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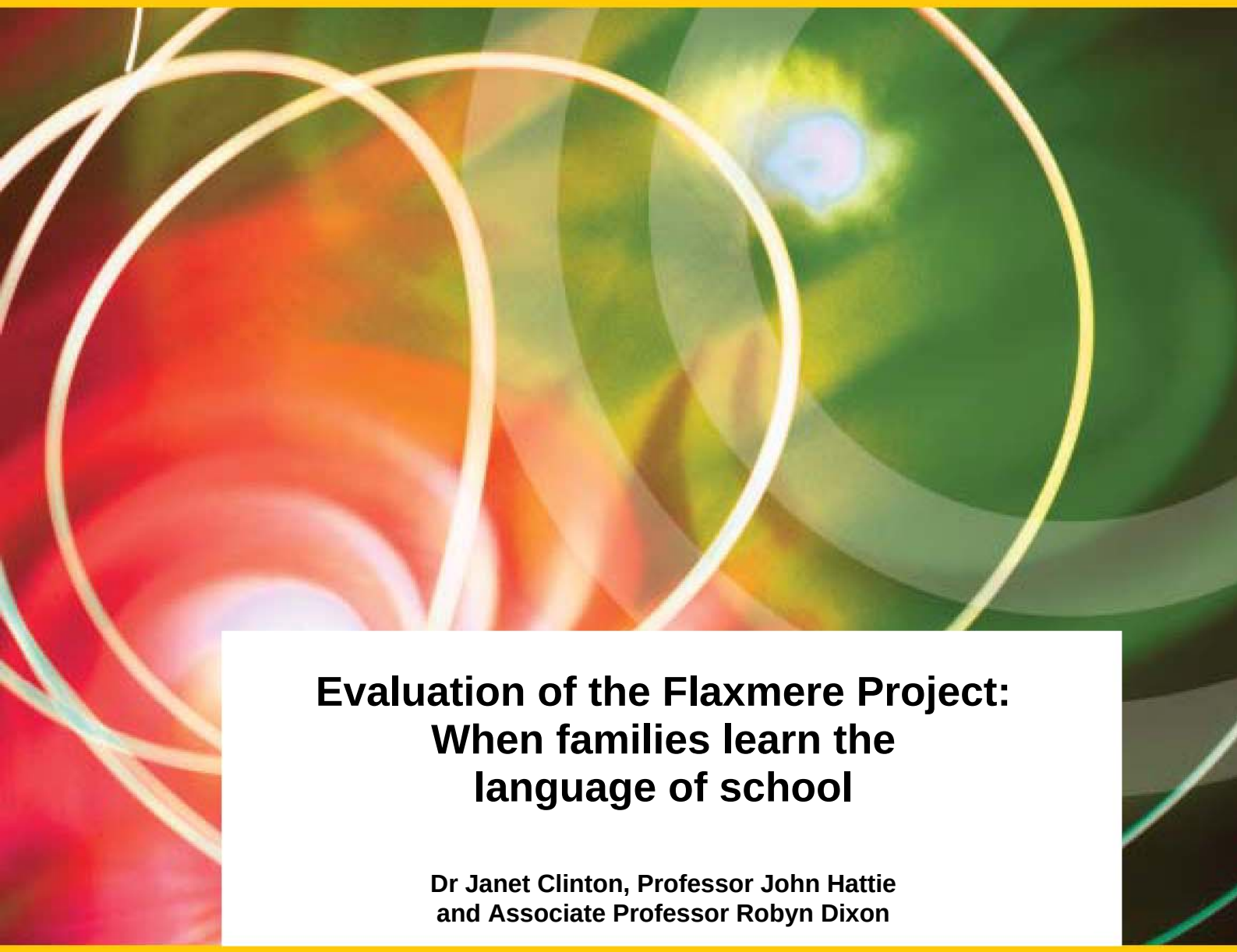

Evaluation of the Flaxmere Project: When families learn the language of school

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Evaluation of the Flaxmere Project:

When families learn the language of school

Final report

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Contents

The Flaxmere Project **5**
Project goals 5
People involved 5
Project initiatives 6

The evaluation **9**
Programme logic 9
How the information was gathered and evaluated 11
Key findings 14

The initiatives **17**
Home School Liaison Persons initiative 17
Computers in Homes 18
Homework support 20
Transition-to-school initiative 21

The people **23**
Parents 23
Students 24
Teachers 34
Home School Liaison Persons 36
Principals 36

Summing up **41**

Tables

Table 1: Flaxmere Project initiatives 8

Table 2. The averaged mean effect size from the first three terms compared with the averaged mean from the last three terms across all four sources of evidence 27

Table 3: Mean asTTle reading scores from Time 1 to Time 3 for those who completed the tests on both occasions 28

Table 4: Mean asTTle mathematics scores from Time 1 to Time 3 for those who completed the tests on both occasions 28

Table 5: asTTle collated attitude results over time 29

Figures

Figure 1: Flaxmere Project programme logic 10

Figure 2: Multi-test console report for reading 30

Figure 3: Multi-test console report for mathematics 31

Figure 4: Multi-test console report for writing 32

Figure 5: A structural equation model of major factors from the programme logic predicting achievement (reading, writing and mathematics) 33

The Flaxmere Project

The Flaxmere Project was a partnership involving five Flaxmere schools; their school communities; and the Ministry of Education.

It was developed to improve current and long-term educational outcomes for children through involving parents/caregivers and the community, and built on an existing collaborative relationship among the senior management of the five schools.

Approximately 1800 students attend the five Flaxmere schools (of which 71% are Māori and 16% are Pasifika), and just under 100 teachers are associated with the schools. All five schools are classified as Decile 1A, which indicates they serve some of the lowest resourced communities in the country on the basis of household income, parents' occupation, household crowding, parents' educational qualifications and income support payments received by parents.

The Flaxmere Project consisted of a series of initiatives relating to improving home–school relations within and between the five Flaxmere schools. It was implemented differently in each school, but they all shared a common desire to engage with the community, build community capacity and strengthen student performance. Three initiatives were common to all schools – Home School Liaison Persons, Computers in Homes, and homework support.

The independent evaluation, funded by the Ministry of Education, was conducted in parallel with the implementation of these initiatives.

Project goals

The Flaxmere Project started in 2001. Its aims were to:

- build relationships between the schools, caregivers, and community
- develop more effective and efficient use of resources by developing collaborative measures where possible
- use the project to bed down resources and processes that were not dependent on the continuation of additional funding
- produce sustainable organisational change which was necessary for the above to occur
- use the project to help develop a rich culture of data-driven self-reflection in the schools.

People involved

The Flaxmere Management Group (FMG), comprising the five principals, representatives from the local Ministry of Education, and the Flaxmere project manager, oversaw, among other tasks, the day-to-day delivery of the project. The project manager was contracted through the lead school.

The Ministry of Education provided funding, and Ministry representatives provided guidance, support and advice throughout the project, as needed.

The evaluation was carried out by a team of University of Auckland researchers, led by Dr Janet Clinton. Parts of the evaluation were formative, in that the information gained was used to "fine tune" the project over the period of the evaluation.

Project initiatives

The five schools developed three major overlapping initiatives: Home School Liaison Persons (HSLPs), Computers in Homes, and homework support in the form of before- and after-school homework centres and learning kits. These initiatives were common across all schools, although they were presented differently in each school. There were also other initiatives specific to individual schools focused on specific areas of learning.

Students were selected for the project on the basis of those who had the most to gain from a particular intervention. The processes for selecting target families were unique to each school. One school included all families, another chose those students who were in the lower achievement groups, and another chose families who were considered the most at risk (in terms of their children's attendance and achievement at school).

The number of students participating varied at any one time, as students joined or left particular initiatives. In all, 757 students were in the Flaxmere Project at least one term, 540 in two terms, 347 in three terms, 359 in four terms, 223 in five terms, 184 in six terms, 188 in seven terms, 126 in eight terms, and 64 students in nine terms. On average, students were in the project for three terms.

Home School Liaison Persons

The employment of Home School Liaison Persons (HSLPs) was a major intervention, and the HSLPs were the key in many of the other initiatives from the more formal, such as Computers in Homes and homework support, to the more informal such as parent meetings, and helping individual students.

Each school contracted independently for up to one HSLP, but the implementation varied across schools. For example, the HSLP role could be undertaken by one person within a school or by a number of people. In most instances the HSLPs were trained and experienced former and part-time teachers.

Computers in Homes

Computers in Homes was a core initiative and for most participants it epitomised what the Flaxmere Project was all about. It was the only intervention to operate from a centralised location.

The goal was to provide 100 families with computers over the period of the Flaxmere Project, and this was achieved and exceeded by 2004, with 200 computers placed with families.

Schools' used their own criteria to select families to take part in the initiative.

Upon accepting a computer, families had to agree to certain conditions that were outlined in an agreement. The families were provided with a computer, software, 10 hours of training, and technical support. They were also supported in their use of computers by the Home School Liaison Persons.

The initiative was initially managed by the Flaxmere Project manager but, in 2001, a Computers in Homes manager was appointed and given responsibility for the management, development and programme delivery aspects of this intervention. The role included working with parents, ensuring all computers were operational, and providing ongoing technical support. In the latter stages of the

project, this job merged with that of the Flaxmere Project manager and a workshop technician (funded by the Flaxmere Licensing Trust) and an administrative assistant helped the project manager.

Upgrading the computers started towards the end of 2004, and more advanced training sessions were offered.

Homework support

Homework support included homework centres and the provision of learning kits (e.g., atlas, dictionary, pencil, eraser, felt pens) to children who were in the project (although the distribution varied by school).

The homework centres varied in the times they opened (morning and/or afternoon), but in all cases attendance was voluntary (although in one school where the homework centre was only available to students in a Flaxmere Project, there were very strong expectations that the children attend). Often it was the parents' choice to participate in this intervention although the HSLP did invite or encourage project families to use the centres. The homework centres in some schools were open to families outside of the project as well, and therefore were seen as part of the school and not just an initiative for project families. It was also a place where teachers, parents, children and/or HSLPs met and worked together.

