Parent Mentoring Initiative Evaluation

Report to the Ministry of Education

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PARENT MENTORING INITIATIVE EVALUATION

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EVALUATION OF THE
PARENT MENTORING INITIATIVE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Parent Mentoring Initiative was funded by the Ministry of Education between 2002-2005, for two key purposes. First, the project aimed to strengthen relationships through a bi-directional partnership between parents[1]/caregivers and teachers; parents and children, and families/communities and schools, in order to support the educational achievement of learners. Second, the initiative sought to stress mutual responsibility and accountability around these partnerships.

A literature review conducted by Hucker (2001), identified a definition of parent mentoring that formed the basis of the Parent Mentoring Initiatives (PMI). Hucker defined parent mentoring as "the forming of relationships between parents and school that enables both parties to contribute more effectively to the education and achievement of students" (01/Contract/617 Parent Mentoring/Parent mentoring PISCPL RFP final doc. p.5).

Ministry of Education (Ministry) estimates indicate that 600 families were involved in the initiative in any one year. Primary data for this evaluation were collected from a total of 123 respondents. This included 77 parents who attended focus group meetings; 19 principals and 19 co-ordinators who provided feedback by way of either postal questionnaires or face to face interviews, and eight teachers who returned postal questionnaires. This constituted a 60% questionnaire completion rate across the three regions. The data were supplemented with material from analysis of secondary data pertaining to the Flaxmere and Counties Manukau initiatives (Brown, 2005; Clinton, Hattie & Dixon, 2004; Cotching, 2005; Counties Manukau Questionnaires; Hahn, 2005; Perry, 2004; Phillips, McNaughton & McDonald, 2002).

Analyses of the data indicate five key findings. First, a range of parent mentoring models and strategies have developed and been implemented, in unique and locally contextualised and appropriate ways, across each of the three geographical regions. Second, the support parents have received through the initiative is varied. Third, the benefits to teachers and schools from the PMI have been considerable. All schools made progress in reframing the home-school partnership and the various mentoring initiatives engendered considerable parent involvement, collaboration and team work.

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[1] Throughout this report the use of the term parents, is intended to include caregivers, whanau etc

Fourth, the PMI has impacted on home-school dynamics through enhanced: parent–child relationships; home-school relationships; co-coordinator-parent relationships; and parent–parent/community relationships. Finally, the data suggest that evidence of
the success of the initiative is to be found in three key areas. These include 1) growth in the numbers of parents participating in school activities and an associated increased positive attitude toward school; 2) enhanced learner capability and 3) increased parent involvement in 'other' educational opportunities.

In sum, analyses of the data indicate that the PMI has enhanced the bi-directionality of relationships between homes and schools. The parent education strand of the initiative has been realised more fully in some regions than others. The impact of the initiative on student achievement, whilst anecdotally reported by respondents, has yet to be substantiated through a full analysis of quantitative achievement data.

INTRODUCTION

This evaluation of the PMI assesses the effectiveness of the various programmes, and the impact they have had on home-school relationships. The evaluation explores the efficacy of the varying programmes within their individual contexts, and the strengths and limitations of these programmes.

The PMI was introduced into five clusters totalling 29 schools, in three geographical areas where local schooling improvement initiatives were already established: the Far North, Counties Manukau and Flaxmere. The criteria for selection to be involved in the PMI was the ability of the existing programmes to have: a two way relationship between the school and the community; accurate school reporting mechanisms around student progress and achievement; an active information flow between school and families around school related programmes; parent engagement in decision making around their children's learning; learning resources distributed and used in homes; training and development provided for staff; a parent education component with a focus on supporting children's learning and a model of evaluation of programme effectiveness in terms of enhanced academic outcomes for students.

Each cluster school contracted a local co-ordinator. Some were qualified teachers, and others parents or community personnel. Co-ordinators were key agents in supporting and enabling school communities to build positive home-school relationships, thereby facilitating successful educative journeys for students and parents. While somewhat diffuse across regions, the co-ordinator role involved a focus on children's learning, and support of that learning through building expertise/capacity in the community. Concomitant with this was the fostering of self determination, and commitment amongst parents to their children's education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This evaluation was guided by a qualitative, cumulative case study approach which brought together the multiple case studies across the participating school communities to answer the research questions. The finer points of the case study approach in qualitative research are detailed by a number of authors (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, Burns, 1994; Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1994; Yin, 1989). It is sufficient for purposes of this evaluation, to note that the focus of the research was upon qualitative issues which probed 'how' the projects operated and enhanced relationships within and across school communities. It also sought to identify a) 'what' are the perceived benefits for the initiative for students, parents, teachers, schools and communities, b) evidence of enhanced student achievement outcomes; c) effective practices in terms of participation, achievement and growing teacher capability and d) practices that enhance sustainability beyond the project funding.

For these reasons, case study was selected as the most appropriate methodological tool. A case study methodology provided a useful way to systematically look at the specific school cluster cases, collect the data, analyse and interpret the findings and report the findings. In sum, case study was selected because it enabled the examination of specific educational practices; provided a comprehensive description of those practices and aided the identification of areas for improved practice, learning and sustainability.

Credibility of the findings was enhanced through the triangulation of additional data gathering sources including interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis.

Ethical Considerations

The data collection processes implemented throughout this inquiry have been guided by the ethical principles adopted by the American Anthropological Association. These included discussions, either by telephone or email with principals, support staff and/or local Ministry staff, making the nature of enquiry overt; and written communication with respondents explaining that their participation was voluntary, confidential, and that their anonymity would be maintained (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Letters explaining the project aims, and accompanying informed consent forms were given to all participants. The protection of identity was effected at all times through the non recording of names on focus group data.

Selection of Respondents

Potential respondents included parents, teachers and principals in each of the cluster schools and the local liaison co-ordinator. The initial contact emails/letters explained the nature of the research and sought the cooperation of respondents to participate in focus group discussions, interviews and/or postal questionnaire completion. One hundred and twenty-three principals,

teachers, co-ordinators and parents participated in the study. This included 77 parents, 19 local liaison co-ordinators, 19 principals and eight teachers.

