Family and Education

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My interest in the family is two-fold. Firstly, I have my own family which represents the traditional concept of the nuclear family. Secondly, as a teacher, I will be affected by families' experiences of changes and stress and the impact on our children's learning.

This link between the two institutions, family and school, requires teachers to be more knowledgeable, understanding and appreciative of the transitional nature of the family system and the factors that impinge on family life. "Families are very powerful institutions, and their influence over the young members registers in every part of their lives, including schooling" (Connell quoted in Barcan and O'Flarherty, 1998:10). The relationship is better understood through a discussion on what makes a family, the changing nature of the family structures, the pressures those structures are under, the influence that they have on children's educational achievement, and what we can do as teachers.

What is a family? There is no universal definition of the word 'family'. The word 'family' has undergone many forms in its historical/cultural context. The forms vary both between and within cultures. The definition continues to evolve as economies and societies change through time. It ranges from the extended family, such as the whanau, to the nuclear unity of mother, father and children.

Bronfenbrenner (quoted in Smith, 1998:268), defines the family as the "structure known for nurturing and sustaining the capacity of human beings to function effectively in all domains of human activity – intellectual, social, emotional and physiological". However the family is more than just a structure, it also involves a set of human relationships. According to Gubrium and Holstein (1990:13), the family is "a way of describing our social relations, some of which are formally kindred and others not". Both the structure and the relationships within the family make up what Federico Mayon, Director-General of UNESCO calls "the natural environment for the

growth and well-being of all family members, particularly children" (Boyden with UNESCO, 1993:6).

The composition of the family includes members who are the building blocks of societies. Statistics New Zealand (1998:100) defines the family as "two or more people living in the same household and who comprised either a couple, at least one parent/child relationship, or both." This description of the family doesn't include the Maori view of the whanau. The definition of whanau is expansive and "is more responsive to the urban environment and the fact that whakapapa links are often marked by the separation of distance" (Adair and Dixon, 1998:148). Despite the separation, the wider kin remains "the basis for social life' (Smith, 1998:274).

Until the 1970s, the structure of the New Zealand Pakeha nuclear family had remained relatively unchanged from its colonial days, that is, two parents and children. However in terms of numbers there had been considerable shift from large families to small families. Following this change had been the shift away from the traditional family structure. Since the 1970s, there has been a drop in the proportion of families with two parents and a corresponding increase in different family types such as the solo-parent family, the step-family and the extended family.

According to *Statistics New Zealand* (1998), the two-parent families, (that is, father employed and the mother at home), while still dominant, is in decline. Couple-only families (this includes those who have not yet begun childbearing) are on the increase. One-parent families continue their upward trend. In addition, other family types are resulting from separated and divorced parents sharing custodial responsibilities although no percentages were given. Other family types included were types of extended families.

Family Type	1986	1996
Two-parent families	30.3%	18.8%
Couple-only families	32.4%	37.3%
One-parent families	14.3%	17.7%

(Figures from *Statistics New Zealand,* 1998).

(There were 67,071 extended families living in New Zealand in 1996. Unfortunately the census did not break down the data any further to give a comparative percentage to the total population. Only percentages comparing characteristics within the extended family group per se were provided.)

The evolving and diversifying nature of other family types has produced complex relationships. Today's children are found in many different living arrangements that involve blended and step families. Divorce rates, since 1985, have remained relatively stable at 12 per 1000 in 1996 (*Statistics NZ*, 1998:28). However, this figure does not give a true indication of what is happening in our society. It appears that couples are increasingly rejecting legal marriage, opting out for de facto relationships instead. As a result there are many families that may dissolve and reform without any official record of their formation. Moreover there are many couples who choose to separate unofficially. Remarriage is on the rise. In 1952, 18.75% of all marriages were remarriages for at least one partner compared with 36.5% in 1996. (*Statistics NZ,* 1998:22). De facto relationships involving divorcees rose from 17.5% in 1981 to 30% in 1996 (*Statistics NZ,* 1998:23).