Of the students taking part in the Flaxmere project, 326 attended homework centres.

Other initiatives

By the end of 2002, a variety of interventions were in place at the individual school level. These catered for a range of needs, with specific initiatives often covering more than one area of learning and social development (or "intervention focus areas"). Some schools targeted whole cohorts for intervention while others selected according to specific needs. Parents and students could also self-select.

The initiatives were:

- a new entrant programme in two schools
- numeracy workshops for mothers of pre-school children
- a Year 4 literacy programme
- a modular programme targeting students under a number of different aspects including numeracy, literacy, ESOL, extension groups, and through a homework centre
- an HSLP working with special needs children

In the early stages of the project, the Ministry of Education also provided funding to facilitate wireless connections between schools, and MUSAC providers worked with schools to develop a modified MUSAC package so that schools could engage in data sharing.

The initiatives, their main areas of focus, and the number of children participating are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Flaxmere Project initiatives

Initiative	Description of initiative	No. of students
Major intervention initiatives		
HSLPs	• Focus on actively engaging families/whānau/caregivers and Flaxmere community in education	• all participating families
Computers in Homes	• 200 computers placed in the home of selected families. Focus on supporting ICT use	• 398
Homework support	• Focus on supporting homework either before/after school or in the home (homework centres and learning kits)	• 326
School-specific initiatives		
Study skills	• Focus on how to study, on building sound homework habits, on study skills/routines as opposed to content	• 326
Attitudinal development	• Focus on attitude to learning, attitude to instruction, attitude to personal challenge and responsibility	• 176
Literacy	• Focus on literacy	• 168
Social development	• Focus on esteem and/or confidence, interaction skills, leadership skills, or other social development skills	• 127
Home changes	• Focus on parenting skills, home learning skills, health issues, assisting the child by building the home	• 125
Curriculum enhancement	• Activities related to the development of academic achievement. Focus on remedial or enrichment, ICT skills, and matters curriculum related (including CiH but excluding literacy/numeracy)	• 119
Language/culture	• Focus on Te Reo/Tikanga, and on ESOL/NESB and international student issues	• 91
New entrant/new school	• Focus on new school situations including new entrants, change of school, new to New Zealand's style of schooling, or leaving school.	• 56
Numeracy	• Focus on numeracy	• 46
Truancy	• Focus on absenteeism and/or lateness	• 17

The evaluation

The evaluation was carried out by Dr Janet Clinton, Professor John Hattie and Associate Professor Robyn Dixon, of the Centre for Child and Family Policy Research, Faculty of Education, University of Auckland, working collaboratively with the Flaxmere Management Group, which included Ministry of Education representation.

It was undertaken over three years, with ongoing collection, collation and analysis of data from the start-up phase in November 2001 through to October 2004.

It was designed to evaluate the overall effectiveness of the Flaxmere Project, particularly the three major components: the Home School Liaison Persons, the after-school initiatives, and Computers in Homes. The information was also used to shape and improve the project during the course of the evaluation.

The researchers gathered information relating to three main areas: baseline information which provided the platform for measuring progress; information which related to how the various initiatives were carried out; and information on the changes that occurred as a result of the initiatives.

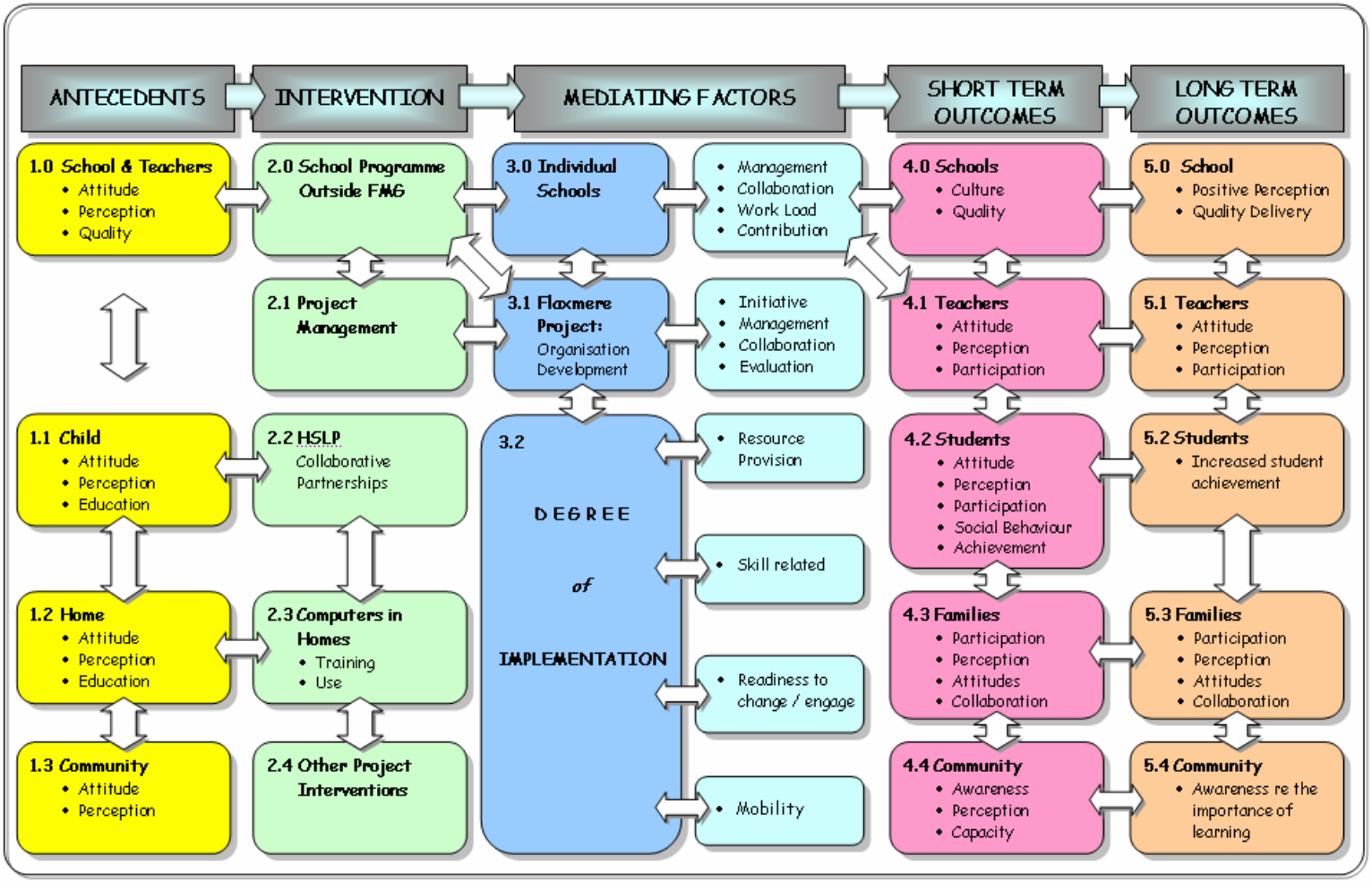
Programme logic

The use of programme logic underpins the methodology used for the evaluation. A programme logic model is a diagram that provides a framework for understanding an intervention and how its activities are intended to impact on long- and short-term outcomes.

The Flaxmere programme logic (see Figure 1) describes the context for, and participants in, the project (the antecedents); the various components that together make up the project (the intervention); the various factors which influence how the project is implemented (the mediating factors); and the project's outcomes (short- and long-term).

The Flaxmere programme logic was developed by the evaluators, the Flaxmere Management Group and the Ministry of Education, who worked collaboratively to identify the variables for the evaluation. These variables were: attitude to education (e.g., of parents, students, teachers); perceptions of education (e.g., or parents, students, teachers); participation (e.g., parents' and communities' involvement with school); education levels of family members; social behaviour of students; quality (e.g., of teaching, resources, physical environment, organisation); school culture/climate; specific initiatives; and degree of collaboration.

Figure 1: Flaxmere Project programme logic



How the information was gathered and evaluated

The evaluation process included ongoing consultation between the evaluation team and stakeholders, including the Flaxmere Management Group, the Ministry of Education, schools and project team members.

The researchers gathered qualitative and quantitative data for each of the three years from focus groups, surveys, interviews, standardised tests on achievement, and existing school documentation. Surrogate indicators (see below) were also developed to provide information on progress in the early stages of the project.

Focus groups, interviews and discussions were held with each of the groups (parents, students, teachers, principals and Home School Liaison Persons) usually three and sometimes four times a year, and the evaluation team held feedback sessions at least once a year to update the participants on progress.

All parents and students, whether in the project or not, were surveyed in the first and third years, while those involved in the project were also surveyed in the second year. Teachers were surveyed every year, the Home School Liaison Persons were surveyed in the third year, and principals were surveyed at the beginning and again at the end of the evaluation.

Other community stakeholders were also interviewed and surveyed.

School data were analysed for information on target and non-target students, and school documentation was used to get information on individual school initiatives.

Structural equation modelling was used to evaluate some of the links identified via the programme logic.

Databases

The evaluation team had access to three databases. These were:

- the schools' shared database, called Classroom Manager (which is part of the MUSAC system). Data included Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning and Progressive Achievement Tests, and all data were entered by the schools
- the Intervention Database (known as HSLP Database, which was set up for HSLPs to record their interventions, and which also included the data from the surrogate indicators)
- the Social Database (this was developed by the evaluation team and included data gained from the surveys and focus groups).

Surrogate indicators

Surrogate indicators were developed to provide information in the early phase of the evaluation before data were available on the long term outcomes. They covered aspects such as families' participation in, and perceptions of, school; students' participation in, and perceptions of, school; and perceptions of student progress. The surrogate indicators continued to be collected throughout the project, providing another source of information on the project's impact. These surrogate indicators were collected three times a year, from students, HSLPs, teachers and caregivers or parents. The HSLPs facilitated the collection of the indicators.