Regional response statistics:

Far North:	42 parents	10 co-ordinators	10 principals 2 teachers
Manukau:	15 parents	5 co-ordinators	5 principals 3 teachers
Flaxmere	20 parents	4 co-ordinators	4 principals 3 teachers

Across the Far North, Counties Manukau and Flaxmere regions, there was a 60% completion rate of distributed questionnaires.

Data Collection and Analysis

Primary data for this evaluation were collected from the 123 respondents who attended focus group meetings, participated in interviews, or completed postal questionnaires. To enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings (Anderson, 1998), the data were triangulated with secondary data, and some additional primary data gathered in an earlier evaluation. Focus group discussions were the primary data gathering tool for working with parents. They are particularly suited to this type of social research in that they provide a powerful means for gaining insight into the opinions of the particular groups involved. Questions were provided by the Ministry and these provided the basis for the focus group discussions.   Questions permitted probing into ambiguous answers and the context and reasoning behind the answers.

The postal questionnaire, completed by respondents who could not attend focus groups or interviews, was an adaptation of the focus group questions that sought similar information. A loosely structured interview schedule based on the Ministry provided questions, was used for interviews with cluster co-coordinators and principals.

The form of analysis for this study was one of qualitative interpretation. The findings were not expected to be conclusive at this stage, but rather, a reflection of a number of context specific situations that warrants further investigation. Essentially, the analysis and interpretation of this data sought to assess the overall effectiveness of the PMI within the specific clusters of schools, and to explore the wider effects of the initiative on various stakeholders within the school communities

Findings from this evaluation are discussed in the following section under six headings including: implementation models, parent support mechanisms, teacher and school support mechanisms, relationships, evidence of success and barriers to success.

FINDINGS

A.   Implementation Models

The data evidence that the PMI is being implemented differently not only from school to school within geographical regions, but more significantly, from school region to school region. It appears that factors such as geographical isolation and concomitant population density, in addition to ethnicity and a sense of community, have impacted upon the ways in which the parent mentoring programme has been implemented. Three distinct models of implementation are apparent in each of the three regions involved in the initiative. As has already been indicated, the flexibility of implementation possible in this initiative has been a strength that both co-ordinators and principals noted. They described being able to synchronise PMI funding with other sources of Ministry and private funding, for example, Trust funding for Computers in Homes, to produce the best possible outcomes for children, parents and the school. The following section briefly summarises the programme objectives and measures of success in each context.

Far North

In the Far North, the PMI resourcing has been utilised across the cluster schools to encourage pre-compulsory education, primarily via the distribution of learning resource packs for pre school children. The resources include for example, activity sheets, toys, recipes for play dough, songs and nursery rhymes. The objective of the resource packs has essentially been to support parents as first teachers, through the provision of early learning materials. The packs have also provided parents with information and support to work with their children in initial literacy and numeracy skill development.

The resource packs have been provided in Te Reo Maori, bilingual, or English media. Resources have been distributed at preschool or kohanga reo, or in some cases, have been sent home from school with older siblings. The packs include a letter to parents offering suggestions around how to promote oral language development and interactions between parents and child/ren. The learning packs have primarily been used as independent learning packages for parents and children in the home, with varying levels of support provided by the co-ordinator and/or school. Preschool children have also had access to their local school reading resources.

One school, which extended the programme to school based, versus solely pre-school activities, particularly focussed on the Pause Prompt Praise (PPP) reading programme. The objective was to provide a mechanism for enhancing children's reading abilities, through parent engagement as tutors. Training for parents was provided as part of this initiative.

Irrespective of the specifics of how the parent mentoring resourcing was used in the Far North, the data indicate that the programme has resulted in positive outcomes. Whanau have experienced increased access to learning resources that support their children's early learning experiences, and there were increased opportunities for whanau participation in educational

opportunities. As one co-ordinator said, "[We have] *a higher intake of kids with fewer and fewer skills – without PMI*, [we] *would have been far worse off."*

What has worked well in this area then, has been the resource packs and the local connections - parent-to-parent and with the schools. These initiatives have enhanced parents' confidence and provided a wider range of strategies for relating too, and encouraging the learning of preschoolers. Further, they have contributed to the building of effective relationships with schools, both for parents and for their preschoolers' confidence on entering the school system. The initiatives have also given principals and teachers a better knowledge and understanding of the needs and aspirations of the preschoolers' parents. Most Far North work has operated at the level of individual parents and their children, rather than in groups. As the area has a high number of geographically isolated parents, some of whom have travel constraints, this individual approach has worked effectively.

Counties Manukau

Counties Manukau has adopted an holistic approach to building home-school relationships within the context of the PMI. Relationship building has focussed on the wider whanau and inter-parent relationship strengthening through a primary focus on the growth and development of early childhood learning centres (known by a range of names). This initiative grew out of the Early Childhood Primary Link (ECPL) project that endeavoured to link schools and early childhood centres in low decile areas, to ease the transition process for parents and children from home to school.

The on-site playgroups that have arisen from the PMI aim to strengthen the links between schools and the contributing early childhood education centres and local families of pre school aged children, through the provision of structured education programmes for pre school children and parents, and through the establishment of a resource bank with educational materials that parents can use to support their children's learning. Each playgroup is run by part-time Community Liaison Worker (CLW), whose role is to support parents in supporting their children's learning, and to create and strengthen links between parents and school.

Parents attend the playgroups, meet new entrant teachers and principals, and thereby become familiar with school life, thus enhancing home-school relationships. Because the playgroups are on-site, parents and children become familiar with their local school and its systems. The active involvement of the Associate Principals in working with the CLWs has been another important way to create a two-way link between families and schools. The education provided to parents supports them as first teachers, thus empowering them to be actively engaged in their child/ren's learning. The programme coordinator plays an integral role in all aspects of the programme implementation. There is an emphasis upon meeting family and community needs via a range of initiatives.

