

Parent preferences: Low-decile school teacher attributes**Vicki M Carpenter****Introduction**

This paper contributes, albeit minimally, to our knowledge of what low-decile school parents consider important attributes regarding their children's teachers. Empirical evidence originated from the Kaiako Toa project (Carpenter, McMurchy-Pilkington & Sutherland, 2004).

In recent years, a substantial amount of discussion has centred on the importance of establishing or maintaining an educational 'partnership' between parents and teachers. The word partnership encourages and implies consensus, involvement and sharing (Vincent 1996). Vincent and Martin (2002) maintain that there is a complex set of issues and relationships (which include social class) involved with parental positioning and responsiveness at individual school sites.

Anderson (1998) describes 'partnership' as a form of public relations which creates greater institutional legitimacy for current educational practices. The word can be disabling in that it encourages a sense of complacency; the rhetoric implies power sharing, while in reality participation mechanisms (eg BOT structures) can be exclusive to particular groups, and are often 'sophisticated technologies of control' (Anderson 1998).

In New Zealand, partnership rhetoric gained momentum with the introduction of Tomorrow's Schools (Department of Education 1988). Notwithstanding this, BOT involvement represented the predominant post Tomorrow's Schools increase in parent interaction with schools (Harold 1992; Wylie 1999). Wylie demonstrated that:

Parental involvement in schools ... declined rather than increased, as the reforms intended (Wylie 1999:xix).

Exceptional New Zealand parent-school involvement initiatives have been researched. In Takiwa School a group of ex-Playcentre parents maintained that Tomorrow's Schools legislation gave them the power to question the school's philosophical approach, and to influence and be involved in classroom programmes. A school within a school evolved, with parents integral to some school programmes (Carpenter 2001). The Kura Kaupapa Maori movement is a further example of parent involvement in school programmes that extends beyond governance (Smith 1997). Such initiatives aside, parents are less involved in the education of their children than they were prior to 1987.

I take the position that children learn best when their parents or whanau have a comfortable relationship with the teachers of their children, a relationship in which common goals can be established and achieved.

Currently, in low-decile schools, most interaction is one-way. School professionals choose when, where and how to interact with parents. Of all parents, those who are unemployed, receiving state benefits, or are Maori have the least contact with schools. Low income parents may feel uncomfortable in the school, or feel that the school should be left to 'get on with its job'. Survey questionnaire findings reveal that these groups are the people who most desire more contact (Wylie 1999).

Low-decile school parent communities are much maligned. Deficit explanations hold them personally responsible for their children's lack of school achievement. One way to break such perceptions is for teachers and researchers to listen to, and take account of, parent voices. Teachers and researchers know very little about low-decile school parent opinions of teachers and schools. Perhaps if we knew more, schools might be more responsive and proactive. With a more equitable partnership, achievement levels for low-decile school children may improve. This paper enables the voices of some parents to be heard.

Kaiako Toa project

The Kaiako Toa research project (Carpenter, McMurchy-Pilkington, Sutherland, 2004) examined the beliefs and attitudes underpinning the practice of nine highly successful primary school teachers working in Auckland's low socio-economic schools. The full study involved 54 interviews and their analyses. Interviewees included the selected teachers, and principals, teaching colleagues, school trustees and parents from their schools.

Teachers each nominated two community people interviewees: a BOT member and a parent. Thus there were eighteen community nominations and the responses from these people are the focus of this paper. For this new focus, a fresh scrutiny was undertaken of Kaiako Toa data. This involved a re-analysis of the transcripts and the recoding of data. The results provide a community perspective from voices not often heard in academia. These are of Maori, Tongan, Samoan, Cook Island and Pakeha working class parents. Five were male and 13 were female. Ages ranged from the late 20s though to early 50s. All were parents, and each had between one and nine children.

The original interviews were conducted in homes, local community facilities (eg libraries) or schools. Tape recordings were made, and transcripts were returned to interviewees for verification. Ethical procedures were followed throughout. Pseudonyms are used in all publications and discussions.

As well as being asked to discuss the identified teacher, interviewees were asked about generic qualities they valued in, or desired of, teachers in their schools. Interview transcripts provided a rich source of data, providing an insight into a range of desired teacher attributes.

Cameo – Tongan mother

The following cameo provides an example of the interview process, and also serves as an introduction to parental desires for their children. The Tongan mother was interviewed by the author of this paper, and the notes were made soon after the interview.

