supply on their own (Ainscow, Muijs, & West, 2006; Gross, Haines, Hill, Francis, Blue-Banning & Turnbull, 2015; Evans, 2013; Hands, 2009; Hardy & Grootenboer, 2016; Leonard, 2011; Sanders, 2001; Sanders, 2003). These partnerships broaden the horizons of education

beyond the capabilities of schools that are isolated from their community, increases a schools' capability to address new information and ideas from the evolving world, and allows the school to provide its students with 21<sup>st</sup>-century future-focused learning experiences (Bolstad, Gilbert & McDowall, 2012). In the context of education in Aotearoa New Zealand, the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) is founded on the belief that schools should support students in lifelong learning and active community engagement (Ministry of Education, 2007). The NZC expands upon these beliefs by stating 'Community Engagement,' 'Learning to Learn,' and 'Future Focus' as three of its eight principles (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 9). School-community partnerships establish a platform to uphold these principles, by providing students and schools with opportunities to engage with their communities in authentic, skill-enhancing ways. By giving students the chance to interact with their local, national, and sometimes global communities, school-community partnerships allow students more possibilities to extend their learning beyond the classroom and to acquire social capital (Evans, 2013). The concept of social capital is explored later in this review, as research shows that the acquisition of social capital can further the healthy development of children and young adults (Sanders, 2003). The importance of social capital is also explored in regards to youth participation in society, and the connections between school-community partnerships

and citizenship education. While the demand for future-focused education and the development of partnerships is becoming fairly ubiquitous in nature, there are undeniable challenges to developing and maintaining fully collaborative relationships. The development of successful and efficient partnerships can be a daunting task to educators as it can be complex and time consuming, and thus requires a good deal of strategising to avoid time and resource waste (Ainscow et al., 2006; Evans, 2013). This review concludes with an overview of the factors explored, including implications of the development of future-focused school-community partnerships in Aotearoa New Zealand.

## Types of School-Community Partnerships and Qualities that Enable Success

### *Forms of Partnership*

Schools can choose to collaborate with several kinds of partners, as different forms of partnerships have varying implications and potential advantages. Sanders' (2003) literature review on the practice of community involvement found that there are several main forms of school-community partnerships. Sanders (2003) divides the types of collaborative relationships by classifying them as student-centred, family-centred, community-centred, or some combination of the three. Business partnerships are generally student-centred relationships between schools and organisations. The businesses can provide material goods or work experience to the students, which can provide students with real-world experience and potentially benefit the business by increasing its workforce. University partnerships are generally school-centred relationships between a school and an associated university. In this case, the university can provide resources in the form of professional development which can increase the pedagogical knowledge and ability of the entire school staff. Service-learning partnerships are generally student- and community-centred relationships that allow a school and its students to experience civic participation, and to have a voice in local issues such as environmental or social concerns. Service-learning partnerships are a powerful tool for providing students with opportunities to extend their learning outside of school and to gather real-world experience. School-linked service participation partnerships are generally student- and family-centred partnerships that provide services to families and students in need of health and social care services (Sanders, 2003). Additionally, schools can partner with other schools in the community. As explored in Hands' (2009) qualitative case study, school-school partnerships are generally school- and student-centred, and provide for the exchange of education-related resources, for example, professional development, pedagogy and practice, and staffing support.

### *Qualities That Enable Successful Partnerships*

A successful partnership could be defined as a sustainable relationship in which one (if not both) of the partners effectively receive goods provided by the other partner, whether that be knowledge, materials,

experiences, or some other type of resource. An external evaluation performed by the Education Review Office found that several qualities lend themselves to the success of school-community partnerships in New Zealand (Collins & Mutch, 2012). One of the most pertinent factors is the ability to communicate and collaborate well, as transparent and constant communication ensures that all partners are on the same page and working toward the same goals (Gross et al., 2015; Collins & Mutch, 2012; Leonard, 2011). Leonard (2011) also found that power sharing is essential to the success of the partnerships, as a balance of power allows for the development of mutual trust between students and the partners. Gross et al. (2015) and Collins and Mutch (2012) discovered that schools with a welcoming culture and strong commitment to student success made stronger partners. The research collected by Sanders (2003) in the United States found that in order for a partnership to be successful, great care has to be taken in the professional preparation, including carefully selecting partners based on common goals, and a demonstration of their commitment to collaboration and communication. In order for school-community partnerships to remain relevant and future-focused, they must adapt to the changing needs of students, schools, and communities, and be willing to engage in a process of critical reflection and evaluation (Sanders, 2003; Bolstad et al., 2012).

