

# What Does It Mean to Be a Successful School?

**EXPECTATIONS, ASPIRATIONS AND PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT.**

1B SUBMISSION – JAMES GRIFFIN

# 1 Introduction

What comes to mind when you picture a successful school? One definition might equate school success with high academic achievement while another could relate it to whether children develop skills and *as well as* grades. Other definitions may emphasize an inclusive atmosphere where all children are valued for who they are and what they bring, or, a school community that extends beyond the school gate. School success can be defined in many ways and according to writer Larry Cuban, definitions of success are affiliated with beliefs about the purposes of education (Cuban, 2003), which in turn are akin to the nature and ideals within each society (Noddings, 2005).

Hodgkinson (1991) establishes three distinct purposes of education that have been pursued throughout the history of formal teaching at school: aesthetic, economic, and ideological. Aesthetic purposes are rooted in “self-fulfillment and the enjoyment of life” (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 23). Noddings, (2003) elaborates and says that children’s happiness in school is an important goal as well; it may even be instrumental for happiness in the future. Aspects of schooling that contribute to achieving aesthetic ends include music, drama, sports and the wider academic curriculum (Hodgkinson, 1991). The second purpose that Hodgkinson proposes, economics, includes training children for jobs so they may earn money and live a financially stable life, and so that they may potentially compete in the global economy sphere. The final reason for education in Hodgkinson’s “constellation of purposes” is ideological education (Hodgkinson, 1991, p. 24). This purpose is founded on the belief that school is a learning environment where political, social, and cultural beliefs and values of the society in which the education occurs can be transmitted.

Creating successful schools is a priority for governments, district officials, administrators, teachers and parents around the world, but just what are the facilitators for successful schools? In 2000, The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction collated research on the characteristics of successful schools in America, and created a framework for others schools to base their practise on (WDPI, 2000). The framework summarises seven contrasting characterises that facilitate a successful school (ibid). See box below:

1. **Vision:** having a common understanding of goals, principles and expectations for everyone in the learning-community.
2. **Leadership:** having a group of individuals dedicated to helping the learning-community reach its vision.
3. **High Academic Standards:** describing what students need to know and be able to do.
4. **Standards of the Heart:** helping all within the learning community become caring, contributing, productive, and responsible citizens.
5. **Family - School and Community Partnerships:** "making room at the table" for a child's first and most influential teachers.
6. **Professional Development:** providing consistent, meaningful opportunities for adults in the school setting to engage in continuous learning.
7. **Evidence of Success:** collecting and analyzing data about students, programs, and staff (WDPI, 2000).

*Source:* (WDPI, 2000, p. ix)

All of these attributes have a place in Hodgkinson's three purposes of education, and in the following essay I wish draw on two in particular. Firstly, the notion of 'standards' or 'expectations' as I will refer to them, because, in a study on the practices and beliefs of exemplary teachers, Brown and Medway (2007) found that effective educators had high expectations of every child and communicated these expectations to each child on a daily basis. They found that by communicating the message that every child can succeed they raised children's expectations of themselves.

And secondly, 'Family and School Partnerships'.

Parents are their children's first and most influential teachers ... When families are engaged in their children's learning, not only do children do better but the school also becomes a better place for all children to learn (WDPI, 2000, p. 6).

The decision to focus on these two themes is based on my belief that the success of a school should not only be based on what students do whilst they are at school, but also on the success they have

after they leave. This justification places student's aspirations at the forefront, and as the literature in this piece reveals, these aspirations often positively correlated to the expectations placed on children by both their teachers and their families. Before exploring these matters in depth, it is necessary to first clarify the ways in which schools measure the outcomes of such approaches.

## **2 How can we measure success?**

The way success is measured by a school depends on the variable being assessed whereby some variables are more predictable. For example, during my PPI placement, a change in the way students were grouped in music classes significantly affected their academic achievement during points of summative assessment. Such test results were then compiled and compared with those from previous years and this then gave an informed understanding of how students were progressing.

The aspirations of children throughout and after their education, as well the quality of relationship between their families and the school are more difficult factors to assess though and thus require different methods. One way to assess the success of these subjective factors is through survey methodology. In 1998, Jonathan Plucker and Russel Quaglia designed a 'Students Aspirations Survey' and concluded that the survey was a 'promising instrument for measuring the aspirations of high school students' (Plucker & Quaglia, 1998). More recently the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction created surveys to help schools identify their perceived strengths in each of the seven characteristics. These surveys can then help to identify other areas that could be targeted for improvement.

