

Final Project Report:

Connecting Classrooms and Communities: Family-School Partnerships

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Project Success and Challenges

Despite the challenges, and based on the number of strengths, I believe that overall my project was very successful. Most of the challenges faced stemmed from family involvement and many of the successes were shown in the students' experiences.

The biggest challenge during this project was getting family feedback and involvement. My original survey and request for partnerships had a very low response rate, and thus I was faced with the challenge of supporting my students' passion projects with a fewer number of partners. At that point I turned to colleagues as partners and rearranged my schedule so I could support groups as well. Despite the disappointing number of responses, my students were able to create numerous valuable partnerships with a mix of families and the school community. They were still able focus on building upon their passions with the support of a partner throughout the project.

A smaller, yet critical challenge was the limited amount of time to create relationships. Meaningful and natural relationships develop at different and unpredictable rates and I was unsure how the restricted time-line would affect the partnerships. Although the relationships that were created throughout the partnerships turned out to be meaningful, I feel that the momentum of the project was cut short. As the project progressed I slowly received more feedback and interest from families. I believe that given more time that more partnerships would have been created. I hope to continue building momentum next school year so the current partnerships will inspire new relationships.

The strengths of the project overwhelmed the challenges. Many of the strengths were not part of the original project objectives and goals, as they were a result of the challenge of minimal family partnerships. Although the number of family partnerships were few, they were critical to the success of the project. One of the strengths of the project were the positive and meaningful relationships that were created with both the families and the school community throughout the project. We had two mothers, a father, a great-aunt and an aunt come to our classroom to share their passions. Each time my students were engaged, asked meaningful questions and showed a connection to our guest. We had one mother create a partnership with our class by supporting two groups throughout their passion projects. This mother became part of the classroom and was always welcomed by my students. Those working with her were excited to see her, and those students who were not with her group demonstrated a desire to be working on their own project with their partner. Most of these relationships were non-existent before the project, so I believe that the partnerships created new and meaningful relationships.

An unforeseen strength of the project were the partnerships created within our school community. Our administration team, resource teacher, teacher librarian, librarian assistant to two teachers partnered with our classroom throughout the project. Most (if not all) of the partnerships were not only new, but unique in their nature for my students. Everyone who was involved in the project added a unique quality. The biggest success of the project might be that students' built partnerships with both the families and the teachers.

Another strength of the project was the impact on the students. The students demonstrated a high level of engagement and were invested in the success of their passion project. My students were always excited to have someone come and share their passion. In all occasions, my students had an opportunity to connect to someone they didn't know well based on a commonality of having a passion.

The one-time partnerships were impactful in inspiring my students to follow their own passions, and to spend time doing the things that they love. I believe that the one-time partnerships helped to light a fire within my students and heightened their engagement in the entire process. This engagement was shown in their daily requests to work on their project, the quality of their work, minimal or no behavior problems, and the desire to share their projects with other students and their families. These partnerships demonstrated to my students that families care about what happens in the classroom and their learning. The in-school partnerships have connected my students to teachers and given them a familiar and trusting support system. My students were given an opportunity to take charge of their own learning. They decided which passion to follow, which goals to set, how to practice their learning and finally how to share their learning. I believe that my students' interests and well-being were the true guide to this project.

Still in the realm of partnerships, another critical success of my project were the collegial partnerships. As I had predicted more family partnerships, I had completely overlooked the importance of the support of my colleagues. The project would not have had the success it had without the support of my administrators, the willingness and eagerness of several staff to share their passion, the teacher feedback, the teacher librarian who supported two of my passion groups and finally the teacher who offered to have his students both interview and create a video highlighting the passion projects.

Evaluation of Proposed Goals and Objectives

I feel that the accomplishments of my original goals and objectives show that I did what I originally set out to do. Strengthening relationships between the children and the community was a critical goal for my project. I wanted to create new relationships through partnerships, and I wanted to build upon my existing relationships with my students. Quality partnerships were created, and they were unique in their common goal of following passions. Two moms, a dad, a great-aunt and an aunt, (all who had never volunteered in my classroom), built a relationship with my students based on sharing their passion. Since prior to this project they didn't have any interactions with the classroom, I feel that I was successful in strengthening relationships with families. I also feel that these relationships went beyond volunteering to exchange home-reading books or coming on a field trip. The family members who came into our classroom shared something personal, and my students engaged with them on a deeper level. These relationships met my goal of creating family partnerships outside of traditional volunteer roles.

Although it was not part of the original goal, relationships were also created with two teachers in my school with whom my students had previously limited interactions. Although relationships with the school community were not specifically stated as a goal, these relationships still met the objective of increasing student engagement and well-being through connections and partnerships. Because of these school-based relationships, my students know many other adults in the building who have shown an interest in their learning. My students have experienced the advantage of having multiple people support and guide them in their learning. I believe these relationships increase their engagement in school and their well-being as they feel personal connections.

One of my objectives was to increase my knowledge and understanding of each child through partnerships. I feel that generally, supporting and observing my students as they followed their passions helped me gain insight into what they love to do. Although most of the time their passions weren't too surprising to me, any amount of time spent on learning the personal interests of others helps to increase your knowledge of them. Since I didn't receive as many family partnerships as I had hoped, I ended up coming in to school on my days off to support two different passion groups. This was never my plan, but I needed to adapt to the limited partners who showed interest in leading a group. This opportunity to lead two groups was a wonderful experience and helped me to better meet this objective. When I met with my group, I was able to meet in a different classroom with few interruptions. Our conversations were relaxed and more personal than in the classroom. The students and I had a unique opportunity to learn about each other in a casual atmosphere. I enjoyed supporting the students and following their lead. Without this experience, I may have said that this objective was not met. I would say that this objective could have been met more fully if I would have had this opportunity with all the groups.

Another goal that was met was placing student interest and passions at the centre of all partnerships. Focusing on the importance of following one's passion, all the partners who came into share their own passion inspired my students to follow their own interests. The passion of those who came into our class was contagious. My students experienced the joy in doing and sharing one's passion and thus their own passion was nurtured. The partnerships that were created to help my students explore their own passions were based solely on student interest. The adults were true facilitators of student learning as student voice and choice were heard loud and clear. This placed student well-being at the centre of all the relationships. The relationships and partnerships demonstrated to my students that their passion

was important. It was important enough for families and teachers to take the time to listen to and support my students' ideas and desires.

I believe that my project met my goal of providing a creative and engaging environment for my students. My students demonstrated that they were engaged in their passion projects by taking ownership and initiative. At the start of each day, many students inquired about the next time that they would meet with their partner. They often asked to work on their project, even when their partner was not available to meet. My students also demonstrated engagement as their projects are of high quality work. They did not need reminders to do their best or to stay on task. My students demonstrated creativity as each project is unique.

I believe that my project also met my objective of increasing student engagement through partnerships and the passion project. Prior to the passion projects, exploration time for some students involved many reminders and redirection to choose an activity that was classroom appropriate. These students wanted to play running or throwing games that were only appropriate for recess. Many students would repeatedly ask to play math games on the ipad, as they found imaginative play a bit of a struggle. When students were working on their passion projects with their partner, engagement increased. Exploration time sounded more like a buzz of excitement instead of inappropriate volumes and movement. Students didn't need redirection or reminders to make appropriate choices.

I also believe that the partnerships and passion projects increased student learning. Without small group support and the opportunity to follow their own interests, I don't believe that the same amount of learning would have happened. Each student grew in their knowledge and ability in their passion. In some groups, the growth was less than in others, but none the less the learning would not have happened without a partner giving guidance. Typically during Exploration Time I am on my own and I am not able to support individuals in the same way that the partnerships provided.

For my objective of creating a welcoming climate for families, I used an electronic survey to ask my families about how welcomed they feel in my classroom. With the anonymous survey, I didn't receive many responses. However, all participants selected that they feel very welcomed and valued in my classroom. I was happy to hear that the lack of involvement wasn't due to feeling unwelcomed in my classroom. What this survey did tell me, however, was that several families feel uncomfortable in the classroom. I didn't explore all the possible reasons with the survey, but this informs me that I have a welcoming environment, but perhaps the classroom has now become unfamiliar. I feel that if I continue to give opportunities for unique partnerships, that perhaps we can help families feel more comfortable.

