

Parental and Student Resilience in Education

Principal Sabbatical Report

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge my board of trustees for supporting my sabbatical application and time away from school. I would like to thank the wonderful staff, students and whanau of Mangaroa School for their support over the past term. The chance to travel, re-energise, reflect and research has been invaluable. To my colleagues, both overseas and in New Zealand, who have given their time so graciously and willingly to talk about resilience in their schools and communities – thank you!

Finally, I'd like to thank the Ministry of Education for providing principals the opportunity of sabbatical leave. The time to research and recharge, away from school, and to have so many conversations with colleagues throughout New Zealand, and afar, has reinvigorated me and made me even more appreciative of the job that I am privileged to get up for every morning.

Purpose

To explore how schools are engaging with parents to increase both parent and student resilience around education, particularly in the junior school.

Background

Over the past seven years (in my time as a principal), I have heard the same complaint from leadership teams throughout our nation – students are showing up to school far less prepared for school than we were back in the day. Sure, little “Susie” can programme mum’s iPhone to play Bluetooth in her car by the time she’s four, and “Austin” can work the iPad better than his parents, but neither can hold a pencil correctly or cut with a pair of scissors. Students often can’t write their own names or recognise the letters of the alphabet when they start school. And that’s okay. Because, as I reassure parents, that’s what they send their children to school for... but it is also the time when some parents begin looking around and starting to compare what their child can/can’t do in relation to others in the classroom. For the first time, instead of seeing everything that their child *can* do, they become incredibly worried about what they *can’t* and that worry can land on the shoulders of the child, who is suddenly under a barrage of alphabet and number work every evening at home under the guidance of their parents (not the teacher). And then there’s the child who had, up until then, been the star of his/her own show – he/she gets to school and realises that they’re now sharing the stage with fifteen or so classmates. Others are putting their hands up on the mat and calling out answers to the teacher, answers that that particular child has no idea about. Others know their alphabet, their numbers and the sight words that are on display around the classroom. Suddenly, and often for the first time, they are no longer the star. School isn’t as fun as they thought it was going to be.

So how can we make the transition easier for the parent, the child, and the teacher? At Mangaroa:

- We start by reassuring the parents before their child starts school. I have every family in for an interview before enrolment begins (unless they already have a child at the school).
- We provide information packs to parents which educate them about our school vision, expectations, etc. It also tells parents what to expect when their child starts school.
- We hold New Entrant evenings to discuss the programme at school and the nerves that are inevitable for both whanau and child once school starts for that family.
- We provide opportunities for lots of school visits and we encourage playground visits on weekends.
- Our new entrant teacher visits play centres, kindies and day care centres to meet our students before their first school visit.
- We include the local kindergartens in our cluster professional development.
- We have established a coherent pathways team who work together across kindergartens, primary schools, intermediate schools and colleges to ensure smoother transitions take place between all.
- We start the day with a “Play to Learn” classroom programme which enables our learners to co-construct and play alongside their peers in an unstructured, unguided manner (but with the teacher closely monitoring, taking photos, making notes, etc.). This programme has been incredibly successful around the anxiety that our students (and their parents!) used to feel when the 9am bell would ring and they’d have to go and sit quietly on the mat waiting for the daily roll. Now, the roll is taken while they collaborate and “play” – building up their social and cognitive skills, whilst developing

maturity and self-confidence which allows them to engage in new experiences in their new environment.

The Play to Learn programme was initiated in my school, in part, to reduce the tears from students (and parents) when it came time to say goodbye in the morning. I can't count the times that, as a new entrant teacher, and then as a principal, that I've been called on to separate a parent and toddler so that the school day can begin. A mum or dad who left a crying child in the classroom to make a quick exit was the anomaly, not the norm. It wasn't uncommon to see one of our new parents leave the classroom (after finally getting their little one settled), only to walk around to the other side and look into the window, where, if spotted, the cycle of tears starts again (sometimes for both)! As a new entrant teacher, I would reassure my parents that it was perfectly okay to leave the classroom while their child was clinging to a leg, sobbing uncontrollably. After relinquishing their little one, I would promise to call home in fifteen minutes if their child was still as upset. I never had to, as inevitably, once the parent was out of sight, the tears would stop. If the parent was particularly vulnerable, I would have the office call home anyway, to tell him/her that the child in question was happily now reading, writing, playing or whatever we were getting up to in class. The Play to Learn Programme has reduced this anxiety, in our estimation, by around 75%... it's been massive!

