Principal Sabbatical Report – Term 2, 2014

…if we believe that students build their knowledge by communicating what they know then providing an opportunity for the students to tell their family what they know can significantly assist with that learning.

<div align="right">(Absolum, 2006, p.201)</div>

<div align="right">

Carmel Bullôt
Principal
St Patrick's School
Panmure, Auckland
www.saintpatricks.school.nz

</div>

Acknowledgment:

I acknowledge and thank the following who have made this sabbatical study possible:

- TeachNZ and Ministry of Education
- St Patrick's School (Panmure) Board of Trustees for their support and willingness to allow me to apply for this sabbatical.
- Special mention to the Deputy Principal – Mrs Adrienne Dines for her readiness to take on the role of Acting Principal and for ably doing an excellent job in my absence.
- Sincere thanks are also extended to the St Patrick's School family– staff, children and community for their positive support of each other and Adrienne in my absence.
- I also acknowledge the schools that have contributed to this report and allowing their concepts, thinking and systems and to be shared with others.

Hapaitia te ara tika pumau ai te rangatiratanga mo nga uri whakatipu.
(Foster the pathway of knowledge to strength, independence and growth for future generations.)

Report Topic:

Topic: To investigate how Student Led Conferences support and enhance student achievement, student engagement, and parental/whānau involvement in student learning.

Purpose: Through visiting schools and research:

- Develop a methodology for our decile 2, mainly immigrant and Pasifika community that will support staff, students and families to develop and sustain the ability to engage in purposeful learning conversations.
- This approach will support the development of student led conferences from our youngest (Year 0/1) students.
- It will also outline the professional learning and support necessary for staff to scaffold and implement the approach, across the school.

Background:

As practitioners it is our wish to enable our students to develop to their potential. In line with current learning theory, we believe that this happens when students are active in their learning journey. Therefore, it is our role to work with students to enable them to know the 'what' and 'why' of skills they are learning; how and 'where to next' to develop their skill set.

 Our school mission statement *"To provide Catholic Education where teaching and learning enable all children to develop to their full potential"* expresses a state where our students will make the most of their talents and the educational opportunities provided by our school. Being able to openly and freely talk about their progress and achievement using the language of learning is an important aspect of enabling children to develop as learners and reach their full potential.

Our school leadership team has been investigating student led conferencing as a means to promote active learning/student engagement, enhance student achievement and increase parent/whānau involvement with student learning. Historically parent/whānau participation at Student Learning Conferences has been at a high level. However, we aim to sustain this involvement across the school year. Since the 2013 introduction of 1:1 devices in our Year5-8 classes we have noticed an increase in parents taking advantage of the ability to engage with their children's learning outside of the traditional school setting.

Our Intermediate classes have been using 3-way Learning Conferences as our reporting process; however it our plan to move the locus of control to all students through student-led conferencing.

Initiating Student Led Conferences:

For students to lead the reporting to parents/whānau independently by their senior school years, development is required from school entry. One of my areas of foci when visiting schools was to look at the ways each school scaffolded their junior students to be able to share their learning and next learning goals with their parent/whānau. I was aware of the concerns Junior teachers may raise regarding the possibility that preparing children for Student Led Conferencing distracts from curriculum teaching and learning. Some Junior teachers reported that the preparation could be time consuming; however the outcome for student and their parent/whānau was indeed worth it and was instrumental in helping each child to become an independent learner; actively involved in their learning journey. Watkins (2009) describes *that when learners drive the learning it leads to:*
- *greater engagement and intrinsic motivation*
- *students setting higher challenge*
- *students evaluating their work*
- *better problem-solving* (p.20)

Common themes across schools:

One predominant feature in all classes and schools visited was how the language of learning was embedded in all classroom discourse. One school focused primarily on the Key Competencies in their Student Led Conferences; with students reporting to parents how their learning demonstrated progress and achievement in reaching goals based on one or more of the key competencies (*Thinking*, *Using Language, Symbols and Text*, *Relating to Others*, *Participating and Contributing* and *Managing Self*). Teacher-led whole class discussion and one-to-one learning conversations were centred on how the learning tasks would support children to achieve their Key Competency goals. I observed this discourse style at varying class levels. All schools visited had participated in *Assessment for Learning* professional learning and development as part of or just prior to the introduction of Student Led Conferences.

Anecdotally parents/whānau commented that they were (pleasantly!) surprised by how confident their child was in discussing progress and achievement. Parents felt more disposed to support their child in achieving the goals set during the Student Led Conference as they had been part of the goal setting discussion.

All schools ensured there was continuing review of their Student Led Conference process; parents/whānau, students and teachers being asked for their input into how the process worked for them and how on-going improvement could be effected.

An important feature of Student Led Conferencing was the goal setting for future learning. On the whole, students knew their next learning steps because of the language of learning used in the classroom. The input from parents/whānau and teacher related to how these groups could support the student.

