Teachers are often encouraged to form partnerships with others to meet the needs of the children they teach. For example, an ideal teacher-parent relationship is frequently referred to as a partnership. The current international trend towards forming partnerships is not restricted to the relationship between home and school. Many government agencies are now forming partnerships with local community and iwi groups to deliver health, education and social services. Talk of "partnership" is now so common that one British author has described it as "the policy makers' obsession" (Rhodes, 1997). If we are to believe the rhetoric, partnerships between state bureaucracies, teachers, schools, universities, businesses, and communities will make a major contribution to solving current educational problems.

Despite the enthusiasm for partnerships, the research literature describes more failures than successes. Part of the problem is that "partnership" means very different things to different people. For some, partnerships are about the equal sharing of power; so for them, the success of a teacher-parent partnership is judged on whether the parents feel respected and empowered. For others who are not so interested in the power issues, partnership means involving other people in achieving particular outcomes. In their case, the success of the teacher-parent partnership is judged not on equality of power but on whether the outcome is achieved. Sometimes the term is used so loosely that it is not clear exactly what is meant.

None of these approaches to partnership addresses its multi-dimensional nature. In this article, we propose that partnerships are about relationships that include, but are not completely determined by, the way in which power is shared. These relationships evolve as the partnership develops, and to a large extent determine its success. However, partnerships are also formed to achieve particular tasks or outcomes, such as improving student success or solving difficult problems. We argue that effective partnerships integrate the relationship and task dimensions in ways that allow the partners to work together and to learn from one another about how to achieve their tasks. For example, if teachers and parents are to work in partnership, they need to identify a task such as raising a child's achievement, and establish a working relationship that co-ordinates the efforts of each partner.

In this article we show how it is possible to integrate these task and relationship dimensions.[1] We are not assuming that

PARTNERSHIPS:
Accomplishing important work together

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partnerships will solve all the problems faced by teachers and schools. We do propose, however, that effective partnerships increase opportunities for the partners to learn from each other, to provide mutual support, and to increase their commitment to a particular set of decisions. Partnerships give people the opportunity to achieve outcomes that are better than those that can be achieved by working alone. There are, however, costs to partnership that must be weighed against its benefits. Working in partnership with other people may increase surveillance of each other's work, reduce autonomy, and be time-consuming, as partners determine how to work together.

For teachers and other school personnel who want to work in partnership with others, we hope this article will provide a way of thinking about partnerships that will help to increase the benefits and decrease the costs.

The qualities of partnerships

Partnerships have both generic qualities that apply to all situations and specific qualities that depend on the context. In the generic sense, we propose that *individuals or groups are in partnership when they each accept some responsibility for solving a problem or achieving a task, and establish processes for accomplishing the task that promote learning and shared power over decisions related to the partnership.*

How the partners deal with each of the elements of this definition depends on the particular partnership context. Participants in any partnership must therefore negotiate the minefield of what the task might be, the responsibilities each might assume, and the processes they might use to work together.

Our theory of partnership was developed through close study, over a four-year period, of the Ministry of Education's initiative, "Strengthening Education in Mangere and Otara" (SEMO). In one phase of our research, we studied the development and success of a range of partnerships between teachers, parents, boards of trustees, early childhood educators and the Ministry of Education. In the following section, we explain how we used the idea of partnership to evaluate the way some of the SEMO schools were reporting to parents. We were able to show how the schools' reporting practices were counterproductive to the goal of building a strong partnership between parents and teachers.

The reporting study

In 1996 the Education Review Office expressed serious concerns about the quality of education in two South Auckland suburbs, Mangere and Otara. As a result, the Ministry of Education

introduced an initiative to strengthen the education offered in the two suburbs and to raise student achievement. Part of the initiative was designed to strengthen partnerships between the schools and their communities. We were contracted to undertake a process evaluation of the initiatives, and one of the contexts we studied was the schools' practices of reporting to parents on literacy achievement. We collected reports of high-, middle- and low-achieving students from ten primary schools and one middle school, interviewed the principals and teachers about the reasons they reported as they did, observed report evenings in two schools, and interviewed as many of the parents who attended as possible.

