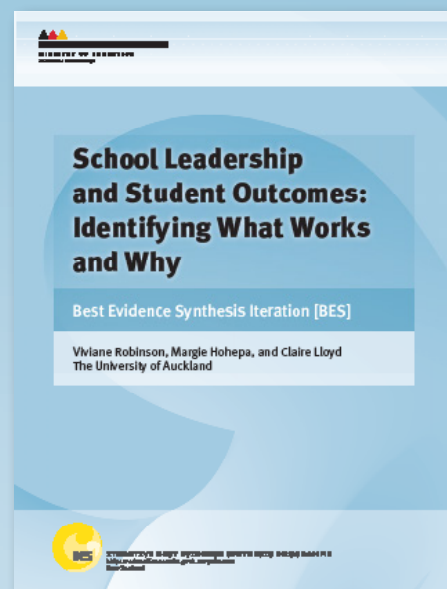


Develop educationally powerful connections based on relational trust

This is one of a series of cases that illustrate the findings of the best evidence syntheses (BESs). Each is designed to support the professional learning of educators, leaders and policy makers.



BES cases: Insight into what works

The best evidence syntheses (BESs) bring together research evidence about ‘what works’ for diverse (all) learners in education. Recent BESs each include a number of cases that describe actual examples of professional practice and then analyse the findings. These cases support educators to grasp the big ideas behind effective practice at the same time as they provide vivid insight into their application.

Building as they do on the work of researchers and educators, the cases are trustworthy resources for professional learning.

Using the BES cases

The BES cases overview provides a brief introduction to each of the cases. It is designed to help you quickly decide which case or cases could be helpful in terms of your particular improvement priorities.

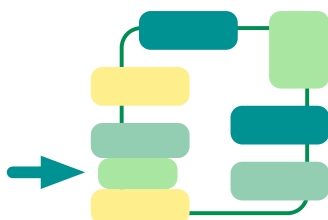
Use the cases with colleagues as catalysts for reflecting on your own professional practice and as starting points for delving into other sources of information, including related sections of the BESs. To request copies of the source studies, use the Research Behind the BES link on the BES website.

The conditions for effective professional learning are described in the Teacher Professional Learning and development BES and condensed into the ten principles found in the associated International Academy of Education summary (Timperley, 2008).

Note that, for the purpose of this series, the cases have been re-titled to more accurately signal their potential usefulness.

Responsiveness to diverse (all) learners

Use the BES cases and the appropriate curriculum documents to design a response that will improve student outcomes



The different BESs consistently find that any educational improvement initiative needs to be responsive to the diverse learners in the specific context. Use the inquiry and knowledge-building cycle tool to design a collaborative approach to improvement that is genuinely responsive to your learners

Develop educationally powerful connections based on relational trust

This case illustrates how a principal built trust in her senior management team and with the school’s parent community during the successful implementation of a high-impact literacy intervention.

This intervention could not have succeeded without a sense of shared responsibility built on a foundation of relational trust. Relational trust is based on four qualities: personal integrity that sees values reflected in actions; respect for the time and expertise of staff and parents; demonstrable competence in the leadership role; and a sense of personal regard for parents, teachers, and students.

See also the background study, [Reading Together at St Joseph’s School, Otahuhu.](#)

A senior management team creates educational connections between school and home

Introduction

This case explores how one school developed educational connections with its families in a way that had a payoff in terms of impact on student outcomes. We use the word ‘educational’ very deliberately here because parent/whānau involvement is often viewed by schools (and parents) as little more than an adjunct to the real work of schools. The case will demonstrate that parents can contribute to the real work in ways that benefit students, teachers, and themselves. These benefits accrue to a school that makes direct, focused efforts to work with families to raise student achievement.

The case involves the implementation by a senior management team (SMT) of a parent tutoring programme known as Reading Together. Through this programme, schools work with parents to help them develop tutoring skills that have been demonstrated to improve reading comprehension and foster positive parent–child–teacher relationships. The SMT became interested in the programme because it was research-based, the evidence indicated substantially improved outcomes for students, and its demands on resources seemed reasonable in light of the potential gains.

