An Evaluation of Parents and Caregiver Perceptions of Online Communication in Intermediate (Middle) Schooling: Involvement and Effectiveness

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Abstract

A dominant theme of the 21st century has been the rapid changes in technology and the move towards online communication. The impact of these changes has influenced how schools interact and communicate with parents/caregivers. It has been well documented by researchers, and acknowledged by both educational leaders and practitioners, that effective partnerships between school and home have the potential to positively impact on student outcomes. The importance of parent engagement and involvement cannot be underestimated, yet in related research to date, the parent voice is rarely considered.

The purpose of this study is to help rectify this gap by evaluating parent and caregiver perceptions of online communication and how this involves them in their child's schooling. Through intermediate school-based research conducted in New Zealand, the study will identify how parents engage with online communication and examine the conditions that influence this involvement. This study will also determine how effective parents regard the online communication between school and home.

Respondents for this study were selected from parents/caregivers who had students at an intermediate school in Auckland during the 2011 school year. An online survey was sent out to the school community and in addition, six parents were interviewed face to face. Analysis of the data collected revealed three major themes which influenced the engagement of parents in online communication. These broad themes were the shared responsibility of the parent and teacher to support the child's learning, parent capability and understanding of the technology, and the expectations held by the parents towards the use of online communication by the school. From, the online survey and parent interviews it became clear that the parents wanted to be actively involved in their child's learning.

By identifying the conditions that influence parents/caregivers to engage in online communication, this study made it possible to develop guidelines for schools to enhance and encourage online partnerships.

Introduction

Engaging and involving parents, families and the community in students' learning is an important objective for every school. Forging partnerships between school and home enable parents to actively support their children and such relationships have been shown to have a strong impact on student outcomes (Alton-Lee, 2003). These school-home partnerships are dependent on educators initiating links and recognising strengths within the diversity of their school communities (Epstein, 2001; Grant, 2009; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Reynolds, 2005; Smrekar, 1996; Walberg, 1986). Epstein first pointed out in 1985 that "parental encouragement, activities, and interest at home and parental participation in schools and classrooms positively influence achievement, even after the student's ability and family socio-economic status are taken into account" (p.19). The challenge for schools is to maintain these partnerships in a world that has constantly changing forms of communication. Online communication systems such as school websites, email, wikis and learning management systems are just some of the ways in which schools are now interacting with parents and the wider community.

A recent innovation in online communication to connect teachers, students, parents/caregivers is the parent portal. The New Zealand Ministry of Education has defined a parent portal as a web-based gateway enabling parents to view their child's online data, which could include current topics, homework, assessment, attendance and achievement information (2010b). Part of a New Zealand Ministry of Education initiative, it was developed by KnowledgeNET, one of the providers of learning management systems to schools in New Zealand. The purpose of this initiative was to strengthen the links between school and home by enabling parents/caregivers to engage in online learning conversations with teachers and their children. The parent portal was seen as innovative as it had the potential to open lines of communication by providing parents with instant access to their child's electronic learning (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Across a range of research, there has emerged a strong argument that parents/caregivers who are involved in their child's learning make a positive impact on how well they achieve and develop (Alton-Lee, 2003; Biddulph, Biddulph, & Biddulph, 2003; Epstein, 1985, 1987, 1995, 2001; Ramsey, Harold, Hawk, Marriott & Poskitt, 1992; Walberg, 1986). Based on years of research, Epstein (1995) identified six major types of involvement between school, family and community. These were:

> 1) Parenting —helping all families to establish home environments to support children as students.
> 2) Communicating — designing effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programmes and children's progress.
> 3) Volunteering — recruiting and organizing parental help and support.
> 4) Learning at home — providing information and ideas to families about how to help students with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning.
> 5) Decision making — including parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives.

6) Collaborating with community — identifying and integrating resources and services from the community to strengthen school programmes, family practices, and student learning and development.

These six major types of parental involvement created by Epstein provided the theoretical framework for this research study described below.