We found that only two schools reported children's literacy achievement in terms of reading ages or curriculum levels. Six others rated the children's reading achievement using a variety of descriptors, including "excellent", "achieved a high standard" and "above average" for the highest levels of achievement, and "needs improving", "limited achievement" and "below average" for the lowest levels. Two schools did not give any ratings but described what a child could read, and the remaining school reported on effort and not achievement. We found that the parents were confused about what the various descriptors meant, with most thinking that a rating of "excellent" meant their child was doing well in comparison with New Zealand children of a similar age. In reality, teachers in the different schools varied in the standards they used when giving these ratings. A high rating could mean that the child was doing well in relation to others in the class, or that the child was performing up to what the teacher believed was their potential.

A national survey of reports to parents (Peddie, 2000) found a similar pattern of reporting in most schools, so the processes we observed in our study were not restricted to that particular context.

The partnership task

One of the most important elements in a partnership is the task that both partners are trying to achieve. The task motivates the partnership and provides the basis for making decisions, such as the responsibilities of each partner and how decisions will be made. The task can form the basis of such decision-making, however, only if the partners have a shared understanding of its key aspects.

In the reporting context, it is sometimes difficult to work out what the task is. Is it to keep parents informed? Is it to reassure them about their child's learning? Or is it to work together to maximise the child's achievement? Since literacy achievement is at the heart of primary schooling, we suggest that a key task of reporting is to help parents and teachers work in partnership to raise literacy levels. A first step in building such a partnership is to let parents know how well their child is achieving in relation to their expectations.

In our study, most parents thought that their child was achieving much better than they really were, because few children were given ratings using the lowest descriptors of "needs improving", "limited achievement" or "below average". The teachers did not use these descriptors because they wanted to be positive and encouraging. Principals were also concerned that if the teachers in their school reported more honestly than those in neighbouring schools, the parents would move their children to those schools because their report grades would be higher.

In our reporting study, the teachers' desire to be positive was usually more powerful in determining what they wrote in the reports than their desire to be accurate about levels of achievement and to work with parents to improve them. So in these schools, reporting did not meet the first criterion of partnership, which is working together on a *shared* task.

Partnership responsibilities

In our definition of partnership, we suggest that each partner must accept some level of responsibility for the task to be accomplished. But as with other aspects of partnership, deciding on responsibilities is complicated. For a start, decisions related to particular tasks are not always within either partner's control, because complex educational tasks are usually nested within a set of other tasks that are controlled by others outside the partnership. Improving educational achievement, for example, is influenced by many different factors, and the areas within which any set of partners is able to operate are inevitably limited.

The partners therefore need to identify their overlapping areas of influence and their responsibilities within that area, while recognising that other things beyond their control may impinge on how they act. For example, in a teacher-parent partnership, it may be decided at a reporting conference that the teacher's responsibility is to set and mark homework and the parent's responsibility is to provide a space, time and assistance for the student to complete the homework. These responsibilities, however, have to be set within the broader context of family finances and school policies. Is there a suitable space at home? Do school policies support teachers in their task?

Acceptance of responsibility also depends on how tasks are defined. When a task is poorly defined or the partners define it differently, they are likely to hold different assumptions about their responsibilities. Parents in low-income communities, for example, sometimes consider that the task of educating children belongs to the school and that their job is to make sure that the child arrives at school clean and fed. For these parents, being in partnership with teachers to improve their children's achievement makes little sense. If they were to take on additional responsibilities, then these assumptions about the appropriate roles of parents and teachers would need to be discussed as part of the negotiation of responsibilities.

Misunderstandings can arise when partners are expected to take responsibility for new tasks for which they do not have the expertise. It may mean that if parents are to help their children with homework, they need not only encouragement to take on this role, but also practical assistance. Most of the parents we interviewed wanted to help their children at home but had not received advice from the school about what to do. As a result, some parents set several hours of homework each night on content that they hoped would be helpful for their child but which was unrelated to their current classroom activities. In effective partnerships, the partners not only take responsibility for aspects of the task but also decide together what help each may require.

Working together and learning from one another

In our definition of partnership, the phrases "promote learning" and "shared power" draw attention to the relationship side of any partnership. Relationships are, of course, crucial, but they must be developed in ways that serve rather than undermine the achievement of the task. In the reporting study, the teachers' desire to be positive and welcoming meant that the parents did not have the information they needed to help their child achieve to their expectations.