For my objective of increasing the amount of meaningful connections, I asked my families how they felt about their involvement in the passion projects. My limited responses told me that yes, they felt that their role in the passion projects was meaningful and my families felt that their involvement had an impact on student learning or engagement. Unfortunately, I didn't have a baseline before the passion projects began. However, my opportunities for meaningful connections would have been non-existent in my opinion as volunteer roles such as home-reading book exchange and field trips were the only opportunities available.

My final objective was met as the families involved in the passion project indicated interest in future partnerships. Although my involvement and responses on the survey were limited, they all indicated that they'd be interested in future partnerships. The survey also asked those who were not necessarily

involved in the passion project about their desire for future partnership opportunities. All of the responses indicated an interest in unique partnership opportunities.

Project Impact

For myself, the project impacted my professional partnerships. Typically, I do not seek out guidance, help or feedback from colleagues that are not in the early years. I often speak to one or two teachers who have classrooms close by, but rarely do I seek professional support outside of those classrooms. I have now experienced the advantage of partnering up with different teachers who have different strengths. Not only did my professional partnerships make my job easier, it made learning and teaching more meaningful for my students. They worked with other students from different classrooms and witnessed older students teaching and leading. Older students had the opportunity to take leadership and try out newly learned skills.

From my observations, I believe that my students now see new opportunities for learning with people other than their classroom teacher. At the start of this project, my students found it very difficult to imagine any other learning partnership besides their parents helping them with homework. They hadn't experienced parents or family members leading the class, and I don't think at the outset that they understood why we would invite families in to our classroom to support our learning. My students also struggled with the idea of their parents having something valuable to share or to teach. I believe that now my students have seen that anyone can come in to a classroom and share their passion and inspire others to do the same. I believe that they now see that learning partnerships don't all have to look the same, as everyone brings different strengths to the experience.

From my observations, I also believe that my students now know the joy of learning based on their own interests. During previous inquiry projects, my students have compromised by following the general interest of the class, as I couldn't provide individual support. When I have tried to give my students an opportunity to follow their own interests, their learning was stunted by the limited support that I could give them. I believe that my students now know this joy because they continue to ask about what they can learn next. After seeing each unique project, my students want to explore other passions too. Some of my students want to continue learning more about their passion as they know they've just hit the tip of the iceberg. I feel that the partnerships and passion project has impacted their ideas around what learning looks like and feels like.

The feedback from my parents, albeit very limited, was very positive and demonstrated an impact on their child's engagement and learning. Parents who completed the survey believe that the passion projects and partnerships are valuable for their child's engagement and learning. These parents stated that they would like to see more opportunities for partnerships, and a few parents indicated that they would be interested in being involved. The survey also asked parents to reflect upon how welcomed and valued they feel in the class, and how comfortable they feel in the class. All of the responses informed me that they feel very welcomed and valued in my class. However, a few responses told me that they do not feel comfortable. This feedback will impact my plans for future years. I feel that I should continue seeking out partnerships, as families feel that it is valuable. However, I will need to get more specific feedback as to help families feel comfortable. I will continue to share our learning and

work hard at keeping families involved in the learning. I am hoping that the more involved I keep the families the more comfortable they may become in their child's classroom.

The feedback I received from my students will also impact future passion projects. My students loved having guests come into our classroom to share their passions. They loved the learning and the new friendships. The majority of my class would like to see partnerships continue, and they would like their families to be involved. About 1/3 of my class stated that they wished they had chosen another passion, often one that another group had done. I think that this is an important part of the process for my students. It's great that they can look back and reflect upon what they enjoyed and what they would change. This feedback will impact the passion projects in the future. With more time, I will be able to give students more opportunities to follow a variety of passions. This way, if they are interested in another's passion, they will have the chance to try it themselves. My students gave me the impression that they were not done with the passion projects as they wanted to continue to learning process and relationship building.

Lessons Learned, Experienced Gained

I have learned the importance of seeking feedback from colleagues, students and parents. Feeling restricted by time, in the past I have often assumed what other people think and made changes accordingly. Since every step of this project required me to seek feedback, I had the opportunity to see how feedback can have a huge impact on the outcome. My support team 's feedback helped me to adjust my parent survey, feedback from my parents helped me understand different perspectives and change my approach, and feedback from my students helped me to see the importance of the "little things." My colleagues' feedback was encouraging and showed me that other teachers want you to share the successes you have in your class. I will make a point of seeking out feedback from a variety of sources more often.

I learned the impact of detailed planning. Knowing that I was following a strict timeline with a lot to accomplish, I worked hard at making sure my project stayed on track. This meant making detailed calendars, many lists, and making step-by-step plans to ensure that no details were forgotten. Although I consider myself an organized person, this extreme planning helped me see the importance of carefully thinking through each step. I felt that my students gained the most from my planning as I carefully scaffolded them along the way. I made notes to myself about how I could ensure that student voice was heard. I believe that paying special attention to detail saved myself a lot of grief as I took the time to foresee any challenges and adapt my plan when necessary.

I gained an appreciation for working with a team. As my project developed, I was surprised to find myself communicating with a team that involved both teachers and parents. Even further into the project, I felt surprised by a supportive team of teachers, administration, parents and newly developed partnerships. At the outset, working with a diverse team would have made me feel a little uncomfortable. At the end of this project, I feel excited to create future teams that are comprised of many different stake holders. I have learned that giving each team member an opportunity to bring their strengths to the table not only makes an incredibly strong team, but also a happy and stress-free team. Knowing that each team member was bringing a unique quality helped me to relax and enjoy the process more than if I was trying to do it all by myself. Why do it alone when it's so easier and more beneficial to work with a team?

I learned that I am a better teacher when I plan for student voice and choice. Before this project, I do feel that I worked hard at listening to my students' interests and strengths and gave them opportunities to have choice. However, I didn't always plan so that their voice was heard throughout the learning. For this project I brainstormed with the students from the outset. I was not only open to hearing their opinion, but I had planned for ways to guide the conversation and record our journey. I was prepared for different outcomes and came prepared to be the best learning coach that I could be. I believe planning for student choice and voice helped my students take ownership over their projects.

What worked what didn't:

Sending the parental survey, consent form and background on the project home all at once did not work. I thought that by sending home one package containing everything they needed to know would be a nice way to inform the parents while informing me with the survey. As I only received a handful of consent forms and surveys back, I feel that this was a poor decision. The package may have felt too heavy and too much of a time commitment. Many of the parents may have felt that giving consent for their child to participate in my project was the same as telling me that they were interested in participating. As I only received a handful of consent forms back, I sent the consent form separately a second time. This time I quickly received all the consent forms back.

My survey did not work as I only received a handful of responses. I wonder if the survey was too long, or if the package made the survey seem too long. My survey was not anonymous, and this may have made it unsuccessful. I believe that if I could have made the survey shorter and electronic that I may have had more success.

Having family members come in to my class to share their passions was successful. I believe that this level of commitment was an appropriate amount for a first-time partnership. Having only received one parent who wanted to support a group of students throughout the project, I believe that asking parents to join a group may have been asking too much for a beginning partnership. However, family members who came to class to share their passions knew that it was only an hour commitment. I believe the one-time partnerships were also successful because sharing your passion likely feels more comfortable than leading a group of students.

Partnerships within the school community were very successful. Partnering with different teachers throughout the project helped both myself and my students. I didn't have to feel overwhelmed by the amount of work, and my students experienced the benefits of a team of teachers who were willing to support their learning. I believe that these partnerships worked because teachers were able to follow their own strengths and passions while supporting those of my students. An excitement was created as more people shared their passions. Teachers were able to bring small pieces to the project that were still meaningful and played an important role in the success for the students.