The parent data indicate that the on-site playgroup initiative has:
- enhanced relationships between parents and schools e.g. *"My relationship with the teachers has grown, I know who they are."*

- eased the transition to school process for parents, children and teachers e.g. [On starting school] *my child could even make her own dental appointments, she knew who the principal was* [and] *who the teachers were.*"
- increased links between home and school in terms of raising parent expectations around student learning e.g. "*I monitor TV watching…usually 30 minutes…do homework after TV*" and "*We continue routines at home,*"
- facilitated parent personal growth opportunities eg. "*The parent mentoring has shown* [me] *that I can help parents or little children, communicating in such ways and understanding people's purposes or points…*" and
- facilitated increased numbers of parents being involved in school related activities e.g. "*I go to parent/teacher discussions, parent coffee mornings. The school and playgroup have a great community spirit.*"

What has worked well in the Counties Manukau context has been the emphasis on group activity. In an area where parents live in fairly close proximity to one another, but have not previously necessarily had much to do with their schools, the PMI has supported increased relationship building and parent participation in school activities. Principals, parents and local co-ordinators were all extremely positive about the effect of the PMI in growing home-school partnerships. The flexible nature of the PMI to adapt to specific local needs was particularly beneficial in this urban context.

Flaxmere

The approach to programme implementation at Flaxmere[2] has involved a collective of interconnected initiatives that are embedded in existing school programmes. These include the preschool family programme, computers in homes programme[3], the homework centre initiative, the Home School Liaison project, and an enrichment programme. This enrichment programme involves a student planned and managed programme of study, offered in either Te Reo Māori or English. Students select what they wish to study, for example, students have explored film making, fashion, and cooking. Their final reports/presentations are prepared on the computer. The PMI has supported the enrichment programme by "*strengthening relationships between year 1 teachers and parents and Māori teachers in the enrichment class*" (Parent Focus Group response). All these initiatives are aimed at improving educational outcomes for children, particularly numeracy, literacy and behavioural/attitudinal outcomes, and all are focused upon enhanced home-school relationships. The programme co-ordinator plays an integral role in the overall programme success.

The success of these programmes is well evidenced in parent voices - "*I try to speak like you told us to, to believe it will happen…and it does! Now my kids look up to me. EVERYBODY is happier*" (Perry, 2004, p.5) and "*Things that you think are impossible, co-ordinators have made it seem simple.*"

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[2] Two fifths of the Flaxmere funding is through the PMI, and the balance comes from Schooling Improvement Funding
[3] Flaxmere was the only cluster to operate the computers in home programme within the context of its schooling improvement activity.

Stories abound here of parents and families who have found that the provision of computers, software and support has enhanced their learning and aspirations beyond what they had considered possible. As one parent commented, "*Mum can do invoicing for her husband; Grandma, who is partially blind, can send emails and photos, Dad has a new job requiring computing skills he didn't have before*." Several parents with literacy problems used the computer to learn about written language – in fact, two of these parents who attended focus group meetings are now on their school's Board of Trustees (BoT).

The Flaxmere PMI impacted on a large number of students. The length of time students were involved in the programme varied, from 757 students having at least one term's involvement, to 64 students being involved for the full nine term duration of the project.

Clinton et.al. (2004), note that across the various initiatives, the "*average student spent an average of 13 hours in a programme over a 2 year period. It is important to note that it was the number of interactions with the families, rather than the length of time in the programme that had the greater impact*" (p.7) on enhanced student achievement outcomes. Indicators of programme effectiveness focussed on a broad index of progress in terms of enhanced social, attitudinal and academic outcomes for students and/or parents.

In Flaxmere, an external evaluation was funded in parallel with the project. This was outcome focussed, "*based on a collaboratively developed programme logic…team independent from the school [and] aimed to be both formative and summative*" (p.7). Data were collected in three data bases and included:
1. achievement and social databases that explored data on school climate, the Flaxmere community, self-concept, learning strategies, self-efficacy etc;
2. cluster school databases of student achievement, for example, asTTle, PATs, 6 year nets, SEA and/or NCEA results, and
3. an intervention (HSLP) database that recorded student intervention measures. The Flaxmere involvement in the PMI provides an example of a synthesising of various interventions and funds. What worked well here was the schools' ability to meet local community needs.

With a high proportion of parents employed in seasonal work with frequently early starts, the homework centre initiative (with breakfast provided) was a notable example of empathy with parents' needs, along side a concern for children's enhanced educational achievement. The funding from the Trust for computers was a major asset in this area, and greatly enhanced the benefits of the PMI funding in providing hardware that could be used to build bridges between homes and schools and strengthen the achievement of both parents and their children.

B.   Parent Support Mechanisms

Parents in all three regions have received both resources and educational guidance on how they can support their children's learning, both in the preschool and compulsory schooling years.

Most parents involved in the initiative have received regular personal support from their local co-ordinator. There is however, potential for greater utilisation of resources, if parents are more fully informed of how to use them. The data highlight a unanimous expression of parental appreciation for what the programme offers, in comments such as "[it is] *useful"...structured... well-planned...Both my child and I are learning so much."*

Five key mediums of support for parents are identifiable in the data including:

1. the provision of learning resource packs to use with children
2. the availability of multi-lingual learning resources for children
3. invitations to attend school functions (and a greater confidence to accept such invitations) and to use library resources
4. the provision of culturally appropriate, professional development programmes in parenting and childcare practices, offered by respected co-ordinators who frequently act as mentors to parents
5. the provision of a range of professional development opportunities for parents including, for example, computer/software instruction, drivers licence education, teacher aide training, and nutritional guidance

This range of benefits demonstrates how the PMI has facilitated increased knowledge, confidence and opportunities for parents and their children. It has encouraged the development of positive attitudes towards schools which are seen as the locus of the programme. The benefits for parents possibly go beyond what was originally envisaged for the initiative; they are however a valuable addition to its aims.

Learning Resources

Learning resource packs for pre-school children, particularly those in multi-lingual mode, have been extremely useful for both parents and children in some contexts as evidenced in comments such as:

> *The sheets you get every week – things you wouldn't think of yourself* [are] *useful*

> [The] *resources, activity sheets, toys, use of library, packs of material…*[I] *had forgotten a lot of things and this reminds parents*

These resources appear to be more helpful to parents living in geographically isolated areas for whom formal pre-school options are not necessarily a readily accessible option. Having older children deliver the materials home was appreciated by parents in remote regions, and the ideas provided in the packs are supporting parents to support their pre-school children's education. Where there is ready access to more formal pre-school opportunities, the resource packs appear to be of limited value in supporting parents to support their pre-school children's education. What has worked effectively in these packs is the sound structuring of the material in general, supported by the resourcefulness and creativity of the local co-ordinators.

