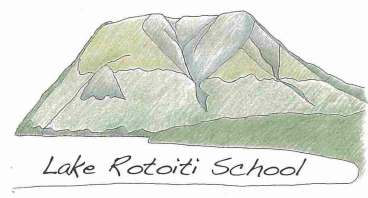


**Giles Panting – Principal Sabbatical Report
Lake Rotoiti School, St Arnaud, Nelson Lakes
2013**



**The role of the specialist in the New Zealand Primary School –
considering the opportunities for accelerating children’s learning
through engagement with professionals other than the
class teacher.**

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Lake Rotoiti School Board of Trustees for so wholeheartedly embracing the concept of the Principal Sabbatical Scheme and supporting my professional learning. Thanks also to Nicola Crawford for managing and leading the school in my absence.

Thanks must also go to the children of Lake Rotoiti School, past and present, whose contribution to our school self-review processes have provided much of the evidence in this report.

A sincere thanks is due to the Ministry of Education for allowing me this time for thought, research and reflection, resulting in the affirmation of my belief that what we are doing at Lake Rotoiti School makes a difference to our learners.

Executive Summary

The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) embodies an expectation that schools and teachers will adapt and refine their teaching to the context of their own schools, the key function being “a vision of our young people as lifelong learners who are confident, creative, connected and actively involved,” (The NZ Curriculum, 2007). However, the introduction of National Standards in 2010 has raised concerns of over-testing and a narrowed curriculum, with the result that schools are ever vigilant over the need to provide a broad and balanced curriculum, adapted to the needs of our learners.

This report sets out the steps taken by Lake Rotoiti School to give its learners access to a rich and stimulating curriculum which motivates and engages, within a school which might only offer two teachers for the whole of a child’s primary education (Years 0 – 8). Through looking for opportunities within its community and sometimes further afield, Lake Rotoiti School has provided learners with access to a range of subject specialists, tutors and enthusiasts; all of whom have a passion for what they are teaching and a degree of expertise not expected of the general primary practitioner.

Purpose

The purpose of this enquiry is to set out and reflect upon the role of the specialist (also enthusiast) as teacher and/or tutor in the primary school. The thoughts of staff members and pupils have been sought in the undertaking of this enquiry and collated in a way that gives us insight in planning the future at Lake Rotoiti School and offers a case study for other similar schools.

Background and Rationale

Lake Rotoiti School, St Arnaud, is a small (U1), isolated, rural Primary School, usually serving between 28 and 34 pupils at any one time in a two-class setting; usually Years 0-4 and Years 5-8. Historically, children have been taught in the school by the same teacher for however many years they remain in that class, with support from another teacher who regularly relieves for the Teaching Principal. The Board and staff acknowledge that teachers will have their own strengths and areas where they feel less confident in delivering a rich and stimulating curriculum. Therefore, successive Principals of the school have sought to enhance the curriculum by employing specialist teachers and tutors, or by embracing the enthusiasm of talented and passionate locals or visitors to the area.

The village of St Arnaud itself, through its location in the Nelson Lakes National Park, attracts inhabitants and visitors with a wealth of personal and professional experience. St Arnaud has a strong Department of Conservation (DOC) presence and this brings with it staff who have a wealth of worldwide conservation experience and science-based qualifications. The nature of the National Park ensures a range of inhabitants and seasonal workers who come from all over the world, often with surprising skills and experiences. The school has adopted a curriculum which states that 'in consultation with the Principal, a teacher may alter the focus of the planned learning area to make the most of learning opportunities that arise' because 'unforeseen learning opportunities may present themselves and also means that we can be responsive to national and global issues as they happen.'

The rationale for this enquiry is to collate some of the strategies that have been implemented or continued over the last five years and to reflect upon their ongoing success, their possible impact upon children's learning and the implications for the future.

Methodology

A review of current literature referring to the use of subject specialist teachers in the primary school was panned to provide a significant background to this study. However, this has proved to be fairly scant in terms of what is widely available. In many cases, a paragraph or two is all that was available in terms of what relates to what we are trying to achieve at Lake Rotoiti School.

As this study/review evolved, it has become apparent that our approach at Lake Rotoiti School is somewhat different to other schools. This is, in part, due to our philosophy for curriculum design in relation to what we want children to learn and that this is largely driven by the school's small size and relative geographical isolation. To this end, this report also gives an overview of the different forms these programmes may take; their successes and limitations.