## Implications of Successful Partnerships

*"School-community partnerships, then, can be defined as the connections between schools and community individuals, organizations, and businesses that are forged to promote students' social, emotional, physical, and intellectual development," (Sanders, 2001, p.20).*

The collated research on the many forms of school-community partnerships reveals a variety of potential advantages and benefits that can become available to students, families, schools, and communities through successful collaborative relationships. Research has shown that effective partnerships have the possibility of increasing the achievement of students, strengthening the relationships within the schools, supporting students' families, and bolstering communities (Sanders, 2001; Sanders, 2003; Hands, 2009; Bolstad, 2012). A United States case study of one urban high school used Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to explore why strong school-community partnerships benefit the academic and social development of young students, and revealed that the relationships built around a young individual serve to fill their developmental needs more so than a school could achieve on its own if it were isolated from the community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, as cited in Leonard, 2011). In addition to filling a student's developmental needs, partnerships can provide students with pathways to future community involvement. A study performed in the United States revealed that youth community engagement has an impact on the likelihood that students will exercise democratic agency in the future and potentially become involved in politics (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). Similar research done in

New Zealand has shown that the opportunities provided to students through school-community partnerships gives them authentic means of developing their own citizenship dispositions, and teaches them how they might exercise agency and make change within local, national, and global contexts (Wood, 2012; Wood, 2013). In summation, successful school-community partnerships have the possibility to provide students with a variety of experiences to extend their learning beyond the classroom. This carries the potential to enhance the social, academic, and healthy development of students by providing them with a wider array of resources, experiences, and opportunities than the school could have provided on its own. The benefits of successful school-community partnerships are not one-sided. The opportunity for students to work with the community in authentic and purposeful ways can serve to bolster the wider community, while simultaneously allowing students to develop their citizenship orientations and understanding of democratic agency, as explored further.

#### *Partnerships as a Vehicle for Social Capital Acquisition and Active Citizenry*

School-community partnerships play an important role in broadening the social horizons of students beyond the walls of their school. The social networks that arise from partnering allow for students to have greater access to social capital, which can be defined as the relationships held by an individual within larger social contexts that can benefit the individual through their connections and access to influence. Social capital plays an important role in the lives of individuals as they make connections within local, national, and global contexts. Sanders (2003) argues that children in siloed schools do not receive the amount of social capital necessary for healthy development. To take the school out of isolation and provide students with greater access to social capital, schools must bridge the gap by creating pathways to social experiences through partnerships with the wider community. Leonard (2011) expands upon this argument by using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory to explore how relationships that branch out to the 'exosystem' of an individual, provide them with social experiences that would not have otherwise been attained (Bronfenbrenner, 1979 as cited in Leonard, 2011). The types of experiences offered via school-community partnerships is an important factor in the development of students' citizenship orientations and their ideas surrounding democratic engagement. Wood (2013) argues that social, economic, and cultural capital (which is condensed into the term 'participatory resources') is achieved through social acts such as school-community involvement, and is the basis for students' citizenship orientations. Wood's (2012) study of four New Zealand schools found that students' citizenship orientation was also largely affected by that of their teachers'.

Additionally, it was found that students from low decile, low socioeconomic, rural schools tended to be more concerned with local and community issues while students from high decile, high socioeconomic urban schools tended to be more concerned with national and global issues. If the findings of Wood's study are held

true, there must be a balance struck by teachers and school administration between upholding the probity of global concerns whilst concurrently maintaining a commitment to developing authentic relationships with the local community and valuing local concerns. If not addressed, the dichotomy between the citizenship concerns of low and high socioeconomic schools could lead to increased polarisation and calcification of beliefs. This would potentially result in active global citizenship holding higher symbolic capital than local active citizenship, and the ability to participate in global social contexts becoming "the preserve of elites" (Wise & Velayutham, 2009, p. 48 as cited in Wood, 2012). To avoid global citizenry from becoming the dominant form of citizenship education and the domain of the higher socioeconomic majority, it is imperative that citizenship education be responsive and relevant, but also acknowledge school-community partnerships and participation within local community contexts as a form of active citizenry (Wood, 2012). In regards to the development of school-community partnerships, the research on social capital and citizenship education reveals a few implications for achieving successful, future-focused partnerships. School-community partnerships should offer students opportunities to learn that are relevant to their lives and local/communal contexts, but also opportunities that allow them to extend their engagement and interest to broader contexts. Bolstad et al. (2012) argues that these types of far-reaching partnerships will promote innovation and change, and act as a cornerstone for future-focused education.

#### *The Impact of Partnerships on Schools in Challenging Circumstances*

School-community partnerships can be particularly beneficial to schools, families, and students from difficult or challenging backgrounds. These schools are often consistently hard pressed to find enough resources to support the developmental needs of their diverse learners, and may have poor relationships with the wider community. A study undertaken in Australia revealed that the deliberate establishment of a 'Community Partnership' programme in a low socioeconomic community was the foundation for a series of beneficial changes, including strengthened relationships between the school and the community, and the critical reflection of established and previously unquestioned teaching practices (Hardy & Grootenboer, 2015). In the United Kingdom, partnerships with other schools in the community (school-school partnerships) were shown to benefit schools in challenging circumstances, as it increased the school's capability of addressing complex challenges such as supporting the needs of vulnerable learners, and of solving problems such as staffing shortages (Ainscow et al, 2006). Therefore, lower decile schools in Aotearoa New Zealand should endeavour to develop school-community partnerships, in order to increase the number of resources and opportunities available to students and families, and to increase the equitability of educational experience.