When measuring the outcome of the way parents are involved in their children's education, it is important to consider the varying effects of teacher evaluations, parent evaluations, and student evaluations. Some have argued that student evaluations are most useful because it is not the actual parent participation but the student's perception of the participation that is most influential on future outcomes (Desforges, 2003). However, one study by Reynolds (1992) found that student evaluations of parent involvement in school were negatively correlated with both parent and teacher evaluations of parent involvement. Reynolds (1992) suggests that students may perceive

their parents coming to school as a negative reflection upon them, associating it with being ‘in trouble’, as opposed to receiving support and encouragement.

### **3 High Expectations and High Aspirations**

Expectations of student achievement in the classroom and the resulting impacts of such expectations has been a well- researched topic for several decades because there are many factors that shape how teachers form expectations of students and how students form expectations of themselves and their own potential (Khattab, 2015). The principle of high expectations is based on the on the premise that all children have the potential to learn, grow and develop and promotes the idea that each child’s development has both universal features and features that are unique to each child and their context (Arthur & Beecher, 2008).

In this section I explore the idea that a successful school is firstly, one that nurtures the predictable potential of students through the use of high, but attainable expectations to promote high aspirations; and secondly that a successful school is one that recognises that by understanding factors that contribute to how both teachers and students form expectations can ensure a positive student learning experience (Hanover, 2012).

...the literature on motivation and school performance in younger school children suggests that expectations shape the learning experience very powerfully. For example, classic studies in the psychology literature have found that merely stating an expectation results in enhanced performance, that higher expectations result in higher performance, and that persons with high expectations perform at a higher level than those with low expectations, even though their measured abilities are equal (Hattie, 2009, p. 122)

Various studies have resulted in a range of conclusions about the role of expectations on student achievement. However, there is one common trend seen across the research that shows students are always likely to match expectations, regardless of whether these expectations are correct, misguided, good or bad. In “Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement,” John Hattie reinforces the legitimacy of this idea and contends that the question is not, “do teachers have expectations?” but instead, “do they have wrong and misguided

expectations that prompt a decrease in learning?” and assuming this is the case, for which students? (Hattie, 2009, p. 121).

Central to my focus on expectations is the idea that low, or high, expectations are a ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ and are the causes of a school’s gaps in achievement (Merton, 1948). It was in 1948 that Robert Merton coined the term ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’, by which he meant that students perform in ways that teachers expect (ibid). A student’s performance depends on inconspicuous and sometimes not so subtle messages passed between teachers about students’ capability, intelligence, and worth (ibid). The term was later used in 1968 when a study entitled ‘Pygmalion in the Classroom’ by Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson provided the impetus for more extensive research on the role of expectations (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 2003). In their study, a range of different aged children were given a nonverbal intelligence test, called the Harvard Test of Influenced Acquisition, which they guaranteed would measure the students’ potential for intellectual development (Nieto, 1996). Twenty percent of the students were randomly selected by the researchers, and it was then made known to staff that these students had above average intelligence levels. Even though their test scores were completely unrelated to their potential, their teachers were told to be alert to any indications of intellectual development. By the end of the school year, these children, especially the youngest, had showed considerably greater gains in intelligence rankings than did the other students. Their teachers also rated them as being more curious, conversational and happy, and thus deemed them more likely to be successful in life.

Because the teachers believed that the students would be successful, they were successful. This truly was a phenomenon. It is known as the Pygmalion Effect and the importance of this research cannot be understated. These results verify the incredible positive power of simply expecting the most out of our students. They also highlight the momentous potential for school success that is lost when, as teachers, we make ill-informed assumptions about the limits of students’ intellectual, emotional and physical capacities. More up to date research now exists on the relationship between teacher expectations, student aspirations and the success of schools. Using the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (DFE, 2014), a study in 2014 by Nabil Khattab examined this relationship and found that students with either high aspirations or high expectations have higher school achievement than those with both low aspirations and low expectations (Khattab, 2015).

However, Khattab also found that low expectations do not negatively impact students' future when they have high aspirations accompanied with high school achievement (ibid).

### **3.1 Facilitating High Expectations in the Classroom**

Many of us are easily sold on the importance of high expectations to our students' experience by the validity of such research results, but we still may not have a clear vision of what those expectations look like, or we may fail to make the transition from the all-important mind-set of high expectations to implementing those expectations in the classroom.