Unfortunately, such family break-ups and reformations involve children. Ecological theorists, such as Bronfenbrenner, point to the importance of transitions on children. "Transitions involve changes in children's position in the ecological environment as a result of a change in role or setting. Settings include child's roles, activities and interpersonal relationship" (Smith, 1998:281). Today's children are undergoing enormous upheavals in their lives. Relationships may disintegrate and new ones formed, for example, step-parent and step-siblings. Parental interaction may cease, the nature and quality of parenting may change, parental conflict may intensify, contact with non-custodial parent, friends, and relatives may be lost while contact with the extended family of the custodial parent may increase, geographical location may change, and living standards may decline.

These upheavals place children in a position of vulnerability. There is a growing concern in New Zealand that the effects of such changes may be negative, harmful and in some instances, dangerous. The effects are more profound for those children in primary and secondary schools. They include emotional withdrawal, psychological disturbances, antisocial and aggressive behavior, poor academic achievement, and poor physical health. However, there are often benefits in marital breakdown and changing partnership. Tensions which existed before the separation may be reduced, children may take on more responsibility for themselves and others within the family, and close relationships may develop between the custodial parent and siblings.

Contributing towards the negative effects is the economic hardship faced by most custodial parents, now a one-parent family. This type of family had the lowest median annual income of $17,000 in 1996 (*Statistics NZ,* 1998). Poverty is becoming more prevalent especially amongst those families who are also experiencing unemployment. The effect is enormous.

> Poverty during childhood (particularly early childhood) has impacts across the life span, setting off a developmental trajectory which is cumulative, affecting every conceivable kind of health outcome from mortality rates to the incidence of many kinds of illness, as well as educational outcomes
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> (Hertzman quoted in Smith, 1998:278).

Children in this group are usually disadvantaged. The economic situation has a major impact on the ability to thrive successfully in the school environment. Poor health and nutrition may result, and access to computers, resources, extracurricular activities, quality schools, and private tuition may be denied. Economic disadvantage also applies to intact families with the overall decline of incomes experienced by the majority of New Zealand families (*Statistics NZ,* 1998).

Children have to cope with the stresses associated with changing family structures but they also need to adjust to the changing role of their mothers. There is a growing trend for women to be paid employment. Fewer women are likely to stay at home to look after children. It has become socially acceptable and economically necessary for

both parents to work. In 1986, 37.1% of women in two-parent families with pre-school children were in some form of paid work. By 1996, this figure had increased to over 50% (*Statistics NZ*, 1998:60). Linked to this trend has been the increase in attendance in childcare centres with a 46% increase between 1990 and 1994 (Smith, 1998:273). Surrogate parenting through these centres is becoming the norm for many children as they spend less time with their mothers, and, in some cases, where fathers are working longer hours, even less time with their fathers.

It is important that attention is drawn to the plight of many Maori families. Maori children, by and large, have fewer opportunities than their European counterpart due to poorer socio-economic status. The *Report of the Royal Commission on Social Policy* (1989:39), points to the fact that Maori families are poorer than the New Zealand average, larger both in numbers of children and adults, have fewer amenities, including cars, washing machines and telephones, are less likely to have an income earner, and are more often one parent families. Concern for Maori achievement (along with saving the language and culture), resulted in the development of kura kaupapa Maori and te kohanga reo. These developments have enabled some Maori children to marry their heritage with the needs of the wider New Zealand society. Although it is too early to evaluate the success or failure of the schemes in contributing to the Maori family improving its socio-economic status, it is a positive move for Maori society. According to Smith, both kohanga and kura have the "potential for radical transformation" and are key factors in the legitimisation of Maori autonomy or tino rangatiratanga (Coxon et al, 1994:174).

Along with family transition and increasing poverty a proportion of today's children may face considerable threats from their family. Most child abuse usually takes place in the home and most child assaults and murders are domestic ones.