Research context

The case is informed by recent research into the implementation of the Reading Together programme at St Joseph’s School, Otahuhu. Reading Together was designed by Jeanne Biddulph in 1983 to help parents tutor children who were experiencing reading difficulties. When first introduced, it produced significant improvement in children’s reading, together with improvements in parent–child and parent–teacher relationships. Similar outcomes have been observed over the last two decades in a range of contexts⁵¹⁹. Tuck (the source for this case) extended this research base by focusing specifically on leadership and administrative processes associated with implementation.

Data for this research were collected from a variety of sources, including:

- interviews with key people involved in the programme (the senior management team, teaching staff, and programme developer);
- observations of two workshops;
- a review of relevant documents (in particular, children’s running records).

St Joseph’s is a state-integrated, Catholic primary school with a roll of 318. Nearly 90% of students identify as Sāmoan, Tongan, Cook Islands, or Niuean. Although a decile 1 school, its attendance rates are consistently higher than for other low-decile schools. There is little evidence of truanting (ERO review, 2004). The school has a very stable and experienced senior management team comprising the principal, deputy principal, and associate principal.

Leadership dimension 6

Creating educationally powerful connections through the development of relational trust

In Chapter 7, we discussed the type of leadership involved in creating educationally effective school–home connections. We found that, to create learning connections that will be sustainable and have a significant impact on student achievement, school leaders need to foster a shared sense of responsibility amongst their staff. School–home partnership programmes that were designed, funded, and implemented by external personnel with little internal involvement struggled to gain teacher ownership. Lack of shared ownership increases the likelihood that there will be discontinuity between the school–home programme and learning taking place in the classroom.

In this case, we will see how the principal fostered shared ownership of the Reading Together programme by building relational trust with her staff. In Chapter 8, we described how trust relationships are particularly important in situations where people are being asked to take risks and make changes.

At St Joseph’s, the programme became part of the everyday life of the school. Those teachers who were not directly involved in the workshops were very supportive of the senior management team’s efforts to implement the programme. They could describe the general structure and content of the training; they expressed interest in the running of the workshops; and they were able to identify and discuss positive changes in the participating children and their families⁵²⁰.

⁵¹⁹ Biddulph, J., & Allott, J. (2006). Reading Together: A programme which enables parents to help their children with reading at home – Overview. *Reading Forum NZ*, 21(3), pp. 20–27.

⁵²⁰ The evidence indicated a range of positive outcomes associated with the programme. These included more positive interactions between parents and children, parental engagement with the school as participants in learning and teaching, greater parental confidence in exchanges with teachers about their children, and improvements in children’s attitudes towards reading. Statistical analysis also revealed significant gains in independent reading skills (measured over a two-year period, compared with a control group).

In this case, we see how relational trust enabled the staff to develop a shared commitment to the programme and to win the confidence and the commitment of the participating parents. As the research on which this case is based focused primarily on the principal, we illustrate how the principal exemplified the four qualities of relational trust identified in Chapter 8 and what the consequences were.

1. Personal integrity

Integrity is a measure of the extent to which the values and principles espoused by a leader are consistently seen in their daily practice.

Leader value: An informed community

The principal was deeply committed to developing an ‘informed community’ within her school. She believed that staff understanding of new teaching and learning initiatives created a knowledge base that informed professional discourse. Out of this informed discourse grew opportunities for professional development, mutual support, and shared responsibility for initiatives.

Consistency with actions: The principal created opportunities to foster staff understanding

It was of crucial importance to the principal that she and the leaders of Reading Together had a ‘deep understanding’ of the programme.

She showed her commitment to developing an informed community by inviting the programme developer to discuss Reading Together with herself and the SMT. The principal considered this meeting an important opportunity for the team to gain a better understanding of the programme, its demands, and its underlying rationale. It ensured that members of the team could discuss the programme with each other and the staff.

