

**Extending the role of school leadership  
in raising student achievement in low  
decile schools.**

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## **Overview**

During 2012 the school worked with SAFs to self-review our systems and find ways to improve student achievement. The review highlighted two areas for development in our school; improving systems around monitoring progress of at risk learners, and forming stronger partnerships with parents and the wider community. As I began to explore my topic in more detail the role that strong partnerships with parents and the community play in improving student achievement became a particular interest so the focus of my study was narrowed to this area.

The first part of my study was to participate in a three day workshop series run by the University of Waikato Educational Leadership Centre. The series focused on “Leadership and the Community” and provided readings and an excellent overview of broad issues around social capital and the concept of “community”. After looking at these broad concepts I spent time reading the Best Evidence Synthesis, “School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why” by Viviane Robinson, Margie Hohepa and Claire Lloyd. My particular focus in this publication was Chapter 7, “Creating educationally powerful connections with family, whanau, and communities”.

During my leave I spent time visiting with primary school principals in my local area, in London, and in New York. My time with them involved discussing the challenges they were facing and how they were engaging with their communities. I had contacts in London and New York who were able to connect me with successful schools that were engaged with their communities. Although the schools abroad were much larger and in a different cultural context it was apparent that they share many of the issues and challenges also faced by New Zealand principals.

## **Additional Focus**

During my leave I spent time on behalf of Western Bay of Plenty Principals Association visiting with principals in Christchurch. This was to show support to our colleagues in that city who we know have had to face many additional challenges since the earthquakes. It was also to learn more about emergency preparedness so that our principals could gain from their experience. This was not related to my area of study but I will attach the report I made in case others are interested in what we learnt.

## **Literature**

Various different scholars have invoked the term ‘social capital’ over the years and there are varied theories as to what it specifically means. Rosalind Edwards discusses theories that concentrate on social capital as “a set of resources that are linked to membership of a particular social group” (p81). She also points to James Coleman’s work where he explains how “children’s educational achievement is driven by parental investment” (Rosalind Edwards, p 81). Lindy M Edwards article focused on Putnam’s ‘civic culture syndrome’ whereby people are engaged in

decision making and exhibit higher levels of trust (L.M. Edwards, p126). She talks about dense social networks and norms of reciprocity. Where there is social capital there will be features of social organisation such as trust, norms and networks that can improve efficiency. L.M. Edwards (p.133) also discussed work by Lowry who placed emphasis on the existence of social networks as a resource. He argued that children in poverty lacked the social networks that would give them access to educational resources.

Social capital is still a very general term whose definition is being explored. What I have taken from it, in the educational context, is that school communities with a high level of social capital will have shared values around the role of the school and the education it provides. There will be high levels of trust and networks that facilitate the participation of members of the community. Parents will believe that what the school has to offer is important for their children. Therefore, it seems that social capital should be built when schools form powerful connections with family, whanau, and communities – as explored in Chapter 7 of the Best Evidence Synthesis.

The Best Evidence Synthesis, “School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why” (BES) by Viviane Robinson, Margie Hohepa and Claire Lloyd explores actions school leaders can take that directly influence student achievement. It collects evidence from a range of studies and presents the effectiveness of different actions in terms of ‘effect size’. Overall it identifies pedagogical leadership as having the greatest effect size. In connecting this to community involvement it states that “What is needed is pedagogical leadership that is committed to creating connections between schools and family, whanau, and communities...” (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, p169).

Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd found that there is a range in the quality of whanau and community in terms of how they affect student achievement. The highest affect comes from interventions “designed to help parents or other community members support children’s learning at home and school and that simultaneously provide teachers with professional development” (p144). They go on to list other interventions that can be affective. These include interactive homework tasks where parents work with children, programmes that give parents the skills needed to effectively help their children, and strategies to access family/community funds of knowledge.

### **School Observations**

The schools I visited were all considered to be successful schools. My visits involved meeting with the principals and sharing our general experiences and challenges. The conversation would then be steered towards community engagement with questions around how this was being achieved.

I noticed that most of the principals, when sharing about community engagement and what makes a difference, discussed things that I would describe as developing cultural capital. For example, in one school the principal was relatively new and when she arrived the school was considered by many in the community to be failing. Her challenges were numerous and certainly included interventions with the teaching staff to make pedagogical changes that resulted in improved learning programmes. It also involved improved behaviour management. These changed the culture of the school and instilled a sense of pride. What was experienced next was increased community involvement and participation. In other words, the school looked at itself internally and sorted out internal issues. As faith in the school was restored the connections with the community grew.