At Mangaroa School, in line with our school vision, we ban parents from carrying backpacks within our school grounds. Students as young as five are responsible for their own belongings from the moment they enter our gates until the moment they leave. If a student forgets a water bottle, they do not call home for mum or dad to bring it – they use the water fountain. At the end of the day, parents can no longer stand in front of our classroom windows, peering in, while waiting for the 3:00pm bell ... we have specific areas for whanau to congregate. These new "rules" were accepted by our students without hesitation – for some of our whanau, however, it took a lot of time, effort and discussion. I am fortunate to have a board of trustees who are very supportive of our stance on resilience and responsibility.

I wanted to explore ways that other schools throughout New Zealand and afar were supporting students and parents to increase resiliency in school. My goal was to engage with colleagues who were on a similar path so that I could unpack their initiatives and activities with staff back at Mangaroa School.

Resilience, Mindsets and the Learning Pit at Mangaroa

In 2018, we changed our school vision from *Confident and resilient students, prepared for the future* to ***Confident and resilient learners, preparing for the future***. Altering only two words changed the scope of our school. The expectations, not just for our students, but for our whanau and for our teachers are now the same. We are ALL learners and we are ALL teachers. We learn off one another. When I have parents into my office to discuss their child's behaviour, or, in extreme cases, their own behaviour, it is our school vision that I keep coming back to.

The part that parents play in promoting (or hampering) resilience in children, has been studied vigorously since the late 1990s. It has been noted that there is no consensus regarding the definition of resilience (Kinard, 1998), but rather a cluster of meanings associated with doing better than expected in difficult circumstances. At Mangaroa School, the majority of parents are very involved in their children's learning. We are a Decile 10 school but our students come from vast economic backgrounds. As with most primary schools throughout New Zealand, our parental involvement is strongest in our junior years and tapers off as students get to the senior school.

In 2018, I began interviewing every family that wanted to enrol their child at our school. Part of every discussion includes me stating outright that, "If you are a helicopter parent, we are probably not the right school for you." I follow this up with the ethos of our school, which is that we actively encourage resilience by allowing students to climb trees, build forts, play Bullrush and get dirty. I also tell them that yes, there have been injuries (though none serious) but that, for the most part, our students know to get up, dust themselves off, and get back to playing. Our stance on allowing Bullrush, and encouraging tree climbing, much the same as we were doing in schools forty-odd years ago, has seen our school become quite sought after, and we adhere to a strict zoning policy. Teachers, also, needed to be challenged on resiliency, particularly when they were on duty, as students would be sent daily to the staffroom asking for an ice pack. Finally, in a staff meeting, I let teachers know that every time an ice pack was given out, it was to be written up in our student management system as a medical incident. The feedback from staff at that meeting was that they were fearful of reprisals from parents if they *didn't* give an icepack out and parents found out. Unfortunately, this fear of reprisal is something that is becoming all too common. When I spoke to 24 principals throughout New Zealand, Canada and Norway, there was a consensus that this fear is becoming more prevalent for all of us.

