Highly valued by our society, school success has many lifelong benefits such as higher socio-economic status, health and well-being (Oreopoulos, 2007). The importance of educational success is often implicit in the complaints, excuses and laments of students, teachers and parents when faced with poor academic performance (Dweck, 2007; Epstein and Becker, 1982; Harari and Covington, 1981; Jansen, 2006; Peterson and Irving, 2008).

The degree to which the three main stakeholders in student learning and achievement (students, teachers and parents) believe they are responsible for learning outcomes is an important consideration and component in student success. It is likely to affect young people’s behaviour and motivation, and ultimately their development of academic skills, expertise and competence. A lack of clarity and or unity around who these stakeholders perceive is responsible may indeed be a conflicting and complicating factor in students’ academic learning and success.

This study sought to explore the language and idiom of the three key stakeholder groups with respect to responsibility for student success and failure. Focus groups were conducted with the three groups to identify what they thought was most important for school success and in particular the degree of responsibility each group took for learning outcomes. Focus groups were chosen as the preferred methodology; unlike questionnaires they enabled the participants to freely identify who they thought was responsible for student academic success without being constrained by a forced choice format and subsequently falsely prioritising their responses.

A point of difference with this study is that qualitative data was collected simultaneously from the three stakeholder groups from within the same schools. To date, little research has been conducted with students, teachers and parents from within the same school communities, making this research
particularly salient. Given the environments in which students grow up are likely to have a strong influence on the development of the students’ own beliefs, there is a need for investigation as to whether there are any differences between the three groups.

A brief review of the literature on the factors that have been associated with responsibility for learning follows before a discussion and evaluation of the research findings.

Research on who students think is responsible for their learning is limited. Numerous studies have looked at factors that influence or predict student success (e.g., ability, effort, self regulated learning, parental involvement, teacher-student relationships), but there is a dearth of literature on the value students place on these influences.

One notable exception to this is Jones’ (1991) work with Pasifika and New Zealand (NZ)/European girls. Jones found that students from low socio-economic areas tended to think it was the teacher’s responsibility to help them learn, whereas students from high socio-economic schools tended to think they were responsible. Another study by Peterson and Irving (2008) also found that NZ secondary students were likely to take responsibility for their success, but more likely to blame the teacher for their failure.

There is little doubt that students who do take responsibility for their learning (success and failure) perform better. For example, secondary school students who use assessment results to take responsibility for their own learning have been found to achieve higher grades than those who see assessment as an indicator of school quality or a predictor of future job success (Brown, Peterson, & Irving, 2009).

Research on Anglo-Australian and Italian-Australian students’ beliefs about ability and effort found 12–14 year olds from both populations generally rank effort and ability as most important for being good at a task, with teacher input seen as less important (Cashmore and Goodnow, 1986). Chinese junior and senior high school students in Hong Kong differentiate more, placing greater importance on effort for exam performance followed by ability, teacher help and home conditions. A similar emphasis on the importance of effort for exam performance has been found in American university students (Williams and Clark, 2004). In contrast Parameswaran & Hom (2001) found that 6–10 year old Tamil speaking students in India do not make clear distinctions between ability and effort. While these findings indicate some cultural differences in what students believe is important for academic success, this is not the same as asking them who is responsible for academic success. Hence, while students may see personal effort and ability as important for academic success, the responsibility for encouraging that effort and developing ability may lie elsewhere.

Research on parents has tended to focus on parental factors that influence school success, such as parental support of the child in the home (e.g., helping with homework, emotional support, assistance with educational decisions, and encouragement) and parental involvement in schools (e.g., helping with school administration, supporting teachers, attending meet-
The research findings suggest that certain types of parental involvement are associated with higher levels of student achievement (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2009). However, we have to infer from these actions that there is an underlying belief system that causes parents to be involved, such as a sense of responsibility for their child’s learning outcomes.

Research has been conducted on the different attributes parents give to their children’s success. Parents have been found to associate their child’s success with their child’s ability, whereas their child’s failure is more likely to be attributed to a lack of effort. This is argued to be a self-protection bias which enables parents to view their child in a good light and allows parents to justifiably encourage their child to try harder when they fail. As effort is seen as variable and controllable it can therefore be increased, whereas ability is viewed as relatively fixed and stable (Rytkönen, Aunola, and Nurmi, 2007; Rytkönen et al., 2005).