The data indicate that regular parent and child face-to-face contact with school personnel and co-ordinators, in an on-site preschool context, is the most effective mechanism for supporting bi-directional partnerships between home and school.

Most of the local co-ordinators have demonstrated commitment beyond their expected role in finding and/or developing material that parents can use and replicate at low cost, to support their children's learning. The variety of co-ordinators and their different life experiences, have provided a rich resource which could be utilised in future Ministry projects.

Life Skills Professional Development

The PMI evidences the positive impact of culturally appropriate life skills professional development programmes for parents. As parents are supported to extend their knowledge and understanding of human developmental processes, not only are they able to better support their children's learning, but further, they become empowered to engage more fully in the home-school partnership. To exemplify, parents commented that because of the PMI:

> *Parents are daring to do things they might not have otherwise done*

> *I used to scream at the children* [but] *I don't any more*

> *I'm able to talk to the children without shouting*

> *From taking my kids to preschool, I now know a lot more about this school and I would like to contribute on my opinions or suggestions in these* [school] *meetings from a parent's point of view*

It is evident from this feedback that 'good practice' models used by co-ordinators, particularly in group settings such as the playgroups, have been beneficial in helping parents to explore alternative approaches to child care and education. It is also clear that for many parents, building confidence to 'speak up' at school has been a feature of the initiative.

Other Professional Development

Across all regions, informal and more formalised professional development initiatives for parents, that focussed on enhanced employment opportunity related outcomes, were beneficial in terms of personal value for parents and professional value for schools. In this way the symbiotic relationship between home and school was nurtured. As parents developed competence in literacy or computer skills for example, they not only manifest enhanced self esteem, but further, they evidenced an increased willingness to contribute to school life. For some this was as teacher aides, for others as BoT members etc. The data reveal that as schools invested in raising the capability of parents, there was a concurrent development of bi-directionality in home-school relationships.

It seems likely that the 'fear factor' some parents experienced before their increased involvement in schools through the PMI, has been negated. Parents have acquired skills that are beneficial to their own career possibilities and are also contributing these back to the schools – for example by joining the BoT.

C.   Teacher and School Support Mechanisms

The data suggest that throughout the three regions, and particularly in Counties Manukau and Flaxmere, teachers are aware that the PMI is operating in their school community; they are supportive of the initiative and have some level of contact with parents and children through the programme co-ordinator. Because the initiative specifically targets preschool children's families in the Far North, teacher and school contact is more limited.

Teachers and schools report seven overall benefits from involvement in the initiative. These can be summarised as 'personal good/micro-level' benefits and 'professional/macro-level' benefits.

Personal/Micro-level Benefits

1. Inter-school teacher collaboration and collegiality afforded from sharing with the cluster groups. This is well evidenced in the following teacher comment: *"The professional development, financial support, increased association with other units* [was useful] *because of the support both professionally and financially…"* This was not perceived as a strong support mechanism in isolated regions, or where schools had teaching principals or small staff numbers. These factors appeared to preclude principals' or teachers' participation in cluster groups, because of the difficulty of accessing relief teachers.

What appeared to work well in some areas, at least for the teachers who participated in this study, was the opportunity afforded through the initiative, for teachers to utilise class release time, to meet with other teachers and grow collegially and professionally.

2. Enhanced computer skills provided by facilitators, fostered a greater awareness amongst parents of the need to improve their own literacy, and an increased desire to improve their job opportunities through enhanced education. This initiative was also beneficial to teachers across the regions, who appreciated the opportunity to develop their information technology skills.

3. Co-ordinators have helped some teachers to break down personal barriers to approaching some homes. Perry (2004) reports *"Recognition...of common accord to be found in houses of widely divergent cultural capital has provided opportunity for both sides to meet"* (p.7).

Teachers also reported in some cases, that the initiative had facilitated parent knowledge about child development and provided them with strategies to better support their children's learning.

The 'fear factor' that some parents feel in approaching schools has been mentioned previously. The PMI data indicate that the liaison role of the co-ordinators has been of assistance in helping teachers to become more comfortable in approaching parents. The comment by teachers about parent awareness of the need to improve their own literacy was reinforced by parents in the Flaxmere area. This was also an obviously unexpected benefit of the initiative.

Professional/Macro-level benefits

4. Enhanced parent confidence has facilitated increased parent involvement in school activities, for example as teacher aides, parent help, singing and music assistants, and/or, simply 'coming to school', and this has provided valued support for teachers. This support mechanism facilitated by the PMI was noted across all participating cluster schools.

It is likely that this increased involvement has resulted from the confidence parents have developed within the context of the PMI, in extending their range of skills for working with small children and in feeling more comfortable with the schools. Furthermore, this confidence has occasionally extended beyond work with their own children in school, to cover involvement in school camps and other school activities after their own child has left the class. These anecdotal stories demonstrate ongoing positive effects of the initiative.

5. Closer relationships have been established between teachers/schools and parents, through a deeper level of understanding of home environments. For example, in Flaxmere, a co-ordinator reported on the benefits of a regular time allocation in the school improvement section of staff meetings reminding staff about the Home School Liaison Programme (HSLP), and keeping them 'in the loop'. One particular story concerned a 7 year old Tongan girl who was consistently late and whose family failed to respond to the teacher's concerns. A home visit by the co-ordinator found that both parents were going to work at 7am, and that it was this child's responsibility to get her younger brother and sister fed and dressed, and to clean the house before she could leave for school herself. This knowledge changed the relationship between the school and the family and resulted in "[the] *teacher stopped hounding* [the] *child and…would say I'm glad to see you are here."*

The development of closer relationships between teachers/schools and parents was also commented on by Clinton et. al. (2004) who said:

> *Perhaps the most important effect of the HSLPs on the teachers was that many teachers claimed feedback from the HSLPs about the home life of their students had altered their perceptions of the students in the classroom and made them more aware of the difficulties some of the children experienced at home* (p.15).

It is evident that co-ordinator positions have been crucial in facilitating the development of strengthened home-school understanding. Co-ordinators who have not generally been involved in classroom activities, have had the flexibility to approach parents and to listen to their concerns. This aspect of the PMI has been an effective mediating mechanism between parents and schools.