What's different as a result and sustainable change

One of the biggest differences as a result of this project are the new connections and relationships. These connections, relationships and partnerships are many and affect many different groups within and outside of the school.

As a professional, I have connected with other teachers to support student learning. I have sought out feedback, expertise and partnerships that aim at giving my students more individual support. I believe that these partnerships are sustainable. Even though my colleagues and their expertise may change, I know that if I make professional relationships a priority that these types of partnerships are sustainable.

Family communication, feedback and engagement has increased since the beginning of this project. I have made a point of keeping parents involved in the entire process of their child's passion project. I have asked for feedback, ideas and engagement. I have enjoyed sharing this project from onset to finish, as previously I neglected to share all stages of student learning. As a result, I have seen the importance of sharing the learning that happens along the way. I have also made a point of seeking family feedback and involvement. As a result of these opportunities, my students' families have been given an opportunity to share their voice. As I will continue teaching my current grade 1 students next year in grade 2, I believe that these families will show greater involvement as they now know what they can expect. I can build on current relationships instead of having to start from the beginning. I believe that involving the families as partners is sustainable. The more I involve the families and seek their input, the more it will become common practice.

Learning partnerships between my students and myself have changed as a result of this project. I learned to become even more of the facilitator and involve my students in all stages of the learning. My students had opportunities to lead their own learning. I believe that teaching grade 1 and 2 makes it very difficult to support individual or small group projects. However, I do believe that this type of teacher-student relationship is sustainable. I will need to continue to reach out to my colleagues and families for support. I will need to continue to learn different strategies for supporting students at this age. I will also need to continue being very organized and plan step-by-step processes to help scaffold my students into independent learners who become leaders. I know that this is sustainable as when the teaching and learning becomes more relevant, personal and meaningful, it becomes common practice.

My project was focused on creating community-school partnerships within my classroom. I do believe that this is sustainable as a small-scale project. Ultimately, I would like to see community-school partnerships branch out to be the larger community, and to involve the entire school. I know that for that goal to become reality I need to involve other teachers, classrooms and families in my partnerships. I know this will be difficult, and I believe that community-school partnerships would need to become common space before it could be sustainable. My small-scale project relies heavily on myself, whereas sustaining whole school involvement would require partnerships to become embraced by the majority, especially the leadership.

Leading change

I have learned that leading change takes a lot of time, organization and communication. Leading change requires time to create, get feedback, reflect, adapt and then start it all over again. Leading change requires one to be prepared and organized so that events can play out as smoothly as possible. Leading change also requires a lot of communication to keep everyone involved and engaged.

Leading change requires creativity and innovation. Starting something new is exciting and rewarding, but also involves frustration and defeat. Change requires starting from scratch and using original ideas to create something new and different. It means being innovative when things didn't go as planned.

I have learned that just because I am ready for a change doesn't mean that everyone else is ready too. I have been on my own personal and professional journey, and others are on their own journey as well. I need to focus on my own journey and inspire others to join. To share my journey with others, I need to invite feedback, voice and non-threatening ways to participate.

Development of Skills and Knowledge

I have further developed my technical knowledge in creating and sharing my project. I have learned how to create a blog that meets my needs. I have developed skills in becoming more efficient with the methods I use to share files. Using numerous ipads, phones and computers, I adapted to regularly sharing and posting whatever the students were working on.

I have developed skills in reflection and adaptation. I improved upon my ability to use feedback and personal reflection to adapt my plans when necessary. Taking more time for personal reflection often left me seeking out feedback, and often asking for support.

In asking for support, I have learned to become more flexible in my planning. With numerous partnerships, I learned how to work with multiple schedules I learned how to adapt quickly. I learned to have plan B,C and D ready in preparation for changes.

I have further developed skills in scaffolding the learning process for my students. I am a big picture thinker, and I often don't take the time to think and plan for all the small details. I found that in planning for every small step, that I could be more intentional in providing guidance. As I paid more attention to scaffolding, I learned to keep the goals attainable.

Future learning needs

In order for me to become a teacher leader, I need to further develop my ability to share my journey in a way that engages my target audience. For engaging my educator audience, I need to learn how to create opportunities to invite other teachers to join my journey. I believe that I will need to learn multiple strategies such as effective ways to get honest feedback, low-commitment but meaningful ways to join as a professional, and meaningful opportunities to work together as classrooms. I need to learn how to share my journey in a manner that doesn't feel imposed.

I also need to learn how to give my students' families a voice in the classroom. After receiving very little feedback and low participation, I have done a lot of reflection and looked for feedback from numerous audiences. After my interview with United Way, I learned that it is important for peers to lead peers. I believe that if I had parents leading parents, that I might receive more genuine feedback and engagement. I need to learn how to create these opportunities so that all families feel comfortable in the classroom. Having a uniquely difficult classroom this year, I do believe that one of the reasons for low participation is the current group of families. This has challenged me to question why some families are more difficult to engage and reflect upon ways that I could speak specifically to this group. I need to continue exploring different feedback from educators and families. I need to explore different ways to invite families in to the classroom and engage in their child's learning.

In the distant future, I will need to learn how to engage the local community. I know that in order to keep community-school partnerships sustainable, I need to start slowly and allow the change to occur naturally. One thing I have learned is that brainstorming, problems solving and being innovative works better in groups than alone! I hope that I can slowly gain educator and family support. If this happens, I can develop a team of people who are interested in engaging the local community. We can learn together the best ways to create real-world connections and learning opportunities for our students.

Connecting Classrooms and Communities: Family-School Partnerships

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Project Summary:

I believe that family-school partnerships can play a vital role in student engagement, academic success and over-all well-being. I want to provide unique opportunities for families in my school community to move beyond the traditional volunteer role towards a partnership in student learning. Having only one teacher supporting a class of grade one and two students in following their unique interests through reading (research), design and play is challenging. Since children of this age group are still developing skills in independence, each child requires a significant amount of individual support. I believe that our daily “exploration time” would provide a unique opportunity for families to partner with individual or small groups of students. Exploration time is a one-hour period each day where students get to explore interests such as creating through art, building, games and imaginative play. This family-school partnership will create opportunities for one-time or regular involvement for families to support student interest and learning. For this project, family members will partner with me and grade one and two students during exploration time to support student interest and learning.

Supporting well-being for all should be the driving force behind education. In order to support well-being for our students, educators need to build trusting relationships that encompass the whole person. Since students spend less than half of their time in school, partnerships and communication with student families are key to developing these authentic relationships. Family-school partnerships place the individual student’s needs, strengths and passions at the centre as both parties share the same goal of student well-being. Families can provide unique perspectives and offer one-on-one attention to help guide students as they develop their strengths through personal interests. Families can extend the learning that occurs during the school day and show support when educators regularly communicate. Students are best supported when school and family come together for the mutual goal of well-being for all. Educators need to engage students in authentic and real-world learning experiences that support well-being, follow personal strengths and interests and inspire students to become life-long learners. Catherine O’Brien and Patrick Howard (2016), say that if we repurpose education with the vision of well-being for all, sustainably that we are moving in the right direction toward transforming education to meet 21st century needs. In the shift towards repurposing education with the vision of well-being for all, O’Brien and Howard recommend “creating environments where students and teachers are actively engaged with life, developing the capacity and skill to contribute to their own well-being, and well-being of others and the environment that sustains us” (p.128).

