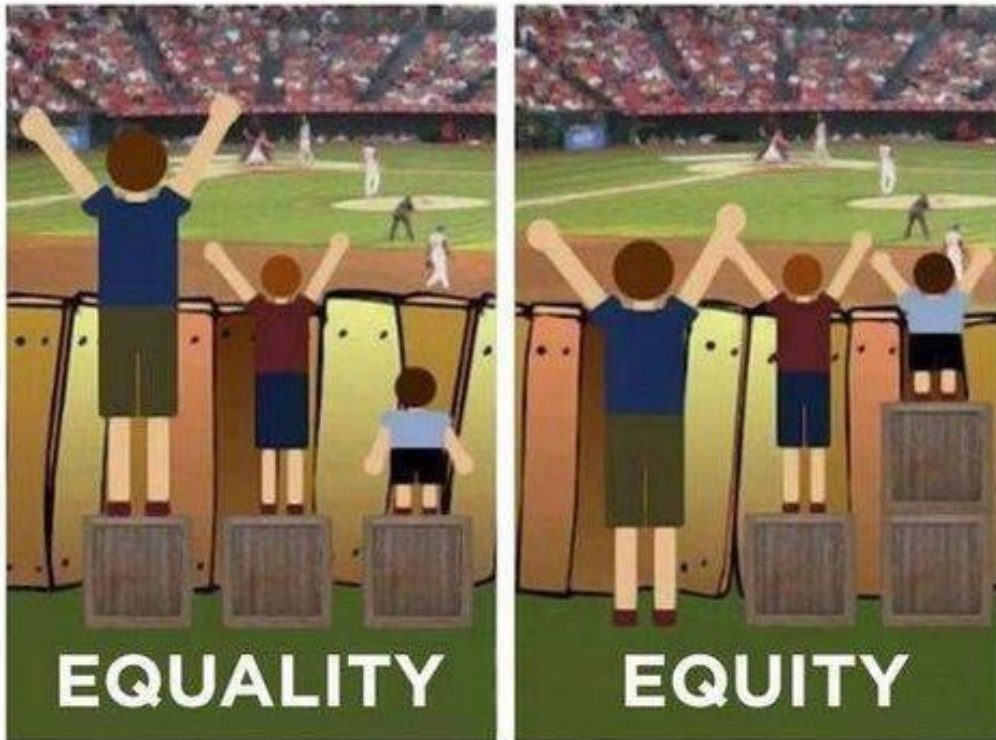# How Can Schools Better Support Effective Parenting in their Communities?

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Title and focus of the sabbatical

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How Can Schools Better Support Effective Parenting in their Communities?

A synthesis of school visits, interviews and professional reading looking at how schools can support effective parenting in their communities leading to children having better learning experiences at school.

About the Author

I am a primary school principal with almost 8 year's experience. I am also a father of one 3 year old and I am only just beginning to understand the vital importance of effective parenting for society.

My contact details are as follows principal@waimatemain.school.nz or 0274288143 for those of you who wish to contact me about this sabbatical report.

Acknowledgments

My sincere thanks go to…

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  - Dr. Laurie Thew, Principal Manurewa Central School
  - Tone Kolose, Principal Maunrewa South Primary School
  - Kathleen Paku, Maurewa Parenting Hub
  - John Good: Reading Together Project Manager, Ministry of Education, Auckland
  - Jason Swann: Principal. Otahuhu Primary School
  - Rema Leitch: Pillar of all things wise!

A Note from the Author…

- I have chosen to present my findings under four key questions that I set out to answer at the beginning of this sabbatical rather than the usual headings of summary and findings etc.
- I have also chosen to write in bullet pointed short statements rather than connected prose. I hope this is more useful to busy principals and teachers who are time poor.

Question 1:

What does research tell us about the impact of out of school factors on children's academic performance in school?

Food for Thought….

"Schools can ignore what lies beyond their gates but they cannot escape it. Students bring with them ...everything that has happened to them elsewhere in their lives. Families and communities are present in the classrooms as students themselves. The choice is not whether to allow the outside world into the

school. It is whether to do so openly and thoughtfully, embracing the challenges and opportunities it presents, or pretend against all the evidence that the outside world does not exist.