In order to facilitate high expectations for all children in the class, teachers must recognise the aptitudes of diverse learners in their classroom and understand that some children will require different circumstances to achieve their learning goals (Saffigna, Church, & Tayler, 2011). To achieve equality, teachers must expect each child to succeed and strive not to differentiate expectations because of gender, race, socio-economic status, ability or other difference (ibid). Evidence shows that a teacher's expectations can in fact affect an entire class of children by influencing children's self-perceptions (Rubie-Davies, 2006). Most importantly, children are very vulnerable to negative self-fulfilling prophecy when their families, friends and other teacher's expectations of their ability differ considerably from their own (Nieto, 1996). This is a prime reason why teachers and families must communicate well their expectations to avoid the paradox of negative self-fulfilling prophecy.

During my time training to be a teacher I have seen expectations used in a variety of ways that I have separated into two distinct categories. First, expectations that are related to academic achievement – these describe what students are expected to know and be able to do. I have seen these expectations put in place by the emphasis of conceptual understanding and the application of knowledge, skills and processes. For high academic expectations to flourish, there must be measurable performance indicators and benchmarks for all students an inclusive curriculum, good resources and a rigorous assessment process.

The second category of expectations are a newer dimension to the idea of school achievement. These are the expectations that prepare children to take their place in society. These include teaching children to make responsible decisions, to advocate equity, diversity fairness, inclusiveness and justice. These expectations also teach children to contribute to the community and to care about others, ultimately developing and adhering to a core set of values.

## **4 Family Involvement with Teacher Strategies**

Families and schools are inevitably related because they both comply to the legal decree that children be educated. However, during my time training to be a teacher I have experienced two very contrasting school environments, whereby one school had very close links with parents, and the other did not. The result of this was that often, the expectations placed students at school were not mirrored by their parents because of a lack of communication.

It is my opinion, based on my teaching experience, that the aspirations that children form in school must also be nurtured by their families, but this is only possible if parents have the same high expectations as their children's teachers.

Parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation (Desforges, 2003).

Hobbs (1984) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggested that the relations between families and schools should be enhanced if children's education is to be optimised, though only in recent years have authorities started to make improvements (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2010). Hobbs, (1984) spoke of developing shared responsibility between school and home, and Bronfenbrenner, (1992) highlighted the need to better-develop the school's relationships with other aspects of society. Together they have both made the point that schools and families must engage in regular communication if each institution is to have an impact on the education and socialisation of children.

Empirical research advocating the concept of teacher-family interaction gained recognition when studies of parental intervention with young children begun in the 1960s and proposed benefits to children from parents' involvement in their schooling. Bronfenbrenner (1974), for example, concluded that it was critical to the success of educational programs that parents be involved in their children's education. Among the benefits suggested were improvements to student behaviour, student achievement, better homework habits, lower student absenteeism, and generally more positive student attitudes toward school, – all qualities that are unquestionably attributes of a successful school.

Of especial importance for sustaining the child's learning in school is the involvement of parents in supporting at home the activities engaged in by the child at school and their participation in activities at school directly affecting their child.' The parent, however, need no longer be the child's principal teacher as at earlier stages. Rather he acts as a supporter of the child's learning both in and out of school, but continues to function, and to be identified by school personnel, as the primary figure responsible for the child's development as a person (Bronfenbrenner, 1974, p. 56)

However, today schools do not always recognise or value the ways in which parents are already engaged with children's learning, or if they do, they may not collect sufficient data about their own interventions, particularly relating to the impact on academic outcomes (Westheimer, 2008). Some pieces of literature also suggest specifically why parent/teacher relations do not always flourish. For example, lack of time, a lack of opportunities for involvement, and antagonistic or indifferent or attitudes from members of staff (Lightfoot, 1978; Moles, 1982; Becker & Epstein, 1982). Sometimes teachers may be hesitant about involving families because of the time investment required for efficient parent participation, and the lack of external reward for doing so (Becker & Epstein, 1982). Teachers may also have to tackle low skills on the part of the families, and may sometimes fear families questioning their professional competence or blaming them for the children's problems (ibid).

## **4.1 The Journey to Greater Parental Involvement**

The UK Government first set out a plan for expediting parental engagement in a White Paper published in 1997, entitled ‘Excellence in Schools’. The paper suggested three crucial points to improving the teacher-family partnership. Firstly, providing parents with information. Secondly, giving parents a voice. Thirdly, encouraging parental partnerships with schools (HMG, 1997).