6. Teachers/schools have gained a deeper understanding of more appropriate mechanisms for home – school dialogue, for example, face-to-face conversation versus questionnaires.

7. Teachers/schools have gained a fuller understanding of the desire of parents to have more formative, versus solely summative feedback about their child/ren's progress/learning.

D.   Relationships

Respondents reported the impact of the PMI is most marked in four key relational areas including:
- parent – child/family
- home-school
- local coordinator – parent and
- parent – parent/community

While the amount of contact children and parents had with co-ordinators, teachers and schools varied according to individual programmes, these four relationships were universally reported as being either considerably enhanced and/or highly satisfying.

Parent – Child/Family Relationships

Respondents throughout the three regions commented on the positive benefits of parents spending time with their child/ren. Parents, teachers and co-ordinators all commented on the positive changes for parents arising from their involvement in their children's school lives, helping children to set goals, with homework and so forth (Clinton et.al, 2004, p.24).

The following comments exemplify the perceived benefits of the PMI in building parent – child relationships:

> [My] *son looks forward to the time we spend together*
>
> *Mum spends special time with child away from others*
>
> [I] *never used to do anything with my child and now I do*
>
> *X works with sister – sister is like a mentor*
>
> *Older children work with younger ones* [at home] *so it helps the whole family*
>
> *The impact on children who feel proud of their parents is obvious*

The resource packs, addressed to individual preschool children, were particularly helpful in this regard. Parents reported that the packs made preschoolers feel 'special' and helped them to

identify with the homework routines of older siblings. As indicated previously, the playgroup-type initiatives also provided parents with a wider range of interactive and educational skills to use with their own and others' children.

Home – School Relationships

Schools across the PMI have fostered relationships with parents, initially through the provision of skills and knowledge which have subsequently facilitated enhanced parent confidence, particularly in educational matters. The development of home – school relationships is being achieved via a variety of mechanisms including:

- Parent involvement in preschool/kohanga reo (often situated on school grounds) and/or classrooms. Teachers commented:

    > *PMI is a starting point to some parents recognising that they are the*
    > *key players in decisions affecting their child's learning*

    > *Staff have a better understanding of the homes, and parents have*
    > *understanding of teachers…*[it has] *broken down the walls*

- Parent involvement in workshop sessions with co-ordinators, in how to use learning materials at home supports parents to feel more comfortable with attending school functions and with approaching school staff to discuss any issues that may arise in their child's education.
- Parent support groups/family days
- Parent - teacher face to face discussions versus report cards, about children's learning, facilitated by the co-ordinator. One teacher commented:

    > [PMI has] *changed teacher's learning also.* [I] *stopped parent*
    > *interviews where teachers just say what the child should be*
    > *doing…now* [I] *tell parents how to help their child get from here to*
    > *there and I give resources to help achieve this.*

- An open-door policy where parents can come and observe lessons. Perry (2004) commented in regard to this:

    > *When a child sees his teacher valued by his parents, and he sees his*
    > *parents valued by his teacher, he has all the more reason to see*
    > *schooling as an integral, relevant and valued part of his world and*
    > *his day.* (Gender bias in original)

Clinton et.al's report (2004) notes that over a three year period, 97% of parents in the cluster schools agreed that their school was doing a good job in building home-school partnerships. Ninety eight per cent of parents considered school to be a very important aspect of the child's future, and two thirds of parents expected their children to attain diplomas or degrees. Clearly

then, the PMI has fostered a number of effective mechanisms for supporting bi-directional relationships between home and school.

Co-ordinator – Parent Relationships

The data suggest that the local co-ordinator is a key agent in enabling school communities to build positive home–school relationships, thereby making the educative journey successful. The co-ordinator role appears to have been somewhat diffuse across regions, and the potential of the co-ordinator in supporting parents to support their children's learning, was not fully realised in all contexts.   Common roles however, have involved a focus on children's learning, and support of that learning through building expertise/capacity in the community. Concomitant with this has been the fostering of self determination, and commitment amongst parents to their children's education.

Some regional co-ordinators visited homes, or accompanied parents on their early visits to schools. This was particularly helpful for parents of cultures other than
European/Pakeha, and helped break down barriers within the safety of a supportive relationship. One co-ordinator commented in regard to this role *"You can walk through the school, and children know that she knows my mum and dad, and she knows my nanny, she's been to my house."*

In other areas, co-ordinators operated from within the school as a part of the staff. In these contexts, the co-ordinators acted as a liaison between the home and the school, helping each to understand the culture and the expectations of the other. Some co-ordinators were involved in parent meetings and/or in helping individual students, all which built relationships between the co-ordinator and parent. Clinton et.al, (2004) note that where the Home School Liaison Person (HSLP) is a trained professional – in most cases, an experienced teacher – this *"has allowed the language of schooling to be heard and learnt in the home"* (p.5). This appeared to become increasingly important as the Flaxmere project progressed, and the importance of HSLPs in the project was recognised. Clinton et al, (2004, p.8) comment:

> *Computers were more the medium to gain access to the parents...HSLPs developed a high level of trust ...gained the respect of the families...Computers in people's homes were powerful change agents, but powerful in allowing access to "school expertise" into the homes. At the same time, ancillary benefits for families – computing, confidence, jobs, focus for meeting other parents, focus to family discussions*   [was recognised].

Consistency of project personnel is a key aspect to the building of co-coordinator-parent relationships. Principals commented that *"project staff had engagement and ability to interact with parents/whanau on a professional and personal level"* (p.35).   Furthermore, the competence of the co-ordinator appeared to be a strong determinant of successful relationship building in the co-ordinator – parent context.

It is apparent then, that the selection of appropriate co-ordinators who can establish healthy, supportive relationships between parents and schools has been critical to the success of this

initiative. Feedback from some parent focus groups, indicate that an inappropriate choice of co-ordinator has the potential to negatively impact upon the overall efficacy of such an initiative.