Martha was interviewed in her home. This was a two-storied state house duplex which was on a very busy arterial route from the city. It was difficult to get attention when I arrived, no reply from front door knocking, and a wringer washing machine full of clothing was whirring away outside the back door, making my knocks inaudible. Eventually Martha came to the door, welcomed me, and invited me into her lounge.

The lounge was dominated by a large white board on the wall at one end, a computer, television, video tapes and books/encyclopaedias covered shelves at the other end. The room was small, and sparsely furnished. We sat at the dining table, in the centre of the room. Martha, a mother of four children, was approximately 40-45 years old. Managing the home and family was her fulltime occupation. In the past she worked as a domestic (ironing), and on pressing machines. English is her second language and her conversation was halting at times. Martha's husband was a taxi driver who worked long hours.

As the interview progressed it became apparent how committed Martha and her husband were to education. The whiteboard was provided so that their children, aged from 8-17, could teach each other 'everything' they had learned that day at school. The expectation was that the older children would help the younger children, and that father would contribute if any explanations were not clear. The four children spent 1-2 hours at the whiteboard every night. The computer was for necessary school work and educational games (no internet connection). The videos were all educational and they were played while the children ate their breakfast.

Our family, we support education, we support the church and we support the health of the family.

Martha and her husband sent their secondary school aged children to city single sex state schools. This involved considerable cost for uniforms and fees, and father dropped the children off daily as part of his taxi run. According to Martha the three older children were doing well at school, she was pleased with their progress. Her youngest child attended the school in which Avril (one of the 9 Kaiako Toa teachers) taught.

Martha expressed strong views about curriculum and teachers. In summary she felt that schools should concentrate more on the three Rs – Reading, Writing and Mathematics. She saw every other subject as peripheral, but in particular she felt schools gave too much emphasis to Music and Sport. To Martha a teacher with a Diploma was not good enough to be a teacher, it was important that all teachers hold a Bachelors Degree.

Some teachers are a little bit smart, (some are) very smart, and some teachers are not at that level. I think you might know what I am saying.

In order of importance the teacher attributes she valued were: a Bachelors Degree, being able to plan carefully, and a liking for children:

(being a teacher -) It's like a mother, and the men like a father ... it's good for the teacher to like the children that she looks after, twenty of them from different races.

She emphasised that it was essential that teachers were able to help children understand the material, because without understanding there is no learning.

Sometimes a good teacher has to say things five different ways for different children, to help them understand ... If no explanation, no understanding.

Martha was very troubled by what she saw as disruptive elements in classrooms:

It's very hard here ... in the islands (Tonga), when the teacher stands at the front all the class is quiet, and listens and looks at the teacher ... A good teacher can make the class quiet.

The interview ended after approximately one hour. Martha's views need dissemination. Teachers can be dismissive and feel that parents couldn't care

less, this is an example of two parents who couldn't care more (notes made by Vicki, November 2000).

Findings

An inductive process was used to re-examine the parent data. This enabled the building of abstractions. Open coding divided abstracted information into themes which enabled the identification of key attributes. The findings were then ranked in order of importance, according to the number of interviewees who noted the attribute (numbers in the first brackets indicate the number of interviewees who noted the attribute, n=18). The second bracket indicates the total number of mentions made of the attribute. Some interviewees discussed an attribute more than once:

1. Teachers must have discipline and order in their classrooms. This is not to be achieved by shouting or yelling. (14, 30).
2. Teachers need to be organized, and able to deal with any unexpected issues that arise. (12, 12)
3. Teachers can be from any ethnic group but they need to be non racist, and able to work cross-culturally and gain pupil respect. (11, 13)
4. Teachers need to be kind and caring, like a parent. (10, 18)
5. Teachers should be welcoming to parents, and (if possible) able to work alongside the community. (10, 16)
6. Teachers should have fun, smile and be happy. (10, 14)
7. High standards should be expected of the children. (8, 16)
8. Teachers should be passionate about their work. (8, 8)

Other teacher attributes noted, in order of importance, were: able to work in a team situation with teaching colleagues, empowers children and believes in them, hard working, has a holistic life outside of teaching, has knowledge of curriculum content, is able to explain difficult material, is open, consistent and fair, has an attractive classroom, holds high qualifications, has an ability to 'read' children, is IT competent, is focused more on the academic than on sport and music, has leadership qualities, is a learner, sees the importance of assessment, is intelligent, and is honest.

Parent voices

The following section takes the first six of these and provides examples from transcripts. Board of Trustees (BOT) indicates the interviewee was the BOT member, CP indicates a community person.