Previous research has focused on the positive impact that the digital environment has had on students' learning when effective partnership and collaboration occurs between teachers and students (Roblyer & Edwards, 2003; Condie & Livingstone, 2007). This research is limited however, when extended to digital communication between teachers, students and parents. The Best Evidence Synthesis conducted on New Zealand school leadership and student outcomes by Robinson, Hohepa and Lloyd (2009), stated that "research and development is also needed on how electronic media and the Internet can mediate effective connections between schools and homes, whanau[1], and communities" (p. 168).

The aim of the research described below was to hear the voice of parents and enable them to influence a school's online communication system. Hattie's (2009) research emphasized the importance of schools helping parents to "learn the language of schooling so that parents can provide every possible assistance to their children in terms of developing the child's learning and love of learning, and in creating the highest possible shared expectations for learning" (p. 33). By measuring parental involvement and engagement in online communication this research study acknowledged the importance of the parents' input into their child's learning by deliberating seeking their views, rather than considering the school's views. This was essential because as Lumby (2007) pointed out:

> the way their [parents] voice is heard is coloured by the assumptions and ambivalence of policy-makers, professionals and researchers. They [parents] are often conceptualized instrumentally in relation to how far they provide a perceived positive or negative influence on their child(ren) and on schools (p.221).

This research was therefore instigated with the purpose of informing and enhancing future practices of schools by offering guidelines to support parent involvement in digital communication.

Research Questions

This research study was designed to consider the following key questions:

1. How did parents engage in online communication?
2. What conditions influenced the involvement of parents with online communication?
3. How effective did parents regard communication between school and home?

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[1] A New Zealand Maori word meaning extended family, that is now common usage within New Zealand

Methodology

New Zealand schooling begins on the day a child turns five, and comprises six years of primary school, two intermediate school years, and five secondary school years. A particular feature of New Zealand education system is it's decentralised nature, with each school having its own Board of Trustees comprised of seven elected parents, one elected teacher, the principal and, if a secondary school, one elected student. The Board of Trustees has more power than in most school systems. They govern the school, hire and fire all staff, including the principal, manage the finances, maintain the property and have a voice in the implementation of the curriculum. In the New Zealand system, parents have an active role in the life of the school, so accurate and timely communication between school and home is critical.

Contextual Background

The research took place at an Intermediate School located in Auckland, New Zealand. The school was classified as decile 9 (generally with children from a high socio-economic area), co-educational with a roll of approximately 600 students at the time of the research. The Intermediate had a diverse range of ethnicities amongst the children who attended the school, approximately 30 different nationalities being represented. Most of the students were New Zealand born but the school also attracted international students, mainly from Korea, and there were approximately 20 such students at the time of this research. The school catered for the middle years (11-13 year olds) with approximately 28 teaching staff.

In the learning management system at this particular school, each student is required to create a home page, which not only links to work, subjects and websites but also describes their goals and interests. This webpage encourages students to express themselves creatively through text, images and animations and also develop web design skills. The home pages in the learning management system enhance communication and collaboration across the school as each student links to their class page, homework page, team pages and single subject areas such as Arts and Technology.

Another tool within the learning management system, which parents have access to is the portfolio pages of their child. This contains student self-reflections on their work, assessments, and artefacts they had created. The parents/caregivers also have access to the learning journals, which are tools that allow students to record and present their ideas using a variety of multimedia methods such as audio recordings, video, and static images. They encourage dialogue and collaboration as the teachers, parents/caregivers, and peers are able to make comments in the learning journal. One of the advantages of the learning journals is that they can be used for a range of purposes such as recounting or recollection of events, recording the process the student went through to complete a task or as a place to store information. Students are able to evaluate their own progress as well as the progress of their peers. Students are able to scaffold each other through the learning experience by sharing websites, video clips, images, and information they have researched. Teachers as well as parents/caregivers are able to make suggestions or recommendations on the learning journals.