John Collier (1998), from St. Andrew's College in Sydney, wrote an article in his school newsletter titled, "How should parents act when their child has a problem at school?" Whilst not a big fan of Collier, I did agree with the majority of his article, including: *My advice to parents who work themselves into a state of high anxiety over single incidents, or even sets of incidents, is to take a step back and look at the long view. Parents who regularly place this stress upon themselves will be nervous wrecks by the end of Year 12! Moreover, they often inadvertently pass on this stress to their children, so worsening rather than improving the problem.*

So often what started as a very small incident in a classroom or on a playground can be blown out of proportion once parents get involved, particularly when that involvement does not initially involve the school, and parents take matters into their own hands. By the time leadership teams do get involved, rationale has more often than not been ‘thrown out with the bathwater’ and the situation takes much longer to resolve.

More and more often at school, we are seeing parents pass on their own anxieties to their children. The discussions that I’ve had over the past ten weeks certainly back this up. Wilson and Lyons (2013) state that *research shows that anxious children can learn patterns of worry from parents who are only trying to help*. They go on to say that *when we act as worried, frustrated parents, we rarely teach our kids and teens how to stop being worried – instead we inadvertently teach them to think and act in ways that reinforce their fear and avoidance*.

Diane Levy (2002) writes that *allowing our children to learn through safe mistakes is way ahead in the success stakes compared with telling them, making rules and punishing infractions*. She goes on to say that *there is a swift and easy response to parenting – yelling, and there is a carefully planned response that requires thought, restraint, patience and often hard work*. It is this, she says, that will give our children a learning experience to stand them in good stead. Levy has it right -- not just for parents parenting children, but also for parents addressing concerns to teachers and administrators at school. But even more than just for parents – Levy’s statements are also certainly true for teachers addressing students in their classrooms.

Every classroom at Mangaroa School has a poster of James Nottingham’s “Learning Pit” concept (which has been adapted for our school). The Learning Pit shows a student facing a challenge, falling into “a pit” and then finding ways to *solve the problem* to get out of the pit. All of our learners are encouraged to get “in the pit” as much as possible. The only way to develop our abilities is to work at them! Nothing comes easy and we can, and do, relate the learning pit, and the two growth mindsets, back to our school vision.

Carol Dweck has spent the majority of her life researching human motivation. Her theory of the two mindsets, fixed and growth, are incredibly powerful, and we use them, alongside the learning pit. According to Dweck, people with "fixed mindsets" stop trying when confronted with a challenge because they've convinced themselves that they're not good at whatever the subject is. A growth mindset, however, is about believing that people can develop their abilities (2017).

Do Deciles and Location Make a Difference?

According to the 24 principals I spoke to, when it comes to parental resilience, there wasn’t a large amount of difference between our lower decile schools and our decile 9/10 schools. The difference, I learned, is that parents in higher decile schools are seen and heard from on a more regular basis. In my discussions with other high decile principals, we found we had the following in common: a lot of affluent families with single parent incomes, where one parent (in more cases than not, the mother) is readily available for every school function, trip

or activity at hand. Some parents drop off their children and stand chatting for up to an hour with other parents each morning, and are back an hour before the bell at the end of the day. These parents know *everything* that is going on at school, including things that don't pertain to their own child's class (and they're the first to share any news with other parents who arrive at school).

Principals at the lower decile schools I spoke to said that the majority of their parents are not around much, except at drop off and pick up times (and a lot of these parents avoided classrooms and discussions with teachers, preferring to wait in the parking lots or at the school gates. When parents were required at school, they would show up, but principals felt it was more of a "needs to be there," rather than a "wants." One principal stated that his Decile 1 school had parents who were open about the fact that they hadn't enjoyed school when they were young. He said that a lot of his parents had left school early (before the end of Year 12) and that it was a constant battle getting these parents to regularly bring their children to school (let alone get the parents to attend meetings, social gatherings or school trips).

When it came to the resilience of students between Deciles in inner city schools, it was a mixed bag. According to the leaders I spoke to, some of the lower decile school students had very high levels of student resilience, and some had lower. The same was said of the higher decile schools. The prevalent factor was that students who were only children tended to be the least resilient, in both higher and lower decile schools. First born children tended to be the second highest category of being the least resilient, particularly in two-children families, whereas younger students and students who had several siblings tended to be more resilient.