1. Teachers must have discipline and order in their classrooms. This is not to be achieved by shouting or yelling.

They need to have a teacher with strong feelings otherwise these kids will start running rough shod over everybody. There's quite a few hard little kids down there ... (teachers should be) not really hard but stern enough to keep them in line. Avril's BOT

Bev's got control of the class, excellent control but she doesn't have to yell and scream ... I've never heard her do that. She's just got this presence and she builds on a very pleasant relationship with children. They know she is the teacher and they know the boundaries. Bev's BOT

Catherine's not loud yet she has a loudness with her quietness... I have never seen that teacher spinning out, I have never seen her look depressed, I have never seen her look angry. So for me as an adult, I guess if you've got a child in a room with a person displaying a very controlled, calm teaching ability, she gives them confidence maybe. Catherine's CP

I think a good teacher can make the class quiet. Avril's CP

Hine's quite firm ... (as) a senior teacher she sometimes has to tell the senior kids off as a whole, like when they're in assembly and just the tone of her voice, you can see the kids are listening, not with fear, but they actually react to that particular tone and they realise that she has expectations for them. Hine's BOT

I found that Bev was nice. She doesn't scare away the children, she could growl and not scare them whereas the others they can growl and be absolutely terrifying. There's a real difference. Bev's CP

I can't imagine that she angers very often. Deborah's BOT

I think she sets the boundaries, they've got a set of rules they have to follow and she reminds them too but I think she reminds rather than tells them off.

Deborah's CP

I notice with Eve, she's done an excellent job at doing that, at disciplining and teaching the kids at the same time. (Eve) growls at them, gets at them not to do this and that, and it's really helped the kids a lot to behave. Eve's CP

I went on a school trip with them. She's quite young but she has got all those kids under control, I was really impressed because they're big kids in that class and you hear things don't you? And she had them under control, not a problem at all, no one would back chat, nothing. Gemma's CP

It's just that personality that gives off, and she has got a natural authority and the kids respect her. If she says boo they acknowledge that, whereas if some of the other teachers, they tend to take a couple of moments before they react. I dunno what it is, it's just the children can hear her from down the hall and thought 'I better behave myself'. Isobel's CP

2. Teachers need to be organized, and able to deal with any unexpected issues that arise.

... look at her classroom, she's not all hyped up and strung up. So what are her students doing? They know where they stand. This is a very calm, collected, controlled looking woman to me ... They see this power she has which is a kindness, a charm, a calmness to me which has such power. Catherine's CP

She doesn't just pick one person, she delegates all these little privilege jobs to different people so everyone gets a fair turn in the classroom. That's hard work just that little bit, yet she's seen those little things ... A mountain is a mountain and address it, and a molehill is a molehill, please address that one too.

Catherine's CP

Her room is always extremely well-organised and you can get a very good idea the minute you walk into her classroom anytime of what's going on in that classroom ... she's very good at organising her life and she's very good at organising her work. Fiona's BOT

It was just fantastic how she had them all doing all their jobs. She's great at organising like sending one group of children to one activity and sending the next one on and organising everybody and getting parents there, and giving them their jobs. Hine's CP

She must put a fair bit of time into the planning. She's a very calm person ... I can imagine her setting up everyone, very well organised. Deborah's BOT

She seems to be able to juggle any interference. Because she is an area leader she would have children sent to her that had to be dealt with, but I think she deals with it appropriately. She makes sure that the class is set up first. Isobel's CP.

3. Teachers can be from any ethnic group but they need to be non racist, and able to work cross-culturally and gain pupil respect.

Someone who has a big understanding on cultures and doesn't put their outweigh, throw that out there. We're a multi cultural society so that's very important, and that they answer parents' questions as fairly and as honestly as they can. Catherine's CP

I think her Maoritanga helps her a lot. Hine's CP

Culturally she is very sensitive and in turn of course she is very sensitive to others, but there's a lot of multi culture in our school and she's very sensitive towards those cultures as well. I think it's the Maoritanga that makes her exceptional. Hine's CP

(Teachers) must challenge, they must strive for the children. The cultural background of the teacher, or a cultural match with students does not matter as long as education is happening. That is the most important thing, that the children are learning. Eve's BOT

We are all the same, no-one's perfect, we're all a family ... With Eve she keeps them all the same, she's not the type that goes against other races. Eve's CP

They like parent input and they're very aware of all the cultures, no bullying, nothing like that. Gemma's CP

I really feel it's important for kids to see people they identify with succeeding. ... We've got a Samoan teacher and I think that's great because ... we want to see that kids see a Samoan that does work with their cultural group, and all that kind of thing, are teaching in the school. Isobel's BOT

I think just have an empathy with the kids. Appreciate something about them that others don't. Isobel's BOT

She really cares about each one of them and she is un biased. Unprejudiced and I actually say that to her sometimes. She doesn't give me those feelings that whereas some, you wonder. Isobel's CP

4. Teachers need to be kind and caring, like a parent.

I just think that teachers in low-decile schools need to understand that what they've got in front of them is not the whole picture ... that they understand that the reason the kids are not paying attention or the reason the kids are falling

asleep in class probably isn't that child's fault ... being able to appreciate that...

