

Deanwell School's Authentic Relationship Framework

Deanwell School (TLIF 4-063)

I began to see that in order to meet the social, emotional, physical and academic needs of all of my students and progress their learning, I needed to step back and observe them first and then take time to build strong and trusting relationships with them and their whānau. I could also see that I needed to provide a differentiated learning programme that engaged the students and met their interests and needs. At the same time, I needed to build a culture of success by finding each child's strength and using that strength to grow new learning. I realised that behaviour teaching and learning needed to be embedded in my classroom learning programme throughout the day in order to be able to achieve these aspirational goals.

Teacher reflection

Overview

Deanwell School was deeply concerned about the high rates of challenging behaviour exhibited by its students. Teachers felt unable to address these behaviours, and the school office felt like a 'triage station', with senior leaders constantly having to respond to problems rather than lead positive culture change. This was impacting on students' opportunities for learning, teacher self-confidence, and everybody's wellbeing. It had become a charter goal to implement positive behaviour for learning practices across the school.

The school wanted to investigate whether a culturally responsive relationship framework, aligned with a sociocultural view of learning and behaviour, might impact on teacher practice and on learning, behaviour, and community wellbeing. They believed such a framework needed to be authentic; co-constructed with the wider community and tailored to their place. To support its implementation, teachers needed to carry out individual inquiries, supported by whole school professional learning.

The development and implementation of the framework has proved successful in shifting teachers from what they now recognise to be an exclusive, traditional way of viewing behaviour to one that is inclusive, cultural, and relational. The school has recultured, creating an environment that is far more conducive to teaching, learning, and community wellbeing. The process of co-constructing the framework with a reference group made up of school and community members, played a pivotal role in achieving this shift.

The inquiry story

This whole school inquiry was led by a group of teachers from across the school. This team was supported by the reference group, including the principal, members of staff (teaching and support) and whānau. All staff participated in the inquiry, and the school's kaumātua provided cultural advice. Students and whānau also participated in activities and data collection, with the intention of creating schoolwide changes to thinking and practice.

What was the focus?

Deanwell School had longstanding and often complex and demanding issues with student behaviour. The disruption was having a detrimental effect on teacher practice, student learning, and the wellbeing of all community members. The project team was tasked with addressing what had become a charter goal: to design and implement an innovation that would embed positive behaviour for learning practices throughout the school.

Most students at the school are 'priority learners': students who are Māori, Pacific, have additional learning needs, or are from low-socio-economic backgrounds. In the long-term, the project team hoped that teachers would become 'agents of change', implementing pedagogical approaches that would help achieve equity, excellence, and belonging for all.

The project team hypothesised that the development of a cultural relationship framework focused on teachers' relational, pedagogical, and ontological understandings would help them to respond more effectively to student learning and behaviour. The team was interested in multiple relationships, between students and staff, students and students, and school and whānau. They hoped to shift practice and discourse across the community to foster positive, respectful relationships in which power is shared.

What did the teachers try?

The project team began by investigating existing programmes, such as Positive Behaviour for Learning School-wide and Incredible Years Teaching. However, the team concluded that the school needed to adopt an approach more suited to their local context – a jointly created and owned Deanwell School Cultural Relationship Framework.

The draft framework was informed by a sociocultural perspective on learning and teaching that incorporates powerful educational connections between home and school and by culturally responsive approaches to teaching derived from Kaupapa Māori. It was particularly influenced by:

- Huakina Mai (Savage et al., 2012) with its understandings that i) behaviour is the product of a series of interactions between people and their environments or social events and ii) that these interactions should be viewed as a 'video' (part of a changing story) rather than a 'snapshot' (a disconnected, standalone event)
- Mason Durie's concept of Mauri Ora and the aspiration that Māori learners be supported to learn and achieve academic success within contexts that support and help strengthen their sense of cultural identity (Poutama Pounamu, 2018).

In an attempt to involve the whole community in the inquiry, the team adopted John Leonard's (2011) consultation framework with its five levels of community participation and engagement: Information, Ratification, Consultation, Participation, and Self-determination. They began by establishing a reference group, dominated by whānau, and including the school's kaumātua. The website was refreshed, with student advice and support, and a series of whānau hui were held. As the school community clarified its values and expectations, these were made visible in all communications and in the school environment.