The surrogate indicator forms comprised two parts. The first part covered 14 surrogate indicators relating to student attitudes to behaviour; their involvement in schooling and the programme, and their academic outcomes, namely:

- **student attitudes to:** being at school; getting homework all done; behaving well in class; behaving well out of class; behaving at home; attendance and punctuality; doing well at schoolwork (i.e. general progress)
- **student involvement:** attendance status; lateness; absence status
- **student outcomes:** attitudinal maturity; literacy; numeracy; oral language.

All four groups assessed student attitude indicators, but only parents, teachers and HSLPs (that is, not students) assessed student involvement and outcomes. The numeracy, literacy, oral language and attitudinal maturity indicators were assessed on a five-point scale, with one representing "well below level expected for students of this age" and five representing "well above level expected for students of this age". The attendance status was assessed on a five-point scale, with one representing "very poor – considerable effect on performance" and five representing "excellent – rarely, if ever, absent". Absence status was assessed on a five point scale with one representing "habitual truant" and five representing "genuine, rare absence; does not like being absent".

The second part comprised 15 surrogate indicators, known as the "happiness with" indicators, and each of the four groups (parents, teachers, students and HSLPs) was asked about the extent to which they felt parents were happy with the following:

- that their child was learning new things well
- to visit school and meet the teacher
- to talk to teacher about school and learning
- to talk to HSLP about school and learning
- to talk with children about school and learning
- to observe in the classroom
- to help out at school
- with their ability to support homework
- with their ability to help child in learning
- with their ability to learn new things
- with the child's amount and type of homework
- with home–school relationship
- with their parenting skills
- with others knowing the family was a participant
- with the gains the family had made through the project.

Achievement tests

The evaluation team used achievement measures already being used in the schools, such as the Progressive Achievement Tests and other school curriculum achievement data. These provided data on literacy and numeracy which was used within the project to monitor student progress.

The evaluators also used data from the Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTle) resource, which is used for assessing reading, writing and mathematics. The asTTle resource provides

teachers, students, and parents with information about a student's level of achievement relative to the achievement outcomes for curriculum levels 2 to 6.

At the start of the project, the asTTle resource was in a development phase, thus the evaluation team compiled and administered items for writing, reading and mathematics, and developed scoring models for each of these. The scores were placed on the asTTle reading scale, the asTTle writing scale, and the asTTle mathematics scale, which enabled comparison to many other groups throughout New Zealand, and in particular to schools comparable to those in Flaxmere.

In order to establish a firm baseline of achievement data, asTTle assessment tools were used in all schools with all students at Years 4 to 9, early in 2002. This data was scored and was established on the Classroom Manager database.

Surveys

The evaluation team also administered a number of social questionnaires, in the form of survey booklets, to parents, teachers and students. These were used in all schools at all year groups and included questions relating to school climate, attitudes towards the Flaxmere community, self-concept, learning strategies, and belief in their own ability (self-efficacy).

Students were surveyed on their participation in and enjoyment of school; perceptions of parental involvement; learning goals; school climate; self-esteem; and their belief in their ability.

Parents were asked for their perceptions of the purpose of schooling, their expectations of their children, the effectiveness of the schools, their perception of their child's ability; their involvement with school, their role and effectiveness as parents, and their views of the Flaxmere community. The survey was also used to get demographic information.

The teachers' surveys included questions on the purpose of schooling; their school's effectiveness; their rating of their school's climate; ratings of the students they taught; the importance of students' access to computers and the internet; perceptions of the Flaxmere community; and their views of their ability to change students' motivation and performance (that is, their self-efficacy).

Principals were asked whether the project achieved its aims and about the barriers to achieving the aims, the strengths of the project, the success of the various initiatives and the extent to which there was collaboration.

Home School Liaison Persons were asked similar questions to those asked of the principals, and were also asked to comment on how their role had changed over the three years.

Other surveys included those relating specifically to Computers in Homes. The evaluation of this initiative was primarily based on material from a survey of parents carried out late in 2004. It also included relevant information from the original Computers in Home survey taken in 2002 and qualitative data from focus groups held across the three-year period. The surveys were in two parts. The first was completed by the adult living in the household who used the computer the most, while the second was completed by every child in the household.

Focus groups

The information from focus groups provided a picture of the context, influences and impacts of the project on participants over the three years. The questions were developed and amended over time in

order to capture developments. For example, in early focus groups, questions focused on identifying perceptions of the project while in later groups the focus was more on the impact of the project.

Other sources

Many parents also wrote letters to the evaluation team to describe their views, and many community members attended a community meeting early in the project.

The manager of the Flaxmere Project also collected information each year about individual school intervention activities and programmes. This and other existing school documentation provided baseline data for the interventions over the three years.

Key findings

The Computers in Homes intervention was deemed to be highly effective. There was high usage of the computers by families, with benefits to both the child and the family, and the computers became important to the families.

The computers also provided the Home School Liaison Persons (HSLPs) with a focal point for discussing schooling and education with families. This enabled families to find out more about the school curriculum and what their children were, and should be, learning; in effect, they were a means of introducing the language of schooling to homes.

The Homework Centres took pressure off parents to help with homework, and taught parents who attended how to help with and talk about school work.

The Transition from Early Childhood/New Entrants initiative helped parents understand children's learning and helped provide strategies to support them in this. This initiative varied by school. For example one school had a well-structured programme with a high degree of implementation, whereas another school did not have this initiative.

There were multiple benefits from the HSLPS, via these various projects, particularly their role as the interface between families and school.

Parents, through their involvement with the Flaxmere Project, were able to provide greater support for their children in schooling and the project also helped parents themselves develop new skills. The parents had high expectations and a high level of satisfaction with the local schools and the Flaxmere community.

The students perceived major changes in their involvement in schooling, particularly related to behaviour and involvement. While there were some effects on achievement, the three-year evaluation period was considered too short to see significant and sustained changes in longer term outcomes.

The teachers took the longest to see changes resulting from the project but over time they saw changes in students' belief in their ability to engage and succeed, and came to see changes in the parents' understanding of schools.

The principals considered there was much evidence of success with the shorter term outcomes of the project but raised concerns that longer term outcomes would be compromised by, for example, uncertainty over funding.

The next section presents the evaluation's findings in more detail. We start by discussing the findings in relation to the three major initiatives of Home School Liaison Persons, Computers in Homes, and the homework support initiative. We also discuss the transition to school initiative.

We then discuss how parents and students perceived the project and the effects it had on them; the views of teachers and HSLPs; and an overview from principals on the short- and long-term successes of the project, aspects that supported the implementation of the project, and barriers to implementation.

The initiatives

This section discusses the findings in relation to the major initiatives of Home School Liaison Persons, Computers in Homes, homework support, and the transition to school initiative.

Home School Liaison Persons initiative

All groups saw the Home School Liaison Persons (HSLPs) initiative as successful. Students felt contact with the HSLPs helped them in areas such as how to set goals, and that the home visits were supportive and useful. Parents, too, were satisfied, viewing the HSLPs as an important support to families in their pursuit of learning.

Parents were generally pleased with the positive impact HSLPs had on students. Typical comments emphasised the role that HSLP support had in student retention and the opportunity for students to achieve a career, as well as on students' social skills and academic learning:

> *It all comes down to HSLPs – there is that extra support.*
>
> *Gave her lots of options. If this project wasn't here they wouldn't do anything.*

In 2004, teachers who commented on HSLPs had mixed perceptions. Some teachers were very positive saying that they liked the focus for "independent learning", while others considered that the focus outside the classroom meant the teachers were not involved.

Many teachers said that feedback from the HSLP about the home life of their students had altered their perception of the students in the classroom and made them more aware of the difficulties some of the children experienced at home.

By 2004 principals saw the HSLP as the person who either was the key to the project in the school or one of the project champions.

One principal attributed parental engagement to the HSLPs, saying:

> *HSLPs and their intervention have been most successful. They have touched many parents and have engaged with them in many ways; that is, CIH, training on and off-site, upskilling in the use of computers, parent discussion/focus groups.*

In 2002, HSLPs themselves were confident that, because their interventions were involved with more than academic activities, they were having an effect on social and behaviour issues, such as absenteeism, punctuality, and effort in the target children and families.

There were, however, feelings of extreme tiredness and frustration by the end of the first year. All project staff had worked very hard throughout the development of the project and there was a sense of frustration emerging with factors relating to workloads, the database development, and the evaluation process.

There was a sense that in some schools the HSLPs were pulled between being a teacher and an HSLP (some were working part-time as teachers at the same time as being an HSLP, and some were former teachers). Some were clearly working as HSLPs, while others were still very much in the teacher

mode. Some felt they were not accepted by the rest of the staff. HSLPs also mentioned issues relating to equity with respect to their working conditions and remuneration.

In 2004, HSLPs were positive about the project and their level of collaboration was high. They commented that they had regular team meetings and were pooling resources in some areas to have greater effect. At the same time, data collection and entry was said to be a continuing issue for HSLPs and viewed as impinging on their "real job" and "a big ask". Some HSLPs commented that the project was completely integrated into the school culture, while others said the project was still perceived as "an add-on".

Computers in Homes

Family members were extremely satisfied with the Computers in Homes initiative, and this was maintained over the years of the project. Almost all participants (97%) stated that if asked by a friend whether they should belong to such a project they would respond yes. For many, key reasons for their satisfaction were the level of support they received from the staff at the Flaxmere Project office, and that it gave them opportunities to learn that they would not otherwise have had.

The adults in the families reported using the computer on average about 8 hours per week while their children used them on average 15 hours per week. Given others in the families were also using the computers as well as other children who visited the home, the total use was close to 30 hours per week. This is high usage of the computers, and also indicates that the computer became a "family" resource. This usage was maintained over time.

Children reported that they used the computers for a variety of purposes, most commonly doing homework, writing stories, watching and playing games. Having access to a computer made them more eager to get on to homework as well as making it easier to do. The older students reported using the computers also for email, accessing the internet and listening to music. Parents used the computers for writing letters, accessing the internet, listening to music and watching movies.

Parents were grateful for, and enthusiastic about, the computers in their homes, because they not only helped their children but they also helped the parents and, as low-income families, they could not have afforded a computer. Some reported that access to a computer and to training to develop computer skills had raised their children's involvement in schoolwork and increased their confidence and self-efficacy. It had also had an impact on the parents themselves by, for example, giving them confidence to go on to further study.