In Sir Ken Robinson’s book *Creative Schools*, he speaks to moving education to a more holistic approach that nurtures the diversity of our children. Robinson (2015) believes that education is only improved when we understand that it is a living system. People will thrive under certain conditions and not in others. He recognizes that children typically spend more time out of school than in it. Knowing this, we know that parents and families have a major influence on our students. By connecting with our families, educators can better understand the interests and characters of the students that they teach. From these relationships, educators can learn to see the individual and understand that life is not linear. Sir Ken Robinson reminds us see individuals as unique, and that there are many routes to fulfillment. Without relationships, the well-being of our students cannot be met. (Robinson, 2015)

Providing a creative and engaging environment that supports well-being for all requires strong caring relationships at the centre. Dr. Patrick Carney and Dr. Michelann Parr believe that

schools are challenged to promote equitable and inclusive school climates to ensure all children develop mental health and a positive sense of self and belonging. Carney and Parr (2014) say that this is a community effort that requires dialogue among families, communities and schools. They provide many strategies in *Resilient, Active, and Flourishing: Supporting Positive Mental Health and Well-Being in School Communities* that support positive student-family-teacher relationships. These strategies include engagement, focusing on strengths and working together to promote well-being at school and at home. Carney and Parr believe that students-family-teacher relationships need to communicate openly and engage families in identifying strengths. It is important to build identity through family stories and model how strengths help us overcome challenges (Carney & Parr, 2014).

Supporting the well-being of students requires a trusting relationship that allows student choice and voice to be heard and respected. This relationship is built on the belief that we teach children, not simply students. Joyce Epstein states that educators who view their students as children are likely to see the family and the community as partners with the school. Epstein (2002) states that these partnerships can “improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents’ skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community and help teachers do their work” (p. 20). Epstein’s theory of Overlapping Spheres of Influence explains that with frequent interactions among schools, families and communities that students are more likely to hear common messages from these various groups that speak to the importance of working hard, thinking creatively and of helping one another. (Epstein, 2002) These partnerships place students at the centre and are designed to engage, guide, energize and motivate students to create their own successes. Stefanski, Valli, and Jacobson (2016), also point to the research that shows how partnerships between schools and communities support student learning and strengthen families and neighborhoods. Stefanski et al. argue that schools need to move beyond simple parent involvement and engage parents in meaningful partnerships with the school. While comparing four partnership models between schools and families, Stefanski et al. found that full-service community schools recognized that parents are key players whose ideas are both important and necessary. It is this type of parent engagement that leads to rewards for students, families and schools (Stefanski et al., 2016). With a focus on the child and strengthening partnerships, well-being is supported for all parties involved.

Debbie Pushor, an educator at Princess Alexandra Community School in Saskatchewan, had a life-changing experience that influenced the way she partnered with parents in her classroom. Her experience with teaching sisters, whom she refers to as Melissa and Melody, helped her look inward as an educator instead of only looking outward to the families. Melissa and Melody, although great students, were typically wearing dirty clothes and had an odor that other children noticed. Debbie Pushor called these parents in for a meeting, without indicating a reason. Seeing herself as the expert, she planned on telling them how to do a better job at keeping their children clean. However, when she met the family she changed her position and felt ashamed. Melissa and Melody’s parents “expressed concern for their daughters and were clearly anxious about why I had asked them to come and see me. In that moment, in their tightly interwoven hands, their worried expressions, and their questions about their daughters – I was both embarrassed and humbled.” (Pushor, 2011, p.66). At that moment, Pushor decided to take the time to celebrate the girls’ growth and learn about the family. She describes this experience as beginning “to sit with them, rather than stand apart from them.” (Pushor, 2011, p.66) Thirty years later, she is still influenced by this meeting. She believes that as we seek to reach out to

families and the community that as educators we need to look inward as a starting point. As a professional team at Princess Alexandra Community School, educators meet regularly to share personal experiences with families to challenge or affirm beliefs that are shaped by these experiences. Pushor says that as educators we need to take the time to have honest and open conversations and explore new ways of making sense of the school's relationship with families and the community. We need to engage parents at a deeper level that goes beyond volunteer programs, meet the teacher and fundraisers. (Pushor, 2011). She believes that as we move from traditional ways of involvement to new ways of engagement that "we enable parents to take their place alongside educators in the school of their children, combining their knowledge of children and of teaching and learning with teachers' knowledge" (Pushor, 2011, p.67). Pushor says that in terms of family-school relationships that we get what we put in. If we give "our heartfelt care and commitment, time to listen and learn, and space for parent knowledge to be shared alongside our own knowledge, what we get is stronger schools, families and communities" (Pushor, 2011, p.68) As I move forward in creating school-family partnerships it is evident that successful partnerships are those that are meaningful for all parties involved.

The research has given me a greater focus and deeper meaning for my project on creating school-family partnerships. My first motivations for this project were primarily to give families an opportunity to be more involved in their student's learning. As a parent, I want to know more about my child's school day and have opportunities to be more involved and to extend the learning at home. As a teacher, I could see how this partnership would engage the students and give them time to explore their passions and strengths. These motivations haven't necessarily changed, but they have become secondary. I feel strongly that creating relationships has become the greatest focus. It is relationships that connect us, provide meaning and make us stronger. When students, families and schools are connected through meaningful relationships I believe that these relationships support student success and well-being. Through the research, I can also see how these relationships and meaningful connections can support the well-being of everyone. When relationships become the focus, we can place more emphasis on what's really important and support each other instead of work against each other. Sir Ken Robinson's book *Creative Schools* has had a large impact on the way I see education, and this project. I am motivated and inspired by the emphasis he places on well-being by understanding that seeing the individual is of utmost importance. He says "there is another world that exists only because you exist: the private world of your own thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, the world within you.... We only know the world around us through the world within us, through the sense by which we perceive it and the ideas by which we make sense of it" (Robinson, 2015, p.52). If we focus on relationships we can better understand and support each unique individual. I see relationships as a key proponent to well-being for all. The research has shown me that it is paramount that a trusting and caring partnership is created where well-being for all is at the centre of all decisions.

The feedback I have received thus far has helped me keep focus and narrow the project scope to be reasonable yet meaningful. It has been suggested that I start small, as whole school change needs to start organically. I need to engage students, staff and families in as many parts of the process as possible. I had planned on having students share their partnership ideas with me, but now I am thinking that it would also be great for the students to communicate their partnership ideas with their parents via our class blog or letter. I have been reminded that I need to be open to feedback along the way. So far I have received great feedback from my administrators which pushed me to create a specific time (explorations time) as a great start to

family partnerships. I need to be aware of the language used to present the project, as well as language constraints due to the numerous ESL families. Feedback has supported my idea of engaging families in student learning. This partnership is exciting as it moves beyond traditional roles of parent volunteer and focuses on building strong and caring relationships.

This project is also exciting as it moves beyond traditional teaching and learning towards education for sustainable development (Efs). In *Learning For The Future*, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) expert group developed core competencies in ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) for educators. I believe that my project on school-family partnerships works towards meeting several of these competencies. According to UNECE expert group, an educator in ESD needs to be someone who inspires creativity and innovation and engages with learners in ways that build positive relationships (“In Learning For The Future”, 2012). I believe that building family-school partnerships works towards building these positive relationships. The student-teacher relationship grows stronger as the student feels supported. The teacher-family relationship is strengthened as they work together towards a common goal. The passion projects involved in this project also inspire creativity and innovation in young children. According to UNECE expert group an educator should also be able to connect the learner to their local and global spheres of influence (“In Learning For The Future”, 2012). I believe that by partnering with families, my students are connecting to their most local and closest spheres of influence. In this partnership, children are experiencing creativity, innovation and problem solving with families in their local community. The UNECE expert group also states that an educator in ESD needs to understand why there is a need to transform the way we educate/learn (“In Learning For The Future”, 2012). I strongly believe that education needs to focus on well-being, relationships and encouraging creativity and innovation in our children. I also believe that family-school partnerships works towards meeting these goals.

Goals and Objectives

Goals:

1. Strengthen relationships between the children and the community.
2. Place student interests and passions at the centre of all partnerships.
3. Place well-being for all at the centre of all relationships.
4. Provide a creative and engaging environment for the children.
5. Gain a better understanding of each child through building partnerships.
6. Create partnerships with families outside of traditional volunteer roles.

Objectives:

1. Increase opportunities for meaningful connections with families.
2. Create a welcoming climate and increase family and community involvement.
3. Increase student learning and well-being through connections and partnerships.
4. Increase student engagement through the partnership and passion project.
5. Increase knowledge and understanding of each child through family partnerships.
6. Families involved indicate engagement and interest in future partnerships.

