

Factors Affecting Educational Outcomes

The Nov. 2004 issue of *Educational Leadership** magazine, titled “Closing Achievement Gaps,” contained a series of in-depth articles examining why some sectors of society continued to underperform others.

We’ve stated in the past that there are many similarities between the US and NZ in terms of educational shortcomings, especially with regard to the indigenous and immigrant populations of both countries.

One article noted that achievement gaps by race/ethnicity and income mirror inequalities in those aspects of schooling, early life, and home circumstances that research has linked to school achievement. Extensive analysis of 50 years of studies and data concluded that 14 factors correlated with student achievement:

Before and Beyond School:

- Birth weight
- Lead poisoning
- Hunger and nutrition
- Reading to young children
- Television watching
- Parent availability
- Student mobility
- Parent participation

In School:

- Rigor of curriculum
- Teacher experience and attendance
- Teacher preparation
- Class size
- Technology-assisted instruction
- School safety

Other articles offered these observations:

- The threat of stereotypes is real, and can become self-fulfilling.
- Research on gender and education reveals a disconnect between teaching practice and the needs of female and male brains.
- Racism in educators’ attitudes – and in how students are placed in advanced classes – still robs minority students of chances for success.
- One study in Richmond, VA, disclosed that the local penitentiary predicts with accuracy the number of prison cells to prepare by the number of students in the public schools who are reading below their grade level in the 2nd grade.
- In 2003, the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis published a study by a group of leading economists, brain scientists and child development experts that showed early childhood education is probably one of the best investments a state can make.
- In a 1995 study, researchers visited the homes of families from different social classes to record conversations between parents and toddlers. Some observations were:
 1. Professional parents spoke an average of 2,000 words per hour to their children, working class parents spoke about 1,300, and welfare mothers spoke about 600.

* Published by the ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development), Alexandria, VA, USA.

2. At four years old, children of professionals had vocabularies that were nearly 50% larger than those of working class children, and twice as large as those of welfare children.
 3. The researchers also tracked how often parents verbally encouraged or reprimanded their children. Toddlers of professionals received an average of six encouragements per reprimand. Working class children got two.
 4. For welfare children, the ratio was reversed – they received an average of one encouragement for every two scoldings.
- The advantage that middle class children gain after school and in the summer comes mostly from the self-confidence they acquire and the awareness they develop of the world outside their homes and immediate communities as they participate in organized athletics, dance, drama, museum visits, recreational reading and other activities that develop their inquisitiveness, creativity, self-discipline and organisational skills. After-school and summer programmes for dis-advantaged youth will narrow the achievement gap only if they duplicate such enriched experiences.

The concluding article summed it up well:

*“As several articles in this issue of **Educational Leadership** discuss, academic achievement gaps begin long before children enter the education system. Low-income and minority pre-schoolers, as a group, experience a broad range of conditions that place them at a disadvantage from the start – such as inadequate health care, poor nutrition, parents with low education levels, too much television watching, and a lack of enriching language experiences.*

What would happen if we provided these children, from the time they entered school, with the most experienced teachers, the smallest class sizes, the newest physical facilities, and the most enriched curriculum materials? Could all this extra support overcome their early disadvantages and eradicate the achievement gap? Unfortunately, we don't know. Research shows that far from getting the best of everything, low income and minority students in the US get less than their more affluent peers do. As Kati Haycock, Director of the Education Trust says, “The fact is, we have organized our education system in this country so that we take children who have less to begin with and then turn around and give them less in school, too. Indeed, we give these children less of all the things that both research and experience tell us make a difference.”