## Challenges to Developing Meaningful Partnerships

There are several major challenges that must be overcome in order for school-community partnerships to reach their full potential (Sanders, 2001). One of the biggest difficulties cited by schools is the amount of time needed and complexity involved with developing partnerships (Ainscow et al., 2006, Sanders, 2001). Ainscow et al. (2006) found that due to the number of variables involved in school-founding partnerships, there is a considerable amount of strategising necessary in order to avoid wasted time and wasted resources. This means that the education staff involved in pursuing partnerships must be willing to work hard and be persistent in their efforts. In order for school-community partnerships to provide authentic and relevant means for students to participate within social contexts, teachers must face the challenge of imparting the importance and brevity of global issues while concurrently valuing local and community issues (Wood, 2013). This presents a challenge as teachers must be willing to critically reflect on their own citizenship orientations, and to take an unbiased and equitable approach to addressing local, national, and global issues. Research undertaken in Australia on the effects of school-community partnerships in challenging and low socioeconomic environments, found that critical reflection upon the practices involved in community collaboration is necessary for the partnerships to not only be beneficial, but relevant to a school's specific needs (Hardy & Grootenboer, 2016). That being said, Hardy and Grootenboer (2016) identify one of the main obstacles as being the need to approach education in a more holistic way, and for teachers to broaden their perceptions of teaching practices to reach beyond the boundaries of the school walls. In order for school-community partnerships to support future-focused education, a shift must be made from the traditional approach to partnerships in which external partners support the school in mainly extra-curricular or co-curricular realms (sporting events, school camps, etc.) (Bolstad et al., 2012). This manifests itself as a challenge to also find partners who are willing to provide experiences and opportunities for students to participate in activities that fall outside of the traditional domain of school-community partnerships. As found by Evans (2013), one of the most significant challenges faced by new educators is the development of relationships with families and with the community. As classrooms continue to diversify, the difficulty of creating authentic relationships increases as teachers are responsible for widening their cultural knowledge and making sure their pedagogical practices are culturally appropriate for all. To summarize, the main challenges surrounding the implementation of successful school-community partnerships are: acquiring resources such as time and willing partners (including school staff), taking an unbiased approach to addressing issues from a local to a global context (and acknowledging all scales of participation as active citizenry), shifting to more future-focused partnerships, and giving teachers the space to

develop deep and diverse cultural knowledge that is relevant to their students.

## Conclusion

Despite the many challenges facing educators and partners in the development of school-community partnerships, the collated research reveals that these relationships have diverse and impactful benefits for students, schools, and their communities, and should be pursued where possible. The New Zealand Curriculum supports community engagement, and lifelong and future-focused learning in its principles (Ministry of Education, 2007). The development of school-community partnerships has the ability to bring these principles to life in the classroom. Through these partnerships, schools are able to supply students with more than a basic subject-driven education. These partnerships provide students with the opportunity to participate in the community and work alongside partners, gaining extra-curricular and real-world experience, and in many cases enabling them to give back to the community. Gross et al. (2015) found that schools that showed a commitment to inclusive education were able to impart associated values back into the community. That being said, school-community partnerships have the potential to promote a social shift away from long-held deficit perspectives and non-inclusive practices. School-community partnerships can provide social experiences and influence that support future-focused learning as students are able to experience active citizenry as they participate through relevant and authentic ways in the community, concurrently learning about their roles as democratic agents of change. Through these experiences and opportunities, students gain greater access to social capital than they would have received within the walls of the school. In essence, school-community partnerships serve to remove schools from the isolation of their physical boundaries, and expand the horizons of education (Bolstad et al., 2012). As research reveals, community involvement can increase the likelihood that students will be civically or politically engaged later in life (McFarland & Thomas, 2006). In order to fully understand the advantages and challenges of school-community partnerships in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand, more research should be done on New Zealand schools to gain an understanding of how best to achieve cultural cohesion with the community and deepen learning opportunities (Collins & Mutch, 2012). Given the nature of social inequality in New Zealand schools (Wood, 2012; Wood, 2013), the potential for school-community partnerships to provide all students with opportunities to engage with their communities could result in future politics being more democratic and truly representative of diversity within society. In order for schools to be able to develop such successful, future-focused partnerships that meet the needs of the New Zealand Curriculum, they need to overcome challenges such as the amount of time needed, finding willing partners, and the work required to maintain authentic relationships. As New Zealand becomes an increasingly diverse country, classrooms are likely to become more diverse in their make up too. School-community

partnerships provide an outlet for students to come to an understanding of their identity in the context of their local community, which allows them to have a deeper understanding of their individualism in regards to national and global contexts within this increasingly diverse country. In conclusion, the development of school-community partnerships is an important and effective practice of future-focused education, as they can provide a plethora of resources for students that could empower them on their educational journey and development of identity, and civic responsibility in an evolving country and an evolving world.

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