Parent – Parent/Community Relationships

Principals and co-ordinators acknowledged that parents benefit from frequent and focussed contact with other parents, sharing experiences and childcare strategies. This has led to greater involvement, and more interaction of parents with their own, and other parents' children. Several parents commented that they enjoy getting together with others in the project, and that the resource packs gave them a common topic of conversation as exemplified in these parents' comments:

> *With us parents getting along, it's hard to miss a day* [at school] *and miss out on the chat. It is good to share together and it's good for the kids.*

> [PMI has] *created increased networks amongst families...some families are isolated and it is brave for them to even come into school.*

Some parent mentoring groups have deliberately engineered opportunities such as sports days for community interaction, with the focus on networking. A co-ordinator commented *"We were like little pockets that didn't know each other, and now we have networks of different groups that meet once a month."*

Across all participating school clusters, parents reported parent to parent, and parent to wider community relationships as being considerably enhanced and highly satisfying from engagement in the initiative. This is encapsulated by a teacher who said *"The project is much bigger than individual schools or teachers – it is about a whole community."*

What is evident in these comments is that schools can be daunting places for parents, particularly for those with no previous children at the school. The project's success has largely occurred because the choice of initiatives and support of co-ordinators, have encouraged both social and educational activities for parents in the schools. This aspect has helped parents to feel more comfortable, to extend their knowledge and networks, and to want to come to the school.

E.   Evidence of Success

Analyses of the data indicate that evidence of success of the PMI was conceptualised in three key ways by respondents. While all three are grounded in educative processes, a deeper level of analysis suggests that:

- the provision of learning opportunities and associated student achievement
- relationship building, and
- parent empowerment through the realisation of aspirations, resulting from engagement in a range of professional development initiatives,

facilitate optimum outcomes. Each of the three regions involved in the project, reported outcomes that matched these conceptual categories.

Provision of Learning Opportunities/Student Achievement

Respondents reported enhanced learner capability was one measure of success of the programme. In particular, parents, principals and co-ordinators reported that new entrant children transitioning from the on-site playgroups are more knowledgeable in elemental aspects of numeracy and literacy, evidencing skills in numbers, alphabet, colours, book formats and so forth. This is highlighted in comments such as *"our children know how to write their names before they go to school, they can count numbers…by the time they go to school they know how to do their abc, their names and their last names."*

One local co-ordinator reported that the standard six week assessment administered to 5 year old children, had been re-written to include more advanced knowledge and skill items, because the children entering school from the on-site playgroup could competently complete the standard 5 year old test items prior to school entry. Principals too spoke of the increased school-entry abilities evidenced by 5 year olds who had attended on-site playgroups.

Psychomotor skills were also frequently commented on – the ability to 'colour inside the lines' and use scissors. Further, respondents reported that children are socially and emotionally confident, motivated and positive in their attitude, and are evidencing smooth transitioning into school life, as a result of their enhanced learning.

This finding correlates with the "upward spiral of learning" (p.16) identified in the Phillips, et al, (2002) study. The Picking up the Pace report suggests that

> *Children who can engage competently with instructional activities they meet at school are able to get into a pattern of exponential growth in their learning and development. Children with more expertise enter into dynamic relationships with teachers. If they know more, or have more expertise in an area on which instruction is focused, they can get more out of it. The learning spirals up ('the rich get richer'). If this doesn't happen, the learning can spiral down ('the poor get poorer')* (p.16).

Similarly Clinton et. al, (2004), report that teachers saw changes in behaviour, retention, and confidence, and an enjoyment of learning in students involved in the PMI. *"All teachers emphasised the most important outcome as, the children in the project now wanting to come to school"* (p 30). Further, the Clinton et. al (2004) study concluded that *"computers in homes are the most visible innovation…also the most liked and the most effective"* (p.16). Computers were perceived to be a means to an end; that is, they facilitated trust with HSLPs, changed attitudes, and facilitated the development of self-esteem, and confidence. *"The computers were seen as a means of reducing inequalities and increasing opportunities"* (p. 18).

The Ministry is currently analysing school achievement data, in particular observation survey results (Brown, 2005; Cotching, 2005; & Hahn, 2005). While the analyses of student achievement data are still incomplete, the anecdotal evidence offered by parents, teachers and co-ordinators suggest that overall, the PMI has impacted positively on student achievement. Some principals expressed concern however, about the lack of clarity in the early stages of the project, and some at later stages of programme implementation, about what would be "counted as success". They suggested that had clear performance indicators of student success been documented by the Ministry at the outset of the project, they would have collected more specific formative and summative data to evidence shifts in student achievement.

Positive Indicators of Student Achievement

Nationwide, schools use a range of assessment tools for a wide variety of purposes. The Observation Survey was selected as the most suitable assessment tool for gaining insights into how the PMI is impacting upon student achievement, because most schools collect student data using the observation survey. It could therefore, reasonably be expected that participating schools would have this data available. Grounded in Clay's (2002) work, the observation survey encompasses a set of five systematic observation tasks involving: letter identification, print concepts, word reading, writing vocabulary, and hearing and recording sounds. Running records and the Burt Word Reading Test are also included as part of the overall assessment tool. These tasks "have the quality of sound assessment instruments with reliability and validity, and discrimination indices established in research" (Clay, 2002, p.3).

The observation survey data indicate that students with experience of the PMI, consistently recorded achievement above those who had not been involved in any early childhood education activity. Students whose early childhood education included involvement either in the PMI or other formal preschool experiences, joined the group of students achieving at, or above national norms and expectations in letter identification, word recognition, hearing and recording sounds, running records and the Burt test. The primary data make several references to this positive aspect of the PMI. Parents commented on what the PMI has offered their child/ren in addressing oracy, literacy and numeracy gaps: "*My child knows how to use scissors, pencils and even a mirror.*"

Similarly one local co-ordinator confirmed that "*the most advantaged group* [of children] *is showing up as those who attended our on-site playgroup.*"

Clinton et al's (2004) report supports this trend, noting that "*For some principals* [the] *new entrant programme was the most successful of all, particularly for the parent whose first child was starting school. The early communication in the home is bound to bring more far-reaching impacts as the children and their parents progress through the years of schooling.*" (p.21).

While observation survey targets were not achieved in the Flaxmere school Clinton et al (2004) refer to, and there was some drop off in 2004 from 2003, the results were still well above those for the period 1998-2002. Similarly, in Counties Manukau Hahn reports "*there are far fewer children in the very low category than was the case for many years previously*" (2005, p.17).