Between September 2009 and March 2010, Ofsted visited 47 schools to evaluate the effectiveness of engagement with student’s families (Ofsted, 2011). Their attention was on building positive two-way relationships with families, the quality of correspondence and reporting to families on progress, and the devices for helping parents to support their children’s learning. Evidence from these inspections now supports that a critical dimension of effective teaching and learning is the relationship between the teacher, their students and their families (Ofsted, 2011).

Moving forward, the Schools White Paper (Department for Education 2010) now sets out how the Government will improve the outcomes and life chances of all children. The paper presents a strategy for raising achievement levels, improving pupils’ behaviour, and lowering the attainment gap. Overall, schools will be increasingly accountable to parents for the progress and achievement of pupils. Additionally, the Field Review on Poverty and Life Chances (Field 2010) identifies an important role for parents in attaining each of these targets, particularly in the early years of secondary school. Both the White Paper and the Field Review reinforce the need to involve parents in education, and to create a good learning environment at home.

## **4.1 Family Engagement Interventions**

In this final chapter I give evidence of what characterises strong links, and what best promotes a positive relationship between the teacher and the parent. According to (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2010) ‘Parental Engagement’ includes a wide variety of activities. Parenting can be taken to define: housing, health, nutrition, safety and home conditions to support learning. ‘Engagement’ is taken to include: help with homework and subject skills and aspirations. Also, volunteering; helping in

classrooms, parents' evenings, field trips; participating as a member of an audience. Decision making: undertaking role as school governor or other committees and advisory groups. Collaborating with the community: community contributions to schools and families; family and school contributions to the community (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2010).

According to the same Ofsted report in 2010 mentioned previously, 'the schools judged by inspectors to be good or outstanding in having two-way relationships with parents had the following (Ofsted, 2011): (See box below).

- Engaging with parents to assist with pupils' learning in school
- Engaging parents in revision, study support or family learning activities
- Listening to parents carefully in consulting them about whole-school curriculum development
- Using home and school diaries or planners
- Discussing pupils' assessments and information about their targets with parents
- Using websites, email and other electronic media, such as texting, to communicate quickly and effectively with parents about curriculum and teaching matters as well as day-to-day information
- Consulting parents on individual matters relating to the curriculum that their children followed

*Source: (Ofsted, 2011, p. 7)*

During my time training on placement, there were several strategies, policies and programmes designed by the school to bridge the gap between teachers and pupils' families, creating the inclusive community Ofsted proposes, where information and expectations are communicated and exchanged regularly. These included online communication technology (VLE's) and Parent Support Advisors. I was also informed that to engage effectively with parents, staff require training and coaching through initial teacher training or continued professional development, particularly when working with parents whose backgrounds are very different to their own. The school

appeared successful in its communications with parents because of its broad understanding of parental engagement, and its parental engagement strategies accorded with the interpretations and values of the parents they were aimed at. The school also had evidence of the impact of family literacy, language and numeracy programmes on children's academic and learning related outcomes. As a result, the school provided family literacy and numeracy programmes for the most disadvantaged families and the benefits had been shown to last beyond the duration of the intervention.

## 5 Conclusion

'Our children are living in the most intensely stimulating period in the history of the earth. They are being besieged with information and calls for their attention from every platform - computers, mobile phones, advertising hoardings and hundreds of television channels' (Robinson, 2008). With this in mind, to be successful schools need to be places where students are continuously challenged and motivated to meet expectations whilst families need to echo similar attitudes towards learning. This however, is just one definition of success that mainly leans towards Hodgkinson's aesthetic purpose of schooling. There cannot however, possibly be one single definition of what it means to be a successful school given the subjective nature of the definition (Cuban, 2003). What we define as success comes down to what we believe the purpose of education is for (ibid).

There are unquestionably links between high expectations and high aspirations, and undoubtedly there is much to be expected from children when their parents are part of the school community and thus understand and share the expectations placed on their children by their teachers. In the same way that quality of leadership, teaching and facilities are key facilitators of educational attainment, so is the level and quality of engagement that parents have with their child's learning and expectations outside the school environment. The more parents are engaged in the education of their children, the more likely their children are to fulfill their aspirations of becoming well rounded, educated and skilled members of society.

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