

## Kia Mau te Ha – “A breath of fresh air”

I would like to sincerely thank the Western Australian Education Support Principals and Administrators Association (WAESPAA) for their subsidy to support my attendance at the third combined conference of the Australian Special Educators Principal's Association (ASEPA) and the New Zealand Association of Special Education Principals (NZASSP) that was held on the 15<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> September 2009 in Wellington New Zealand. In partnership with Fiona Forbes I had submitted and been accepted to present a break out presentation on: *An Australian Perspective on Early Language and Learning Development: An Interagency Model*. Within this presentation I outlined the development of an inter agency model to support parents with children with disabilities; early identification of children with speech and language difficulties / disorders and the use of the Hilton Davis Family Partnership model. My attendance at this conference provided me with opportunities to increase my knowledge and understanding of current research and trends in special education at an international level, develop professional networks and share an Australian perspective on early intervention for children and families at risk. For me the highlights of this conference were the outstanding quality of key note speakers: John Visser Senior Lecturer in Special Education, University of Birmingham., Eileen Visser Inspector of Special Education OFSTED in England and Barry Carpenter Associate Director (SEN), Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford.

John Visser's presentation on **Parents and Accountability** looked at the belief systems of educators in working with parents and how these impact on our interactions and outcomes. He described how systems talk about parental choice but how that choice is based on being fully informed. That there has been a *rise of the expert and decline of the family* and that there is an underlying '*tension between equality of opportunity and equality of culture*' (*State v group / individual*). He outlined concerns that schools see "behaviour" as the responsibility of parents and the consequent provision and role of Parenting Classes within a school context. He described parenting classes as '*a complex process of raising awareness about parenting by means of participating in a series of group sessions whose overt purpose is to allow parents to find ways of improving their parenting or feel affirmed in their parenting*'. John outlined his beliefs and strategies that parent education needs to be part of a larger support service of families and children and indications were that school based teacher delivery of parenting classes don't work. So when looking at accountability in relation to behaviour (here he made note that learning is behaviour) educators need to look at what needs to be done rather than why. The emphasis needs to be on how the family can be supported rather than the problem. He outlined the demographics in relation to the work the Children's Trust had done in North Somerset and the results of a needs analysis. This analysis consisted of 3,132 questionnaires and resulted in the identification of issues relating to anti social behaviour; easier access to parenting classes; better information /advice; traffic calming; and better health care support. It also identified concerns regarding emotional health of children and young people; repeat incidence of domestic violence; school attendance and exclusions and parental responsibilities for behaviour. This analysis led to the formulation of a four tier service.

- Tier one - universal services for all children
- Tier two - services for vulnerable children at a local level
- Tier three - services for identified children in need throughout North Somerset
- Tier four - individual children with high levels of need

There was a recognized need to provide high quality resources and information on parenting, the development of clear referral systems, early intervention services and co-ordinated interventions with relevant training and professional development for those who would be supporting families.

John Visser's other presentation **Partnerships in Action** outlined his work as chair of the Children's Trust in North Somerset. This has seen the establishment of a multi agency service to support children in care and those with disabilities and learning difficulties. John described the political background that underlined the review and development of the Children's Trust that was formed as a result of Every Child Matters agenda. In 2003 the UK Government published a Green Paper called *Every Child Matters*. This plan was to strengthen preventative services by focusing on: increasing the focus on supporting families and carers, ensuring necessary intervention takes place before children reach crisis point and protecting children from falling through the net and ensuring that the people working with children are valued, rewarded and trained. This resulted in the UK Government publishing *Every Child Matters: The next steps*, and consequently passed the Children Act 2004, providing the legislation for developing more effective and accessible services focusing around the needs of children, young people and families. It's goal is that every child, whatever their background or their circumstances have the support they need to be healthy ,stay safe ,enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. This is done through the

development of Local *Strategic Partnerships* whereby the stake holders in the area work together to ensure that services are delivered in a coordinated framework and that the *right actions are taken and right services delivered*. The numerous directorates have been replaced with one Director of Children and Young People Services ensuring a single overarching framework. This has resulted in a *Wrap Around Service* that met the needs of children and families in the areas of disability, special education, social deprivation, juvenile justice and health. John outlined the importance that the Every Child Matters agenda cuts across these areas with the notion of 'vulnerability' and the difficulty that families need services rather than labels but were unable to get a service without a label. The key agencies involved in the Children's Trust are Police, Area Health Authority, Connexions (Employment service), Education, Learning & Skills Council, Social Care/ Welfare Agency, Juvenile Justice, Youth Service, Voluntary Workers and Parents and young people. The Locality Team is then responsible to make sure that agencies work together to meet needs of children, young people and families, support agencies to share information they have so that needs are more easily met, ensure maximum parental / child / young person involvement., provide services to meet local needs and involve children and young people as much as possible in decision making. It is important to note that while the Every Child Matters agenda is about early intervention, the Children's Trust has identified four age groups; 0-4yrs, 5-11yrs, 11-16yrs and 16- 19yrs and that the level and type of service delivery changes in keeping with the identified needs of the age group.

Barry Carpenters presentation on **Complex Needs** recognised an increasingly wide and varied group of learners who "*include pupils who do not simply require a differentiated curriculum or teaching at a slower pace but who, at times, require further adaptations to teaching if they are to make progress.*" He stated that there was throughout the world 780 million young children are affected by biological, environmental and psychosocial conditions that limit their cognitive development. That those children with disabilities / difficulties have a wide range of often co-morbid conditions including Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD), Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD), Speech/Language Impairment (SLI) and Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLD) and that the biological basis for this is not yet fully understood. His presentation centered on the premise that we must seek to *build an inclusive curriculum around adaptation, modification, and design...that will be relevant to all learners.*' He talked on the impact of disadvantage, deprivation and disability as a continuum of vulnerability. He then further outlined the prevalence and impact of poverty, alcohol, drugs, smoking and mental health on children and families and the levels and types of service delivery needed to meet the increasingly complex needs.

I found these presentations highly relevant, informative and supportive of the existing inter agency early intervention models being developed in Western Australia. I have come away from the conference with new skills relevant information, re energized and focused on my work in the special education sector in Western Australia.

Thank you for the opportunity,

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