> Every year in New Zealand twelve or more children are murdered by parents and caregivers, mostly by their fathers, and the figures appear to rise year by year. Hundreds are hospitalised for their injuries and thousands beyond these are in daily danger (Ritchie, 1997:138).

Child abuse is an ongoing process that extends through a period of time and may be emotional, physical or sexual. Emotional abuse may involve neglect (by depriving the child of love, attention or health care), isolation, intimidation and humiliation of the child. Although it is a relatively minor issue for the New Zealand public, its eroding effects on the child are being made known through media advertising (as in the case of the child who gets out of bed, makes her own breakfast, and the parents are left to wonder what it is that they are doing, or not doing - the real message that is being conveyed). Instead the focus is very much on the sexual and physical abuse of the children. Sexual abuse may range from verbal harrassment to inappropriate touching through to sexual intercourse. It usually involves girls who are abused by their father, and especially, stepfathers, brothers and male relatives or friends. Physical damage is accompanied by psychological devastation which may lead to loss of confidence and self-esteem, depression and suicidal tendancies.

Physical abuse is usually committed by men on women and children. Statistics from the United States popular publishing magazine 'Ms' (quoted in Boyden with UNESCO, 1993:99), showed that 53% of men who batter their wives also abuse their children. The effects of this abuse on children are likely to lead to delinquency, antisocial and aggressive behavior. It is disturbing that these trends and their associated outcomes have placed our children's lives in chaos and, in some instances, in fatal situations.

Many of the changes experienced in the contemporary family are the result of social and economic forces. Skolnick (quoted in Walsh, 1993:23), refers to the family as 'a shelter from the workings of a harsh economy. . .battered by forces beyond its control.' The family's changing nature has important implications for government policy on social issues, and in turn these policies have serious consequences for children. New Zealand was a nation that once prided itself in looking after its people. However, the welfare state no longer exists in its original form. Instead, government's efforts to support and protect the family are targeted through subsidies given to private organisations such as Plunket and voluntary agencies such as Barnados. Alongside this shift from universal to targeted assistance is the decline in the government's financial assistance for families. Real family assistance for low-income families has

fallen since 1986 (Shirley et al. in Kamerman and Kahn, 1997:268). Yet these are the same families who are experiencing the stresses associated with the structural changes that result from the reduction of the state assistance. The domestic purpose benefit, family support, accommodation supplement, community services card, child-care subsidies and student allowances have done little to alleviate the conditions of those affected families.

The plight of many families has important implications for us. As teachers we have an important role to help these children in their time of difficulty, even though the extent to which we can help them is limited to our sphere of influence as teachers. This role has ethical and practical issues, for instance, although we could help to organise placements within health camps for seriously deprived children we would still have to rely on the children's parents or caregivers to permit the child to go to these camps. Alternatively we could contact Resources Teachers of Learning Behavior (RTLB) and Special Education Services (SES) for assistance. In both these instances the parents' permission is not required though it is likely the school will contact the parents for their support. Moreover, RTLB and SES may make recommendations which require parental consent. Teachers can act within the opportunities available in classroom (for example, putting in place a form of contract with a child that has easily achievable aims) which do not require parental consent. However, any positive change of behavior or attitude towards learning may be restricted to the classroom, or possibly the overall school environment as the home life may not be conducive to the positive change undertaken in the school. Often seriously disadvantaged children see the school as their most secure institution in their lives so it is important that teachers of these children be approachable, trustworthy and supportive. This will allow children to feel free to communicate their hopes and joys, and fears and concerns.

Undoubtedly the teacher's job is made more difficult by the different types of families in existence in New Zealand today and the effects that the changing nature of the family structures have on the children. There are many children who are under significant pressure caused by factors outside their control and some deal with it better than others. Alongside the different approaches and the use of different institutions to help children, especially those in distress, we, their teachers, can also help by thinking

of the children who are in our care as though they are our own. That way we will treat them the way we would like our children to be treated; that is, with love, care and concern.

Bionote

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