The effects of the programme were not limited to the target child in the family. The discussions within the families, the confidence in using computers and the increased job opportunities for parents were also important effects. For example, the focus groups gave examples of a father who had been able to point his boss to an appropriate website in support of his argument regarding a work and safety issue, and of job promotions because the parents had attained computer knowledge.

Computers were considered extremely important in the future of these families. Reasons included increased family interaction, improved schoolwork, higher computer literacy, enhanced access to information, initiations into the "way of the world", and enjoyment. The computers were seen as a means of reducing inequalities and increasing opportunities.

The following comments are typical of how parents and children perceived the value of the intervention:

We are in the business of learning and teaching with our children. I want the best education for them.

Teachers are now not the only easily accessible resource.

[The computer was important] because of the whole family sharing homework tasks.

As a family we all sit around the computer and do games. Even my 47 year old husband has just learnt to use it.

It has encouraged my partner to read.

Thank you. It's very humbling to watch the confidence on my children's faces.

I'm very pleased to be a part of this programme; it has opened my eyes to the necessity of having to have one computer in the home for your children's learning and for the whole family.

My father who was computer illiterate now uses it almost every day. My mother can now surf the net like a pro and also uses it for her church correspondence. We also use Excel to keep track of the power bill.

Over and above all these benefits to families was the role of the initiative as a powerful change agent, in the sense that the computers provided an avenue for families to tap into school expertise, and for bringing the "language of schooling" into the home.

The HSLPs saw the key to the influence of computers in the homes as the high level of trust that was developed as a consequence of the careful building of relationships with families. This relationship was developed via chats, visits, and the "extra" help in tasks; for example, assisting family members obtain driving licences. The HSLPs noted changes in the attitudes towards schools, improved parental self-esteem and confidence in the parents' ability to achieve, more interactions in supporting other families, and relief for families from having to oversee homework.

The benefits of the Computers in Home initiative

The benefits of the Computers in Home initiative can be summarised as follows:

- Parents were interacting more with each other via the training classes.
- Students benefited from knowing their parents were learning alongside them.
- Parents' attitude to school improved as a result of being involved in the programme
- There were perceived improvements in schoolwork and attitude of children.
- Students said that having access to a computer made them more eager to get on to homework as well as making it easier to do (This was also noted by parents).
- Families were able to access information via the internet.
- Child and parent relationships improved as parents gained a better understanding of what their children were doing.
- An improvement in future outlook for all family members through learning new skills.
- Parents gained confidence in their work situation.
- Teachers said that participating in the computer programme had increased students' computer skills, parents were more involved in their children's learning as a result, the presentation of homework had improved, and students had been able to complete projects at home using the internet.

- Home and school relationships improved as a result of communication about computers between teachers and parents.
- The programme helped parents become involved with school activities, and build lasting relationships with the school.

Homework support

Students were positive about the homework centres and liked doing homework there, with some students saying it was "fun". Things they liked included having adult support and being better able to do their homework now.

Students who received the learning kits were positive about these as they "could do their homework at home".

Parents also liked the homework kits for the support they provided for children's learning. As one parent said:

> *Learning kits – dictionary, atlas – have meant our children are comfortable at home, able to work in their own environment, and without these would have to go to the library.*

Homework centres were popular amongst parents because they removed pressure from homes, they improved student parent relationships and children enjoyed going. The homework centres provided support for the children in ways in which the parents felt they were unable to provide; for example, specialised assistance in mathematics.

All centres were open to families outside of the project as well and therefore were seen as part of the school, not just an initiative for project families.

Teachers described the homework centres as providing students with resources and a snack in a nice atmosphere, making it an enjoyable place for children to be. They also said that in terms of their teaching, homework involving computer use could now be set as this could be done at the homework centre if the students did not have a computer at home. The learning kits were also regularly mentioned as a great asset – they helped families to take more responsibility for homework completion as they provided the necessary resources, which in turn had increased homework quality.

For the teachers in one school, the homework centres were the aspect of the Flaxmere Project that had the biggest impact. Teachers were enthusiastic as it meant homework was completed before class and they knew student reading and spelling was being done.

Teachers also said the homework centre had impacted on the culture of the school, with tuakana/teina support in the form of peer tutoring.

Some teachers commented that they were also making more of an effort to get to the homework centre to see their students. This interaction between teacher and students outside of the classroom was viewed as a positive outcome and one school had begun to roster teachers into the homework centre as part of their school duties.

Principals felt after-school time was easier for families with children doing their homework at school. Some students had raised their personal expectations in terms of quality homework completed on time and the gaining of excellent homework routines. Other students learned strategies for doing their

homework well, such as how to practise their spelling, or how to use the internet to find answers to questions.

In another school, the principal said learning kits were used to support students in doing their homework. These were a valuable resource for families, facilitating family interactions and supporting learning at home. This in turn enhanced an educational partnership and educational dialogue.

The Home School Liaison Persons were likewise supportive of the homework centres. They saw them as a successful way to support students and parents, and improve student learning. As one HSLP said:

> *Children are enabled to complete their homework regularly, with any support they need readily available, while parents are freed from the struggle to make sure homework is done. We had one delightful letter of thanks from a parent telling us how her relationship with her daughter has changed for the better now that her daughter was able to arrive home with her homework tasks complete and there was no more conflict. She was also astonished at the improvement in her daughter's reading with the regular reading each day at the homework centre.*

The HSLPs also said that the learning kits helped students complete their homework, and that they supported family learning.

Transition-to-school initiative

Generally teachers considered the early childhood transition-to-school initiative to be successful in bridging the gap between home and school. Teachers thought the children settled into school more easily. Also, the initiative targeted new families and therefore gave these families an immediate connection with the school.

For some principals the group in transition from early childhood to school was the most successful group of students on the project. One principal said this was especially successful for the parents whose first child was starting school.

Practices that the principals considered as particularly successful were teachers and parents working together to set goals and expectations; the development of supportive practices for children at home and school, with parents given equipment and strategies to help them support the learning at home; the expansion of the model of Parents as First Teachers, which enabled opportunities for modelling of best practice; the opportunity for educational dialogue to develop understanding and expectations; and the establishment of opportunities for building positive relationships.

HSLPs likewise said key features which contributed to the success of the transition-to-school initiative were the provision of behaviour and learning strategies for parents to use with their children; the facilitation of parental understanding of education; modelling of best practice; and the establishment of positive relationships between home and school early on in schooling.

The effects of the transition-to-school programme are expected to be far-reaching, and to show up in longer term outcomes such as achievement as the children and their parents' progress through the years of schooling.

The people

This section discusses how parents and students perceived the Flaxmere Project and the effects it had on them; the views of teachers and HSLPs; and an overview from principals on the short- and long-term successes of the project, aspects that supported the implementation of the project, and barriers to implementation.

The information is from focus groups, surveys, surrogate indicators and standardised achievement data.

Parents

All the parents in the Flaxmere Project talked about how they were more involved in education, in a variety of ways, as a result of the project.

They described the satisfaction they felt that their children were more engaged and that, for many of the children, school was more enjoyable. The parents worked on schoolwork with their children, especially reading, more than they did in the past. They noted increases in their own education by, for example, going back to school themselves and having increased opportunities in their workplace as a result of their new skills, especially with computers.

Parents also felt they had a greater understanding of what the schools did, and this increased level of understanding allowed parents to raise their expectations of their children's educational aspirations.

Parents also felt they were aware of the language of schooling – they could "talk the talk" – and, by the end of the evaluation, a number were working at school or involved in school groups as volunteers.

At the beginning of 2002, parents taking part in the focus groups were keen to get involved in their children's education. There were comments about difficulties in becoming involved because of a lack of confidence, negative attitudes based on past experiences, and limited understanding of what learning is about. By the end of 2002, parents involved in the project commented that they were putting more time into their children. They also commented on a sense of connectedness with the school and a feeling that the schools were working hard for the community as a result. On the whole, they saw themselves as privileged to be part of the project, that they had been reminded of the importance of schooling, and that they had not really understood how low their children's achievement was.

By the end of 2003, parents said they were spending more time at school and more time engaged in education. They mentioned talking about, and working on, school work with their children more than in the past, and of improvements in their own education – three, for example, described how they had "gone back to school" by enrolling in adult education or polytechnic courses.

In addition, some parents felt they had improved their skills in behaviour management techniques, and had a better understanding of teacher expectations and goals. As one parent commented, they were learning how to help their children in a way that supported what the school was teaching them.

Parents reported that the children were more outgoing at home, were taking more responsibility for their learning, and were more willing to do their homework. Parents of older children emphasised the

change in their children's self-esteem and self-efficacy (self-belief). The children had more confidence in making goals and more understanding of how to achieve those goals. For example, one parent said:

> *My son is now working hard to ensure he gets NCEA level 1 maths and English so that he can take up an apprenticeship that a firm* [through work experience on the project] *has offered him.*

Whereas the 2002 focus groups talked about what *should* happen in schools and communities, by 2003, they were talking about what *was* happening. As one parent said:

> *We're very involved with the school and if we saw something we didn't like we wouldn't hesitate to go into the school and talk about it.*

By 2004, parents' understanding of the purpose of the project had improved. They benefited through gaining confidence, improved self-esteem and the opportunities to improve their own skills. They perceived Flaxmere as a good place to live in, and relationships between home and school were positive, with parents more involved in their children's learning. Parents had a strong belief in their children's ability to succeed.

There was a clear perception that their children's school work had improved. Parents attributed this improvement to their children learning study skills such as prioritising, doing extra work on the computer, improved confidence and an improved outlook on school. Parents also saw benefits for other family members other than the student targeted by the project; for example:

> [The] *elder brother wants to carry on at school from helping his brother.*

In the 2004 survey, parents overwhelmingly agreed that their school was doing a good job at achieving the purposes they considered important and they were satisfied with the project as a whole. They had a positive impression of Flaxmere as a community, particularly the belief that Flaxmere was a friendly environment.