Isobel's BOT

Every parent that would wait with me would comment on how they were so happy with the way she works with their child, that she was really caring ... It was just the way we saw her with our child, and the way our child was coming home. Bev's CP

She likes the children, same as the man who teaches, to be a father. But the children will know ... If they respect the teacher ... they can study good. Avril's CP

She believes every child is a unique human being ... that they deserve the education that they've come to that school for, that nurturing that some of them may need, that guidance that they all need and providing them with a safe non-hostile environment that if they're not comfortable in they can reach out to her and say help me please. Catherine's CP

Eve is a caring teacher, about all issues, she is committed. Eve's BOT

You're so much in the public eye and every child you have is somebody's precious darling and they have a different set of expectations to your expectations as a teacher. Fiona's BOT

She's always hugging the kids and telling them they're great and handing out certificates and this is to all of them. She treats them all the same and builds up their good points and if they're low in some areas, she really tries to bring it out of them ... She believes in the family. She believes in sharing. Hine's CP

She exerts love, she exerts caring, she exudes enthusiasm, she exudes that this is just her life. I know she has a life beyond teaching yet we don't see that. What you see is Catherine. Catherine's CP

5. Teachers should be welcoming to parents, and (if possible) able to work alongside the community.

I love her room ... As an adult you sit there times that we've gone there, and you just look all over the place. There's things to read, there is things to look at, there's things to touch. And that, as an adult, you appreciate it. Bev's CP

It is OK to express views. Teachers can do what they want as long as they do their job. Community involvement by teachers has to be positive, in other words don't whack people in bars. Eve's BOT

If we feel our child is being bullied or our child feels they have been bullied they are going to listen and address it and you know feedback to the parent that they've done everything that they can in that area. Someone who gives you an open book to communicate with them. Catherine's CP

It's her presence, she's friendly to all the parents, she involves all the parents, if she's ever had any concerns she contacts the parents. Catherine's CP

Very welcoming and for some of our kids, unfortunately, it might be the only safe environment they have. Bev's BOT

A positive teacher gets basically, in our community, I would say, a lot of new found parent friends. I'm not just talking about friend's friends, I'm talking about people wanting to go into that classroom to help out, to take the pressure off ... So parent help, if you provide an environment that a parent wants to go into, they will go into it. Catherine's CP

She's very willing to listen and offer suggestions and she'll ring you if she has any concerns. Deborah's CP

Unless you have a good relationship with the teacher that you are working with, you don't know where your children are at. Isobel's CP

6. Teachers should have fun, smile and be happy.

She's always got a smile on her face. Yeah, she just warms herself to the children and just creates this conducive and secure environment in that classroom. Bev's BOT

She'll surprise them by suddenly dressing up as a spice girl. Catherine's CP

Right at the end of the library you can hear Fiona and she is not shouting but she's got a carrying voice and she's saying something funny or positive or cute or laughing. Just the general impression of happiness so everybody around her seems to be happy too. I just love to be near her myself so I suppose the children do too. Fiona's CP

She has a go at everything I notice on camps. She's out there doing kayaking, sailing, flying fox, doing dancing to the fitness. She's out and right on top of it all. Hine's CP

Yes she takes part in teaching the kids sort of out of school things like dancing and I see Gemma there and she gets involved in sports and she just wants the best, she always wants the kids to have fun so I think that is the attitude that we want, not just academically push, push, push but just relax and have fun as well. Gemma's BOT

Discussion:

Two reservations are necessary before any conclusions are posited. Firstly, the findings result from the analysis of data obtained from a small, non random purposive selection of parents. As parents were selected by the nine teachers they are not truly representative of their communities. They are possibly drawn from amongst the wealthier amongst parent populations, and each perhaps has a habitus analogous to that of the teacher who made the selection. Secondly, parents were not asked to rank teacher attributes – had this been the case the findings may have been different.