The only qualitative study we could find that directly asked parents about the influences on student achievement was a study with parents of Maori secondary school students (Bishop et al., 2003). This study found 46% of the parents’ discourses about influences on their child’s achievement concerned their child’s relationships (mostly with their teachers), 35% concerned aspects of the school structure or learning environment and only 19% concerned factors relating to the child and the child’s family background. This study is limited however by focusing only on one ethnic group, but it does suggest parents acknowledge the important role teachers play in children’s success.

There is considerably more research on teachers’ views about who is responsible for student learning. Findings suggest that students show the greatest achievement gains when teachers take collective responsibility for student success and failure, rather than blaming the students for failure (Lee & Smith, 1996). Differences in the attributions given for student success have been found to vary with teacher experience. Experienced teachers tend to attribute academic success to stable, biologically determined and uncontrollable factors of the child such as ability (Georgiou, 2008). In contrast, novice teachers are relatively more likely to attribute student achievement to teacher factors and student effort (Georgiou, 2008). This suggests teachers become more cynical about their own ability to raise student performance the longer they teach and implies a decreasing lack of commitment to ensuring such an outcome.

Brown’s (2008; 2009) work on teachers’ conceptions of assessment also hints at who teachers see as responsible for student learning. Brown found that teachers tend to view assessment as a way of measuring and encouraging students to be accountable or responsible for their learning, much more than they see assessment as a way of making schools accountable. Further, Brown (2009) argues that teachers are more willing to take responsibility for learning outcomes if the assessments focus on deep learning and enable improvement. Otherwise, they see assessment as measures of surface learning used to hold students accountable.
Many teachers believe parents play a key role in their child’s education. Crozier (1999) found teachers believe parents should ensure children come to school ready to learn (e.g., coming with pen and pencil); they should encourage children to do homework and provide an environment that facilitates study. However, Ran (2001) noted some teachers also believed there should be limits to parental involvement with British teachers believing many UK-Chinese parents spent too much time and effort in supporting their children to do well and applied too much pressure on their children to perform in examinations.

**Method**

**Participants**

Student, parent and teacher focus groups were conducted in three New Zealand secondary schools in a large urban area. Schools were selected to represent a high, middle and low socio-economic area (decile). Each focus group consisted of between 5 and 10 people. The number of focus groups, school decile and participants for each school is provided in Table 1. Table 2 indicates the gender and ethnic mix of the student sample with respect to the school decile. Ethnicity was not recorded for the parent or teacher groups. In total, 43 students, 27 teachers and 22 parents participated.

The students were selected by a school liaison person with the proviso that they represented a range of abilities and ethnicities. All the students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of school</th>
<th>Parent Groups</th>
<th>Teacher Groups</th>
<th>Student Groups</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low Decile</td>
<td>1 (7)</td>
<td>2 (12)</td>
<td>2 (14)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Decile</td>
<td>1 (9)</td>
<td>1 (6)</td>
<td>2 (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Decile</td>
<td>1 (6)</td>
<td>1 (9)</td>
<td>2 (17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL PARTICIPANTS</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note** The number of participants is provided in brackets.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Low Decile School</th>
<th>Medium Decile School</th>
<th>High Decile School</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NZ European</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maori</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were in either Year 9 or Year 10 (aged approximately 13–15 years). The liaison person in each school also recruited the teachers and parents. While all participants may have known each other they were not necessarily friends.

**Design**

All focus groups were conducted at the schools, recorded on audiotape and were 60 minutes long. Each focus group was led by an experienced facilitator who was part of the research team. Another team member took notes. Transcriptions and notes were merged for analysis. To establish rapport, the researchers greeted participants on arrival, offering refreshments. Focus group discussion practice was explained and questions were answered about the research before discussions began with a warm-up exercise that involved participants introducing themselves.

The aim of the focus groups was to explore what parents, teachers and students thought about the purpose of schooling, their expectations for success, perceived responsibility for students’ education, influences on achievement and the role of effort and ability in achieving success at school.