The surrogate indicators also provided information over the duration of the project on parents' views on their relationship with the school; for example, the extent to which they were happy to visit the school and meet the teacher, help out, observe in the classroom; the extent to which they were happy with how their child was learning, with their own ability to learn, and their ability to help with their child's learning; their satisfaction with the amount and type of homework their child received; and whether they were happy to talk with their child, their child's teacher, and the HSLP about school, teaching and learning.

Towards the end of the three years, the surrogate indicators showed parents were generally much happier with their own ability to learn new things, to talk with their children about school and learning, to help their child in learning, to support homework, to talk to HSLPs about school, and with their parenting skills.

Students

The students perceived major changes in their involvement in schooling, particularly related to behaviour and involvement. The social surveys measured the following dimensions: school participation and enjoyment; perception of parental involvement; performance goals for learning; perception of school climate; self-esteem; and self-efficacy.

Overall, students responding to the social survey showed dramatic changes in the dimensions measured, with gains in every section, particularly those related to learning. The students generally liked their schools and were happy to be involved in learning. The results suggest that the students were more engaged in a positive mode of learning, and they had more specific and realisable targets for learning. There were particular gains in self-efficacy, performance goals for learning (i.e., being more focused on learning) and strategies for learning. Self-concept illustrated strong gains in areas related to school.

Effect sizes are used to provide an indication of the level of change. Effect-sizes are a standardised measure of impact, and are the differences in means on two occasions corrected for differences in the spread of scores. An effect-size greater than .8 is indicative of major impact, an effect-size greater than .4 is an average but worthwhile impact, and an effect-size of less than .2 is small and often of little significance. For example, by the third year, students in the Flaxmere Project perceived parents as more involved than they were in year 1 (effect size .62).

In terms of students' approaches to school work, students involved in the Flaxmere Project showed gains in engagement (measured by a decline in performance avoidance; that is, a decline in the use of strategies to avoid involvement in school work), gains in performance approach (they were more likely to use strategies for undertaking school work) and gains in task goals (they were more likely to adopt the goals of learning). The effect sizes between the third and first year was 1.25 for their reduction in performance avoidance, .43 for performance approach and 1.10 for task goals.

Flaxmere Project students showed major increases in self-concept (as measured by positive concept about school, negative concept about school, physical abilities, physical appearance, and positive and negative social relations) in the third year compared with the previous two years.

In the third year, those in a Flaxmere programme also had higher mean scores than their peers who were not in a programme for self-concept about school (effect size of .19), about their physical appearance (.13) and about their physical abilities (.22).

Self-efficacy (self-belief) was looked at in relation to academic tasks (e.g., learning mathematics, finishing homework, concentrating at school) and self-regulation of behaviour in relation to school work (e.g., remembering everything for school, being involved in class discussions, working in a group). There was an increase in the third year in both self-efficacy in relation to academic tasks (effect size of .24) and in self-regulation of activities (effect size of .48).

Thus, by the third year the students involved in the Flaxmere Project were more able to regulate their learning and be independent about goal setting and attention to school work. Further, there were some increases for those in a Flaxmere Project programme compared to those not in a programme (effect sizes of .22 and .15 respectively). The work of the HSLPs, in particular in goal setting, provided opportunities for the students to explore their goals.

The students were also surveyed about self-strategies for learning. This looked at self-handicapping (inventing handicaps as to why they could not learn or succeed in school work) and discounting their own effort and success. Students were less likely to self-handicap or discount in the third year compared to the first year of the evaluation (.41 and .42 respectively). In the third year, there was no difference between those in and those not in the Flaxmere Project in terms of self-handicapping but those in the project were less likely to engage in discounting.

By the second year of the project (early 2003), all students in the focus groups clearly saw the Flaxmere Project as a positive experience involving computers, educational trips, homework centres, and HSLP visits to their homes. The older students were more articulate about the benefits and their experiences of the project. They had been able to set goals for next year (i.e., work experience, courses, employment) with the assistance of the HSLP, and acknowledged they were probably still at school because of the project. Some of these older students were concerned that there had been a reduction in the amount of support from the HSLPs. They felt very strongly that there were many students on the project who were missing out on the support they needed.

By 2004, the students taking part in the focus groups were resoundingly positive about their community. They said things like "tight community – everyone knows each other", "heaps of good schools", and "somewhere you can communicate with anyone". Some students noted that the community did not deserve the stigma associated with it. Students' views were best summed up in the words of one student who said:

> *Don't judge a book by its cover. They don't know it.*

At the same time, the older students did say they were more likely to go out of the community to go to college.

All students described the project as providing learning opportunities. It was perceived as helping them get a better education and this in turn was said to provide future choices. In the words of one student:

> *Helps you achieve your goals and dreams and it is exciting – know more about people and places.*

The thoughts of the other students were summed up succinctly by the students in one focus group who said the project was a means to learn; communicate; socialise; cooperate; and use things such as computers better.

The surrogate indicators also provided information on student attitudes, involvement and outcomes for those students who were a part of the Flaxmere Project.

To get the best estimate of change over the various terms, the averaged mean from the first three terms was compared with the averaged mean from the last three terms. Table 2 presents the effect sizes based on these end-to-beginning contrasts. The major changes were related to literacy, numeracy, and attitude to attendance and punctuality. There was also some change relating to overall school attendance (a student's attendance and punctuality status), behaviour in and out of class, oral language, general progress (doing well at school) and attitude to being at school, but much lower effects for maturity, doing homework and behaviour at home.

Table 2: The averaged mean effect size from the first three terms compared with the averaged mean from the last three terms across all four sources of evidence

Domain*	Surrogate indicator	Effect size
Outcomes	Literacy	0.39
Outcomes	Numeracy	0.35
Involvement	Lateness	0.33
Attitude to	Attendance and punctuality	0.32
Involvement	Absence status	0.30
Involvement	Attendance and punctuality status	0.29
Attitude to	Behaviour out of the class	0.26
Attitude to	Being at school	0.26
Attitude to	Behaviour in the class	0.26
Outcomes	Oral language	0.26
Attitude to	General progress (doing well at schoolwork)	0.25
Attitude to	Behaviour at home	0.21
Attitude to	Getting homework all done	0.15
Outcomes	Attitudinal maturity	0.12

* Note: Outcomes and involvement were assessed by parents, teachers and HSLPs on five point scales. Attitudes were also assessed by students.

Student academic achievement

Standardised student achievement assessments provided data on academic achievement. These data were collected throughout the evaluation and included Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning (asTTle) in literacy and numeracy.

The results from November 2001 were compared with those April 2004. The analysis compared the progress of students in a Flaxmere Project programme with those who were not. As the number of students who took the tests varied during the project, only those students who could be matched over time were included in the analysis. These results should be read with caution as they represent only a small proportion of all students involved in the Flaxmere Project.

The asTTle scores of students in the four Flaxmere primary schools are also compared with the performance of students in other New Zealand schools of similar decile ratings and ethnic composition.

The asTTle results

The asTTle resource is the first national, standardised achievement tool available for teachers that is directly tied to the New Zealand curricula.

The asTTle assessments in reading and mathematics compared scores over time of students involved in the Flaxmere Project with those not in the project.

Reading and mathematics

In reading, as shown in Table 3, students who participated in at least one Flaxmere initiative showed an effect size of 1.00 between the first and third tests. For those not in the project, the effect size was .88. Thus, those students in the project showed slightly greater gains in reading achievement than those not in the project.

Table 3: Mean asTTle reading scores from Time 1 to Time 3 for those who completed the tests on both occasions

	Time 1 (April 2002)			**Time 3 (April 2004)**			
	No.	*Mn*	*sd*	*No.*	*Mn*	*sd*	*Effect size*
Not in a programme	74	423	57.59	74	470	47.33	0.88
In a programme	58	420	71.10	58	483	55.69	1.00

In mathematics, however, as illustrated by Table 4, those not in the Flaxmere Project had almost twice the gains on asTTle mathematics scores as those in the project.

Table 4: Mean asTTle mathematics scores from Time 1 to Time 3 for those who completed the tests on both occasions

	Time 1 (April 2002)			**Time 3 (April 2004)**			
	No.	*Mn*	*sd*	*No.*	*Mn*	*sd*	*Effect size*
Not in a programme	36	464	73.57	36	533	66.34	0.99
In a programme	51	472	96.13	51	525	121.20	0.49

Those who participated in at least one Flaxmere Project intervention had higher growth rates of learning in reading than those who did not participate in any interventions. This was not the case with mathematics. A possible reason for this difference is that Flaxmere Project parents were able to work with their children more in literacy than they were in the numeracy areas.

Attitudes to reading and mathematics

A comparison of the results of student attitudes at April 2003 (Time 2) with those at April 2002 (Time 1) (see Table 5) shows the effect size is major for all students assessed, whether in a Flaxmere Project initiative or not (.96 for reading and 1.31 for mathematics). However, attitudes to reading for those not in the Flaxmere Project show a bigger difference (ES 1.21) compared with those who were in the project (ES 0.40), although there were no differences between the two groups for mathematics (ES 1.31 and 1.30 respectively).

However, when comparing April 2003 (Time 3) with April 2002 (Time 2), those in the Flaxmere Project had almost double the gain in attitudes to reading and to mathematics, compared to those not in

the project (ES 0.74 compared with 0.39 for reading and ES 0.58 compared with 0.29 for mathematics).

Table 5: asTTle collated attitude results over time

		Time 1 (April 2002)		**Time 2 (April 2003)**		T2-T1	**Time 3 (April 2004)**		T3-T2
Reading Attitude	*No.*	*Mn*	*Sd*	*Mn*	*sd*	*effect-size*	*Mn*	*sd*	*effect-size*
Not in an intervention	122-362	2.30	0.70	3.06	0.55	1.21	3.28	0.57	0.39
In an intervention	42-372	2.45	0.89	2.70	0.60	0.40	3.18	0.70	0.74
Total		2.34	0.75	2.98	0.57	0.96	3.23	0.64	0.41
		Time 1 (April 2002)		**Time 2 (April 2003)**			**Time 3 (April 2004)**		
Maths attitude	*No.*	*Mn*	*Sd*	*Mn*	*Sd*	Effect size	Mn	sd	
Not in an intervention	129-336	2.05	0.74	2.96	0.64	1.31	3.15	0.64	0.29
In an intervention	43-332	2.07	0.63	2.88	0.62	1.30	3.23	0.58	0.58
Total		2.06	0.72	2.94	0.64	1.31	3.18	0.61	0.38

* Effect sizes were calculated only for students for whom there were scores at both points in time.