In comparison, those students who experienced no early childhood education recorded the lowest scores over all five observation survey tasks, reaching or exceeding the national norm only in the letter identification task. In concepts about print, writing vocabulary and the Burt Word Reading test, this group of students scored below the national norm. In one school, school entry assessment scores in oracy, literacy and numeracy were well below the national average for decile 1 schools, and even lower when compared to all schools. Consistently, the poorest scoring children were those with no preschool experience.

One cluster of schools in the PMI was the first in New Zealand to use asTTle tools for assessing achievement in years 4 - 8. When compared over time, those who participated in at least one PM programme had higher growth rates of learning in reading, than those who did not participate in any programme over a three year period. This was not the case however, in mathematics (Clinton et. al, 2004). In seeking a rationale for this, the primary and secondary data both suggest that parents were more confident working with their children in literacy, rather than numeracy activities. Nonetheless, improvements in *attitudes* to reading and mathematics were much greater (at least twice as much) for those involved in a PMI programme, compared with those not in such a programme. The effects of being in a programme were therefore considerable, in terms of students' liking of, and confidence in, reading and mathematics (Clinton et. al, 2004).

The data indicate a number of initial positive outcomes in terms of student achievement. It is acknowledged however, that widespread, sustainable change takes time. Clinton et.al, (2004) noted that in the initial stages of the project, teachers were not convinced about the efficacy of the PMI or its facilitation of student achievement. Later in the project though, teachers were beginning to see the programme effects on children both in and out of the classroom, and how as teachers, they personally could benefit from an increased understanding of what happens in the home.

It appears that 'proving' long-term positive effects of the PMI in terms of student achievement, is not an easy task. This is partly because the parameters of what would indicate success were not clearly defined at the outset of the project, and hence possibly-relevant indicators have not been formally gathered. What can be stated with confidence, is that attitudes to education have been considerably enhanced across the clusters. Furthermore, initial analysis of literacy data gathered via observation surveys, and anecdotal evidence gained through the primary data collection, suggests that student achievement has been improved, particularly in the years immediately following involvement in PMI related programmes.

Relationship Building

The data testify to the strengthening of relationships amongst stakeholders, including principals, teachers, co-ordinators, parents and students, and within individual school learning communities across all regions. There is evidence of the development of a shared understanding around learning and teaching, and consequently, a strengthening of relationships amongst principals, teachers, co-ordinators, parents and students, as a result of the PMI. This is demonstrated in

comments such as: *"staff understand homes, parents understand teachers...they have broken down the wall"* and *"I never used to go to school before the programme."*

The following vignette provides a particularly pertinent illustration of the power of relationship building. A morning tea was held in one school to welcome new parents and talk about literacy issues. On this occasion, the principal personally hosted and served the parents, and the co-ordinator commented that this single departure from traditional norms of social hierarchy, and the value and respect for parents demonstrated, brought about a huge change in perception, leaving a lasting impression upon the parents. This event was also noted in the school's programme summary: *"The feedback from the parents was awesome, they felt privileged to have a principal take time out from her busy schedule and sit, serve and talk with them"* (Cluster Report).

The provision of a range of learning opportunities for both parents and children afforded through the programme, has resulted in a demonstrable growth in the number of parents participating in school activities. There appears to be a correlation between enhanced parent confidence fostered through relationship building, and their engagement in school related learning activities.

Parent/Caregiver Empowerment

The data suggest that there is enhanced empowerment, solidarity and integration into the school learning community, of parents involved in the initiative. Schools are working with parents to co-construct a learning community in which principals, teachers, students and parents can share common understandings, and validate
different kinds of experiences, skills and knowledge. As this occurs, relationships are being strengthened and in particular, parents are experiencing the realisation of their aspirations and an empowerment previously unknown.

Some parents involved in the PMI are becoming active members of their school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and some are establishing their own whanau support groups. Others are learning to read, write, or operate computers. Comments such as those following highlight the benefits of the PMI in terms of the realisation of parent aspirations, and the ability of some to use the language of educational practice to discuss their concerns with teachers:

> *I used to be so shy because I knew the teacher was higher than me but now I know it's closer*

> *The package taught me what I could say to a teacher when you pick up on something the child is doing*

> *I didn't realise I wasn't dumb until I came to your course*

Respondents reported further benefits from the initiative including involvement in professional development opportunities such as teacher aide training, computer training, driver licence

preparation, and BoT involvement. These benefits are summarised in respondents' comments such as:

> *Without her* [local coordinator] *lots of parents wouldn't have done so much…English lessons, driving lessons, coffee mornings planning resources, events, trips.*

> *Dad can't read and write properly, and doing this programme is helping dad too – so much so that he has joined the BoT.*

The positioning of parents as partners in the home-school initiative has necessitated a mind-shift, as many parents in the focus groups alluded to their own negative experiences at school. School was a place many parents did not enjoy, knew very little about, and therefore did not want to visit. *"School was a diminishing place, one in which they felt unsuccessful and belittled"* (Perry, 2004, p.2).

However, as parents realise the skills needed for achieving outcomes, there are positive benefits for parents and children. Parents now express pride in their children's learning and as children see their parents succeed, they evidence pride in their parent's achievements.

Clinton et. al's (2004) findings identify five changes in parental behaviours, attitudes and/or knowledge, as a result of learning with their children. Analysis of the primary data in this evaluation support these findings:

1. Satisfaction that their children are more engaged in schoolwork and enjoying school
2. Parents supporting their children with schoolwork, especially reading, more than in past
3. Parents increasing their own education through new skill acquisition
4. Parents gaining a fuller understanding of what schools do, and thereby having increased expectations of their children's achievement
5. An enhanced awareness of the language of schooling

F.   Barriers to Success

The data reveal that identified barriers to the success of the PMI can be crudely categorised into three key areas including staffing, resourcing and social/relational issues. Some of these barriers were context specific while others were more general across the regions.

Staffing

Principals commented on two aspects of staffing that impacted negatively on programme effectiveness. First, in some areas, a shortage of co-ordinators was perceived as a potential obstacle to programme sustainability. Second, in Flaxmere, some principals reported a degree of teacher dissatisfaction around the hours associated with inputting data into databases. Two

schools however, noted that having worked through the associated issues, the databases are now being used for assessment and reporting purposes, and hence, the initial barrier has in fact become a benefit.

