

# CHAPTER 7:

## Supporting key relationships

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For many students, *'enjoyment'* of school is more heavily influenced by friendships with other students, relationships with teachers, and other social opportunities and experiences, than it is by what they learn in class. At the same time, however, students frequently express a desire for good teaching and learning opportunities. And integral to what they regard as desirable learning opportunities are satisfying interactions with their teachers and classmates.

In common with many international and national studies, Bishop et al's *Te Kōtahitanga* project emphasises the importance of certain key relationships in terms of their impact or potential impact on students' educational experiences and outcomes.

These relationships include: those among students in the classroom; between teachers and students; among teachers within the same school, and, as previously discussed, across schools and sectors; between the school and parents and families; and between students and their families.

Blatchford et al (2008, p.29) state that:

'The extent and quality of communication amongst ... schools and families has been shown to impact considerably on successful transition. Research that would promote policy and good practice in the area of communication is needed. Specifically, pupils as well as professionals and parents/carers need to be

involved in any such research, with a view to addressing the concerns of all parties and taking account of each perspective when formulating possible actions to deal with challenging transitions.'

Aspects of these key relationships in relation to student learning, achievement, and well-being are briefly touched on in the remainder of this chapter.

McGee et al found that:

- School-based research has indicated that in order to be educationally effective, a school learning environment for emerging adolescents should promote both academic and social development together.
- When asked about matters of transition, students often focus on teachers. What students think about a subject is frequently dictated by what they think about the teacher of that subject.

## Classroom Dynamics

Evidence from our study identified the importance of fostering a classroom environment characterised

*Students and teachers alike are unhappy when there is friction as it undermines ability to learn, enjoyment and well-being.*

by positive relations between teacher and students, and among students. Students and teachers alike were unhappy when there was friction (eg, people being told off), and constant disruptions, feeling that it undermined ability to learn, a sense of enjoyment and well-being, and ultimately,

attitudes towards one another, and to subjects or to learning overall.

Classroom dynamics are not only affected by the personalities and behaviours of students and teachers, but also to an extent by the way lessons are structured and conducted. A comparison of our transition study students' ratings at the end of Year 8 and the end of Year 9 revealed differences in how they felt they were able to interact with other

*"It's been a really supportive year for the class. We started off with camp and that's a really neat time to build relationships and break down barriers."*  
Year 8 teacher

students in class before and after transition — for instance, the students were less likely as time went on to say that they helped each other during lessons, less likely to say they discussed work with one another, and less likely to say they laughed while they worked/learned.

Another identified ingredient of positive classroom dynamics was the need for boundaries

and expectations for behaviour being agreed upon and clearly conveyed to everyone, and fairly and consistently applied.

There are therefore a number of dimensions for achieving positive classroom dynamics, from providing a range of opportunities early on for helping students get to know each other well and establish a level of trust in and respect for each other, to ensuring that well understood and maintained rules and procedures are in place for the benefit of the class as a whole.

Other dimensions include thinking about how and whether the ways in which teaching and learning are conducted in the classroom foster interest, involvement, and constructive working relationships, and whether the approaches followed are flexible and responsive to the characteristics of the given class of students.

## Teachers and Students Relating to One Another

The Year 8 to Year 9 transition represents some quite marked changes for many students in relation to teachers: not only do they have more teachers to relate to over the course of a school day, but the nature of their interactions with teachers also undergoes changes, with the greater compartmentalising of the secondary school day compared to primary school, and the greater numbers of students overall that secondary teachers work with.

Being less 'known' by their teachers at secondary school was hard at first for some students, particularly for those who had had a close relationship with their previous teachers.

However, it was also evident that as Year 9 progressed most students established very good relationships with many of their teachers and were as likely to say these teachers cared about them as they had been to say this about their primary/intermediate school teachers.

At the same time, students showed an increased tendency between Year 8 and Year 10 to compare and contrast their experiences of teachers, including specifying their reactions to the ways in which different teachers conducted teaching and learning in class.

The nature of students' relationships with teachers and their views about different approaches to

*Showing a sense of humour and making learning fun and interesting were teacher qualities students especially valued.*

teaching impacted on their expressed attitudes towards some subjects, as well as colouring their views about school generally.

### Students on Teachers

Responses from the students overall revealed a great deal of consistency in what students most and least liked to see in

teachers, with a sense of humour and ability to make learning interesting and fun being top of the list of the most desirable characteristics, together with teachers showing they enjoyed and understood teenagers.

At the other end of the spectrum, a teacher 'growling a lot' was the most frequently mentioned 'least liked' behaviour.

