

SABBATICAL REPORT – TERM 2 2008

While in England, I visited six state secondary schools and also met with two leading educators in London to talk about educational change that is occurring in England. I also had the opportunity to visit a number of other schools last year when I went on a Study Tour to England. While my visits were only snapshots of schools' practices, it is my strong view that the transformation of teaching practice in New Zealand to provide better educational outcomes for our 21st century learners is a long way ahead of most schools in England.

Sadly, politicians in England have had far too much say in what is happening in their schools, creating a culture of compliance in teachers, who have not been seen as the best source of educational innovation. While it may well be that there is now more tentative encouragement of change in schools, teachers remain hamstrung by the national testing that occurs at the end of each of the five key stages of a child's education, both at primary and secondary school. These national test results are highly predictable and, as in New Zealand, reflect the socio-economic backgrounds of the students. The saddest thing is that 'league tables' of results are published by an ignorant media who run down schools whose results do not look good against national averages and a media who think that those schools with good results are therefore the better schools. This is, of course, a nonsense in many cases, as it is in fact often the schools with poorer national results which are making the biggest difference to the educational outcomes of their students.

As a consequence of the media and politicians criticising schools' national test results, schools work very hard within heavily prescribed curricula which do not allow for innovative teaching practices, to teach to the tests and to get the best results that they can in these national tests. The result is, from what I observed, that many teachers are involved in outdated and inappropriate lecture-style teaching practices, with a large number of their students being disengaged from their learning.

A further consequence of this is that large numbers of English students fail their exams and leave school at 16 with no qualifications and no self-esteem either and struggle to find jobs, while a smaller percentage goes on to higher education and the sorts of jobs that are likely to see them in positions of power. This situation maintains the very clear gap between rich and poor that exists in England where a class structure is very evident. In my view there is therefore little social justice in England or opportunity for people to improve their socio-economic status through getting a good education.

However, I do want to say that there is some hope for the future in that some schools are trying to implement new ways of delivering their curricula in order to better provide appropriate learning for their students.

I think that we should be very thankful here in New Zealand that in recent years our politicians have appointed key educational practitioners to positions in the Ministry of Education and NZQA and allowed them and other leading educationalists to have a dominant say in educational innovation in New Zealand. It is my belief that our sons and daughters are therefore getting a far better educational deal than their English counterparts and that they will be better prepared to face the complex problems that are inevitable in the 21st century.

I found a wide range of practice with ICT in the schools that I visited:

- While all were concerned about developing a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) directly connected to home and accessible by students and parents, as required by Government by 2010, no-one had developed a satisfactory solution. The best solution would allow access to assessment results, pastoral notes, attendance data and resources used by teachers, (along with links to information from You-Tube, Encarta and Wikipedia as the objective of one school – teachers would identify weaknesses in keywords and the software would immediately upload resources from a range of such sources so that students could find these on their personal site and remediate themselves in their own time, at home or at school).
- In terms of this VLE, most schools have good intentions but are waiting to see what develops, either in other schools or through commercial providers, and have generally put the problem in the 'too hard' basket.
- For those who already have 'Learning Gateways' or who use Moodle for instance, there is a realisation that the VLE interface cannot be static and boring – it must be bright and colourful with its icons and it is

even better if these move to action of some sort. Experience has shown that 'business-like' interfaces are not attractive to students.