A school in London and another in New York provide another example of the development of cultural capital. The New York school is designated a community school and, as such, gets additional funding to provide certain social services to the children. For example, the children all receive free dental care at school, they have a full time nurse who can administer medications, classes can be provided for parents, and a staff member is dedicated to parent liaison – helping families engage with appropriate social services. The London school provides a similar level of social services. That school has seen huge changes over the last 15 years as the area has changed from working class British to a migrant community. They also have staff dedicated to parent liaison and helping them access social services. The principal spoke of working to solve problems in the community and for individual families. Consequently the school has become a trusted place for parents and families.

What has struck me in my reflections on the schools visits is that for all of the principals visited the focus was on people. Learning programmes and pedagogy were important to them but they tended to talk more about people. By this I mean setting a school culture that is welcoming and where children and staff feel valued. It means focusing on the community in a non-judgemental way. They all recognised the need to engage parents with the children's learning but felt that, before this could be achieved, the school had to be seen by the parents as valuing them and being relevant to them. When this is achieved they found that parents wanted to become involved.

What I did not get to see was examples of programmes, as mentioned in the BES as being most effective, where parents and teachers are learning together. As mentioned, schools overseas were able to offer parent education programmes but I did not get to see what these programmes were.

### **Conclusions For Brookfield School**

As a school we are focussed on improving our level of engagement with our schools community. We believe that student learning is improved when there are high levels of cooperation and respect between whanau, the school, and the wider community.

We believe we have been successful in developing a greater level of cultural capital. However, we have more to do in terms of finding specific interventions that will have an effect size that will make a significant difference. I think that building the cultural capital has provided the necessary ground work for good interventions to make a significant difference.

Last year we began the 'Reading Together' programme. This example of an effective intervention is mentioned in the BES. We have found it to be very successful and believe it is improving student achievement. We have made some progress with designing curriculum units that make powerful connections with home cultures. However, this is an area we develop further. I believe the following are areas from the BES can be focussed on for further improvement.

- Joint whanau and teaching intervention. This has a large effect size but few examples are listed in the BES and I did not see any in my school visits. Phonic awareness programmes in general were mentioned in BES and I suspect the data gathered was based on these. The potential area for development could be in the use of IT to support learning.
- Teacher designed interactive homework. Our homework policy has helped us avoid the negative impact on learning that homework can have. There is potential for us to develop interactive homework, especially around our term themes. Develop with this effective teacher feedback which also has a significant effect size.
- Accessing family and community funds of knowledge. The Reading Club has begun this process by bringing community members into the school to support learning. The next stage is to develop systems that can make us aware of the skills and knowledge that exists in our community and to find ways to access this.
- Parent intervention. Reading Together has begun this progress. This programme must be continued and strengthened. We also need to access or develop similar strategies or programmes for writing and mathematics.

## References

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3. Moy, Patricia; Scheufele, Dietram A; Holbert, R. Lance: Television Use and Social Capital: Testing Putnam's Time Displacement. Mass Communication & Society; Winter/Spring99, Vol. 2 Issue 1/2
4. Viviane Robinson, Margie Hohepa, and Claire Lloyd: "School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What Works and Why" Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration, <http://educationcounts.govt.nz/goto/BES>

## **Emergency Planning – Christchurch Visit Report**

During my sabbatical break I spent two days on behalf of the association visiting with principals in Christchurch. The Christchurch Principals Association arranged for Dave Doake to show me the city and take me to selected schools. Dave is a former principal who is in a 0.5 position funded by the MoE to liaise with principals. The principals and schools visited were Jeanette Shearer at Isleworth School, Murray Edlin at Banks Avenue School, Mark Scown at Avondale Primary School, and Richard Paton at Chisnelwood\*\* Intermediate School.

This was the first time I had seen up close and personal the damage that has been done to this fine city. It is indeed extensive and one can only be impressed with the way our colleagues have risen to the challenge and led their schools through incredibly trying times. The positive response of the education sector as a whole has been acknowledged by ERO. However, research has shown that the critical time for cumulated stress comes three years after an event like this. So it is important for us to continue to offer them whatever support we can.

There is a lot we can take from the experiences of our Canterbury colleagues to help us better prepare for a major disaster. However, it is also evident that there can never be a prescribed response that will adequately cover every school in every situation. Certain things can be done but in the end we, as principals, will need to make a lot of decisions on the spot. Our ability to provide positive leadership could depend on our ability to accurately assess situations and delegate responsibilities well.