Other of our data revealed that, once at secondary school, students rated teachers as less likely than their teachers in Year 8 to ask for their opinions or to listen to their ideas and felt that, overall, teachers were a little less likely than teachers at their primary schools to make sure that everyone understood the work. However, in general, before and after transition, students found teachers to be approachable.

Many found too that while teachers post-transition often did not have as much time available to spend

with them as perhaps their primary school teachers had, they were generally very helpful when requested to assist with schoolwork.

But students also emphasised that there were times when they would like teachers to clarify work goals and be clearer about what they expected of students in class and when undertaking homework or other assignments. This view was particularly expressed when the students were still adjusting to all that was new or different at secondary school.

### Teachers on Students

Corresponding with what students said about them, teachers often said they most liked teaching students who exhibited a sense of humour. They also often found it easiest to relate to more outgoing students, sometimes admitting that quiet, shy students could be a particular challenge for them. This suggests that compatible 'matching' of teachers and students can be an important consideration at times.

*Teachers also valued a sense of humour and students being 'willing to have a go'.*

Being willing to have a go, and taking an interest in their subject, not simply just being 'really good' at it, were other qualities teachers valued in their students.

### Understanding and Liking Adolescents

Results from our study showed that students value teachers who understand 'where they are coming from as teenagers'. In particular, they appreciate it when teachers 'get' what they are trying to say, especially when they don't have the words at their disposal to express themselves well, and are able to connect with their (adolescent) humour.

*"The students are at a critical stage of adolescence. They are confused. It was actually quite funny the other day: I had asked my Year 9 class who had watched the 'Human Mind' programme on TV the night before. And two students put their hands up. One was a quiet [studious] boy, which was not surprising, and the other was an outgoing girl. She said 'I did, I did, I did, I did' and then she looked around and realised that she was the only one shouting out. It suddenly went very quiet. She was wanting to impress the teacher but kind of realised that it wasn't cool to shout out like that. They hate to stand out at high school, especially here with a lot of the Pacific Island kids, they really hate standing out from their peers."*

*"The thing I hate in the classroom is the shame, shame, if kids get it wrong. Often mocking [from the other students] comes with it. So kids stop trying if they try and fail, and get mocked. So that is a big issue that we are not really aware of enough. I have no idea how you change that one. It is ingrained. But they need to feel that it is OK to try and maybe not get it right."*

*"They are starting to develop individually, [beginning to learn] that you don't have to be the same as everyone else. They are starting to break away from home, find the opposite sex in many cases. And you see a sudden change in most of the kids, from Year 9 to Year 10. They just often start being really silly, purely to impress other people. It is often quite entertaining!"*

*"So I think they are often quite a bit more insecure about the need to be included and feeling worthwhile."*

Year 9 teacher

## Understanding each Other: Experiences, Perceptions and World Views

From their review of the research literature, McGee et al stated:

Teachers and students have different perceptions of where problems lie. Students tend to think there is a problem with delivery of programmes; teachers tend to think that the students bring problems with them.

There are very many examples of how people may misunderstand each other and draw the wrong conclusions as a result. This is inherently human nature, but learning some 'facts' about others' ways of being can help to reach better shared

understandings, and improve relationships and practice in relation to teaching and learning.

For example, some teachers observed a Pasifika cultural preference for 'blending into the group'. While this may be a reality for some or many Pasifika students, it does not also mean, as some participants perceived it, that these students

did not 'want to take any responsibility for their own learning'. But it does nevertheless have implications for how to manage teaching and learning opportunities for the students.

*"We need to be aware of all the different philosophies of the different groups."*

Year 9 teacher

Tale's story (Case Study 13) demonstrates how a particular misunderstanding can lead to more

serious consequences for a student both in the short- and longer-term.

### ***Case Study 13: Understanding each other***

Despite saying they had 'settled' quite quickly when they first arrived, some students, rather than assimilating into their secondary school, for various reasons became increasingly distanced from some or most aspects of school life.

Tale was a student who had been well liked by all of the teachers and students in his primary school: his Year 8 teacher described him as "*sweet, dreamy and shy*", adding that everyone loved these qualities in him. While Tale had been very anxious about the move to secondary school, feeling he would be out of his depth in a big place with lots of strangers, he found to his pleasure and surprise that he got on well initially, and even enjoyed much of his time there. He attributed this in large part to "*being introduced around*" by older siblings and cousins so that he got to know and be known by people and was able to play sports with them during lunch hours which he really enjoyed.

Family meant a great deal to Tale and he spoke often during interviews for the transition study about how he enjoyed spending time with his siblings (usually playing various outdoor games), helping out his parents and grandparents, and just generally being with members of his extended family. Tale had friends at school and in his neighbourhood whom he valued but he seldom saw them in the weekends, choosing to put his family commitments first.