This paper focuses specifically on whom parents, teachers and students perceived as being responsible for a child’s learning and education. Specifically the parents and teachers were asked the question ‘Who is responsible for a child’s education?’ and the students were asked ‘Who is responsible for your achievement/learning outcomes?’

**Data analysis**

Using a process of analyst triangulation (Patton, 2002), interview transcripts were subjected to independent close readings by each research team member to facilitate an understanding of emergent themes and to develop a system for data coding. Transcript segments were systematically coded into categories so the groupings described responsibility for learning and achievement. Coding of transcripts were then reviewed by each of the researchers followed by findings being compared and any discrepancies in coding assignments resolved.

**Results**

The students, parents and teachers differed strongly in their beliefs about who is responsible for student learning and success.

**Student views on who is responsible for their learning**

The student focus groups were asked to comment on the question: ‘Who is responsible for your achievement/learning outcomes?’ The students in all
groups were aware of their own part in their learning success. One student noted, ‘If you are really bright and you just don’t try, then you will get somewhere, but you’re not going to reach your full potential.’ This approach put the opportunity for success in the students’ hands, and they generally accepted this: ‘You’ve got to be determined and try your best in everything and say, I can do this.’ In general the students recognised they had to ‘put as much effort as you can into it.’ They also knew they had a choice and ‘It’s just whether you choose to listen and take in information.’ That choice committed them to action ‘Because if you don’t want to learn, you’re not going to try your hardest in what you are doing and you won’t pay attention to the teacher and stuff like that.’

However, some students appeared to be somewhat unwilling to accept personal responsibility for making the effort putting the onus on the teacher: ‘With a good teacher you don’t really need natural ability. Like all you need is to pay attention.’

Although recognising they had an important part to play in their learning outcomes, the first thing students mentioned in six of the nine student focus groups was the influence of their teachers. Students from all schools recognised teachers were important for ‘giving us the knowledge’ and ‘giving us as much information as they can’. However, students were more focused on how student-teacher relationships impacted their motivation and ultimately their success: ‘They [teachers] have to be able to relate to the students, they have to have a good relationship with them otherwise it won’t work’ or as one student said, ‘The teacher is not just about standing up there and talking. They have to make you feel safe, that you can go up and ask for help’.

The students also said they were motivated to work for a teacher they liked: ‘If you get a good teacher and they are disappointed in you it affects you, like you want to do better if you like the teacher.’ In contrast, ‘If it’s an angry one (teacher) you barely want to go to class and you don’t learn much at all.’ Some students in the high and middle socio-economic school blamed their lower achievement on having teachers they did not like: ‘You won’t be able to get it because you simply think the teacher is rude and not good.’ Another student believed some teachers ‘mark you down if they don’t actually like you.’

In contrast to those students who attributed their poor marks to a lack of connection with their teacher, there were a few students from each school who were aware that good teachers did not guarantee success: ‘Your teachers are there but they are not really responsible for you to learn.’ Or as another student said, ‘teachers can give it to us (homework) but it’s our choice if we want to do it or not’. These students recognised the need for self-motivation and their own responsibility.

Lastly the students from all the schools saw their parents as playing a role in supporting their success. The parents’ role was largely to support, encourage, push and provide the right environment for studying. As one student said, ‘They turn the TV off for you. You just leave it until they do something about it.’ For some students, that support also meant helping them with
their homework and ‘reminding us if we got homework’, arranging ‘extra tuition’ if needed, providing the right motivation ‘bribes’ or just offering guidance: ‘Your parents are there to make sure you don’t go off the path.’

Overall, the students seemed to accept their parents’ involvement in their education. Some students in the high socio-economic school indicated they wanted to do well by their parents: ‘you want your parents to be proud of you.’

Parent views on who is responsible for student learning

The parent focus groups were also asked to comment on the slightly more generic question ‘Who is responsible for your child’s education?’

Parents from the middle socio-economic school argued, ‘predominantly it’s the child’ as ‘you can only take a horse to water’. This group acknowledged that parents provide support and resources and that sometimes things outside the child conspire against them, but the predominant factor for their child’s success was the child’s own efforts and motivation.