P.7, Equipping Schools to Fight Poverty: A Community Hub Approach available at
http://ppta.org.nz/resources/media/2797-media-school-hubs

Findings…

- *B*etween 40-65 percent of the difference in student outcomes is attributable to family and community factors. [1]
- *John West Burnham (2007)* asserts that this could even be as high as 80% [2]
- As children and young people spend less than half their time in formal education settings, parents, whanau and their communities and the interconnectness of these spheres play a critical role in the educational success of children and young people[3]
- In their book….*Child Poverty in New Zealand, Jonathan Boston and Simon Chapple* discuss the strong links between the high rates of child poverty in NZ and the impact this has on student achievement, specifically…
    - "New Zealand schools are also struggling with children who frequently change schools. In NZ, Rates of residential mobility are amongst the highest in the OECD. Between 2001 & 2006 more than half of NZ's population moved house. About 20 percent move every year."[4]
    - "According to a study conducted by David Fergusson and Lianne Woodward, children of parents in a managerial or professional role achieved university entrance at a rate five times higher than children of unskilled or semiskilled workers." [5]
    - "A longitudinal study by the NZ Council for Educational Research of 500 Wellington children found that children whose family income in 1993/94 was below $30,000 at age five generally scored lower on basic competencies in their first year of schooling compared to their more affluent counterparts. These children continued to score lower at age 10 in crucial subjects like mathematics, reading comprehension and writing. Significantly, this weaker academic performance was evident regardless of whether the family income had improved between ages five and ten."[6]
    - Research at John Hopkins have found conclusively that virtually all parents want their children to succeed educationally. [7]

- In recent decades, significant changes in childhood and family life, economic pressures and the dominance of equipment/electronic media for children have had negative impacts on:

    - Adults; engagement and interactions with children in their families, and
    - The language and cognitive development of children and young people.[8]

- The home environment powerfully influences what children and young people learn, within and outside school. It is considerably more powerful that parents' income and education in influencing children's learning during their early childhood and schooling years.[9]

- Family processes, and how parents interact with their children, are more significant and influential than parental ethnicity, occupation, income and educational level.[10]

This means that…

- Out of school factors are equally important in determining education success as the quality of teaching a child receives. We must look at these two factors as <u>equal factors in a child's educational success.</u>
- We must move away from a model where it is widely believed that a child can leave his or her experiences of the world at the school gate to one where we acknowledge and work with these experiences within school.
- Poverty alone does not determine how well a child will achieve at school. However the impact of poverty on the family and how well the parents manage to maintain a loving, caring, nurturing environment for the children under the considerable stress that poverty brings is.
- We need to continue to look at ways to reduce the difference in inequality for our students and resource the poorest and most disadvantaged at a much higher rate. One American study suggests estimates that these students need 40-100 per cent more funding."[11]
- Upskilling and supporting parents, so that they can provide their children with the best start in life has a positive impact on all educational outcomes.[12, 13]

"Doables' for our school include…

- Start each year with a "I wish my teacher knew"- this is when all children have the opportunity to write something to the teacher in confidence about their home environment.
- Ensure all staff understand the importance of knowing the families and family circumstance of all children in our school.
- Ensure we know our families really well so that we can better understand the out of school factors that our children are bringing to their academic learning.
- Ensure teachers have opportunities to build relationships with parents by providing informal opportunities for teachers and parents to meet.
- As a school, look for ways to work with social agencies, to support parents wherever possible.

Question 2:

What is the latest brain development research on the development of the brain in the first 5 years of life and what can primary schools do about this?

Food for Thought….

"We don't come fully formed into the world. We learn how to think, how to walk, how to speak, how to behave; indeed how to be human from other human beings. We need other human beings in order to be human. We are made for togetherness...."

Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Findings…

All of the following information is taken from

- Unlike other human organs, the human brain does not come fully developed.
- The experiences that young children have with their environment and, most importantly the relationships with the <u>adults</u> around them build their brains. The more positive their experiences and <u>relationships</u>, the stronger the brain develops, the more stressful these experiences and relationships, the weaker the brain develops.
- Young children experience their world as an environment of <u>relationships</u>, and these <u>relationships</u> affect virtually all aspects of their development. Put simply, it is <u>relationships</u> with other human beings that build our brains.
- Early brain development is the foundation for all future learning, health and behaviour.
- Unrelenting stress in early childhood, caused by extreme poverty, repeated abuse or severe maternal depression damages the brain. Scientists call this toxic stress.
- Although it is possible to positively influence children's and adults' brain development later in life, it is both expensive and difficult to do, because the brain's capacity for change decreases with age.
- For every $1 spent on effective early childhood programmes there is a return on the investment of between $4 and $9 to society.