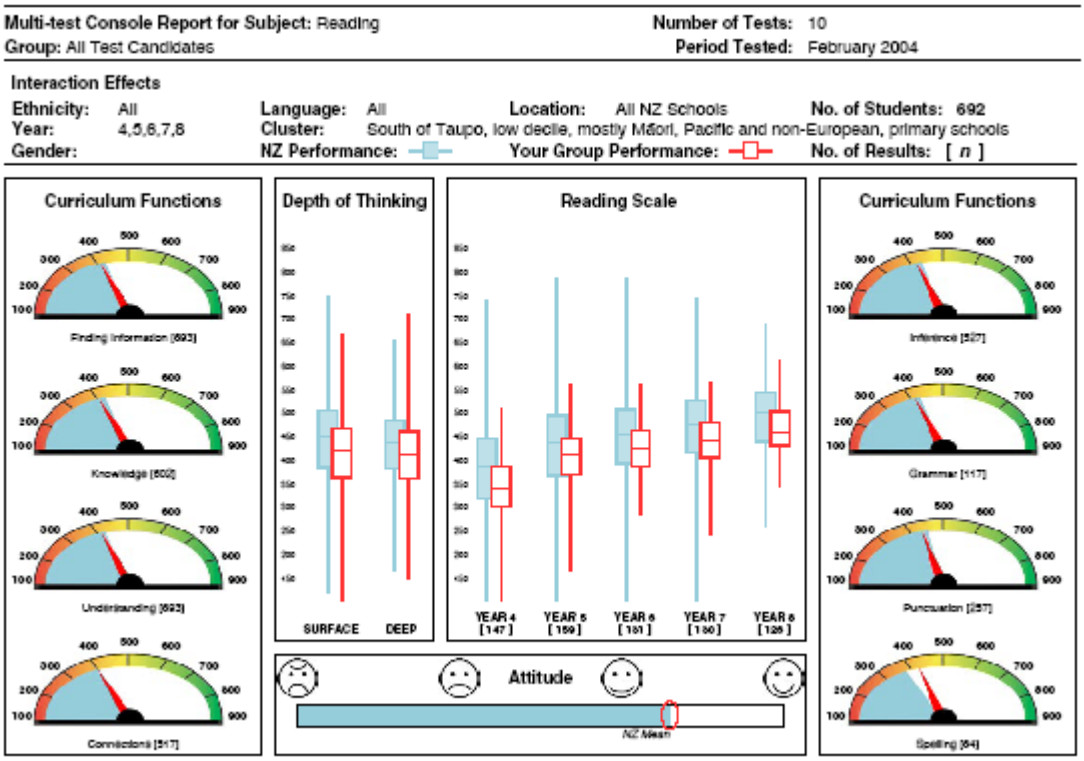
Achievement compared with similar schools

Reading

The "reading console" (Figure 2) compares the means and distributions for reading achievement for 692 students in the third year of the evaluation from the four Flaxmere primary schools combined (the sample includes both students involved with and those not involved with the Flaxmere Project) with the means and distributions for similar schools (decile 1–3 schools south of Taupo, with mostly Māori, Pacific and non-European students).

The performance of the Flaxmere students (shown by the "needle" in the curriculum functions "dial" graphs) is close to the average, as the needle sits broadly on the edge of the shading which represents the comparison group average. On the reading scale (in the centre of the graph), the mean score at each year level for the combined Flaxmere schools is below the mean at each year level for the comparable cluster of schools.

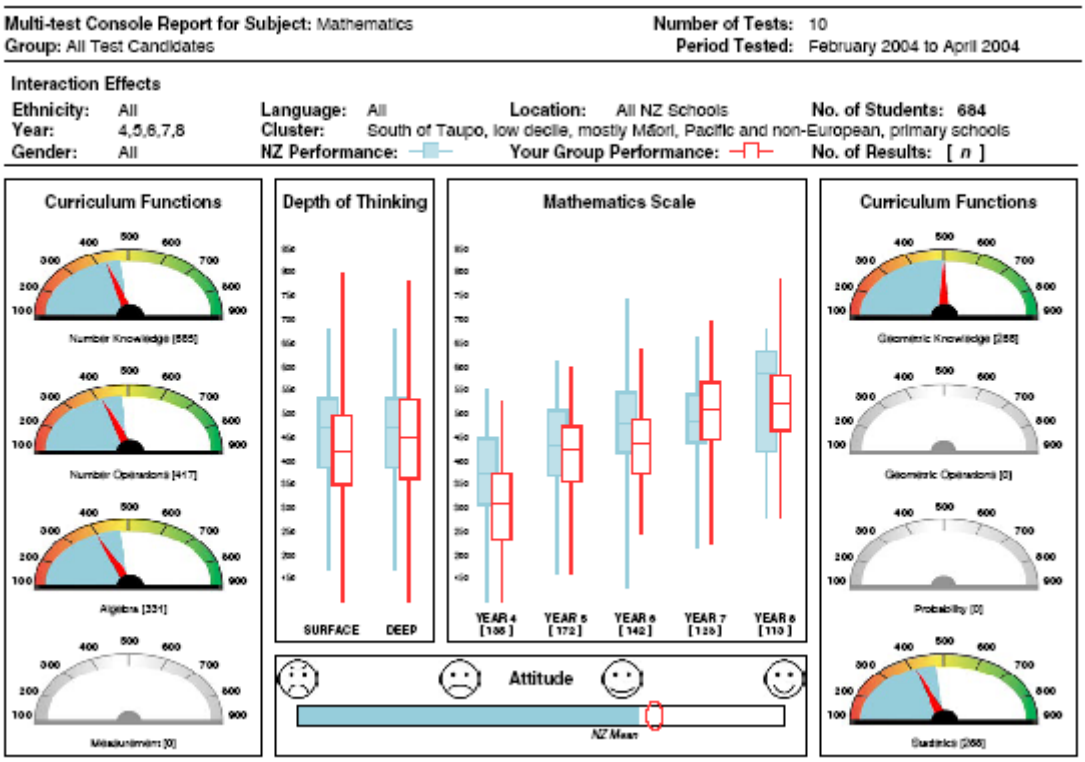
Figure 2: Multi-test console report for reading



Mathematics

Figure 3 compares the means and distributions for mathematics achievement of students in Flaxmere primary schools (includes both students involved and those not involved in the Flaxmere Project) with the achievement of students in similar schools. The mean for the combined Flaxmere schools is below that of the South of Taupo cluster for each year level except Year 7.

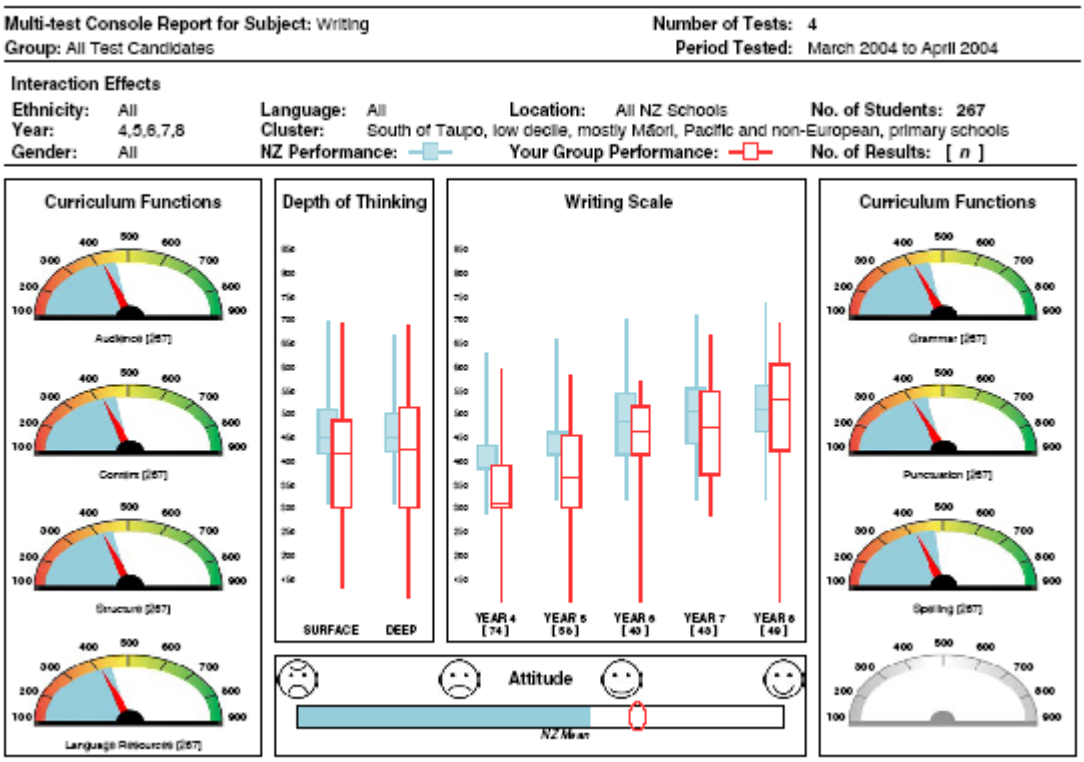
Figure 3: Multi-test console report for mathematics



Writing

Figure 4 compares the means and distributions for writing achievement of the combined Flaxmere primary schools (includes both students involved and those not involved in the Flaxmere Project) with similar schools. The means for the combined Flaxmere students in Years 4 through to 7 are below that for comparable students in the South of Taupo cluster. The mean for Year 8 Flaxmere students is above that of the comparison group, although there great variability in performance (as shown by the spread of the box)

Figure 4: Multi-test console report for writing



What the achievement data show

The asTTle scores for literacy suggest that students in the Flaxmere Project had made gains in reading when compared to those students not in the project. However, although all Flaxmere students were making progress in mathematics, those in the Flaxmere Project were not making as much progress as those who were not in the project. As noted earlier, a possible reason for this difference is that Flaxmere Project parents were able to work with their children more in literacy than they were in the numeracy areas.