A review of the self-review documentation relating to the curriculum at Lake Rotoiti School – we have a system of self-review in place whereby children are routinely expected to contribute to self-review by commenting and reflecting upon a Unit of Learning using our school mission and vision statement: 'Courageous Learners: Preparing our children to approach future challenges with confidence.' Children have prepared a table stating what this might entail and they use this as a basis for discussion after an activity or Unit has been completed (see Appendix 1).

Findings

There is perhaps still an underlying preconception or assumption that '*primary teachers are generalists who have an ability to provide instruction in all key areas,*' (Ardzejewska, 2010). Whilst many would argue that this is the case with a majority of motivated teachers who are skilled in delivering the archetypal broad and balanced curriculum, there seems to be a move in recent years to supplementing and enriching the curriculum with learning activities provided by teachers who are not the class' day to day teacher. Ardzejewska acknowledges this by going on to say that '*there seems to be a parallel discourse increasingly promoting the need for specialist teachers in the primary school setting.*'

Many schools are confident in using specialist teachers for the delivery of programmes for children with additional learning needs, both within and outside of the usual classroom environment. In recent years, there has been some attempt to provide additional programmes for children identified as gifted and talented. In the mainstream classroom, which is the focus of this report, it has perhaps been the norm to see elements of the music curriculum, for example, supported by itinerant teachers or specialists. There has long been a preconception that the teaching of music requires specialist knowledge in order to deliver an effective music education programme. In recent years, it is perhaps becoming more usual to see specialist teachers or instructors within schools who can support children in the area of information and communication technologies – especially as the technologies change at an ever-faster pace.

However, at Lake Rotoiti School, it has become a deliberate planned action to take advantage of specialist teachers and instructors wherever possible. Our curriculum has an embedded flexibility to allow us to change or alter our planning when new learning opportunities become available. It is perhaps a feature as much as a necessity of our small size as well as our geographical isolation that makes this possible. The village of St Arnaud regularly attracts

interesting people due to its unique position within the Nelson Lakes National Parks.

Experience has taught us that these people often have skills, qualifications and experience not usually possessed by the generalist primary school teacher and that the flexible curriculum allows us to take advantage of this. An example of this is that by lending our school bus to a group of university students whose vehicle had broken down led to the impromptu presentation for our learners from a Professor of Microbiology who had worked extensively in the Antarctic. The result of this was that our children had first-hand access to someone who had visited a remote part of the planet who was able to talk enthusiastically about his experiences, sharing real-life stories and photographs that were far more engaging than those readily available in books and on websites. Had our curriculum and timetable been more rigidly structured, we might have been reluctant to accommodate this engaging visitor.

At Lake Rotoiti School, a more typical use of the specialist teacher is in our regular use of subject specialists over a sustained and pre-determined period of time to deliver learning programmes to students. Some of these have been, and are, ongoing: for example, the delivery of music through the teaching of brass instruments both in individual and group lessons and through the development of a school brass band which incorporates nearly all senior class students. Increasingly, we are planning term-long programmes which deliver curriculum content that is not accessible to our generalist teachers. Japanese language and culture has been taught as a part of our Modern-Foreign Language programme to students in both the Junior and Senior classes and Senior class students have benefited from the delivery of a Shakespeare unit for half a day a week over the course of a term.

Lake Rotoiti School Music and Physical Education Programme – the use of specialist teachers in the long term

The music programme at Lake Rotoiti School has been enhanced since 2006, when brass instrumental lessons (and subsequently the formation of the school band) were introduced. This is a programme that has been embraced by the school community and its success has been sustained through to the current time. Indeed, the success of the Lake Rotoiti School brass teaching has led, in part, to the formation in 2013 of the Tasman Music Trust which aims to engage as many children as possible in quality, affordable music lessons across the Nelson and Tasman region.

When speaking to staff, parents and children about this particular initiative for the purpose of this study, it became apparent that one of the key components of the sustained success is due to the fact that it is run by a specialist teacher. Indeed, Fromyhr (1995) reports that specialist teachers are more likely to show '*enthusiasm*' for the subject and other reports discuss how they more like to '*value*' the subject more highly (DeCorby et al, 2005). It is likely that the charisma of the teacher who initiated and developed this programme contributes significantly to its success and that if this teacher were

to leave the area then the whole initiative could potentially flounder. Whilst considering the successes and limitations of the Lake Rotoiti music programme, its sustainability has to be considered given that so much has been invested in one influential member of itinerant teaching staff.