The principal placed a high priority on ensuring that school staff who were not directly involved in the programme were familiar with its design and rationale.

All teachers at the school were involved, at least indirectly, in Reading Together—through their contacts with the participating students, their families, and school leaders. To ensure their understanding of the programme, the principal invited the developer to talk to them about its aims, procedures, and research base. In subsequent staff meetings, the leadership team let teachers know who would lead the workshops, how children and families would be selected, and which children would be involved. Teachers were also invited to attend the workshops.

Modelling the qualities of leadership

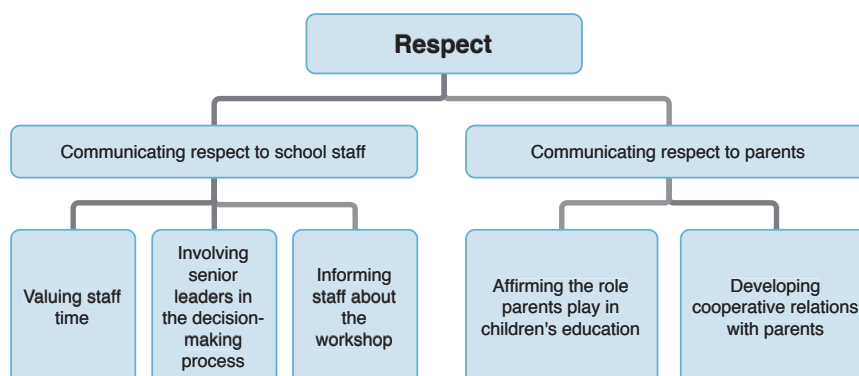
The principal’s efforts to develop staff understanding created opportunities for informal, unplanned conversations between the team leaders and teachers. She recalled “lots of conversations on the run or on the hop ... and not just [with the senior management team] ... there are always key people on your staff who are really interested in such initiatives.” These informal conversations were often initiated by the leadership team. Teachers who attended the workshops also served as key conduits of information and, with the leadership team, constituted an important information network.

In summary, the leader’s integrity was seen in the match between her commitment to an informed community and the steps she took to ensure that it happened. These steps had three important outcomes:

- Even those who were not directly involved in the programme were made to feel included, were kept fully aware of its design and rationale, and were able to discuss positive changes in students and families. Commitment to the programme was fostered by the resulting professional discussions.
- The meetings with the programme developer were important professional development opportunities. For senior leaders, they were the beginning of professional learning that was to continue for the duration of the programme.
- The sense of mutual, collective support was enhanced as staff took opportunities to recognise and affirm the contribution of the workshop leaders.

2. Respect

Respect grows out of the realisation that many different people have important, mutually dependent roles to play in educating our young people. It involves valuing those roles and fostering the regard that is critical for relationship-building and shared commitment to goals.



Communicating respect to staff

Valuing staff time

The principal showed respect to her senior management team by evaluating the programme's appropriateness for her school and community before introducing it to them. She wanted to see whether it aligned with her beliefs about constructive school-home relationships and whether it would complement the school's existing language programme. She also wanted to investigate its practicality in terms of the financial and human resources required. In this way she avoided the risk of wasting staff time by asking them to consider a programme that was neither appropriate nor feasible. Her senior staff recognised, and indeed expected, this respect:

Liz wouldn't waste our time ... that is the trust we have ... we know she would have researched things.

She would have thought about it ... seen the value.

Involving senior leaders in the decision-making process

Before committing the school to the programme, the principal discussed it with her senior management team. She considered these two teachers potential workshop leaders and was only willing to proceed if they saw the programme as a worthwhile use of limited resources. By fully discussing the Reading Together decision with them and seeking their professional judgment, she conveyed her respect for them:

You respect (their judgment). If they had come back to me and said this is far too difficult or is not actually going to work—I would have certainly taken that on board.