Notwithstanding the above, the relative importance of each attribute is interesting. The most popular attributes can be grouped as follows:

The first group (1-2) is that of discipline, order and organisation. Sixteen of the eighteen parents valued at least one of these attributes. Parent preference was that order and control be achieved by a form of 'natural presence' in the teacher. Shouting at children was anathema. Most liked teachers to be very organised, and sure of their direction.

The second group (4-6) centres on relationships. While teachers did not need to be from particular ethnic groups (ethnic matches, for instance Cook Island Maori teachers for Cook Island Maori children, were seen as unnecessary), it was essential that teachers were able to work cross-culturally, and were non racist. Teachers needed to be kind, caring, hospitable, welcoming to parents, and cheerful.

Only eight of the eighteen parents discussed high standards in student work. A similar number talked specifically about teachers being passionate regarding their professional work.

One interesting finding is the importance most parents placed on classroom order and control. In an international study, Kohn hypothesised and confirmed that:

... men (sic) who are more advantageously located in the class structure of their society are more likely to value self-direction for their children, to be intellectually flexible, and to be self-directed in their orientations than men who are less advantageously located (Kohn, Naoi et al. 1990:965).

Kohn et al (1990) found that, in the United States, Japan and Poland, there was a relationship between parental valuation of self direction for children, and the social class of the parent. The lower the parent social class, the less likely it was that parents valued ideational flexibility and self-directedness of orientation.

The findings from the Kaiako Toa study appear to endorse those of Kohn et al. Fourteen of the eighteen low income parents volunteered discipline or order as a good teacher attribute. This leads, theoretically, to Bowles and Gintis (1976). Their correspondence principle explains how working class children learn to reproduce their parents' status in life. For working class children, there is a correspondence between the social relations in education and the social relations of the factory floor. Thus it is more acceptable for there to be control and order in school because that is where children internalise their future role in the workforce. Discipline, order, and organisation are less likely to encourage self-directedness. Self-directedness is reserved for those who are destined to become leaders, the upper classes.

Anyon (1987) described how Bowles and Gintis's reproduction theory manifested in a group of New Jersey schools, and more recently Jones (1991) applied reproduction theory (which included Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital) to the New Zealand secondary school context. Both Jones and Anyon describe classrooms where working class students are managed in very efficient ways, and where such students are often taught in ways which expect them to be obedient, subservient, and become followers rather than leaders.

There is widespread knowledge of reproduction theory in contemporary New Zealand education. The words 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' are common discourse in sociology of education literature (see for example Carpenter, Dixon et al. 2001). As a result of various forms of professional development, teachers are discerning the positive and negative effects of various pedagogical styles on different SES groups (see for instance Carpenter, 2003).

More recent teacher education discourse has moved the focus from reproduction to the importance of production/resistance on the part of teachers. Teachers know they can make a difference, many are aware of the pedagogy of poverty (Haberman 1991), and most have some perceptions of what can help to make schooling more effective for low income and minority groups (see for example Alton-Lee, 2003; Corson, 1998; Cummins, 1986; Freire, 1972; Delpit, 1997; Scheurich, 1998; Bishop, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Carpenter, 2002).

While school professionals may, in many cases, have moved beyond an unquestioning acceptance of reproduction theories to an understanding of the importance of high expectations, these parents did not articulate similar sentiments. Very few spoke of high standards. More than half believed that order and control was essential for good teaching.

Conclusion:

What does this mean for the education of children in low-decile schools? It seems that one half of the 'partnership', parents, may have a different hierarchy of aspirations to those of many teaching professionals. Such parental goals could aid the continuation of low achievement for low-decile school children.

How can such a 'cycle of unawareness' be broken? Who should break it? Is it the task of the system to educate parents? Do some teachers (subconsciously) prefer the status quo because it means they do not have to change their professional practice? Are not bottom-up movements, such as what happened in Takiwa (Carpenter 2000) the most effective for long term change? Freire's (1972) ideas are inspirational for many communities, perhaps his theories could provide an answer?

To address these questions and to establish the extent of any problem, a much larger and more comprehensive research base is critical. A comparative analysis of parental perceptions from across a range of low to high-decile schools could provide important data. Emerging problems and issues may not be confined solely to low-decile schools.

In low-decile schools, power tends to be vested with professionals. Knowledge is power, and authentic, genuine and open democratic partnerships are necessary aspects of power sharing. In the low decile context, power sharing could perhaps include relationships between teachers and parents which lead to shared understandings of the attributes of good teachers.

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