Barriers/Constraints

I believe that this project is limited by both time and scope. Fostering meaningful relationships that turn into partnerships take time. Most of my students' families only attend school 2-3 times each year for conferences and student concerts. I continually have the same 2-3 families volunteer each month (some bi-weekly) and although I have created opportunities for more family involvement, it hasn't increased the amount of involvement. I am anticipating that asking for partnerships to support student interest may not encourage more families to engage. I think that although my letter home to parents might encourage some new thoughts around partnerships, I believe that this might not be enough. Perhaps after I share student-family partnerships, other families might be encouraged or inspired to also create partnerships. I believe that if the time-line of this project allowed for a second round of partnerships that I might have more success.

Since I am only reaching-out to the families in my classroom, I am also limited by the amount of families able to participate. I decided to only include the families in my classroom as I think that my relationships with these families will be beneficial to creating partnerships. I also believe that sustainable change needs to start small. I need to learn from this project before I extend the idea of family-school partnerships to the rest of the school. Future partnerships within other classrooms will potentially be more meaningful and sustainable if they happen organically as momentum builds. However asking for partnerships from a small pool of families will limit the possibilities during this project.

I believe that the largest barrier that this project will face will be family perceptions about school-family partnerships. Generally speaking, parents and families in our school community have low participation percentages with school events and with our parent association. School-wide events, such as student-led conferences, school concerts and our spring BBQ are well attended, but all too often the organizers of events such as the BBQ need to beg for families to volunteer. The parent association hosts a movie night a few times throughout the school year. Many families attend, but the same 4-5 parents organize this event as they can't get anyone involved. Our parent association meets monthly and out of a school of approximately 400 students, approximately 6-10 parents attend each month.

This begs the question, why don't families want to participate through volunteer opportunities? After comparing different models for family-school partnerships, Stefanski et al. found that one problem in creating successful partnerships is the limitations that are placed on families. The

family role is often conceived in superficial or condescending ways. (Stefanski et al., 2016) Stefanski et al. found that the limited documented examples of school-family partnerships suggests a need for partnerships to focus explicitly on the inclusion of parents and families. They suggest that in order to meet the challenge of these perceived limitations that the partnerships should focus on relationship building, bridging power and cultural gaps and cultivating leadership among parents. (Stefanski et al., 2016) Perhaps the families in my school community want opportunities that go beyond specific and limiting volunteer roles. Alternatively, the families may feel that they don't need to be involved in schools. If families haven't had a meaningful and engaging experience, how could they know the advantages? I will work to overcome this barrier by focusing on building trusting relationships where family voice is heard equally to mine. I will also work hard at communicating, through partnership experiences, the benefits of involvement. To start off our project of family-school partnerships, I will be creating a partnership between students and a family member of my own. I will be able to share this partnership with family members through our class blog. Hopefully this shared experience will encourage other partnerships. Throughout the timeline and scope of this project, I don't believe that teacher perceptions will likely create direct barriers. Since I am the only teacher directly involved in the project, I only see teacher perceptions becoming a barrier as partnerships continue once this project has come to an end.

The second and third barrier that I face will be availability and language. I know that most of my students' families work full-time. I also know that many families have younger children at home that need care. I am working to overcome the barrier of time by creating flexible partnerships that can suit different schedules. Although the partnerships will need to be during the school day, I will communicate to families that partnerships do not need to be ongoing, and can be open to different times throughout the afternoon. I will also communicate to families that younger siblings are welcome to join the partnerships. Many of the families in my school do not speak English at home. I am able to engage in basic communication about field trips, reading or math goals, but I don't believe that my letter home to parents regarding the importance of partnerships will be understood by these families. To overcome this barrier, I will open up a two-way dialogue between students and their families. Students will create a list of possible partnerships and families can choose one or suggest other partnerships. I will spend time with my students brainstorming partnership possibilities and opportunities. The students will gain a better understanding as to why partnerships might be great for both them and their families. I will have students write a letter/make a picture to their families about coming into the class to partner. I am hoping that this letter and student excitement will help ESL families understand the possible benefits of the partnerships.

Timeline

Start Date	Details of Activity	Resources	Communication
Week of April 2 nd – 6 th	Start arranging times for interviews. I plan to interview a teacher in LRSD and a volunteer coordinator from a local organization. Dates may be delayed as I wait for divisional ethics approval.	Interview questions Notebook for recording all observations and answers and future questions.	Not directly communicated. Information used to guide project.
April 3 rd and 5 th	Introduction to students about partnerships with families Brainstorm possible partnership projects that interest students. Create potential groupings of students following similar interests.	Chart paper Camera	Post picture of brainstorming chart on Seesaw (class blog account)
Week of April 9 th - 13 th	Create a partnership between a family member(s) of mine and students. Family member will share their passion and work with students in groups.	Family member(s) Supplies for “activity” Camera	Post pictures on Seesaw
Week of April 9 th – 13 th	Help students create letters to go home. These letters will focus on passion project ideas and asking for partnerships and family input on new ideas.	Chart paper Lined paper Envelopes	Letter sent home Note sent home via Seesaw
April 16 th	Send home parent information letter and survey re: family-school partnerships. Parent surveys returned by April 20 th . Date could be delayed as I wait for divisional approval.	Parent information letter Parent survey	Information sent home via student agendas.
April 17-20 th	As surveys are returned gather information. Use parental feedback to help guide the project moving forward. Hoping to meet with interviewees by this week.	Notebook for recoding notes and gathering information.	Not shared.
April 23 rd - 27 th	Make arrangements with interested family members. Plan possible date(s) for visits and create lists of best matched partnerships based on matched interests and number of family members willing to partner.	Notebook for recording information	Not shared.
May 1 st – June 8 th	Student passion projects are developed during exploration time. School-family partnerships help support student passions. Build positive partnerships between teacher and families.	Notebook for recording observations. Camera for recording passion projects as they develop.	Share pictures of passion projects as they develop on Seesaw.

	As partnerships may come and go at different time frames, family members will be asked to reflect about their experiences as they wrap up. This will be the partnership evaluation	Reflection for family partnerships	
June 11 th - 15 th	Share passion projects with other classrooms. Ask school news team to come and interview and create a story Invite families to come see passion projects during school BBQ (Create paper invitations on June 11 th . Date of BBQ TBA)	Camera Paper for invitations News Team – check if they are available to work on news story. Teacher – Tom Stimson	Post pictures on Seesaw Send family invitation home on June 11 th
June 18 th – 22 nd	Passion Projects are shared on school t.v. Pictures will be created into a video that plays throughout the day. Students will be asked about their experiences in family partnerships. This will act as the student evaluation.	Camera Access to school t.v – Teacher Kathy Klenk Reflection for students	Post pictures on Seesaw Post video to school t.v.
June 25 th – July 6 th	Work on creating final presentation/report		Shared with class

Throughout this project, details of student passion projects and family partnerships will be communicated on our class blog on Seesaw. Pictures will be shared of the student passion projects as they progress. Pictures of family partnerships and the unique strengths and perspectives they bring will be celebrated on Seesaw as well. Both project progress and partnerships will be shared at least once a week, depending on the amount of partnerships. At the end of the project, student passion projects will be shared on the school t.v.

Evaluation of family partnerships will occur individually as they wrap up their partnerships for the project. Families will be asked to reflect upon their level of engagement, increased level of relationships, enjoyment and desire for future partnerships. Students will be asked to reflect on the process once all of the passion projects are complete. They will also be asked to reflect upon engagement, increased relationships and ideas for future partnerships. Throughout the project I will keep notes from observations and conversations from students and families. At the end of the project, I will reflect upon the notes to see how many objectives were met and to what extent. After the project and evaluations are complete, I will share final thoughts, observations and outcomes on Seesaw. Students will have an opportunity to share and celebrate their passion project on the evening of the school BBQ.