Informing staff about the workshops

Although classroom teachers were not directly involved in Reading Together, they were kept fully informed about the structure and content of the programme. In this way, their role in educating their students and maintaining relationships with parents was recognised and respected:

There is a sort of a culture of community based ownership of children's progress. We don't see a teacher in a classroom as being responsible, just solely responsible for that child's progress. It is a much broader issue than that and there is a lot of consultation around all kinds of issues to progress and facilitate children's learning ... I think there is a real sincere desire among the staff to make a difference and to kind of progress and ... we look at ways that how we are best going to achieve that, probably.

This effort to inform them and seek their views had three important outcomes for staff:

- It enabled the senior management team to take ownership of the programme.
- It enhanced the status of the programme in the school and, as a result, won teacher interest and commitment. As the principal noted:

It [Cathy and Marian's involvement] and our commitment gave the programme real status both with staff and parents.

- Teachers engaged in professional discussions with each other and with workshop leaders about programme processes and outcomes.

Communicating respect to parents

Affirming the role parents play in children's education

To encourage parental involvement in the workshops and ensure the status of the programme, the principal personally contacted every potential family and invited them to participate:

I tried to make it as personal as possible ... I talked to them about the programme ... [made them aware] that I was asking them because I knew they were interested in their children.

To further recognise and affirm the parents' role, at the conclusion of the programme they were presented with graduating certificates and pictures of themselves reading with their child. Photos were also displayed in the entrance foyer for the children to see.

Developing cooperative relationships with parents

The senior management team took a number of deliberate steps to develop cooperative relationships with parents:

- They held the workshops in the staffroom (rather than a classroom) because it was a more comfortable, informal environment.
- They welcomed parents by their first names and engaged with them in conversations over tea and biscuits.
- They began the workshops with a prayer, partly in Sāmoan.
- They made themselves available, both before and after the workshops, for informal discussion.
- They ran additional sessions for parents who were unable to attend on a particular night.
- The principal visited each workshop and talked informally with parents.

This emphasis on affirming the parents' role and developing cooperative relationships had at least two important outcomes:

- The cooperative parent–teacher relationships that were established carried over into different contexts:
We do have parents now who will come in and very shy parents who wouldn't ever come into the classroom ...
- Workshop leaders gained insight into Sāmoan protocols and how Sāmoan parents interact with their children:
It gave us incredible insight into what was going on in the homes in terms of [discipline] ... As one father said, we only know the PI way ... That was discussed in every workshop.

The principal, teachers, and parents all played roles, whether directly or indirectly, in the Reading Together workshops. The SMT respected the contribution that each person was making to the education of the children. Out of all these interactions came a pedagogical partnership to improve student outcomes.

3. Competence

Competence is another criterion for relational trust. When people rely on others for the education of children, they care about their competence. They judge the competence of leaders and teachers by the value they add.

The principal demonstrated her competence by the way in which she rigorously investigated the appropriateness of the Reading Together workshops for her school (via emails, phone conversations, and meetings with the programme developer and by seeking the advice of her leadership team). She also demonstrated her competence by her active involvement in the workshops, in the administrative support she provided for her senior leaders (by, for example, making the initial contact with parents, sending out follow-up letters, and collating feedback), and in her informal interactions with parents during the workshops. Her goal was to ensure the success of the programme for all involved: families, children, and workshop leaders:

If you are asking teachers on your staff to do something, you want to set it up so that it goes well ... If you are going to put in time and energy and you are asking others to put in time and energy then you want to set it up for success ... so it is not disappointing for them.

By asking her senior staff to commit to the programme and by demonstrating confidence in their ability to lead the workshops, the principal communicated to them her expectation that they would prove competent: "... trust [on Liz's part] and ... [the] trust we give to her" creates a "... sense of empowerment!" "Liz knew we would be able to do it." They also understood that she was committed to developing their skills so that they could lead the programme as effectively as possible. They engaged in considerable planning and preparation before they felt confident of successful outcomes.