Unlike the parents representing the middle socio-economic school, the parents from the other two schools immediately mentioned the importance of the teacher-student relationship as being responsible for school success. These parents believed that children ‘know whether or not a teacher is there just to collect their pay, or whether there’s a teacher that is actually interested in teaching them.’ Parents also recognised the motivating role good teachers played. Being praised by the teacher was particularly important for motivation: ‘that little bit of praise raises them so much higher.’ The parents also believed that sometimes ‘you come across a teacher that doesn’t actually suit your child’s personality’, but they acknowledged that this was part of life: ‘once they get to the workforce they are going to get it anyway . . . someone they are going to clash with.’

These two parents groups also acknowledged that a student’s success was due to a more collaborative effort among teachers, parents and students: ‘the holy trinity’, but they attached most of the importance for this on having a good teacher and good teacher-student relationships for the child to be motivated and therefore succeed.

Many of the parents did accept some degree of responsibility for encouraging and motivating their children to work hard and be disciplined:

‘I think it starts with the discipline and boundaries you give your kids, because at times you have to let them know when to concentrate, when they can cut loose, and know the behaviour that is acceptable at certain times.’

One parent noted it was part of family values to show an interest in the child and ask them, ‘How was your day at school? What did you do at school?’ While one parent thought motivation was at least partly in the genes, the majority indicated it was a learned skill and families had a role to play in nurturing it:
‘... as a parent we can influence outcome because if you have open communication with your child and supply the resources and the tools and if they’re struggling with something and we provide tutoring for them ... we can influence the outcome ...’

Teacher views on who is responsible for student learning and achievement

The majority of teachers were focused on the local effects of effort, with teachers from all schools mentioning the importance of students being self-motivated for more immediate academic success (‘they have to take on board that it is their responsibility [to learn]’).

Another teacher commented that she expected the students to try hard:

‘I think that my expectation is that they are going to make a good effort and achieve to the best of their ability ... but I don’t expect that a teacher is a miracle worker and can make them pass everything.’

This focus on the importance of student effort, for some teachers, appeared to be a way of teachers distancing themselves from poor student outcomes and attributing the responsibility as being foremost with the students. The following quotes from the three teacher focus groups support this:

‘You can give them every single gem, every single arrow, every single bit of support, but at the end of the day, it’s them that hold the pen, ... it’s them that have their desires, and their attitude determines their altitude ... but if they have decided, nah, don’t give a toss, whatever ... they can be the most intelligent people but they will not do it, they will not achieve because they have decided they don’t want to.’

‘I think a lot of our kids and maybe the parents to a point, especially our kids they don’t take responsibility, you know they pass the blame onto someone else, they won’t accept, oh I didn’t do my homework, oh I didn’t learn it because oh I didn’t apply myself. So they are always passing the blame and maybe parents are doing the same.’

‘In a lot of cases the kids just put all the responsibility for their learning on the teacher like they almost expect to walk into the class, be given this knowledge and leave and that’s it. They don’t seem to realise that it is all about them you know and what you do at home, you know, how they are actively [pause], what they can do in class to increase their learning.

‘We’ve gone through all the work and they won’t achieve because they refuse to put the effort in. Now they kind of blame me, but ... it’s not our fault.’

The teachers from all schools believed parents also play a role whether it is ‘checking that they are getting their homework done’ or at a more general level with setting appropriate expectations: ‘The parents’ expectations are so important because if they place value on education then the kids will’.

Several other teachers felt trapped and wanted to blame the bigger system which prevented them from teaching effectively. Some mentioned things like a lack of ‘resources and access to resources.’ Another said:
‘What you’ve asked us to talk about in an hour, there’s so many things actually that are happening that we’ve got absolutely no control over, which actually prevent us from doing what we are meant to be doing. You have to look at the big picture and the big picture is really strait-jacketed, we are told what to teach, when to teach it, how to teach it.’

However, one teacher did accept that their responsibility was to ensure all students achieved:

‘Part of our role (as teachers) is to provide all students with the ability to achieve at some level . . . somewhere in the education system. It’s my job to provide the opportunity for students to show it.’

In summary, the students from all three socio-economic areas saw themselves and their attitude to learning as the most important factor for their success. This was followed by acknowledging the importance of teachers and their relationship with them in ensuring motivation and ultimately success. Lastly they acknowledged the support of parents; however, more often they blamed their teachers for any failure.