Teachers communicate with parents and students through the online school notice boards about up-coming events. The School Calendar also allows the school

community to view important events and dates. Both the School Calendar and School Noticeboard were updated regularly by teachers and the senior leadership team in the school. Through the parent portal, teachers provide parents with digital resources to assist with their child's progress in the Caregiver Resource area. Parents/caregivers can view absenteeism and update personal contact information in the School Records area of the parent portal. The School Area was used by this particular school to store the programme overview for the school, teacher online resources, and to store planning units. The school had allowed the parents/caregivers access to this area to allow transparency and open communication between school, students, and home.

Research Approach

This research used a case study format to conduct an in-depth investigation into a single Intermediate School. The study design used a mixed methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Two types of evidence were collated and triangulated; an online survey completed by parents and individual interviews conducted with a small sample of randomly selected parents. Parents/caregivers were asked questions about how they support their child at home, the different forms of communication related to school programmes and their children's progress, opportunities for volunteering, learning at home, decision-making in particular if parents/caregivers would like a say in what their child is learning and finally questions around collaboration with the community. An online survey tool was used to gather qualitative and quantitative data from the parents/caregivers using *Survey Monkey®,* a tool that allows users to create their own online surveys using question format templates and collect responses electronically.

Results and Discussion

This small scale research study has attempted to address an area of research previously lacking by opening up a small space where the voices of a group of parents have been heard. In using a methodology to enable participants' voices to be articulated, it demonstrated how important it was to consider both the perceptions and perspectives of these particular stakeholders.

Assumptions and conclusions can be made by schools, teachers, policy makers and educational commentators about parental involvement and engagement, that may not necessarily be current. Harris and Goodall (2008) supported the idea that "parental engagement initiatives presuppose that schools, parents and pupils are relatively homogeneous and equally willing and capable of developing parental engagement schemes and general school norms, which is not always the case" (p. 279). This research found that introducing a new technological initiative like a parent portal is not always going to be fully embraced by the whole school community, as it will depend on values and aspirations held by parents towards their own child's schooling. As demonstrated in this study, the response rate to the online survey by 30% of school families suggests that many parents/caregivers are prepared to spend time submitting their opinions and ideas on how this online environment can support their child's learning and schooling, so need to be consulted.

From the findings of the research several conclusions can be made regarding parents perceptions of online communication. Firstly, parents/caregivers are seeking active, meaningful involvement in their children's schooling. The parents/caregivers strongly believed it was their responsibility to support their child's learning at home. This belief supports research conducted by Peters et al. (2007) who found "parents today are also more likely to see education as their own responsibility rather than the school's, and this could heighten their sense of involvement" (p. 98). Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) also noted that:

> The impact of parental involvement arises from parental values and educational aspirations and that these are exhibited continuously through parental enthusiasm and positive parenting style. These in turn are perceived by the student and, at best, internalised by them. This has its impact on the student's self-perception as a learner and on their motivation, self-esteem and educational aspirations. (p. 35)

However, in relation to technological involvement this research found that this was not always the case. The parents/caregivers believe it is their responsibility to support their child's learning at home but they are not aware of, or accessing, relevant resources provided by the school to do this.

However, the survey results did reveal that parents accessing the learning management system had clear expectations of what they expected to view online. The study found that when using KnowledgeNET, parents/caregivers wanted their child's academic progress to be available for them to view and monitor in a more timely manner. The parents/caregivers also expected current work to be online and accompanied by feedback from the teacher. Many of the parents/caregivers were viewing the homework pages online and commented that they expected the tasks to be relevant to current learning.

From the survey and interview comments, it was clear that some parents/caregivers needed guidance on how to support their child's learning. "Parents will be involved if they see that supporting and enhancing their child's school achievement is part of their 'job' as a parent. Likewise, parents will get involved if they feel they have the capacity to contribute" (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p.280). Capacity to contribute could be compromised by the finding that 30% of respondents did not understand some of the terminology used on the parent portal and 30% were not fully confident in using the technology. The interview participants certainly believed that supporting their child was part of their job and they emphasised the desire of having the capacity to contribute, hence wanted the teacher to provide guidelines or summaries of the learning. Such a requirement has also been previously expressed amongst students; "when adolescents perceive that their parents have high educational goals, they have more interest in school, greater academic self-regulation, and higher goal pursuits" (Kreider, 2007, p. 5).