Effective Functions of the Brain

- Scientists have determined that 'effective functions' are some of the most important life skills the human brain can develop.
- Executive function and self-regulation skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully.
- Just as an air traffic control system at a busy airport safely manages the arrivals and departures of many aircraft on multiple runways, the brain needs this skill set to filter distractions, prioritize tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses.
- When children have opportunities to develop executive function and self-regulation skills, individuals and society experience lifelong benefits. These skills are crucial for learning and development. They also enable positive behaviour and allow us to make healthy choices for ourselves and our families.
- Executive function and self-regulation skills depend on three types of brain function: working memory, mental flexibility, and self-control. These functions are highly interrelated. Each type of skill draws on elements of the others, and the successful application of executive function skills requires them to operate in coordination with each other.
  - Working memory governs our ability to retain and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time.
  - Mental flexibility helps us to sustain or shift attention in response to different demands or to apply different rules in different settings.
  - Self-control enables us to set priorities and resist impulsive actions or responses.
  - Children aren't born with these skills—they are born with the potential to develop them.
  - Children's ability to develop these skills are effected by negative environments and more important negative relationships with the adults around them.
  - "The ability to develop and master self- control is the most important 'game changer' for children with behavioural difficulties"- *Nathan Mikaere-Wallis, Brain Wave Trust*

This means that…

- We should prioritise funding for effective, relationship building programmes in the early childhood areas of our education system as it is this time that we can influence brain development the most.
- If children's brains develop best through positive interactions with adults, then we must ensure that early childhood education providers have the <u>best quality</u>, and <u>highest numbers</u> of adult educators possible.
- As a society, we must have honest dialogue about how we support parents to have brain building positive relationships with their children, especially in the first few years of a child's life. For example, is the current model of both parents working and young children attending childcare for longer and longer periods of time the best option for our children's brain development?
- If science tells us that the human brain develops best through positive relationships with other human beings, then all areas of our education system must make relationship building core business. This has implications on staff employments, use of ICT and curriculum design, especially given the fact that equipment designed for a child's solo exploration now dominates.
- At all levels of schooling, curriculum design must factor in opportunities to develop the executive functions of the brain, especially self-regulation, because research shows that improving a child's self-regulation skills is the most effective way of changing a child's life trajectory. Most importantly, in primary education, we must scaffold children's abilities to self-regulate, moving them along a continuum of self-regulation of:

Regulated by others to self-regulation to masters of their own regulation

'Doables' for our school include…

- We should consider how to get more positive role models into our school to support relationship building with our youngest children.
- Staff need to consider the relationships they have with students and inquire into how they can strengthen these relationships, e.g. taking part in school dress up days, spending the odd lunchtime playing sport with a group of children…
- We need to develop and teach skills to develop executive functions of the brain, especially self-regulation. Harvard University has some age specific ideas and activities to do this at http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/tools_and_guides/enhancing_and_practicing_executive_function_skills_with_children/

Question 3:

What are schools doing to support parents to be more effective in the first 3-5 years of a child's life and what difference (if any) is this having on student academic performance within school?

Food for Thought….

"The purpose of a school is to help a family educate a child." Don Edgar

Findings…

- Increasingly schools are involved in greater numbers of parent education programmes as well as running, in some cases, parenting hubs to support and strengthen parenting in their areas.

- There are a large number of high quality parent education programmes, which schools, early childhood centres and other social agencies are delivering to parents. These include, but are not limited to Reading Together, Early Reading Together, Computers in Homes, HIPPY, HPP, PAFT. Supporting Parents Alongside Children's Education (SPACE)
- However, considering the increasing need to support parents who are sometimes struggling under economic and social pressures, the number of schools providing this support remains very small. It is the author's best guess that maybe up to 50 primary schools out of a total of around 2500 are actively involved in parent education of this sort.

These programmes <u>show sustained improvement in students' educational outcomes as well as a host of other social benefits.</u>[13,18]

However, at the same time informed parental involvement can have positive impacts of student achievement, uniformed parental involvement can have negative effects on children's learning.[14]

This means that…

- Schools need to see their role as one where they educate the parent and the child alongside each other. Schools and Govt. need to see this as core school business and fund schools accordingly to do this work. The 'Hub' model where school resources are used for a range of outcomes, not just educational, is the most effective way of doing this that I have seen.
- There needs to be better collaboration between, and coordination of, Govt. services in and around schools. As schools exist in almost all communities, it would be a wise financial move for the Govt. to look to move more of its services into schools.