In order for partners to learn from each other, each partner must seek information about the other's perspectives and adopt a critical stance towards their own views. Partners may fail to do this, either because they have entered into the partnership for non-learning reasons, or because they are unaware of their own biases, assumptions and dominance. Neither the

teachers nor the parents in our study saw the reporting process as an opportunity to establish a task-focused partnership, and therefore did not perceive the need to work with one another on educational tasks. This is not to say that teachers and parents do not establish partnerships in other contexts. The problem as we saw it was that the potential of the reporting context, with its major commitment of time and resources, was not realised.

Sharing power

For some writers, the processes through which individuals and groups acquire power and influence decisions are the most important aspects of partnership. Most research arising from this position concludes that power is rarely equal and that partnership is often a device through which a dominant partner retains control (e.g. Malen, 1999). In the worst-case scenario, teachers see the parent partners as the providers of the raw material that the school then educates. Some of the changes to New Zealand's education administration system in 1989 to increase the involvement of parents in school governance structures were designed to prevent this kind of thinking.

While we agree that power issues are important, we think the assumption that power should be equal has many associated problems. Todd and Higgins (1998) argue that in any situation a complex power hierarchy is likely to be operating. Parents and teachers, for example, are both powerful and powerless in different ways. While professionals might have the power to decide on instructional practices, parents can often withdraw their child from a particular school or class and thus deny teachers the students to teach. Partners having equal power over all decisions is also not appropriate when they have different roles, different interests and time, and different expertise and legal responsibilities. For example, teachers are likely to have greater expertise than parents on particular instructional practices. Todd and Higgins' idea of "joint endeavour" is likely to be more helpful in achieving the task of improved educational outcomes than an insistence on equal power.

Summary of partnership and reporting

Teachers and schools put in many hours of work when reporting to parents. What we are proposing is that reporting should contribute to a partnership between parents and teachers that has lifting the achievement of the child as its central task. To achieve this outcome, however, both partners would need to see the process of educating children as a joint endeavour and one in which both partners must have access to accurate information. If grades are inflated because the primary purpose of reporting is to be positive and to make parents feel welcome, then the educational purpose of this time-consuming activity will be undermined.

Additional partnership contexts

Reporting to parents is only one of many contexts in which there is an opportunity to develop strong educational partnerships. In this final section, we outline four other contexts in which our theory of partnership was developed.

The relationship between teaching staff and parent governors can also be described as a partnership. Our study of the boards of SEMO schools showed that this partnership raises difficult issues about how to share power when the partners have very different types and levels of expertise. Most of the trustees and principals we studied rated their partnership with the other very positively. But as in the reporting study, partnerships were defined primarily in relationship terms, rather than in terms of any educational task. Trustees expressed the task in general terms, such as "working together for the children". Because they were unclear about what this task meant in specific terms, trustees were unclear about the information and expertise they required, and about whether they were fulfilling all their responsibilities. This study showed that, once the task of the partnership is clarified, it is important for the partners to discuss openly how they will recognise and develop the differing levels of expertise that each partner can contribute to the task.

Another study examined a recently created partnership between early childhood education (ECE) centres and schools, which was designed to ensure the smooth transition of children from one sector to the other. Although most of the participants rated their relationships with the other sector as "moderate" or "very strong", these conditions were not sufficient to create either shared expectations for facilitating the transition, satisfaction with the transition arrangements, or transition arrangements that optimised children's learning. These problems remained unresolved because the partners focused on activities such as increasing the number of visits each made to the other, rather than on working to achieve the more difficult task of developing an effective transition.

The final two partnerships that we studied involved three partners: the Ministry of Education, local schools and a forum of board chairpersons. While these partnerships started out with many problems, they were more successful in the long run because considerable effort was devoted to clarifying the task that the partnership was to accomplish. While the relationships in both partnerships began in an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust, they improved as the partners worked on the tasks, resolved problems, and achieved significant educational outcomes.

The overall conclusion of these studies was that less successful partnerships focused exclusively on the relationship, with the more successful partnerships balancing the relationship and task dimensions in productive and creative ways.

Acknowledgments

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Note

1 These ideas are explained in more detail, and illustrated with five different partnership examples, in a recently published book: Timperley, H. S. & Robinson, V. M. J. (2002). *Partnership: Focusing the relationship on the task of school improvement*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research.

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