Behavioural goals were made integral to teachers' learning plans and shared explicitly with students. Teachers and students learned together about the importance of social-emotional learning and self-regulation. Teachers inquired into the impact they were having on students, focusing on three or four students in each class. Students were supported to find strategies to identify and respond positively to manage their emotions and teachers were supported to uplift their capability to address behavioural issues within the classroom, rather than sending students on to the school office.

Teachers, students, and whānau learned the skills to participate in restorative conversations, focused on healing the harm, rather than punishment. The school strengthened their student led conferences by including behaviour learning as a focus alongside academic learning.

Employees embedded this kaupapa Māori world view through the learning of te reo Māori me ngā tikanga. This included learning our local hapū and iwi narrative, noho marae, support of Wānanga o Aotearoa, regular te reo Māori professional learning and explicit teaching of te reo Māori for our students.

Over a series of hui, the inquiry team and reference group co-constructed a cultural relationship framework that made explicit the community's expectations for itself in relationship to the following indicators:

- Mana Mokopuna: learning
 - Mana Wairua: wellbeing, inclusion, belonging
 - Mana tangata: relationships, trust, honesty
 - Mana Reo: language, te reo Māori
 - Mana Tikanga: customs and protocols
 - Mana Mātauranga: Māori knowledge, immersed in our practice
 - Mana Ā-kura: culture of care, we care.
- (Ministry of Education, 2010)

What happened as a result of this innovation?

The process of co-constructing the cultural relationship framework with the reference group had a significant impact on teacher inquiry. The whānau involved in the group challenged teachers, first to narrow their gaze to look about themselves and their community and think about their “why”, then to widen their gaze to better understand their existing relationships and ways of engaging, and finally to respond to all people in more effective ways.

The inquiry team reports that teacher inquiry and professional learning, combined with the processes involved in developing the cultural relationship framework, have been successful in impacting and growing teacher relational, pedagogical, and ontological understanding of behaviour. The ways teachers view, approach, and think about behaviour have shifted significantly from a space of being punitive, negative, and exclusive, to one that is solutions-focused, positive, and inclusive. Teachers work alongside students on their behaviour, explicitly teaching the skills needed.

These claims are endorsed by a recent Education Review Office report commenting that a culturally responsive approach to behaviour for learning has been integrated into the school's localised curriculum. Students learn in an orderly and positive environment and are supported to develop social and self-management skills. Teachers use appropriate strategies to promote positive behaviour and strengthen relationships. Student and whānau views and aspirations are collected and valued. There is a strong, school-wide commitment to bi-culturalism and inclusive practice.

While the reculturing has been successful, the school regards what has happened so far as setting a foundation. Systems and practices need to be further developed in order to maintain, improve, and sustain what has been achieved.

What did they learn?

The concept of viewing behavioural interactions as being part of a video, rather than an isolated snapshot, built understanding of the unique identity of each child and the need to personalise learning and response in order to achieve more equitable outcomes.

Teachers have developed their understandings of the importance of relationships and what a successful bicultural relationship looks like:

- Whānaungatanga: developing the relationship
 - Manaakitanga: maintaining and nurturing the relationship
 - Ako: the reciprocal nature and self-regulation of the relationship
 - Mahi Tahi: the unity of the relationship.
- (Education Review Office, 2016)

Teachers no longer see challenging behaviour as a problem, but as the way a student is communicating their feelings and as an opportunity for learning.

Inquiry team

The inquiry team was led by Kylie Taplin and also included Samantha Hughes, Cathryn Ditchburn, Leanne Doull, John Talsma, and Sarah Hardy. It was supported by a reference group, including the principal, members of the support staff, whānau, and the school's kaumātua.

Expert support was provided by:

- Dr Paul Woller and Dr Mere Berryman (Poutama Pounamu)
- Catherine Savage and John Leonard (Ihi Research)
- Rerekeroa Shaw and Marian Pearce (Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland).

For further information

If you would like to learn more about this project, please contact the project leader Kylie Taplin at kylie@deanwell.school.nz

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