The parents/caregivers also stated that access to the learning management system was one of the benefits. Often research indicates that parents experience practical barriers that prevent active involvement with their child's learning and communicating with schools. Grant (2009) for example reported that some of these practical barriers that parents face as:

time to help with homework or meet teachers often cited as a major barrier, with working parents, fathers and lone parents more likely to see this as a problem. Childcare and transport costs and opportunities are also described by parents as significant barriers (p.9).

The online survey revealed that half of parents (52%) indicated they were not too busy to use the parent portal. But despite online communication through a parent portal allowing parents/caregivers to view their child's learning and what is happening at school when it is convenient for them, a question about the frequency of viewing the parent portal resulted in a range of responses. Only one parent viewed the portal daily, 40% logged on once a week and 58% only logged on once a month.

The majority of the survey respondents were female (78%), possibly reflecting a traditional perception that the female is the predominant child carer. This perception is reinforced by the finding that despite 62% preferring to view the parent portal in the evening when most family members would be present in the home, most respondents viewed the parent portal alone, or with their child, few viewing it as a family.

Some conflicting results also occurred around the question of whom the respondents were using the parent portal with. 66% of respondents stated that they preferred to look at the parent portal on their own, yet when asked if they preferred to view the parent portal with their child present 67% agreed. The results were further confused by 44% agreeing that they preferred to look at the parent portal with other family members present. Hence stated viewing preferences were not always supported by stated viewing facts. It was therefore difficult to definitively determine from these results how parents/caregivers were viewing the learning management system at home. Further research could investigate exactly who the parents are interacting with when using the parent portal, when, and why. There are many possible viewers such as their child's siblings, whanau or even the wider community.

Regardless of the questions about when and with whom they used the parent portal, it was seen as flexible and a way of helping to manage parent-child-teacher relationships. Previously parents/caregivers would have to rely on their child to find out what happened at school or wait for communication from the school in the form of reports or parent interviews. From the survey results it is clear that the parents recognise the potential of the parent portal to inform them about their child's academic process, what their child is learning in class, opportunities for volunteering to be involved with school events and extra-curricular activities. Parents indicated their preference for the parent portal as a form of communication as opposed to telephone contact, school website, and in some cases face to face contact depending on the reason for communication.

Considerations and Guidelines for Schools Considering Similar Initiatives

The key message from this research is that schools need to collaborate with parents to determine what their expectations are with regards to online communication, especially through technologies such as parent portals. It is recommended that this collaboration takes the form of parent consultation through online surveys and workshops conducted by the school.

The parents/caregivers clearly articulated their expectation that they should have access to their child's academic progress and online school reports. This has

implications for educational practice between school and home. Schools will need to ensure that academic data viewed by parents is presented in a way that reflects the context of the learning and is easy to understand. Parental education would also be required on how to raise their child's achievement, understand academic data and use systems like KnowledgeNet.

The learning management system appears to have been successful due to the principal's attributes of effective leadership and managing the process of implementation. This success was underpinned by a deep understanding of the theory behind parental involvement and how to utilise a learning management system effectively into the teaching and learning. Edwards and Alldred (2000), Grant, (2009), Harris and Goodall, (2008) have warned that without a depth of knowledge in this area, there exists the possibility that decisions will be made that hinder partnerships between school and home or impact negatively on certain sections of the school community .

The principal of the school involved in this research study was known as an early adopter of new ICT ideas and strategies. The school had been using KnowledgeNET as their learning management system for the past eight years, and was one the first schools in New Zealand to do so. This demonstrated the foresight of the principal and the leadership team at the school. The principal was willing to invest and support the development of the learning management system by ensuring teachers had the knowledge and skills to do this and ensured that resources such as support materials were readily available. The teachers had time to try out and evaluate how they would use the parent portal to inform students and parents about their schooling. All stakeholders had an input into decision making through discussions and surveys. The principal also encouraged leadership in school by allowing teachers and students to try new ideas (Ely, 1990). However, engaging parents/caregivers to use the parent portal effectively needed further enquiry by the school, hence the purpose of this research.