There were gains also in students' attitudes to reading and mathematics. While all Flaxmere students had improved attitudes to reading and mathematics, between the first and third year, those in the project made a considerably higher gains in their liking of, and confidence in, these subjects than their peers.

Influences affecting student achievement

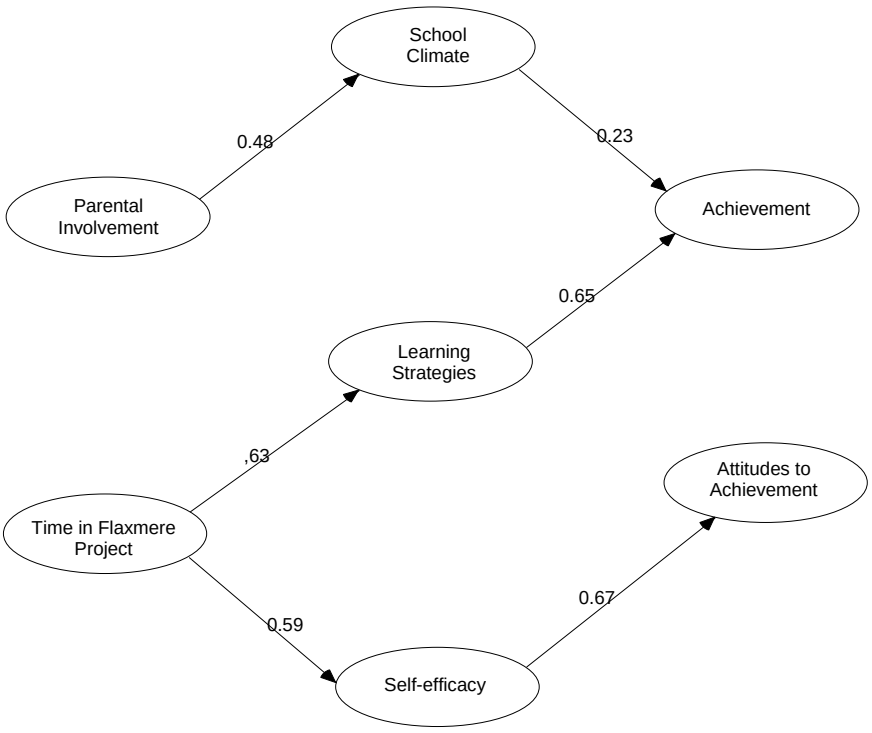
Through the use of structural equation modelling, a sophisticated statistical procedure, it was possible to evaluate the extent to which the links outlined in the programme logic (see p. 9) influenced student

achievement and attitude scores. Models were developed using survey information and achievement data from the third year. The main variables were parental involvement and time spent in the Flaxmere Project, along with the moderating variables of school climate, learning strategies, self-efficacy and attitudes to school.

Figure 5 presents the final model, showing the links between the main and the moderating variables and their cumulative effect on achievement and attitudes. It is important to note that involvement in the Flaxmere Project did not have a direct effect on student achievement, but the effects flowed through school climate and students' learning strategies and sense of self-efficacy. Many other variables were included in the structural models, but they were not as critical as those identified in Figure 5.

The greatest effects of the involvement of parents were that students had more positive attitudes to the school and learning, and these positive attitudes to school led to improvements in achievement in reading, writing and mathematics. The greatest effects from the length of time spent in the Flaxmere Project were that students developed more appropriate learning strategies and higher confidence (self-efficacy) in learning. Having more appropriate learning strategies, in turn, led to higher school achievement while having higher self-confidence led to improved attitudes to achievement.

Figure 5: A structural equation model of major factors from the programme logic predicting achievement (reading, writing and mathematics)



Teachers

Teachers' knowledge of Flaxmere Project grew over the years. They described the project as uniting the schools, and said it was about lifting student outcomes, increasing parental involvement, providing families with choices, and giving them a chance to change.

By the end of 2002, teachers appeared to be more aware of the project but cautious about its progress, although some teachers were very positive. In general, they reported that the project enhanced what the schools were already doing, and they found it difficult to attribute specific benefits entirely to the project: As stated at one school, "The project builds on the good things that already happen here".

By the end of 2003, more teachers felt the Flaxmere Project was becoming integrated into school practice and therefore a part of the school culture. Only one group of teachers from one school expressed the view that the project was not integrated into the school and suggested that they had nothing to do with the project at all.

Many teachers spoke positively about the impact the interventions, such as HSLPs, had on the families involved.

> *It is great that we are able to get the HSLP to check up on kids who are away … They (the HSLP) are able to give us immediate feedback on what is happening. We don't have time to do this ourselves.*

But some were still cautious about the usefulness of computers in family homes, with comments ranging from the intervention being useful to it being a waste of time.

In 2004, teachers were clear that they would like the Flaxmere Project to continue. They saw Flaxmere as a community that would always have families needing extra support and said the project was important in bringing these families into schools and supporting relationships between home, school and community.

One school was in the process of determining the direction it needed to take, as implementation of the project had been an ongoing issue due to problems with communication between school, home, and project. There had been a high staff turnover since the project had started, which meant data collection was an issue at times.

In terms of the relationship between home and school, in 2003 teachers saw the project as enhancing this relationship. One teacher described the project in the following way:

> *The project was about involving parents in their child's education and making stronger links between home and school.*

In 2004, teachers generally considered the project to have achieved much improved relationships between home and school. They remarked that parents were now more involved in their children's education with partnerships between home and school forming. They said, for example, that "without it, parents were not as involved, not coming into school as often"; and "[it] feels like we are all working together to help targeted kids". Many teachers commented on parents coming in to school, good communication between home and school and the increasing interest in learning by parents.

This finding is supported by the surrogate indicator data, which shows teachers' perceptions, along with the perceptions of HSLPs, students and parents themselves, were that the greatest changes in the parents over time related to their ability to help their children with learning, to learn new things, to develop better attitudes to homework and to help their children with homework. The teachers, along with HSLPs, also saw changes in the parents' confidence in talking with the teachers, and the parents' happiness with overall gains from the project, their awareness of the project, and their happiness to visit the school to help their child or see their child at work.

With the surrogate indicator data, the teachers (and HSLPs) perceived greater changes in parents' happiness with, and involvement in, the project over time than the parents themselves. The main reason is that teachers and HSLPs typically began with low ratings and these increased as they saw the gains, whereas parents typically began the project with high ratings. Perhaps a major issue for parental involvement in schooling is the importance of school-based staff seeing, understanding and supporting changes in the home that are conducive to improving student learning.

In terms of the project's effects on students, generally the teachers considered the attendance and behaviour of students was improving, and they noted individual children had changed. They attributed these changes to students having leadership roles, gaining in confidence, and the students liking the special attention. The extra resources and support provided through the project was seen as contributing to more positive attitudes and increased self-esteem amongst students.

Although many teachers described changes in students' engagement in, and attitude towards, learning, they rarely mentioned achievement change. They did say that using an "educational support centre" meant students could catch up, students' computer skills were improving, and peer support in classroom improved learning.

All teachers emphasised that the most important outcome was that the children in the project now wanted to come to school. One teacher noted that "these kids are still at school – retention is such a huge problem; the fact that they are here in Years 11 and 12 is sensational." Another teacher described how the students gave up their holiday time to be on the programme. Yet another said, the biggest change is that "the children want to come to school – not just have to…they used to just drift".

By 2004, teachers were optimistic about students' ability to succeed. They commented on the increased motivation levels of students, increased levels of confidence to ask for help, their pride in what they did, and increasing levels of support from home. Teachers also noted an increase in cooperative learning with students "supporting each other and working as a group".

Quite a few teachers talked about the spin-off benefits to all the students not just those targeted by the Flaxmere Project. This was particularly so with the Computers in Homes and homework centre interventions.

With respect to their own work, teachers' views in 2002 and 2003 varied as to the impact the project had on their teaching. Some said that students were now doing homework. Others said that the project was not impacting on the classroom except for the greater work load associated with monitoring.

In 2004, teachers' confidence in their ability to make a difference to students' achievement had increased, although there was still evidence of deficit thinking in blaming the home for the difficulties in making a difference to learning.

Home School Liaison Persons

By the end of the third year, all HSLPs considered the Flaxmere Project to have achieved its short-term goals. They commented on the improvements in parent, family and student involvement in education, improved home and school relationships, and benefits in terms of teacher understanding of student backgrounds.

Key points made by HSLPs were:

- The project had increased parental involvement in children's schooling and was a catalyst for attitudinal change towards education.
- Parent and school relationships improved due to better parent understanding of what school is about.
- Computers in the homes and homework centres helped get families involved.
- Homework centres supported the children and families in schoolwork and learning.
- Parents benefited through gaining confidence, improved self-esteem and opportunities to up-skill.
- Benefits had trickled through to families and whānau; for example, through access to computers.
- Teachers had a better understanding of the children's circumstances and the impact on their learning.
- Family communication and relationships had improved.

When asked which aspects had best supported the implementation, the HSLPs cited their integration into the school; a good level of resourcing; parent and teacher willingness to commit to the project; sound project management; and computers in the homes and learning kits.

The obstacles for the HSLPs related to a lack of willingness by some families and some teachers to participate; HSLPs workload; the limited feedback in the early stages; and, occasionally, a lack of collaboration between teachers and HSLPs. All HSLPs mentioned the use of databases and the time taken to enter the data as obstacles impacting on implementation of the project. Generally, however, this was seen as an initial problem that was ironed out in the course of the project.

Principals

Discussions were held with the principals at the start of the evaluation in 2002, and they were also surveyed in June 2002 and again in 2004. They were asked to comment on the project's aims, any barriers to achieving those aims, the strengths of the project, specific initiatives and the extent of collaboration among schools.