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Mid Term Progress Report

I've enjoyed taking the time to review the original project proposal at this point of time, as it has provided a great opportunity to reflect, and to refocus for the final stretch. Looking at the original goals that I set out, I feel quite happy about the progress that has been made. The first goal of strengthening relationships between the children and the community has been very successful. Thus far, every person who has come into our classroom to help with the passion projects has connected with the students and made an impact on our classroom. My students often speak of the guests that have visited us, and whenever I speak of another guest my students are filled with anticipation and excitement as we await their visit and then fully engage in whatever they bring to our class. Thus far, our class has had the opportunity to partner with two parents, one great-aunt, and my mom. One of the parents has come over many weeks, and has built relationships with the students. Although the other parent, great-aunt and my mom were only available for a one-time visit, their excitement and desire to share their passion was contagious and I believe impacted the students as they delved into their own passion projects. We are still expecting another aunt and mother to come in and share. Relationships between these families and our classroom were non-existent before this project. Now I hear my students inquire about the partners and call them by name. We had four unexpected relationships built within the school. When staff in our school saw the passion projects develop, many of them approached me with a desire to come and share their passion. I had overlooked that although these teachers and principal were in our school, many of my students would not necessarily know them or have any relationship with them. Our students made connections to the band teacher, the resource teacher, the teacher librarian and our principal. Relationships with these teachers was limited, and now my students have a connection with them and a shared experience of following passions.

My second goal of placing student interest and passions at the centre of all partnerships has also been successful. All of the guests who have shared their passions engaged the students and held their interest. All of our partners who have worked with the students on their passion projects have followed the student's lead. Each student decided which passion they'd like to explore. If students had similar interests, they were paired so they could work together. Student interests and passions are leading the projects and the partnerships.

My third goal of placing well-being at the centre of all relationships has been successful thus far. The relationships between my students and our partners have been engaging, positive, supportive and caring. I can see this both in the faces of my students, and in their constant desire to work with their partners on their projects.

My fourth goal of creating an engaging environment has gone well as my students want to engage in all of the passion projects! At this age, students are still very open to many interests and almost found it difficult to choose one passion to follow. When they see other students working on their projects they show interest by asking questions and ask if they can also learn more about that passion. During exploration time, when most of the projects take place, there is a buzz of excitement as students work hard on their projects. Students often ask about their project and can't wait to continue working on it.

My fifth goal of gaining a better understanding of each child through the partnerships is well on its way, but a goal that is still in progress. I have been able to see the children in different roles, following their interests and taking the lead of their own learning. This has given me insight into their interests and strengths. I am working with two small groups (on my days off) on their passion projects, and I have enjoyed getting to know these students on a different level. They lead the project, and I get the pleasure of helping them on an as need basis. I enjoy our casual conversations and our time that is less interrupted as a busy day in the class can be. I wish I had this opportunity with more of my students, and that is why I feel this is still a work in progress.

My last goal of creating partnerships outside of traditional volunteer roles has been very successful this far. Although I haven't created as many partnerships as I would have liked, the partnerships that were created were driven by the family member and I have tried to provide them with the time and supplies that they needed for their partnership. This goal is definitely still in progress as I have reached very few family members. I am hoping that as we share our partnerships within the school and local community that other non-traditional partnerships are created.

Thus far, many of my objectives are well on their way to met within the scope of this project. I have increased opportunities for meaningful connections, as there were very few opportunities prior. My students' families have been given opportunities to partner with our students by sharing their own passion, or by helping students develop their own passions. My second objective of creating a welcoming climate and increasing family/community involvement is difficult to assess at this point. The families who have come thus far have enjoyed their time with us and family involvement has increased. However, what is the reason that so few families decided to create partnerships? Perhaps the environment is not as welcoming as I thought it was. Perhaps the families didn't partner with us for other reasons unrelated to the climate. At this point, I need feedback to help inform future partnerships. I know that there might be numerous factors affecting the partnerships, and I plan on inquiring with my families so I can do my best at providing a welcoming climate for my families.

My fourth objective of increasing student learning and wellbeing through the partnerships is large, but I feel that I am definitely making progress. Student learning, during exploration time, has increased as this time was most often dedicated to play. Play-based learning is important, and definitely a priority for my classroom. The passion projects helped bring the "play" and "exploration" to a deeper level as the students were given a partner to help them work towards goals that I alone could not provide. Learning also increased as the partnership gave the access to resources that they were unable to manage independently. Although a bit more difficult to assess concretely, I believe that this deeper level of engagement, learning and relationships has increased student well-being. If I assessed student well-being by their desire and excitement to work on their projects with their partner, then I would say well-being has increased. My fourth objective of increasing student engagement through the partnership and passion project has definitely been met. Exploration time has become so much more than free-play. Students are taking control over their own learning, setting goals and working hard on developing their projects. They are proud of their accomplishments and are eager to share them with others. I have increased my knowledge and understanding of many of my students, but not each child. I will continue to work on building upon this knowledge, but I know that I would need more time to meet this objective. My final objective of family involvement is definitely a work in progress. So far, by the end of this project I will have engaged 5 families in the passion projects. I am not confident that my student families knew what to expect with our passion projects and partnerships. Perhaps many of the

families were unsure if they'd enjoy the partnership. Now that many of the partnerships have been shared on our class blog, I am unsure of how many families would be interested in further partnerships. To gain a better understanding, I will need to reach out to my student families to see if there would be interest in future partnerships.

This project has definitely faced the constraint of time and scope. I was worried about creating meaningful relationships in a short amount of time, and this has been difficult. However, many meaningful relationships have been built, and I celebrate those! A few families that would never otherwise come to our classroom have partnered with us and I am very thankful for those relationships. I have worked hard at sharing our partnerships so all of our families can see the impact of the relationships. I communicate often about our passion projects, so families who have not decided to be partners can see the engagement and excitement building as the projects get underway. I have been limited by scope, but I now feel that this has been a good thing. Although we have had 5 families involved, I am not sure if this timeline would have allowed for more. I am happy that the partnerships have been meaningful and impactful. I am happy that many of the partnerships have been family members of our own students. I look forward to creating partnerships with community members other than family, but I feel this was a great place to start!

I feel that the barrier of family perceptions has affected our partnerships. I have recently heard feedback that one of my student's parents did not feel comfortable in our classroom during student-led conferences. They were unsure of how a non-traditional classroom runs as it was unfamiliar to their own school experience. Although I didn't hear more feedback on this topic, I can imagine that families feel uncomfortable when the school experience doesn't feel familiar to what they expect. To overcome this barrier, I work hard at sharing the learning that happens in our classroom. I am hoping that the more I share the more familiar the non-traditional classroom will feel. I still don't know all of the reasons why families don't want to volunteer or create partnerships, but I do feel confident that availability is a large barrier. When I sent out the parent survey to gain feedback about communication and relationships, I received a very low percentage of surveys back. I do believe that many of my student families would have seen the 2 page "package" as overwhelming when time at home is so short. I know that many families rush from work to home and don't feel that they have time to get involved in the school. I continue to work at this barrier by opening my classroom up to many different types of involvement. I will continue to share short, but important snippets of the learning that happens in our classroom. I will try a shorter survey for future feedback, as I believe my first survey seemed too long.

The final barrier of language has been overcome by one of my ESL families. One of my families only speaks Mandarin at home and the mother struggles to speak English. She asked if she could come to our classroom and share her passion of reading by reading a children's book in Mandarin. I am so happy that she feels welcome and safe coming into our classroom even though she struggles with speaking English! Although there are many more ESL families in our classroom, I feel some success in reaching out to one of the families. I had a student letter and many pictures to share the passions in hopes of communicating and connecting to ESL families. I was hoping that engaging the students and giving them lots of experiences to talk about at home would also help with connecting to my ESL families. This may be happening at home, and maybe it isn't. I will continue to try hard at connecting to my ESL families so that they too feel welcome in our classroom.