'Doables' for our school include…

- For all new entrant enrolments, to ensure that their parents have attended the school's Reading Together programme before sending reading books home.
- To investigate other options to engage with parents around their children's learning, Mutukaroa, HPP and HIPPY are some that our school could look to deliver.

Question 4:

- Where schools and other social agencies are involved together to support parents, How are they making these partnerships with parents sustainable in the longer term?

Food for Thought….

"Whaka paohotia oku painga kia ngaro oku ngoikoretanga"

Highlight my strengths and my weaknesses will disappear.

Findings…

The schools and social agencies with the most enduring partnerships with parents were those who had the strongest <u>relationships</u> with their parents.

There is a difference between involved parents and engaged parents. Schools with sustainable relationships with parents had engaged parents. The difference being; involved parents may be physically active in the school, such as helping with the sausage sizzle, but engaged parents understand what the school is trying to achieve around their child's learning. They are active in that learning, supporting it and driving it. They ask teachers the hard questions and are happy to upskill themselves if they believe this will increase their child's achievement.

These schools reported that they worked hard to maintain these relationships. They had made a concerted effort to be more approachable, more informal and generally more relaxed so that parents no longer saw the relationship between the school and the home as them and me, but rather us.

The schools with the most sustainable relationships with parents communicated that…

- These relationships were built on a real honesty and genuine belief in the value of engaging with parents. This belief was shared by all staff.
- The relationship was two directional as the following quotes explain:
  - Social support which is two directional that is which allows people to both give and receive help ensures feelings of mutual respect that contribute to relational satisfaction and is most effective in supporting self-efficacy and personal change [15]
  - In contrast support which is one-directional such as that provided by formal agencies can make the recipient feel inferior, vulnerable and inadequate [16]
- These schools were also prepared to accept that if they wanted sustainable, long term engagement, that if they wanted parents to accept knowledge and information from them, then they had to accept knowledge and information from parents.
- The Māori ideal of 'ako'- we are all leaners at the same time we are all teachers was evident in these centres as were many other Māori holistic beliefs and practices such as Manaakitanga and Homai ki te tangata, te kanohi ki te kanohi- "Give it to a person face to face- real honesty.

This means that…

- Staff and school leaders need to understand what engaging with parents actually is, they need to value it, and be willing to participate fully in the process; Schools need to be philosophically ready.
- As parent engagement leads to higher levels of student achievement, we need to centrally fund it rather than rely on philanthropic funders and short term, here today, gone tomorrow, Government contracts.

'Doables' for our school include…

- Work with the staff to better understand the difficulties our school faces in engaging with our community and ways we can overcome this.
- We also need to ensure that all staff fully understands the differences between parent involvement and engagement.
- We need to look at our school and staff values.
  - Are we all on the same page?
  - Are we prepared to make changes to our practice?
  - What is practical and doable with the hours and resources available?

•   What are the parents, who are being supported by schools and other social agencies, saying about what affect these school and community partnerships are having for them?

Food for Thought….

'We need to have simple truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard; we each listen well." Margaret Wheatley 2002

Findings…

- Parent voice and anecdotal evidence from teachers and principals in schools show that when parents and school commit to community partnerships, the results can be life changing.[17,18]

Following are a collection of quotes taken from *Metzger N., (2014) Manurewa Parenting Hub, Creating Change, Wellington: Ministry of Social Development*

"I've had a tough journey and life is not always happy, but I know that I can always come to the Hub"

"I am not as thick as I thought I was…I am actually taking in information now like I didn't do at high school. I understand maths stuff now…it is a good feeling."

"It makes you step up as being the second educator…You don't just rely on the school to educate your child. You have got the tools now to do it yourself."

It gave me the skills because when my son started school he was really low in reading. In the holidays I got him to read every day. He is now reading fantastically"

"I see myself changing quite dramatically. I had self-esteem (issues), now I go out in the community and I meet other people."

You tip toe around teachers a little bit in case they judge you. I would probably hold a lot in if I was talking to a teacher. The Hub…is really there to help you."

For New Zealand, this means that…

- School and community partnerships work.
- They increase student achievement
- They increase student engagement
- They change how parents see themselves and how parents see how they can support their children.
- They have positive spin offs in the community

'Doables' for our school are…

- Investigate further programmes that our school can deliver to support our parents to support their children.

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