However, as his first year at secondary school progressed, Tale began to get 'off side' with teachers; he was eventually suspended for a few days for surly behaviour and answering back. He felt that he and two of his friends had been unfairly picked on 'because they were Pacific Islanders', accused of something they hadn't done and not given the chance to explain.

The downward spiral for Tale had begun over homework: he refused to do it (ie, by simply abstaining rather than outwardly protesting) because he did not believe in the need for homework, feeling strongly that spending time with family was more important and that formal learning should be kept within the school day and not take up out-of-school time as well. (Tale was making reasonable progress at school, although he did not always find it easy to stay sufficiently focused on his work in class, mainly because of his tendency to day-dream. He was well aware that his parents valued education highly and he generally wished to please them.)

It was evident that although Tale had strong, genuine reasons for his beliefs about the homework situation, he was not able to convey this and his behaviour was seen by his teachers as deliberately uncooperative and disobedient. The result was a lack of understanding and effective communication between Tale and his teachers, leading to an impasse, and no acceptable compromise. Tale was at risk of becoming seriously alienated from school, including disengaging from his learning in class.

## Fostering Communication and Relationships among Teachers in the Same School

Teachers in the same school may often have different views about aspects of policy and practice

*Different views on a policy or practice can affect how students and their teachers experience school.*

(in relation to homework, for example). The extent to which differences in views and perspectives can successfully be either accommodated or resolved can affect how students — and the teachers themselves — experience school.

Our study findings showed that different teachers within the same school, as well as teachers across schools and sectors, also frequently have different perspectives of the same student, suggesting that any one teacher may not always have a well balanced view of (certain) students. While at times this could conceivably work in a student's favour, even more likely, it may have the opposite effect.

There is much said about the need for transfer of information about students across or between schools at transition points. It is equally important

*"We need teachers in the school working more collaboratively ... pulling in teams out of English, social studies, science [etc]. ... Teaching could become a lot more imaginative if people got together to share ideas."*

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to consider the need for effective transfer or sharing of student information from year to year within the same school, especially among teachers who take the same students for different classes within the same year.

A more complete picture of students could be achieved by schools having recognised systems in place for doing this (eg, databases set up for the purpose, regular staff meetings, staff members being tasked

with the responsibility of ensuring that relevant information is passed on at the appropriate time). But often it may simply be a case of teachers being happy to talk with one another, sharing issues and concerns or favourable observations, as well as specific data on student progress.

Some participants also talked about the value of teachers from different subject areas, departments, or year levels within the school getting together in a more structured way to share ideas and practices about teaching and learning and other matters.

## Relationships between Schools and Parents

### Findings from our transition study:

- Some parents felt their children were achieving well or very well in particular subjects and doing well at school generally when in reality they were among the lowest achieving students.
- Around a third of teachers at both primary and secondary school indicated having almost no contact during the year with the parents of participating students. Teachers were more likely to have had infrequent contact with the parents of low achieving students.
- [While] teachers considered the majority of parents to be generally 'supportive' or 'very supportive' of their child, they were more likely to rate the parents of the high achievers as 'very supportive' than the parents of the low achievers.

The importance of school/home contact was emphasised by teachers and principals across both primary and secondary sectors.

It was felt that it was important for parents to:

- take an active interest in what was happening for their child at school;
- communicate with teachers about their child's progress;
- be informed by the school of their child's positive achievements as well as any learning or discipline issues that arose.

However, it was recognised that not all parents feel comfortable about contacting or coming to a school

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and that it is necessary for schools and teachers to try and overcome this diffidence.

Successfully encouraging all parents to be part of the school is often not straightforward,

however. Problems encountered in communicating effectively with parents included language barriers, and perceived 'non-engagement' with the school, particularly among parents in lower socio-economic communities. Teachers' explanations for parental non-engagement included lack of time, fear of the school, or a cultural belief that a young person's education was the sole responsibility of the school, as this is what a school is set up to do.

It was suggested that when schools work as much as possible with community leaders this is a valuable way to increase parental involvement.

*"I think you have to bring the leaders of the different community groups into the school and get them to bring the parents along with them."*  
Year 9 teacher

In terms of effective relationships between schools and parents there are also such issues to consider as the extent to which teachers may need more support or knowledge about how best to convey potentially difficult messages to parents regarding their children's progress, understand

the diverse realities for students beyond the school, and about how and to what extent they may assist parents to help their children more effectively.