Achieving goals

In the early stages, other than for Computers in Homes and overall project management, there was very little resource sharing and there was the sense that the schools were going their own way, with initiatives particular to the individual schools. The schools each had their own culture and, in their eyes, different needs; thus they believed they could manage initiatives themselves, with each school taking a different approach.

The cost–benefits of the project were questioned by some principals, not just in terms of the money but the other resources such as time and human resources.

Principals were committed to the mission of the project, yet there was a sense that it was not going the way they envisaged.

In June 2002 only one principal believed the project was on target. Two did not see the project as on target while others were more non-committal responding "yes and no" and "partly".

Key issues included not enough HSLPs, and the additional workload associated with the project. As one principal stated:

> *Before the project got under way I believe we were probably nearer to achieving what we wanted than we are now – why? [The] emphasis has changed to working on the data, the data collection, record keeping, form filling to justify things for the research people and Ministry accountability make the whole thing impractical.*

By 2004, all principals said they considered Flaxmere Project to have achieved its short-term goals. They commented on the improvements in parent, family and student involvement in education, improved home and school relationships and benefits for teaching practice. However, the principals noted they could only comment on change in the short term context. As one principal put it:

> *Long term the schools are aiming to make a difference to the whole Flaxmere community, working through families to raise expectations and outcomes. It will be a long time before this sort of outcome manifests itself, but there are changes happening that look as if they are leading in the right direction.*

Principals saw the short term achievements as:

- improvements in family involvement in school and education, with parents more involved in and informed of learning processes, strategies and expectations.
- improved relationships between home, school and community.
- parents empowered to help children with their learning. One principal attributed parental engagement to the HSLPs saying "HSLPs and their intervention have been most successful. They have touched many parents and have engaged with them in many ways – Computers in Homes, training on and off-site, upskilling in the use of computers, parent discussion/focus groups".
- after-school time being easier for families, with children doing their homework at school.
- pride on the part of families in being involved in the project.
- increasing efficacy of teaching practice. Principals said things like: "We have learnt a lot more about our own schools and have had models of good practices shared amongst the group" and " We have a clearer understanding of where our students are and are not achieving, but most importantly, we are able to share strategies of where to take our students to next".
- student and parent achievement and attitudinal changes. Principals mentioned changes in parental expectations and parenting strategies, personal growth of parents, changed individual child, sibling group and whole family behaviours/attitudes, and an increased involvement in and personalisation of the education process.

- improved attendance and retention at the college, where attendance for students targeted by HSLPs was said to have improved and there was a significant reduction in suspension and exclusions.

Obstacles

When asked whether they considered there to have been any obstacles to implementation of the project as they would have liked, principals all agreed that time needed to set up the databases had been a real issue. Some schools had problems accessing the databases and felt they would have liked more IT support in using these.

However for two schools this was just seen as an obstacle initially and once the databases were being used for assessment and reporting and teachers were skilled in using the databases, they were seen in a different light.

An increased workload over and above other school-related work was another key issue for principals.

Some of the principals mentioned they thought initial limitations in project planning and goal setting impacted on the implementation. A typical comment was:

> *If we had been working from the perfect model right from the start we would be a lot closer to our goals now. So one of the obstacles has been not knowing where we are going or how we are going to get there.*

Human resources had sometimes been a problem; for example, when the project manager's three year contract ended a new manager had to be appointed. There were also issues over continuity of employment of HSLPs; lack of professional development for HSLPs; and lack of 'troubleshooting' knowledge and dependence on others to remedy the situation.

Funding constraints were an issue for three principals, who said funding limited things such as resourcing of HSLPs and being able to expand the target group.

Other obstacles raised by principals were the transience of families, and MOE feedback and commitment to the sustainability of the project. The college principal mentioned the issues of being the sole secondary school and standing alone in terms of school culture.

Aspects facilitating the implementation of the project

By 2004, key aspects that principals thought facilitated project implementation were:

- commitment of project participants
- feedback from project participants and the research team
- consistency of project personnel
- good leadership
- clear communication processes
- understanding the project's intention and how to use data collection tools

All principals said the commitment of all project participants was very important in aiding the implementation of the project into schools. They mentioned the support of school staff and other

principals; the commitment of project staff, including HSLPs and managers; and family and student responsiveness and engagement. HSLPs were an important link between home and school. Principals said the belief by participants that the project could make a difference was vital to its implementation.

Commitment, accessibility and professional support were said to be important qualities. The commitment and dedication of participants – to the philosophy of the project, to being involved in the project, and to making the interventions part of the school culture – were also said to be significant to the implementation and delivery of interventions in schools. One principal particularly praised the teaching staff at the school:

> *The bulk of the work has fallen on the teachers chosen to carry out the HSLP role in addition to their teaching work. They have continued to believe in and support the aims of the project, and to build the communication channels between home and school. They have been wholeheartedly supported by the rest of the staff, so that their initiatives have been complemented in the classroom and in all contacts between home and school.*

The persistence to continue with new processes was noted by another principal who said:

> *The project has kicked us along within the assessment, evaluation and data recording and processes.....we now have a new database and have developed this to allow for the collection and evaluation of all data and assessments whatever the group or intervention.*

Principals also said that feedback from project participants, such as families and staff who were in the HSLP role, the management group and the research team, was very useful in clarifying understanding and affirming the direction taken. Principals said:

> *The positive feedback from and helpful interaction with the research team members has made everyone involved in the project more willing to move forward.*

and

> *Feedback from families and the staff who were carrying out the HSLP role in our school has led to a better understanding of which interventions were the most effective…it has been the learning that is happening for people involved in the project that has moved it forward.*

Consistency of project personnel was a key aspect in easing the implementation of the project in one school; that is, having staff stay in their role in the different initiatives over the long term so that families "know who to see and what to expect from their involvement with the Flaxmere Project". It was also important that project staff had "engagement and ability to interact with parents/whānau on a professional and personal level".

Other features integral to ease of implementation were good leadership of project staff ensuring clear communication processes, and strong positive relationships where home–school partnerships were forged. Community support from the Flaxmere Licensing Trust for the Computers in Homes initiative was also of benefit in implementation.

One principal mentioned the importance of having a real understanding of the philosophy behind the project. Others thought that once they understood how to use tools such as the shared database, they

had a clearer knowledge about needs and development of targets and this aided the implementation of the project.

Principals also mentioned the need to be open to changing interventions to better suit student needs, and re-evaluating interventions to establish better processes. Having appropriate physical resources was another factor in school ability to deliver interventions. One school mentioned having adequate spaces, another the appropriate learning kit for the student age group.

The nature of collaboration

Principals both in 2002 and again in 2004 said that they considered that collaboration between schools, always good in Flaxmere community, had been overtaken by the project work which meant there was "a limiting effect on the sort of wider collaboration that we thought would be encouraged by the project".

However, they did comment that a recent change in leadership philosophy, where the management group was proactive in direction rather than reactive to the needs of the manager and other associated groups, was working well.

Principals also mentioned that there was regular collaboration around the project and that this was appreciated. Examples of collaboration included the knowledge and experiences brought to meetings by other principals, HSLP collaboration between schools, shared professional development for staff, and shared facilities.

The integration of the Flaxmere Project into the day-to-day activities of schools

The level of integration of the project can be seen on a continuum: by 2004, some schools had fully integrated the project into their day-to-day activities; others had integrated some aspects and partially integrated others; and one school had just started the process of integration.

In schools where the project was perceived as fully integrated, principals described the project as part of the school culture and as integral to the curriculum. One said:

> *Our classroom teachers, our management team, our teacher aides, our support staff, our parents and caregivers and the students themselves are all part of the concept, and the activities are supported by them all and seen as part of the way things happen at this school.*

Another principal talked about the integration as "part of the day-to-day running of our school". This person commented that the use of the Classroom Manager database was becoming more routine, with staff confident about using it.

In one school, integration was just beginning, with the project intervention largely led by the HSLP. There was regular feedback from project participants to the school, and deans were being included in the pastoral care of students.

Summing up

> *The Flaxmere Project is about establishing and implementing processes through which the Flaxmere schools collectively engage with the community and caregivers of children in order to improve the current and long term education outcomes for children. (MOE, 2001)*

The Flaxmere Project comprised a series of innovations relating to improving home–school relations within and between the five Flaxmere schools. Although each school implemented the project differently, they shared the goal of engaging with their communities and parents to improve short- and long-term education outcomes for the children.

The HSLPs provided the main link between schools and families; there were multiple benefits from their involvement, and all groups considered this initiative a success.

Computers in Homes was the most visible initiative, and parents were extremely satisfied with it. The computers became a family resource, with families making high use of them (on average, a family's total use was about 30 hours a week). Parents liked the computers because they not only helped their children, but had benefits for the parents as well.

Computers in Homes was also seen as giving HSLPs an entrée into homes, and providing parents with a positive introduction to the project.

Initiatives such as the homework centres took pressure off parents to help with homework and taught those parents who attended how to help their children with, and talk to them about, schoolwork. The transition-to-school initiative helped parents understand children's learning, and provided parents with strategies to support their children's learning.

All groups involved in the project saw changes by the third year. Parents felt they were able to provide greater support for their children in schooling and also that they, themselves, had benefitted by developing new skills. The parents had high expectations and a high level of satisfaction with the local schools and the Flaxmere community.

For students, the major changes related to their behaviour and involvement in schooling. There were also some effects on achievement, but the three-year evaluation period was considered too short to see significant and sustained changes in longer-term outcomes.

The teachers took the longest to see changes resulting from the project but over time they saw changes in students' belief in their ability to engage and succeed, and came to see changes in the parents' understanding of schools.

The principals considered there was much evidence of success with the shorter term outcomes of the project but raised concerns that longer term outcomes would be compromised by, for example, uncertainty over funding.

The Flaxmere Project has shown that the Flaxmere schools not only know how to change but, more importantly, they know how to improve. They can engage parents in schooling, increase student attendance and satisfaction with learning, and develop parents' confidence in and knowledge of

schooling and learning. In short, through the Flaxmere Project they have learnt how to evaluate their own success, to modify the methods of innovation, and to develop practice around the notion of improvement.