We have been able to track the progress and success of our students over time and there appear to be considerable benefits to the long-term, whole-school commitment to the use of a specialist teacher. Students involved in the music programme are able to articulate feelings of belonging and community through taking part in rehearsals, concerts and tours. Many students have used their brass instrumental skills as a way to help them transition from primary education to secondary education through joining bands and orchestras in the town of their chosen college (students have had the opportunity to do this in Years 7 and 8 and so forge new relationships prior to embarking on secondary education in a much larger establishment). Students have also had broadened opportunities; ex-pupils have gone on to become members of the New Zealand Secondary Schools' Brass Band and have been able to tour New Zealand as a result and, students who learnt brass in the early years are now progressing to study music at degree level. A past student has now progressed to study for a degree in music; this student has come from a family with no background of tertiary education.

Use has also been made of a specialist instructor to deliver a physical education programme to classes. We were particularly lucky that a member of the community, employed for a number of years as a ski-instructor and undertaking casual work in the village during the summer months, was also a qualified sports instructor keen to work voluntarily in order to keep his skills honed.

Research by Morgan and Hansen (2007) suggests that primary teachers are often keen to delegate responsibility for Creative Arts and Physical Education to the specialist teacher. Stodolsky (2008) goes further in referring to these learning areas as 'skills and frills,' and suggesting that primary teachers have an inherent values system in place that prioritises the core learning areas of literacy, numeracy and science and are therefore more likely to defer the teaching of 'skills and frills' teaching to others.

Staff at Lake Rotoiti considered this assumption when discussing the curriculum design at the school and the use of non-permanent teachers. Certainly, on the face of it, it could appear that we have added weight to this assertion. However, ultimately we concluded that our motives are to be as responsive as possible to the instructors or teachers available at any one time (and that our location would seem to attract creative people and those interested in outdoor education) and that our desire to enhance children's learning through the exposure to as many different teachers and teaching styles is our main motivator.

Modern-Foreign Languages (MFL) and English Language – in-school specialization and medium-term programmes

Lake Rotoiti School has a history of using the skills and talents of its teachers to best effect. Past members of staff have had an interest and skill in speaking French, German and Te Reo and they have had the opportunity to leave their regular class to lead weekly lessons in another class. This has given us the opportunity to offer MFL across the whole school at a differentiated and appropriate level. The focus has always been on immersion in language and the culture of the country/language being spoken.

In 2011 we became aware that a teacher from a local college had chosen to move with her husband to St Arnaud village for the duration of her maternity leave. It became apparent that this teacher was keen to work part-time and was capable of delivering a unit of learning in Japanese; covering both language and cultural activities.

Working one morning per week, over the course of a term, this teacher was able to deliver a session in the Junior Class and a session in the Senior Class. Children were immediately engaged and enthusiastic about this programme and were highly motivated to become active participants in these sessions. Again, the enthusiasm of the teacher for a subject about which she was passionate (although not the subject she was ordinarily employed to teach) was evident and a significant factor in the overall success of the unit and the learning of the students.

Sadly, the teacher moved on at the end of her maternity leave, so we were unable to repeat this module. However, it did underline for us the importance of knowing who is in our ever-changing community and engaging with them in a timely fashion.

Similar use has been made of secondary-trained teachers through the planning and implementation of English language programmes – taught by secondary English teachers who have been able to come in and teach in the senior class for a half-day over the course of a term. Modules have been planned to extend children's skills in writing narrative, poetry and a very successful unit on the plays of William Shakespeare. Inherent in this particular initiative was the expectation that older and more-able students would be challenged through differentiated learning activities.

The success of the English units is apparent in the quality of writing that is now being produced in the senior class – not only for the genre of writing covered but across curriculum areas. Marking and moderation of assessment tasks and for the purposes of making National Standards judgments has identified a marked increase in the use of figurative language and evocative and experimental vocabulary and complex sentence structure. Students are also more confident in talking about the craft of writing and language features as a part of everyday learning activities.

Whilst it is not useful to quote percentage increases when talking about a relatively small sample group of children, we are now able to focus our student achievement targets on moving children who are At Standard in writing to Above Standard. This is marked shift in terms of our philosophy for

teaching writing (which has traditionally lagged behind reading and maths in terms of children's achievement), which has been made possible, in part, due to the specialized teaching offered by part-time secondary-trained teachers.

It is interesting to note that an inevitable, although unplanned, by-product of this particular initiative is the professional development offered to the secondary-trained teachers in enabling them to see, first-hand, what happens in a primary class setting, our expectations for their learning and output and what the children themselves are capable of. Likewise, it has been interesting for us to gain first-hand experience of how colleges might implement a unit of learning across a term, or part of a term and what might be expected of children in terms of their learning.