My timeline has been quite successful thus far. I worked hard at staying on track the first few weeks so that the partnerships had as much time as possible to develop. I was able to stay on track with the divisional ethics approval, letters to families, information to families about partnerships, surveys and arranging partnerships. This past month has been very busy with creating partnerships, setting goals for passion projects and having partners come to share their own passions.

Looking forward, I believe that the students' passion projects will be completed by June 8th. I have already set up times with the school news team to interview my students and create a video to share on the night of the family BBQ. I don't anticipate having to change the timeline of the project, and I hope to have everything ready to share on the school t.v between June 11th-15th. The one part of the timeline that has not gone well is my interview with United Way. I have made contact, and a conversation has been going back and forth for weeks. They are interested in meeting, but the communication has long gaps with nothing as they are not responding to my communication quickly. I am still working on an interview time, and I hope that they will be able to get back to me in the next few days.

To date, I have been through a roller-coaster of emotions. When I sent out the family surveys, I was preparing myself for most of the surveys back, with very few families interested in partnerships, when I received a handful of surveys back, I was pretty frustrated. I received a few families interested in partnerships, but I didn't receive interest from the families that I had expected. I was feeling that my project would be unsuccessful and I was disappointed. However, over the weeks that followed, I slowly received more interest. The parents that were coming in were great, and very happy to be involved. Unexpectedly, I received a lot of staff interest and many in school partnerships and relationships were developed. This took me by surprise, and it has been one of my highlights thus far! I have learned about the power of passions! When someone is passionate about sharing it shows! Students have been so engaged and happy to have guests come into our room to share, to teach and to inspire. I underestimated the power of passions. I have been excited myself each time we have someone come into our classroom to share! I have felt challenged by the limited number of surveys that I received. I found it difficult to implement changes with family feedback when I didn't receive any! However, I took to heart the feedback that I was given. I have been self-reflective in how I communicate with my parents, and I plan on making future communication quicker for families to share their opinions. I have been happy to share the passion projects and partnerships thus far, and I really look forward to sharing our final projects with families and the school in the next few weeks. Most of all I look forward to seeing my students shine as they have the opportunity to share their accomplishments!

Cape Breton University

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Confirmation of Support from Collaborating Organization

Project Title	Connecting Classrooms and Communities: Family-School Partnerships
Project Lead (student name)	Ange Neufeld
Contact Information	Ange.neufeld@lrzd.net 204-791-7442

Instructor	Dr. Patrick Howard
Course	EDUC6800: Education for Sustainability Project
Contact Information	1250 Grand Lake Rd., Cape Breton University, Sydney, NS. Tel: 902 563 1300 Patrick_howard@cbu.ca

Supervisor/Head of Collaborating Organization	
Name	DARREN BAKER
Position	VICE PRINCIPAL
Organization	HS PAUL SENIOR LOUIS RIEL S.D.
Contact email/phone	darren.baker@LRSD.net 204 257 4322

- I confirm that the school administration (or division head/management) is aware and fully supports the proposed applied research project.

Name: DARREN BAKER Position: VICE PRINCIPAL

Signature:  Date: 18/03/07

(Head Department/Division)

(year/month/day)

Cape
Breton
University

Office of Research &
Graduate Studies

20 March 2018

Angela Marie Neufeld
Cape Breton University

Dear Angela Marie:

Re: Research Ethics File # 1718-088

The application for the project entitled "**Connecting Classrooms and Communities: Family-School Partnerships**" has been received and the Cape Breton University Research Ethics Board (CBU REB) has granted **approval** to this research project.

Ethics approvals are granted for a period of one (1) year. Principal researchers of ongoing projects are required to submit an annual report for review. Any change to an approved protocol must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation.

Good luck with your research,



Dr. Kathy Snow
Assistant Professor, Education
Research Ethics Board Co-Chair

Signed on behalf of the CBU REB

Cc: Dr. Patrick Howard

Parents and family members,

I am currently in my final course towards completing a masters of education (Med). The course I am currently enrolled in focuses on developing an applied professional research project that I believe to be important to education. I have decided to focus my research project around developing family-school partnerships.

School-Family partnerships aim at placing the student at the centre of all interactions. Research has demonstrated that these partnerships can improve the climate of the school, provide services and supports to families and the community, and help teachers do their work (Epstein, 2002). For this partnership to be meaningful, volunteering and teacher-directed activities cannot be the focus. According to Debbie Pushor, "As we move from old ways of family involvement to new ways of family engagement, we enable parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, combining their knowledge of children and of teaching and learning with teachers' knowledge" (Pushor, 2011, p. 67)

I am interested in gathering the children's ideas and perspectives about different ways that they wish to create school-community partnerships. The children have been brainstorming ideas for passion projects based on personal interests. These passions will guide and shape the potential family partnerships. This process will assist in the design of the project. Your child's participation in the discussion is voluntary. Research participants will not be identified. Both you and your child can decide at any time not to contribute to the information gathering.

If you feel inclined to create a partnership with our class, please be assured that it will be on your own terms. Partnerships are not intended to be teacher directed, but both the school and family working together. Partnerships can look as unique as you want them to look. Your partnership can be whatever length of commitment that you wish, and involve ideas and activities that interest both you and the student(s). If you decide at any time that you no longer wish to participate, you may leave the partnership at any time without consequence. I look forward to hearing your perspectives and learning how to create future partnerships!

Attached you will find both a short survey and a form giving you informed consent. Participation in the survey is voluntary. If you decide to participate, please fill out the survey and the consent form and return it to school with your child. If you choose to not participate in the survey, please recycle the survey.

If you have any further questions or concerns, please contact me.

Sincerely,

Ange Neufeld

Ange.neufeld@lrsd.net

204-254-7477

Sources:

Epstein, J., Sanders, M., Simon B., Salinas K., Jansorn N., Van Voorhis, F. (2002). [School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action. Thousand Oaks, CA. Corwin Press Inc.](#)

Pushor, D. (2011, September). [Looking Out, Looking In: A partnership approach respects the strengths and Knowledge of students' families. Educational Leadership, 65-68](#)

Consent Form for Connecting Classrooms and Communities: Family-School Partnerships

The goal of this research project is to inform our present and future school-family partnerships. The research aims at creating meaningful ways to engage families as partners with the school. The research project will involve one classroom of grade 1/2 students and their families. Using surveys, interviews and observations, the research findings will inform future decisions around school-family partnerships.

Researcher(s) : Ange Neufeld: ange.neufeld@lrsd.net 204-254-7477

Supervisor(s): Dr. Patrick Howard: Patrick_Howard@cbu.ca 902-563-1300

Darren Baker: Darren.baker@lrsd.net 204-254-7477

Research Description

All information collected is confidential and will only be used as part of research work being carried out by researcher/research teams at Cape Breton University.

All data collected will be stored in a secure location. Access to surveys, interviews or observations will only be granted to the researchers listed above or assistants working directly for them. Data, when reported, will be in aggregate form. No personally identifiable information will be given out at any time.

You may choose to cease your participation in this research at any time.

I, _____ give permission (please check all of the boxes that apply)

- For my child to participate in the research project
- To use my survey for the research project
- To use my interview (only where applicable) for the research project.
- To use photographs taken of myself (only where applicable) for school or divisional publications.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

If you have any questions that have not been answered satisfactorily by the researcher(s) or supervisor(s) named above, please contact:

CBU Office of Research and Graduate Studies (ORGS), Dr. Dana Mount at (902) 563-1338, email: ethics@cbu.ca

Chair of the Research Ethics Board at CBU, Dr. Kathy Snow, at (902)563-1170, email: kathy_snow@cbu.ca

Co-chair of the Research Ethics Board at CBU, Dr. John Hudec at (902) 563-1982, email: john_hudec@cbu.ca.

Note: Participants are to be informed of the researcher(s)' "Duty to disclose" suspected abuse or neglect of a child or an adult in need of protection. Under section 23(1), Nova Scotia Children and their Family, The Protection of Children and Adoption (1990) states that "Every person who has information, whether it is confidential or privileged, indicating that a child is in need of protective services shall forthwith report that information to an agency." Agency is defined as "an agency continued by or established and incorporated pursuant to the act..." that is, Nova Scotia Department of Community Service Child Welfare.