The parents were less consistent in their views, with parents representing the middle socio-economic school placing the majority of the responsibility on the child and the higher and lower socio-economic schools acknowledging a more equal split in responsibility for student success between parents, teachers and students. The parents’ responses were often couched in cliché.

The teachers were more united in their focus than the parents, and they also cast the widest net by identifying the largest number of influences on student achievement. The teachers seemed to particularly endorse the importance of the teacher-student relationships and student effort, using a lack of student effort as a way of distancing themselves from student failure. The teachers also gave the greatest acknowledgement of the three stakeholders to the role of student ability even though it was not a primary focus. The teachers were more likely to apportion blame on both parents and students for not taking responsibility.

Discussion

This study investigated who students, parents and teachers from within three different socio-economic communities identified as being responsible for student learning and success.

The most significant finding from this study was the marked differences amongst the stakeholders when it came to discussing reasons for student failure. The majority of participants pointed their finger away from themselves, with the students and parents tending to blame the teacher; and the teachers being more likely to look to students and parents. This tendency for NZ students to blame the teacher for poor performance is in keeping with Peterson and Irving’s (2008) study which found that while secondary students believed assessment could be used to help improve their learning,
there was little indication they actively used that information to make improvements, and instead looked to blame others.

It is possible the majority of participants in this sample associate failure with a lack of effort. Because effort is a controllable and valued quality they adopt a self protection mechanism of blaming others in order to distance themselves from the negative connotation associated with lack of effort. In the case of the teachers and parents this may indicate a lack of commitment to the ongoing motivation of students.

It is important to also note that the beliefs of students, teachers and parents were similar regardless of the socio-economic status of the school. The only exception to this was that parents from the middle socio-economic schools tended to think students were the primary drivers of their success, whereas the parents in the other schools looked more towards the importance of the student-teacher relationship. More research is needed to explore this finding, but it seems that middle socio-economic parents place more emphasis on individual responsibility and hard work than those from higher and lower socio-economic areas. In contrast, when it came to discussing failure, all three groups tended to look away from themselves, suggesting a concerning general lack of personal responsibility for student failure.

The degree to which parents are seen as important for student success also deserves mention. While parental involvement may decline as students enter adolescence, the students in our sample clearly valued and expected their parents to be involved in supporting and encouraging their learning. This finding reinforces the need for parents to become involved in their child’s schooling as confirmed by other studies (see for instance Urdan, Solek and Schoenfelder, 2007).

In general, our findings indicate that teachers and parents focused most on the importance of the student-teacher relationships and ability for success, whereas the year 9 and 10 students primarily placed the onus on themselves, their own effort, then on their teachers and lastly their parents. This finding suggests that in New Zealand, Year 9 and 10 students’ beliefs about the importance of effort for success have not yet changed to be like those of their parents and teachers. This raises the questions of when students’ beliefs change and what are the causes of change, which could provide focus for further research. It also suggests the need to re-emphasise the importance of effort for self improvement in the later school years.

In summary, these findings provide an important voice to the beliefs that students, parents and teachers have about the responsibilities for academic success at school. The simultaneous collection of data from all three stakeholders from the same communities makes these findings particularly powerful as they provide a more complete picture of the environment that the students are growing up in and allow a more direct comparison of beliefs between the groups. Our findings have the potential to provide teachers and school management teams with a deeper insight into the rhetoric of these important and influential education stakeholders and suggest the need for all three groups to take more responsibility for student failure.
Limitations

This study has several limitations; the first being the focus group format. It is possible that more articulate and confident people can sway the discussion resulting in more quotable and codable comments (Urdan, Solek and Schoenfelder, 2007). Secondly, whether the parents were talking about their sons or their daughters was not obvious and as gender stereotype differences have been found in parental educational beliefs (e.g., Frome and Eccles, 1998), it is important for future studies to consider this as a possible mediating variable. Thirdly, although the sample consisted of participants from a range of socio-economic areas and ethnicities (see Tables 1 and 2), the schools were all urban secondary schools which limits the generalisability of our findings. Further we could not analyse our data for cultural differences in attitudes and this is something that should also be considered in future studies.

Future research could use our findings to form a new questionnaire on what and who is responsible for student school success. A large scale questionnaire administration would also allow for cultural, gender and other demographic differences to be explored.

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