However, just providing access is not enough, as parents need guidance on how to use the technology to support their child's learning. Research has emphasized that "schools need to make the shift to encouraging parental engagement in learning in the home through providing levels of guidance and support, which enable such engagement to take place" (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 286). Certainly technological advances help to support such engagement for parents by making it easier to be able to access resources about their child's learning through learning management systems like KnowledgeNET. However, as the research by Harris & Goodall clearly states, it is important that guidance and support is implemented by the school. This needs to take the form of parent training, information sessions, and workshops.

The role of the teacher in assisting parental engagement is critical. The importance of the teacher to scaffold how to use the technology effectively, how to respond to students learning online and create relevant resources that help and support parents/caregivers, is essential. Teachers need to ensure that the purpose of the learning is clearly defined and the outcomes for students are clear, to provide structure for the parent (Falloon, 2004). Research has stressed "the importance to many students of being able to share what they have achieved, and receive appropriate reinforcement for it" (Falloon, 2004, p. 284). This needs to be facilitated by the teacher so parents feel confident in their involvement in their children's education.

The parent portal has the capabilities, if used effectively, for students to share achievement and receive reinforcement from peers, teachers, and parents.

The comments made by the parents in the online survey and during the interviews highlighted the strength and quality of interactions between themselves and their child. It was clear, especially from the interview responses, that a variety of academic, social and emotional learning was taking place at home. Parents were able to view homework online, which in turn allowed them to support their child with the resources and time to complete tasks successfully. Effective three way partnerships through the parent portal relied on teachers providing clear guidelines and expectations around the learning, so that parents were able to understand and support their child.

A further unique aspect of this research related to the relationship of the researcher to the school and students, which allowed access to caregivers and parents. This established relationship with the school may have assisted in creating a climate that allowed the parents to speak freely during the interviews. The parents spoke freely about homework requirements and academic progress, many also described how they exposed their children to other areas of learning such as life skills, sporting and cultural events, debates around world or global issues, and visits overseas. This highlighted the importance of linking the experiences between school and home to make it more relevant for students, which the learning management system can assist with. This concept has been researched by Grant (2009) who emphasizes the importance of creating third spaces. The idea is that the "two different cultures of school and home can coexist and come into conversation with one another" (Grant, 2009, p. 11). A particular strength of this research is access to parent voice, which is often discussed theoretically, but only sometimes heard.

Conclusion

This study has revealed the potential of the parent portal to involve parents/caregivers in their children's learning. It demanded a close examination of key influencing factors such as how parents engage in online communication, which conditions influenced the involvement of parents and how effective parents regarded the parent portal. A report conducted by the Education Review Office (2008) concluded that "Finding new ways to make contact with the parents who, for a variety of reasons, find it difficult to come through the school gate requires schools to be pro-active and open to trying new approaches to engagement" (p. 45). Certainly this particular intermediate school is trying to find an alternative way to engage parents in their child's schooling.

The primary conclusion the researcher has made from this study, is that building a meaningful partnership between school and home is paramount to the success of new technologies such as the parent portal. In particular, parent voice must be heard. Simply providing access to their child's learning is not enough. Schools need to provide support, consult with the community, and establish expectations with all their stakeholders. The parents in this particular study voiced their support of KnowledgeNET and the parent portal because it provided a window into the school life of their child, a window the caregivers and parents could access anytime and anywhere. However, it should not be assumed that the parent portal alone provides parents/caregivers access to their child's learning. There needs to be a delicate

balance between teacher-student-parent involvement with a clear learning pathway and structure. Each stakeholder has a responsibility, which must be explicitly defined for the implementation of learning management systems and parent portals to be successful across the school community. Otherwise the ability to engage all stakeholders will be limited and as such, reduce the potential of involving many parents in their child's schooling.

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