*"While we hope that parents will actively encourage their children to see the reasons for working hard at school and doing their homework, and hopefully provide the resources and support to do it, teachers should be aware of the student's circumstances as there is a huge variation in the living circumstances of some students here. It can be very difficult for some families to help their child with schoolwork. And we are limited in how much advice we can give the families. For some of them it is not possible. For example, one mother is away at work when the children get home from school. She gets home at 1am, then gets up at 5am to get her husband off to work, and then goes back to bed. The children have to get themselves up and off to school."*

Principal, primary school

*"Running more parent nights has been good. We have meetings where teachers and parents can meet each other but also information evenings [eg], the maths department invites all the parents to come and find out about the maths programme and discuss ability and assessment issues."*  
Year 9 teacher

## Meeting with Parents/Families

Maintaining effective communication with students' parents or families was widely agreed to be as challenging as it was important. There was also agreement that it often means having to think 'outside the box' in order to ensure that parents and families feel welcome in the school and confident enough to come along to school-based activities where they can learn more about their child's progress and about the school and wider education matters.

There was recognition too of the need to keep in mind — and overcome where possible: by

*It often means thinking 'outside the box' so parents feel welcome and can come along to meetings to learn about their child's progress at school.*

providing childcare at school while meetings take place, for instance — the practical barriers and competing responsibilities that can make it difficult for parents/families to attend meetings and activities during the school year and help their children with schoolwork.

Secondary teachers also particularly referred to the

logistical difficulties that large secondary schools tend to experience in ensuring that teachers and parents have sufficient time together in order to discuss individual students' progress, successes and difficulties. As is typical in most if not all secondary schools, the secondary schools in our study ran parent–teacher interview nights. These elicited mixed feelings among all parties. While they were considered necessary, there was also a feeling that they were often hurried, making the possibility of

more in-depth discussion impossible. There was concern too that many parents did not attend.

However, innovative approaches to bringing about more effective parent–teacher meetings have been accomplished in some schools. McKinley et al (2009, p.30), for example, describe what they refer to as 'restructured' parent–teacher meetings, in which parents/caregivers, along with their child, meet with their child's form teacher only, for an in-depth overview of the child's progress. (The meetings were established in this form as part of a wider programme of 'academic counselling' for students, in which each student met on a one-to-one basis with the dean two or three times a year to discuss academic progress, aims and aspirations, and how they were going to achieve them.) For the meeting, the form teacher comes prepared with a comprehensive academic profile of each student to discuss with the parent(s)/caregiver(s). McKinley et al report that these meetings, albeit involving a lot of planning, were well received by all involved parties: parents, teachers and students. More detail about the meetings and participants' responses to them are given in the insert box on the next page.

### Questions to consider

- Parents sometimes perceive secondary schools as intimidating places to be. What (more) might we in this school do to help all parents feel welcome?
- Not all parents feel confident about supporting their children at school, and especially through the transition to secondary schooling and beyond. What kind of information or support could we make available for our parents to help them better understand the process of transition, their child's achievement and progress, and what occurs in schools generally?
- How can we as a school, and as individual teachers, best assist parents to provide effective support for their children's education?



## 'The Restructured Parent-Student-Teacher Meeting'

Mckinley et al (2009, pp.46–50) stated that 'The success of the restructured meeting was dependent on the strong organisational processes that occurred before, during and after the event (with subsequent follow-up by form teachers being an important element in the whole process).'

'One of the most significant results of the restructured parent–student–teacher meetings was the enormous increase in participation by parents/caregivers. ... [from] between 9% and 13% [in previous years] to 76%. This meant that most of the teachers were meeting many of the parents/caregivers for the first time and finding them more interested in their children's schooling than they had expected ...the large parental turnout had a significant impact on staff, particularly on their perceptions of the parents/caregivers and the relationships they could build with them.'

'The teachers' overwhelming perception was that the parent–student–teacher meeting provided a means for cementing stronger and improved relationships between all parties.'

'In most cases teachers reported connecting with parents/caregivers in a way that was very different from their previous experiences of "cold hall", "five minute", "merry-go-round" parent/caregiver meetings with subject teachers. There is no doubt that this was helped considerably by the environment the school created, with refreshments, easy parking, child-care facilities, and information available in the hall — all of which was seen as positive. The meeting provided the opportunity for parents/caregivers to develop a tangible and identifiable partnership with their children's form teachers. Together, they were able to increase their understanding of the student.'

'The parent–student–teacher meeting, which began with parents/caregivers and teachers engaging together with the student's record of learning, provided a sound basis on which to change the nature of the relationship between school and home. Individual student portfolios the form teachers created from information given to them by the students' subject teachers, deans and other staff, provided a strong framework for the conversation with parents/caregivers and a clear overview of the student's academic progress and patterns that emerged from different classes.'