This is a very different scenario to the rural, country school that I worked at prior to my current school, and I was eager to discuss this with other rural principals throughout New Zealand, as well as with principals in rural schools overseas. The results were unanimous. Students in rural, country schools showed far more resilience upon arrival in Year One than students in city schools. Principals suggested that this could be due to the majority of rural school students showing up by bus, and not being dropped off by parents (therefore having to fend for themselves from the moment they arrived at school). Rural students often have far longer days and can be on a bus for up to an hour each way to and from school. If a rural student forgot a lunch, he/she wasn't going to call home for mum or dad to bring it. There was also a lot of discussion at the amount of responsibility that rural students had at home, especially those living and working on large farms. One principal I spoke to was amazed that nobody in his class was the least bit interested in video games. He polled his school and less than ten percent of students had gaming consoles at home, and they were used mainly by the parents. Students were far more interested in riding their dirt bikes, going fishing and hunting, learning to shear, learning to drive (in many cases students as young as 12 would drive the farm ute on their land while helping out on the farm) and being outdoors.

Whilst visiting Vancouver Island, Canada, I met with five principals from the Cowichan Valley. There are 17 elementary schools and 5 high schools in their cluster, servicing 7800 students. Each "cluster" is run from a *School Board Office* that is comprised of a tier process beginning with a Superintendent of Schools, a Deputy Superintendent, a Treasurer, etc. Before I became a teacher, I worked as an administrator in the Cowichan Valley School Board Office and I can

tell you, it's as busy as any Ministry of Education Office. The schools are all managed through the one board office which elects one board of trustees to govern all 22 schools. The board office also manages the school buses and drivers, a cache of electricians, mechanics, carpenters, painters, drivers, caretakers, groundskeepers, etc. Principals can be moved throughout the Valley at the Board's discretion and it is not unusual to see a teacher remain at one school for their entire career. The schools do not operate through decile systems, though there is a distinct difference in economic areas between them. The principals I spoke to were aghast that we had a system that based our funding on economic status. That said, they could easily look at one another and "judge" who would have the 'Decile 1' school and who had the 'Decile 10' (just from the locations of their schools).

When I spoke to them about the resilience of their students, and parents, the principal of the lower socio-economic area was able to confirm that her students showed much more resilience than those at her previous school, which was in a higher socio-economic area. Similar to the New Zealand principals I spoke to at lower deciles schools, parents at that particular Canadian school were not often present. She also noted that her current school had a very high First Nations population, and that almost all of her families had more than one child; some parents had up to six children -- which could explain why the parents were not seen at school so often. Because her students were often responsible for looking after their younger siblings, they were much more adept at looking after their own belongings, and packing their own lunches, than students who were only children or who had parents with the time to do it for them. The principal sitting beside her, who was in the highest socio-economic area, noted that her parents were generally wealthy, middle-aged couples who had one-two children and more time to be hands-on parents (and much more time to be at her school, which coincided with what the principals at higher decile schools told me in New Zealand). When I spoke to those principals about the initiatives that I'd put in place at my current school, they were speechless, and then incredibly inquisitive. In British Columbia, the principals have far less autonomy and are under the strict guidance of their School Board Office. One principal said that if she banned parents from standing in front of a classroom window, she knew that she'd have a representative from the School Board Office at her school the next day asking why!

When I asked about how the principals dealt with resilience at their schools, they talked about a common "Code of Conduct" which is reviewed annually and referred to constantly with students and parents. The code is mandated by Safer Schools and allows for all schools to have a common set of rules, rising expectations, restorative practices, consideration for people with special needs and adheres to the BC Human Rights Code. Each school has their own individual school-based team for problem solving and support of students who are brought forward for disciplinary issues. The district also has district initiatives for the SEL-CALM Programme (Social and Emotional Learning) which is underway in most kindergarten classrooms. Six times a year, the schools all close early for professional learning, when the teachers, and teacher aides, have the opportunity to get together for seminars, workshops, etc. The schools also have counsellors attached to them and the counsellors work with teachers on SEL strategies. A newer initiative being discussed in School District 79 is the EASE Programme (Everyday Anxiety Strategies for Educators) which would be great to implement here in New Zealand as well. EASE workshops and resources are available for elementary schools (Years 1-7) and are provided at no cost to British Columbia teachers, school

counsellors and other educators who participate in one day of interactive professional development to:

- Find out about anxiety and how it presents at school
- Discover ways to integrate anxiety prevention tools into regular classroom routines
- Get hands-on strategies to help students
- Use relaxation skills to dial down strong emotions and build resilience
- Take brave steps to face a challenge

The schools on Vancouver Island had not heard of “Learning through Play” (or “Play to Learn”) but do incorporate similar sorts of activities in the mornings, particularly in their kindergarten classes. One principal said that her programme was called “Table Top” and included several different activities each morning, for twenty minutes, which were changed weekly. These could incorporate cutting, colouring, math activities, puzzles, etc. Another principal told me that her programme was very similar, but at her school they called it “Small Jobs.” She said that it definitely helped make the transition into class easier and also helped to have a “soft start” for those parents that were not always punctual. She said that since starting “Small Jobs,” the school had seen a marked decrease in student, and parent, anxiety. She’d also seen a marked improvement in both absences and punctuality.

The principal I spoke to in Norway, who leads a sea-side school in a semi-rural environment, spoke of students as young as six cycling and skiing to and from school with their older siblings as parents would be off at work. She was in awe of the fact that so many of our parents had so much time to be at school, and said that that isn’t the case in Norway, where parents are much more likely to both be working full time jobs. The parents she sees on a regular basis are almost always on maternity leave with a younger child, as maternity leave in Norway lasts up to 59 weeks (at 80% of your salary or 49 weeks at 100%). She did, however, state that at weekend sport, or at any school event, over 75% of parents (both mum and dad) would be there. The lack of parental presence at school did not, however, mean that the expectations and anxiety of parents weren’t similar to the schools in New Zealand and Canada. She regularly received emails, phone calls and texts regarding the students at her school and felt that the anxiety levels of her students was on the increase because of the anxiety of their parents. Professional development in her area regularly addressed anxiety in students, parents and teaching professionals and the PD that she was currently exploring sounded very much like the EASE programme on offer in British Columbia. As in British Columbia, the schools in Norway do not have the autonomy to make decisions in their own schools like we do in New Zealand (much to her chagrin). A new school curriculum was implemented in Norway in 1997 and the different municipalities are responsible for the schools in their districts. The principal I spoke to was very interested in our stance on resilience, particularly around parents staying away from classroom windows in the afternoons.

Summary and Next Steps:

I think that a big part of me longs for the “old-fashioned” schooling experience that I had as a child, when we rode our bikes to and from school, thought that any student who showed up with a juice box was the luckiest kid alive (and must be rich!) and, for the most part, we trusted and respected our teachers. Looking back, I can see that a lot was wrong with that style of teaching – the lack of autonomy in the classroom programme; being expected to respect the teacher at all costs, without any real expectation of respect back; being seated in rows with blatant competition between students. But boy, were we resilient!

Our parents didn’t drop us off and give the teacher a long list of phone numbers to call in case we didn’t settle. If we got into trouble at school, our parents didn’t rush in and automatically accuse someone else of being at fault – we copped it when we got home (and usually, rightfully so!). Times have changed, so much. And perhaps it is naïve to expect that our levels of resilience aren’t going to change along with those. I would have *loved* to have sent my boys to school on their bikes alone like my mom and dad did when I was young. My boys did ride to school, but I rode with them, and was there to ride home with them. Traffic on the roads these days is insane compared to when we were young and it’s far too dangerous to let our kids ride on most of our roads. Lunches are no longer filled with home-baked cookies and cakes because so many of our parents simply don’t have time to be at home baking those goodies (and it’s become so cheap to buy the treats that we coveted so much, and that our parents couldn’t afford, when we were young!). Work days are longer as our parents spend more time in their cars since traffic has more than quadrupled on our motorways in the past fifteen years. Time is so, so precious and when parents get home, they want to spoil and enjoy every moment they can with their kids. I get it.