### **Evacuation and Immediate Aftermath**

It was evident that in the schools visited the evacuation procedure went well and that the drills we are all familiar with generally work. Christchurch schools now have an emergency bin that is taken out at the time of evacuation. The types of things in the bin are listed below.

#### *Emergency Bin Supplies (Typically a wheelie rubbish bin)*

- Battery powered sound system
- Fluro vests for staff – in some schools one colour for teachers and another for support staff. This makes it easier for principals to assess where his/her staff are located.
- Battery or solar powered radio.
- Ground sheets for children to sit on – schools were surprised by the amount of water coming out of the ground.
- First aid kit.
- Water.
- Pencils for teachers to mark rolls.

- Some schools put printed class rolls in the bin each day. Others rely on teachers bringing out a roll. The February quake happened at lunchtime so many teachers were not able to access class rolls. Schools need to discuss how they would deal with this.
- Crow bar.
- Beanies and survival blankets – perhaps a bigger issue in Christchurch but hypothermia could become an issue here if the weather was wet and cold.
- School roll with contact numbers and addresses.

#### *Other Issues To Consider*

- What will your response be if a parent offers to take a neighbour's or a friend's child home? Some schools said no while others said yes if the parents and relationship to the child were known to the teachers and the child was happy to go. Have a system of recording such instances.
- After the Feb 22 event there were thousands more quakes. How do staff know when to evacuate and when not to? They could not evacuate every time there was a shake. If we have a minor shake should teachers take their classes out? In a major event electric bells may not work. It can be dangerous being outside but close to buildings. In one school as soon as one teacher made the call to evacuate they agreed that all should follow. It's important to discuss these issues with staff and try to develop a common understanding.
- Doctrines about whether and when to re-enter buildings have changed. Decisions will be made on the spot about whether it is safe to re-enter buildings. If it is wet and cold more harm could be done by remaining outside. To help with this after a major quake it is good to know which buildings are the safest.
- How will you communicate with your community? One school had success with Facebook linked to Twitter. This provided free text messaging. Do you have internet access in a power cut? In the days following it is great if you have remote access to your phone system to update messages.
- Staff member may need to man the gates and ask parents to put on the 'game face'. Some parents arrive in a distraught state which could upset the children. Have staff ready to assist them and quickly find their children.

#### *Principal's Role*

- Principals need to be able to step back and deal with the big picture. Avoid getting caught up in micro-management. Have your PA by your side so that they can pick up and deal with, or redirect, a lot of the micro-management issues.
- Be ready to delegate responsibilities on the day. This delegation may be dependent on how individual staff members react. One colleague observed

that 5% stood up and showed leadership, 20% were paralysed (and this could be a DP), and 75% just wanted to be told what to do.

## **The Aftermath**

### *Returning To School*

- The school can become a focal point for the community. Parents may need to be able to get together and share experiences. One school put on a cup of tea for parents on the first day back. This got them out of the classrooms and gave them the chance to get together and support one another.
- Make a deliberate effort to find out about the individual circumstances of families. In some cases it took a while before the school realised that certain families were living in dire circumstances. One school surveyed the community after a few weeks to find out how people were faring.
- Find ways to build a sense of community so that people are communicating with one another.
- Principals ditched the planned PD programme and did what they could to take pressure off teachers. Many teachers were traumatised by the earthquake and needed emotion support.
- Expectations of MoE staff and other support agencies should account for the fact that individuals working in those organisations also had major personal issues to deal with and were not necessarily on top of their game.

### *Principal Issues*

Principals found that they were carrying everyone else's problems. This included:

- Well-meaning but uncoordinated responses from MoE personnel. A barrage of phone calls from different MoE staff asking different questions. There is a need for school liaison people to be our one point of contact and have them feed the information on to the different sections of the ministry.
- There are lots of questions from people that need answering but many can't be dealt with in that moment. One principal asked people to email the questions so that he had a record and could be sure he answered them.
- Staff housing issues – staff needing to attend insurance and EQC appointments.
- Parent expectations to “move on”. Parents in less badly damaged areas may not appreciate that staff may live in red zones and are working under stress. For example, in one school they wanted to organise a disco at a time where the principal felt strongly that the staff did not need that.
- Downsizing – redeployment! Need I say more?
- School closures!! One principal has been spending around 80% of his time making submissions around this issue!