Art – the use of specialist teachers to deliver one-off learning activities in the short-term

Further enrichment of the curriculum at Lake Rotoiti School has taken place through the planning of one-off, stand-alone learning activities. These may relate to the current learning focus of the class or they may not. Whilst there would still seem to be prevalence in primary schools towards a topic-based approach (whereby all learning revolves around a central topic-focus), when considering the design of the curriculum at Lake Rotoiti School, we deliberately included flexibility so that one-off (or off-the-cuff) activities could be valued and included. Certainly the children have been able to articulate how these activities often provide a welcome breathing space or refresher time in the middle of focused topic-based learning. Feedback from parents to these activities has also been positive.

A specialist, secondary-trained, art teacher has regularly worked with both junior and senior classes on art projects that happen over the course of one or two days. Children have commented that they enjoy these intensive, focused sessions that allow them to concentrate on art activities exclusively for a set period of time and gain satisfaction from working hard to produce artworks during these days.

There has been a marked improvement in the children's use of specialist art terms and vocabulary; their choice and use of specialist art materials and in their experience and response to art and artists across time and across cultures. This has certainly been an example of where the knowledge, skills and experience of the specialist teacher has been in excess of what might reasonably be expected of a primary teacher. At Lake Rotoiti School, staff acknowledge that we will sometimes operate within our comfort zones when planning units of learning and that this is often the case in art where we all have styles and media in which we are more confident in working.

Implications, Benefits and Conclusions

Through the process of gathering and considering material for this report, key issues have arisen which impact upon the use and effectiveness of learning programmes led by specialist teachers/instructors. There are implications for the design of and philosophy that underpins the curriculum, as well as for the attitudes of permanent teaching staff – particularly in the small primary school setting such as Lake Rotoiti School.

In short, in order for the use of specialist teachers to have significant positive impact on the life of the school and the learning of its students there needs to be a climate that values the input of ‘outsiders.’ The key elements in developing this climate, from the findings of this study would appear to be:

- A shared understanding of the whole school community (staff, children, parents etc.) of the value and benefits of using specialists in the primary school.
- A flexible and responsive curriculum that allows for the inclusion of learning activities that don’t necessarily fit the topic-plan for the year and that allows for best use to be made of unforeseen opportunities that present themselves.
- Staff who embrace change and who are not threatened by the presence of teachers with specialist knowledge.
- That knowing the school’s community is the best way to source those with skills and passions that will enhance the learning in the school.
- That schools need to be realistic in terms of how sustainable a project may be and whether its continuation and success relies upon the participation of particular teachers/tutors.
- The payment of teachers: how to pay? There are implications for the setting of annual budgets for the payment of staff or for the usage of Banked Staffing entitlements.

Ultimately, the success of any element of curriculum design and its success has to impact positively on the learning of the children for whom it is intended. Some of the comments that children have made in relation to the programmes discussed in this report are as follows:

- We were learning even though it was fun for us.
- We got to do things that aren’t our usual learning.
- We are getting a wider range of learning subjects and opinions from different teachers.
- We learned that there are different styles in the way that people teach.
- It’s good to experience different teachers in general.

In considering our current and past practices and gathering information for the purposes of this report, we have reaffirmed our belief that for a small, rural, isolated primary school, the opportunities offered and learning of our students is enhanced by continuing to plan for and seek the help of specialist teachers and instructors.

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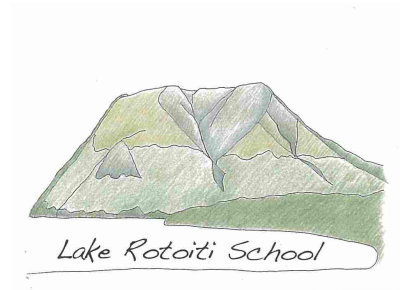
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Appendix 1 - example Children's Review Format

Children in the Senior Class came up with the following headings when asked what "Courageous Learning" would look like and how we would know when we had been engaged in Courageous Learning. To review 'Have-a-Go-Sailing' the class have listed examples of where we met these criteria.

| | | |
|------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| Have a go at everything: | Try hard to achieve goals: | Keep trying- be persistent: |
| Make mistakes: | Have determination: | Be excited about learning new things: |
| Be confident in what you do: | Be brave-overcome your fears and doubts: | Set goals to get something done: |
| Keep calm: | Look forward to new challenges-even if you're unsure: | Have fun: |