Along with a decrease in resiliency, and responsibility, comes an increase in anxiety across the board. Teachers are stressed. Principals are stressed. Parents are stressed. Students are stressed. It’s common knowledge across our country that it is getting harder to find good, qualified teachers, and principals, and this is a challenge that the Ministry needs to put a strong commitment behind. Programmes in schools like EASE and SEL-CALM (which are being adopted by the schools on Vancouver Island) would be a start. Easier access to training and resources for leadership teams so that they are adequately prepared to work with complex parents and whanau is necessary. The need for additional support in schools around anxiety is growing and, from my understanding in talking with my colleagues, the lack of resources for funding around anxiety is non-existent!

Mangaroa School will have a new leader next year who I hope will continue on with the work that we’ve done around responsibility and resilience. From the schools I visited, and the principals that I talked to, we can stand tall with the work that we have done around resilience, particularly in regards to our parents and whanau. Other schools are wanting to follow our lead. Regardless, I can walk away knowing that we are making a positive difference. And I know that in my first newsletter at my new school, I will be requesting that parents provide additional clothing in their child’s schoolbag, because their child *will* be getting dirty; they *will* be carrying their own school bags; they *will* be out climbing trees, taking risks and having fun. Times are changing. I accept that. But some things don’t have to.

[Rock Star Mums Drink Champagne](#) (Posted via blog on 28 October, 2019).

TEACHERS.

I think there's a real problem with teachers these days.

And you know what I think it is?

It's us bloody parents.

This opinion is based on my personal observations: from overhearing/eavesdropping groups at school pick-up, parent friend chatter, teacher friend chatter and interactions at sporting events where teachers are involved with coaching etc...

Gone are the days when you'd get in trouble at school and the first thing you'd think was "Holy shit! My mum/dad is going to kill me when I get home for this!"

Nowadays, kids are more likely to think "man, my mum/dad is going to go MENTAL at you Miss/Mr (insert teacher's name) when I tell them I got in trouble!"

Little Johnny/Lisa's parents will generally hightail it to the school, full of so much bluff and blunder they're red as a lobster and ANGRY AF when they see the teacher responsible. The teacher who had the audacity to tell their child to stop talking in class/hitting other kids/mucking up. "The bloody hide of Miss Smith telling my child what to do!"

Bah freakin' humbug.

Maybe Johnny/Lisa needed a strong word and was, in fact, being a little poo bum? Maybe - just maybe - having your parents yell at/talk sternly/abuse a teacher is the only ammunition little Johnny/Lisa needs to keep misbehaving and disrupting the class?

Of course there are teachers that probably shouldn't be teaching, I get that. But then again, there's probably some parents that need a few lessons in parenting too yeah?

Honestly, most of the teachers I know care for their students and always go the extra mile (miles) for them. Can you imagine how frustrating it would be defending yourself every five minutes to a cranky parent?

Bueller? Bueller? Bueller?

Political correctness is all fine and dandy but we're getting a tad out of control. There's so much cotton wool being applied and the helicopters are swirling far too close to our kids.

We no longer let teachers be educators who look after our kids with a firm amount of discipline...and no Karen, before you yell "DISCIPLINE? THEY CANT TOUCH MY BLOODY CHILD! WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?" Please note: I'm not suggesting the cane should be reintroduced, but I AM suggesting we take a step back and give them a little bit of respect.

And maybe even let them, you know...teach. 'Cause at the end of the day, it's our kids (getting taught by teachers constantly hamstrung by parents) that are the ones really suffering.

Just a thought from the bleachers

Fi xx

[#calmthefarm](#)

[#notmychildmychildisperfect](#)

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