Reading the material ... we still met every night before ... and there was a good weekend's commitment ... We were really confident of the outcomes ... we thought it would be successful ... the benefits ... looked great for parents.

The principal trusted the skills, knowledge, and professionalism of the leaders but, by involving herself in the workshops, she was able to gain a “feel for how it was going” and judge if the programme was adding value for students. She was also able to confirm the competence of her people: “They were very skilled ... and very quick to pick up on [parents’ concerns] ... made parents feel at ease ...”

The obvious competence of the SMT was an important factor in the creation of an informed community that collectively accepted responsibility for student success. As one teacher observed:

*Liz is very competent, very confident, very clear with what she wants to achieve and I think she has very high standards and you feel, **well I feel that I need to meet those standards ...***

The drive and the leadership comes from Liz at that level. From there I think there are a whole range of ... there are some very competent, able professional staff here who then facilitate at a number of levels ... Yeah I think so, and I think, I really do think we have a very strong layer of leadership for them to grow they need to be really well supported and that does happen. Liz is a true mentor and I have always said that for people in leadership there needs to be the leader, but there [also needs to be the people] at the next level.

4. Personal regard

Personal regard is the fourth determinant of relational trust. It involves caring about others—as people and as professionals. Knowing that others care can reduce vulnerability, increase social affiliation, and invite reciprocal regard.

One of the ways in which this principal communicated personal regard was by actively involving herself in the workshops. This influenced relational trust on two levels.

First, one of the reasons for her involvement was a concern for her senior leaders. She realised that they already had very busy schedules and would be challenged to find the time to fit in a major new responsibility. To ease the extra load, she undertook a share of the tasks involved. Still concerned about the demands on the leaders, she provided further collegial support by actively participating in the workshops. This continuing support signalled to the team that she cared about them.

She is here when we are running it ... and that is all support she is not like gone home and left us to it. She could have gone home, she did not have to stay here ...

Second, her involvement arose out of an ‘ethic of care’ that she shared with the SMT for the well-being of the children and families associated with their school. The programme developer particularly observed their sensitivity to and awareness of the needs of families. All their actions in relation to the programme were prompted by genuine concern.

These two strands of personal regard provided the foundation for staff commitment to the Reading Together programme. Further, the principal’s efforts to get her staff onboard can be viewed as the creation of ‘an informed community that cares about the well-being of students and their families’. Not only did the staff become familiar with the rationale for the programme and familiar with its structure, on numerous occasions they demonstrated their support for the team leaders and the participating children, particularly in informal conversations. They might do this by making general inquiries (“How did it go last night?”) or observations concerning programme outcomes, for example.

The underlying factors ... it does come from the top and it is that desire for all children to be able to succeed and really just wanting them to do well ... and wanting their parents to help to be better parents and we all want it, but it has to be driven from somewhere (teacher comment).

In this case, we have seen how trust is particularly important when creating educationally focused connections between teachers and families. When people trust one another, they feel supported and are willing to take risks, make greater effort, and learn from one another.

Key questions

1. What school–home connections are important in your school? To what extent is the focus of these connections on student learning? How can this focus be sharpened?
2. How does your own leadership exemplify the four qualities of relational trust? How could you work with others to better exemplify them?
3. In your school, how much trust is there between parents and teachers on educational matters? Utilising existing connections, what small steps could be taken to increase that trust?

Source

Tuck, B., Horgan, L., Franich, C., & Wards, M. (2007). *School leadership in a school-home partnership: Reading Together at St Joseph's School Otahuhu*. Wellington: Ministry of Education. www.educationcounts.govt.nz/goto/BES

Further reading

Kochanek, J. R. (2005). *Building trust for better schools: Research-based practices*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

McNaughton, S., Glynn, T., & Robinson, V. (1987). *Pause, prompt and praise: Effective remedial reading tutoring*. Birmingham: Positive Products.

Bryk, A. S., & Schneider, B. L. (2002). *Trust in schools: A core resource for improvement*. New York: Russell Sage.