'...Almost all staff interviewed commented on the strengthened triadic relationship of parent/caregiver, teacher and student, and the open and honest discussions that were able to occur.'

'The discussion between the three parties also enabled teachers to see how the student interacted with his/her parent/caregiver, which provided additional insight for teachers.'

'Some form teachers commented that the length of the meeting allowed for meaningful engagement, with parents/caregivers asking more questions than at previous parent–teacher interviews. As these meetings were considerably longer than the previous five minute ones, it is not surprising that a degree of rapport was able to develop. Some teachers commented on the insights they gained about parents'/caregivers' involvement with and concerns about their children, and spoke of the genuine pleasure they experienced spending time with parents/caregivers, coming together with a mutual interest in their children.'

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'Teachers perceived that some parents/caregivers found the school less formidable because of the initial teacher contact. ... One form teacher described the meeting as a process of breaking down misunderstandings between parents/caregivers and teachers. [Another] form teacher, pleased that most of his predominantly Pacific Island parents/caregivers came to the meeting, felt that giving parents/caregivers an appointment removed a barrier to their attendance.'

'The length of conversation also enabled the teachers to ascertain what information and understanding parents/caregivers had about the school. Deans and teachers both commented on what they saw as a lack of parental insight into school information systems, particularly around assessment deadlines, homework expectations and gaining credits.'

'Overall, the main impact of the parent–student–teacher meetings was the trust and rapport developed between the school and the students and their families, and the sense of enjoyment many of the teachers felt as the result.'

'While there was a general consensus that the parent–student–teacher meeting was a worthwhile process, teachers also alluded to the increased workload involved in the organisation and running of the event. Some teachers expressed reservations about the amount of work that would be involved, but in hindsight, most thought that the extra work was probably worth while. Some staff felt that the work leading up to the event could be streamlined and refined in the following year, such as by looking at time management and paperwork, but it was clear that these issues were not seen as insurmountable.'

## Relationships between Students and Parents/Caregivers

Along with changes in relationships with peers and teachers at the time of transition, students' relationships with parents and family are also often undergoing changes.

A number of students in our study referred to the higher expectations or greater responsibilities being

*An important message for parents is that students in Years 9 & 10 continue to need their ongoing support.*

placed on them by families, because they were now perceived by them as much more grown up. For some students, this was an added burden: at a time when they continued to need their parents/family to provide

support and show an interest in how they were

getting on at school, they were finding that this was tending to reduce.

The transition to secondary school also quite often coincides with (adolescent) communication patterns that are less open and relaxed than previously, making it seem, perhaps, that they no longer value or need parental/family support and interest in the way they did when they were younger. It was evident from the student feedback in interviews that this was not the case. It may be especially important for schools to convey this message to parents/caregivers and families.

Many participating teachers also emphasised the importance of a stable, supportive family environment for students. They stressed that parents' attitudes to secondary school could be a key factor in how their child approaches, and

responds to, transition, and how they progress following transition, another key message to pass on to parents.<sup>37</sup>

#### Findings from our transition study:

- The low achieving students in mathematics, reading and writing were more likely to have fewer books in their homes and less likely to say they enjoyed reading in their spare time.
- The low achievers in reading and writing were more likely to indicate watching television as a favourite spare time activity and, on average, watched more hours of television than the high achievers.
- The parents of the high achievers were more likely than the parents of the low achievers to say they talked to their child often about what they did at school.

### Summary Comments

Students' attitudes to school, learning and achieving well are significantly influenced by their relationships with teachers and other students at school, their experiences of teaching, learning and achievement within the classroom, and by the level of interest, support and encouragement for their schoolwork provided by parents/family.

Social aspects of the transition can require a considerable adjustment for many students, in that they need to accommodate the different personalities, expectations, and teaching methods or approaches of their new teachers, get along with

many other previously unknown students within an often more diverse student population than they have been used to, balance established friendships with new ones, and, at times, adjust to some changes in family relationships and expectations.

The process of establishing new friendships or consolidating others tends to be a significant rival, too, for the students' schoolwork, in terms of their time, energy and attention.

Other important relationships that can directly or indirectly impact on how students experience teaching and learning at school and school life generally include those between schools and sectors, between schools and families, and between teachers in the same school.

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<sup>37</sup> It may be helpful for schools to refer parents/caregivers to the Ministry's website where helpful suggestions have been posted regarding supporting children's/young people's education, and helping them prepare for such changes as the transition from primary to secondary schooling:  
[www.minedu.govt.nz/Parents/YourChild.aspx](http://www.minedu.govt.nz/Parents/YourChild.aspx)