- A number of the schools visited have appointed teams of (usually) non-teachers to develop their websites and/or to develop exciting resources and links to support their teachers' practice. They seem to have sufficient funds to enable such appointments to be made. Ninestiles School in Birmingham is an example of good practice in this respect.
- It is very evident that English schools are very much better funded than New Zealand schools, to support the specialist schools and academies, collaboration between schools and in federations to improve practice and raise achievement, the Building Schools for the Future funding (37 billion pounds over 20 years), and for the 14-19 school reforms which will link schools increasingly to the workplace and post-school providers. The Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT) is leading a lot of this work, apparently very successfully, and Government is providing more funding to the SSAT to employ more people to initiate and lead school reforms.
- Funding from Central Government, through the local Education Authorities (LEAs) which distribute funds, has undoubtedly been substantial and enabled schools to purchase extensive ICT hardware and software, so that all of the schools that I visited are relatively very well-off in terms of ICT provision to teachers and students. However, in my view, not all of this ICT equipment is being well-used. In some areas poor oversight by LEAs and/or schools is leading to poor use and maintenance and future planning and some or all of these responsibilities are shortly likely to be taken on by private companies to better protect the Government's huge investment.
- The allocation of these ICT funds does not seem to be done on any regular basis however and this leads to periodic 'windfalls' which are unexpected by schools and cannot be planned for. This means that schools cannot have any fixed plan for ICT expenditure, nor can they sustain a replacement cycle of hardware. This is a major problem for schools.
- The Government's 'Laptops for Teachers' Scheme has seemingly been poorly implemented. Money to purchase these has come in 'drips and drabs', has in some schools not all been used to fund teachers' laptops but has been used for other pressing ICT purchases, and nor is there any replacement scheme after say three years, as there is in New Zealand. Few teachers were therefore observed using laptops. Rather, in most schools visited, every classroom has a PC on the teacher's desk which can be used for PowerPoint presentations, Internet links and to record attendance and pastoral notes. This has resulted in teachers largely continuing to teach from the front of their classroom in the old 'lecture' style. Indeed, a lot of English teachers profess that there is no better way to teach and it seems that a large number cannot be persuaded to use/integrate ICT tools and resources into their classroom teaching practice.
- Djanogly Academy in Nottingham is the best example I saw of bucking the lecture trend. Their platform of wireless tablet devices is revolutionising the teaching of some teachers at least, so that they can roam the class and provide better individual attention to students. Sadly, the huge capital outlay to provide tablets for all teachers and students is almost certainly not sustainable and as their tablets age and battery life fades they face a major problem in terms of their teaching objectives.
- Djanogly has also made considerable progress with trialling alternatives like HP blades instead of regular thin clients. These blades link computers with thin clients to server blades so that they can run multi-media software and are likely to last for a very long time. They have also trialled smaller hand-held wireless devices like the Q1 with some success in that they are light, have a decent-sized screen and students like them. However, battery life remains a problem, even though newer batteries are more efficient and durable. Students do like good-sized screens it seems and this is a lesson for us to remember.
- All schools have been greatly aided by the Government's scheme to put a computer in every home by funding laptops for 'deprived' homes. These devices are also accompanied by fast-speed internet connection. Most students throughout England outside this scheme now seem to have a computer or laptop at home and almost all have high-speed connectivity, not the least because this is offered as part of many cellphone sales schemes.
- Djanogly has also made good progress over the past year with developing e-portfolios for students. They have begun this successfully with their Year 7 students and aim to extend the e-portfolios next year to

Years 8 and 9 students. Cirencester Deer Park School is another which has made progress with retention of student work and being able to provide records of this to students on a CD.

- An interesting development, most notably at Notre Dame School in Sheffield, is the trial of cellphones without SIM cards as a cheap alternative to other handheld devices. This idea is probably worth further exploration as cellphone technology is developing at a great rate.
- An example of what I consider to be excellent ICT provision, particularly in enabling teachers to personalise students' learning, was found at Ninestiles School in Birmingham where every classroom has a bank of 10 laptops. I wish that this was sustainably affordable in New Zealand!
- In most schools that I visited it seems that each year departments/faculties make bids for ICT equipment which is not then available for general school use but solely within departments. For instance, a department will have a class set of laptops which can be booked for a period. In general, schools found this system effective but such machines were subjected to vandalism at times, particularly when relieving teachers were charged with their use, with the lack of suitable supervision of these devices by some teachers and, of course, in the hands of some students who will always be prone to acts of vandalism. This may well sound familiar to many of you!

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