

Principals Sabbatical Report

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My Sabbatical purpose was to investigate the actions, activities & conditions of school leaders that contribute to effective Māori student achievement &/or improvements in Māori student achievement; and in Māori students achieving success, as Māori.

This initial purpose came about by a remark made by one of the Education Review Office team during the synthesis aspect of their review of our school in February 2011. The remark pertained to “cultural competency” and the profile of what a “culturally competent student at our school” was. This led me to examine what else we could be doing for our Māori students.

The following excerpt from Ruahine’s February 2011 ERO report stated:

“How well are Māori students learning – engaging, progressing and achieving?”

In 2010 most Māori students, in Years 1 to 8, achieved at or above national expectations in reading. Writing and numeracy achievement information indicates that, although many students achieved at expected levels, Māori students are over represented in below expectations data. Students’ individual targets are shared with whānau.

In 2009, Ka Hikitia, Māori Education Strategy, was a key document in a PLD project to build teachers’ responsiveness to Māori students as learners. Classroom teachers set achievement targets with Māori students and share them with whānau. A strong emphasis on effective relationships and personalising learning is making a difference to Māori students’ success.

Students develop strong links with local whānau through kapa haka and cultural events. They aspire to, participate in and enjoy the wide range of leadership roles available. Parents and whānau of Māori students are regularly at the school for special events, information evenings and parent/teacher learning conversations. Teachers keep in touch with whānau, working with them to build partnerships for their children’s education and success at school. Members of the local iwi coach and share their expertise in the learning programme.

Principal’s reports to whānau and the board highlight the learning achievements and challenges for Māori students. Trustees use this valuable information to set targets to further enhance Māori success.”

My initial belief was that our school was on the right track in terms of what we were already doing as a school and as a staff. As mentioned in our ERO report, we had focussed our Professional Learning in 2009 on Ka Hikitia and the use of teacher inquiry to focus on improving outcomes for our Māori students. This focus continued in 2010 with our teacher inquiry focus shifting to personalising learning and using the deliberate acts of teaching to identify what did and didn’t work for our Māori students. However, I felt that there was still a piece of the puzzle missing for both our Māori and our non-

Māori students. I identified that part of that puzzle piece was developing an aspect of our school curriculum that promoted an awareness, celebration and deliberate focus on knowing, celebrating and valuing our unique position as citizens of New Zealand.

Part of my research included talking to principals from schools who had a similar Māori profile to our school (that is a relatively low Māori student population (our school was 17% at the time); similar decile (we are Decile 6); and similar size and community (our school had 170 students and we were in a semi-rural area). One of the things that I found was that the focus of these principals was similar: raising student achievement was at the forefront of our minds and raising Māori student achievement was a significant factor in Annual Goals and professional learning. However, like our school, the focus was entirely on teaching and learning. The concept of “Cultural Competency” had not been considered by these schools. Where work was being done it was largely incidental and definitely not strategic. A lot of “cultural competency” type activities happening in these schools were dependent on involving outside agencies/resource people, or by relying on the culture, passion or knowledge of individual teachers. One of the principals I interviewed commented that exploring cultural competency would be long down the list of their professional learning needs due to their predominant focus on improving behaviour and improving results. To my mind, exploring cultural competency, improving student behaviour and raising student achievement all went hand in hand.

I also spoke to Year 7 & 8 students from my school. I interviewed both Māori and non-Māori students about their ideas, beliefs and observations. My first question to our Māori students was about what they wanted to see more of in school in relation to them being Māori. Straight away their comments revolved around Te Reo Māori. “We want more of it.” “Teachers should be using it every day.” “It should be more than good morning and thank you.” When I asked these students if they thought that the lack of Te Reo Māori by our staff was because they didn’t value the language there was a consensus by them that they felt it was more to do with teacher confidence and lack of teacher knowledge rather than teachers not valuing their language or culture. I then asked the whole group (Māori and non-Māori) if they thought that kids would want to learn Te Reo Māori. Responses from both Māori and non-Māori students who were present was that there should not be a choice: “It’s everywhere. It’s part of who we are.” “If we’re going to say or sing stuff in Māori we should know what it means.” “When people go overseas and do the haka and wear a taonga, they should know the words to Ka Mate and know what the words and actions mean.”

One of the non-Māori students asked one of the Māori students what a taonga was. This then started a discussion of which I was not a part of. All of a sudden, the Māori students present became the teachers. They explained what a taonga was and then went on to explain other beliefs and values (eg. Tangi). Right before my eyes I saw the potential of this type of conversation and interaction as part of daily life in the classroom. Students, who we had labelled as “below expectation” academically, became the experts. Their mana and self-belief blossomed before my eyes. It really was a magical moment in my sabbatical.

One of the other things to happen during the period of my sabbatical was the publication of “Tātaiako – Cultural Competencies for Teachers of Māori Learners”. This document backed up all of my beliefs about all of the necessary components to ensure that our tamariki succeed as Māori – as who they are. I believe that much of what is in Tātaiako

in the behavioural indicators for entry into teacher training could and should be the cultural competency profile for every student in New Zealand.

The original plan was that by the end of my sabbatical I would have gathered enough evidence and information to create a graduate profile of a culturally competent student at our school (and perhaps I could have using Tātaiako as a platform). But my conclusion was that neither I, nor my staff was in a position to create such a profile. Our own knowledge and understanding was lacking.

I had heard of a programme delivered through Te Wananga o Aotearoa called “Mauri Ora”. This is a 12 month programme that creates a foundation for cultural awareness and identity and broadens knowledge of New Zealand history. The programme creates a greater understanding of the unique and fundamental culture that gives Aotearoa its unique place in the world. This appeared to be the obvious next step for our school’s journey. All staff, including office and support staff are completing the paper throughout 2012. Staff meeting time is prioritised to help complete the course work. Local Māori, including parents and whanau members are frequently used as resource people to help staff complete assignments. The completion of this paper will mean for our staff:

- Positive reciprocal relationships with our parents and whanau are being fostered;
- Individual knowledge and understanding is being developed;
- Links with local iwi are being created;
- We will be in a far better position to co-create a culturally competent graduate profile for students at our school.

Many of these outcomes link directly with aspects of Ka Hikitia and with Tātaiako. Having a research based approach strengthens the validity of what we are doing.

My findings have revealed that:

- Current practice regarding cultural competence in my own school and in the schools I visited was incidental rather than strategic.
My recommendation to the Board of Trustees as a result, was that we worked strategically with staff, students, whanau and local iwi to ensure that our approach was not ad-hoc or unplanned.
- The concept of cultural competency is not seen as a priority in some schools.
My recommendation to the Board of Trustees was that creating a graduate profile of a culturally competent student should be a priority at our school.
- There is not one programme, person, or activity that will succeed in raising achievement for our Māori students. It is a combination of a range of strategies and understandings that will produce success.
- Effective teacher inquiry and openness by staff to change their practice, previous-held beliefs and understandings is vital.

In conclusion, it is my belief that there is not one thing that we can do for our Māori students to raise their achievement. There is no one programme, no one resource or activity - no magic bullet. There is no place in our schools for deficit thinking: that Māori students cannot achieve because of their home lives, their inability to learn or their historical data. As the professionals, it is our duty to make changes to our own practices, challenge our own beliefs, and work with our tamariki and their whanau to ensure that Māori students enjoy success as Māori.