School-Family Partnership Survey

Thank you for your consideration in completing this survey! I am asking you to help me learn more about family perspectives on school-family partnerships. Completing this survey is completely voluntary. Sharing your ideas on family-school partnerships does not mean that you have committed to participate further in any way. If you decide that you would like to be involved, you can give me your contact information at the end of the survey.

1. Do you feel that you have a good understanding of your child's school experience?

2. If so, is there anything that the school does to assist in this understanding? If not, is there something that the school or classroom teacher could do differently to better this understanding?

3. Aside from volunteering for special events, do you wish that there were more opportunities to be involved in your child's education?

4. How could community involvement in a school provide benefits for the students? For the community? (Community could mean either family members or members of the community at large)

5. Would you be interested in helping students follow their interests through passion projects? Do you have other unique ideas for school-family partnerships within our classroom?

What is the best method for me to contact you?

Name: _____

Best method of contact: _____ Best time:

Consent Form for Connecting Classrooms and Communities: Family-School Partnerships

I am asking you to help me learn more about creating community partnerships. Knowing that you have successfully develop partnerships with the local community, I am inviting you to take part in this research project. The goal of this research project is to inform our present and future school-family partnerships. The research aims at creating meaningful ways to engage families as partners with the school. If you accept, you will be asked to share your stories and experiences about community partnerships. You do not have to share any information or knowledge that you don't feel comfortable sharing. You may choose to cease your participation in this research at any time. I hope to use your experiences to help create successful partnerships between school and family.

All information collected is confidential and will only be used as part of research work being carried out by researcher/research teams at Cape Breton University.

I, _____ consent to voluntarily participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

If you have any questions that have not been answered satisfactorily by the researcher(s) or supervisor(s) named above, please contact:

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Consent Form for Connecting Classrooms and Communities: Family-School Partnerships

I am inviting you to take part in my research project that focuses on creating family-school partnerships through passion projects. The goal of this research project is to inform our present and future school-family partnerships. The research aims at creating meaningful ways to engage families as partners with the school. If you accept, you will be asked to share your stories and experiences around your passion(s). You do not have to share any information or knowledge that you don't feel comfortable sharing. You may choose to cease your participation in this research at any time. I hope to use your experiences to help create successful partnerships between school and family.

All information collected is confidential and will only be used as part of research work being carried out by researcher/research teams at Cape Breton University.

I, _____ consent to voluntarily participate in this study.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

If you have any questions that have not been answered satisfactorily by the researcher(s) or supervisor(s) named above, please contact:

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Sample interview questions for students

1. Which classroom projects have been your favorite? Least favorite? Why?
2. Do you think that we should invite our families to be part of our class?
3. If a family came to participate in our class, what do you think they could do?
4. How might a family member be helpful to our classroom? School?
5. If a family member became a partner in our class, what project could you work on with them?

Sample interview questions for parents

1. What memories stick out to you from your childhood school experience?
2. Describe your child's education experience so far, from your perspective.
3. Do you feel that you have a good sense of your child's school experience?
4. What are the benefits of community involvement? For the kids? For the community?
5. What could we learn from each other?
6. What are some examples of successful community involvement with a school?
7. Do you have any suggestions of projects where the kids and the community could learn from each other?

Sample interview questions for school/organization

1. How long have you been involved at this school/organization?
2. What are the classroom-based partnerships that you currently have in place in encourage community engagement?
3. Which partnerships have been the most successful? Least? Why?
4. How do you get community feedback?
5. What is key in making the community feel welcome in the physical space?
6. What advice do you have for starting up a partnership for community engagement?
7. What plans do you put in place to make sure that the partnerships are sustainable?

Dissemination Strategy Planning

1. What is the campaign purpose, the intended impact (benefit)?

The intended benefits of sharing this project is to inspire future partnerships between the school and the community, and to highlight the importance of student choice and voice in the classroom. It is my hope that by sharing my journey of creating partnerships through passion projects that both teachers and families will be interested in building these impactful connections themselves. It is also my hope that teachers will be encouraged to provide opportunities for their own students to follow their own passions or interests throughout their day at school.

2. Describe the primary target audiences for your campaign.

My primary target audiences will be the teachers in my school and my student's families.

✓ If you have additional important audiences describe them here

Administrators who have the potential of influencing future partnerships.
Parent Association who has the potential of influencing family engagement.

3. What specifically do you want your audiences to do? To know? To believe?

I want the teachers to know that building partnerships with the local community will help strengthen their relationships with their students as we can understand them better and help them engage at a more meaningful level. If the community invited in is family, then we are able to learn more about the child's life outside of school. If the community member is not family, we are given the opportunity to experience learning with our children and strengthen the relationship throughout the experience. I want teachers to know that building partnerships will help make their job easier. Partnerships enable the teacher to work with students either individually or in small groups. The relationships built throughout the partnerships brings greater meaning and engagement for the students, and student outburst or off-task behaviour is less likely to occur. I want teachers to believe that relationships are of outmost importance. I want them to believe that student well-being is a top priority, and that we can help insure well-being if we focus on relationships and student voice. I want teachers to experience the value that community partnerships can bring. I want them to experience the engagement and joy that student's show when they are choosing their own learning.

I want student families to know that engaging in their child's education can create greater success for their child. I want families to know that they can bring value to the classroom as parents and as experts in their own field of work or interests. I want the families to experience the joy of learning along -side their child, and the benefits of being involved in their child's classroom. I want families to believe in the importance of connecting to their child's learning, their child's teachers and the school community. I want families to believe that building partnerships with the teachers and school will help their child succeed and know that their learning is a priority.

4. What key messages do you want your campaign to communicate?

I want the blog to communicate the importance of building relationships and partnerships for the well-being and success of our students and children.

I also want the blog to communicate the need for student choice and voice in their learning. Learning can be, and should be engaging and meaningful.

5. What communication channels will you use? Consider what is available to you. (public media, print, school/organization networks/resources, social media channels etc.) Be as specific as you can about ways you intend to use each channel you identify.

I will communicate the journey of partnerships and passion projects through our classroom blog on Seesaw. Here, I will post pictures and short descriptions of the journey. The student families will see all of the partnerships and relationships that were built through the act of sharing passions, and through the guidance the partnerships gave students as they explored their own passions.

I also plan to communicate this journey of partnerships and passion projects through a personal blog. This blog will possibly be shared with teachers and families from my classroom. This blog documents the journey in much greater detail by sharing child reactions, engagement and experiences. The blog also gives personal reflections and hopes and dreams throughout the journey. I share background information and some resources for the audience to understand the reason for the journey.

6. What permissions will you require? (model release forms, parental permissions, school/board permissions)

I have received parental permissions for their children to be involved in my project. This permission involves using photographs, work and ideas from their children. I have received permissions from the adults involved to use their photos and ideas in the project. I have also received permission from my school division to conduct the research project. The parents have previously given permission for their children's pictures and videos to be used within the school and divisional publications.

7. What creative strategy will you use? Consider highlights you will emphasize, scenes, sounds, images taglines, tone, overall impression to be achieved through graphic elements – text, colour, font, ect.

I plan on using images to highlight the journey of creating partnerships. I have created a visually appealing main blog page that contains mostly images. These images link to the key partnerships and experiences of our journey.

The images are focused on the personal sharing, relationships and engagement of everyone involved. The images tell a story so my audience will be able to engage in the process quite easily and with little time.

The stories associated with the images focus on the impact of these relationships and experiences. The blog posts reflect upon the meaningful and powerful partnerships that transpired throughout the journey. The stories share the engagement, excitement and joy that the students experienced each time passions were shared.

8. What costs, if any, may be associated with dissemination related strategies? What resources will you need to access? What may be available to help you achieve your strategies? (Consider both material and human)

The classroom blog and the personal blog do not involve any cost. In order to create the personal blog in the format I desired, I accessed personal tutorials that were available through the website.