Across all school clusters, respondents appreciated the work done by co-ordinators. Aspects of the co-ordinator role though, were seen as a barrier by some participants in the project. The fluid role of the co-ordinator for example, was perceived by some as a hindrance to programme effectiveness. The apparent lack of clarity around the co-ordinator role and resultant failure of some co-ordinators to meet parent and/or teacher expectations, or conversely, their fatigue from work overload were problematic. Similarly, the changing role of the co-ordinator created confusion for some participants who were unsure if co-ordinators worked with children, teachers or parents. A clear definition of the co-ordinator's role, in simple language that could be easily understood by all parties, may have averted this situation.

High co-ordinator attrition rates appeared to negatively impact on project stability in a limited number of cases. Where this occurred, respondents reported a negative impact on relationships for some parents, students and staff who did not experience stable, trust based relationships. This resulted in a lack of purposeful programme implementation and a deficiency in project coherence, ownership and follow-up on student data. Selection of the 'right' co-ordinator, who could relate effectively with parents, was seen as critical for the success of the initiative.

Clarification of roles, tasks and relationships around staffing issues would be useful in any further initiatives. For example, identifying the key qualities of a successful and effective co-ordinator, and ensuring that future appointees demonstrate these qualities would support project success and efficacy.

Resourcing

The issue of insufficient numbers of co-ordinators was perceived by some to be a barrier to programme success. Across the clusters, work loads were at times demanding, and financial resourcing challenging.

Time allocation resourcing was identified as both a barrier and a benefit to programme effectiveness. For example, in one region the time required to train staff for inputting data into data bases was seen from both a positive and negative perspective. This was seen as impractical accountability by one respondent who commented "[The] *emphasis has changed to working on the data, the data collection, record keeping, form-filling to justify things for the research people and Ministry accountability and this makes the whole thing impractical"* (Principal) (Clinton et.al, 2004, p. 34). Similarly in another cluster, a number of parents commented on the number of hours co-ordinators spent 'working beyond the call of duty'.

Social/Relational

Family transience and the associated lack of continuity in their children's education, was noted as a barrier to programme success by some respondents. Insufficient time to fully engage in the goals of the various initiatives, has the potential to impact upon the longer term strategic goals of enhanced student achievement outcomes.

Teachers operating from a power-base that positions parents in a hierarchically different position to themselves, have the potential to impact negatively upon the goals of the project. This was evident in teacher comments such as "*I tell parents…*" rather than negotiating or discussing issues with them. This type of situation reinforces the comments of some parents, that school had been a negative environment for them. A key learning from this data lies in the importance of teachers recognising the impact of their words and attitudes on parents, and the 'fear factor' that many parents encounter around schooling.

Effective liaison co-ordinators were without doubt, the key to effective implementation of PMIs across the cluster schools. Their ability to welcome parents and involve them in on-site activities was influential in changing negative parent attitudes around schooling, to positive, supportive participation in educational initiatives.

SUMMARY

These analyses of the primary data collected from schools in the Far North, Flaxmere and Counties Manukau via focus group sessions with parents and co-ordinators, and interviews or postal questionnaires with principals, teachers and/or co-ordinators, and supplemented by a range of secondary data sources, reveal that the PMI has expedited multi –faceted outcomes for schools, parents and students. Time and other constraints around the data collection for this evaluation, impacted upon the number of respondents involved. In spite of the small number of respondents participating in the primary data collection, the findings are useful when triangulated with previously gathered data from two of the three regions.

Respondents in this evaluation evidenced considerable enthusiasm for the PMI, synchronous with reported enhanced social, attitudinal, and/or academic achievement outcomes for both students and parents across all regions.

Three basic models of implementation unique to each geographical region are identifiable, and the support provided to parents, while generic in some respects, has also been largely region and/or context specific. Each model has been effective in its particular context. While undoubtedly, elements of each model could be replicated in other contexts, this evaluation suggests that each approach to the PMI has contributed to increased parent participation in school activities and other educational opportunities, as well as to enhanced student achievement outcomes. What is most important is a collaborative approach to strengthening relationships between home and school, irrespective of the particular mechanisms that are adopted to achieve

this goal. Clearly, a 'one size fits all' approach is neither desirable nor optimal, in terms of realising the intentions of the PMI.

A number of benefits to teachers and schools are identifiable in the data, ranging from personal/micro-level to more professional/macro level benefits. The impact of the PMI has been most marked upon parent – child; home - school; co-ordinator – parent; and parent - parent/community relationships. Evidence of success of the programme while anecdotal in some areas at this stage, can be conceptualised into three key categories including provision of learning opportunities, relationship building and parent empowerment.

Three key barriers to programme effectiveness are identifiable in the data including staffing, resourcing and social/relational issues. Whether the PMIs across the regions have been going long enough to see sustainable gains in student academic performance is something further statistics and analysis will tell. Future research could well focus upon a detailed analysis of student achievement data from this project and make comparisons with pre-PMI results in participating cluster schools, and with contemporary parallel data from same decile schools not involved in PMI interventions. Meantime, student behavioural and attitudinal gains suggest there is genuine value being added.

Parents across the cluster schools reported positive outcomes from participation in the PMI for themselves, their child/ren and family. *"Parents reported that the children were more outgoing at home, were taking more responsibility for their learning, and were more willing to do their homework. Most of all they seemed to have fewer absences, enjoyed school, and were more likely to stay in school"* (Clinton et. al, 2004, p. 22).

In summary, the PMI has clearly made progress towards meeting its two key purposes: First, strengthening relationships through a bi-directional partnership between parents and teachers, parents and children, and families/communities and schools, in order to support the educational achievement of learners; and second, developing mutual responsibility and accountability around these partnerships. The continuing challenge for school communities is how to sustain and increase the new knowledge bases and practices that are building community capacity, in order to effectively continue facilitating enhanced student achievement outcomes.

This evaluation combined with those already conducted, presents indicative data that the PMI has enhanced home-school relationships. Anecdotal reports suggest that the initiative has supported enhanced social and academic outcomes for students and families. Ministry analyses of relevant student data, although not yet fully analysed, suggests support of the anecdotal reports. If sustainability is to be realised, it will be necessary for school communities to embed within their mission and practice, principles and mechanisms that support an ongoing cycle of continuous improvement through PMIs.

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