There was diversity in how evidence and learning artefacts were shared with parents; with some schools using an ePortfolio format that in some scenarios could be shared outside of school. Some schools, and many Junior classes across the schools, used a hard-copy portfolio and in-class displays. However the information was communicated, all students shared evidence of their progress and achievement with parents/whānau. As discussed earlier, in junior classes collating of the evidence was more time consuming as teachers were using this as an opportunity to review and rehearse what the child would share at the Student Led Conference:

- why this artefact was included,
- what aspect of learning it represented,
- why the child was proud of this piece of work,
- what the next learning step would/could be

Schools reported that this exercise became more 'second nature' to the student as they progressed through the school and developed self-evaluative and reflection skills. Many middle/senior school teachers provided on-going opportunities and/or avenues (such as Blogs) for students to self-evaluate and include reflections to their learning.

All schools visited acknowledged that the Student Led Conference process took longer than the traditional Parent-Teacher interview. Schools restructured their reporting timetable. Instead of reporting being held over one or two afternoons

and/or evenings, Student Led Conferences occurred over a period of weeks (depending on the size of the class and year/age of students). Conference times being scheduled at class level, with students often writing a letter inviting their parents/whānau.

Even with the emphasis on student voice in Student Led Conferencing, schools visited allowed time for parents/whānau to talk with the teacher after the Student Led Conference. In schools where the process was to have multiple Student Led Conferences taking place simultaneously, teachers spoke to parents/whānau as the process continued. Where Student Led Conferences were individual, follow-up conversations were often scheduled for another day.

School Variations:

Schools visited differed in their focus for Student Led Conferences. One school designed their Student Led Conference process exclusively around Key Competencies. When reporting to parents/whānau students shared examples of learning that gave evidence to how they had worked towards and/or achieved their Key Competency goal. Next steps were discussed and students and families, with teacher input as appropriate, worked out the next goal. Curriculum reports (e.g. interim National standards reporting) were distributed to parents/whānau shortly after Student Led Conferences, with parents able to follow up with the teacher if they felt this was warranted. Student Led Conferences at other schools visited required students to share evidence about curriculum learning, progress and achievement with future goal setting to be curriculum related. Once school included progress toward mastering Key Competencies in Student Led Conferences.

One school reported that the sustainability of their Student Led Conference practice had been destabilised by National Standards reporting conditions; the obligation to moderate Overall Teacher Judgements impacted greatly and negatively on the time and energy required to work through the Student Led Conference process. At the time of visiting this school they were reviewing how to sustain their Student Led Conference process.

Reported impact of Student Led Conferences on/for learners:

> *Students report increased self-confidence and personal satisfaction with being directly involved in the conferences.*
>
> (Hackmann, 1999, p.1)

All schools visited emphasised that Student Led Conferences were an opportunity for students to share their learning, progress and achievement. Parent initiated discussions about behaviour were not a focus with teachers actively moving the emphasis back to what the child is presenting and offer another time to talk about behaviour and/or attitude issues.

Teachers remarked that for all students, including those children who had presented behaviours that impacted on learning –

- the Student Led Conference focus on *learning-progress-achievement* enabled students to present positive information to their families
- Students were aware that the onus of sharing information lay with them and the responsibility was theirs. If learning artefacts are missing from the evidence for the Student Led Conference this is the student's responsibility to explain to their parents/whānau.

Teachers commented that classroom discourse was based on learning behaviours rather than task behaviours. Therefore the focus on behaviour/attitudes that impacted on progress and achievement was lessened and over time these behaviours decreased. It could also be that 'you get what you look for' – if teachers are focusing their in-class interactions on learning they will see and take notice of the learning.

Students spoken to enjoyed the opportunity to share their learning with their parents/whānau. All children spoke of the pride they feel to show their parents/whānau how they have been able to make progress in their learning. Although a number of the schools visited used a method of on-line sharing for student work, a majority parents/whānau (across all schools visited) mainly viewed their son/daughter's learning at the school during the Student Led Conference. Where parents/whānau did not have access to the internet, this was made available at the school.

A growing development observed in the Senior classes (Year 6 or Year 8, depending on type of school) of schools visited was the students writing their own reports, basing their progress and achievement comments on the success criteria and learning goals decided.   For this process to be valid and successful, the language of learning needs to be the standard classroom discourse.

Reported impact of Student Led Conferences on/for teachers

> *Effective planning and high quality instruction are key to quality student-led conferences. This includes using instructional strategies that provide teachers and students with data through the use of both formative and summative assessments that are a part of daily classroom instruction.*
> http://student-led-conferences.webs.com/

A number of teachers commented that having student lead the reporting enabled them to gain a deep understanding of the child, many commenting "I know each child so well". Through the process of goal setting, reflecting on learning, self-evaluation, review and preparation of evidence in readiness for the Student Led Conference I can understand how a teacher would develop this deeper knowledge of the student.

As noted earlier there is a time implication associated with Student Led Conferences, particularly for Junior school teachers. When thought of a part of the child's learning (particularly to *Think*, *Manage Self, Use Language, Symbol and Text, Participate and Contribute* and *Relate to Others)* this time will make a positive contribution through supporting children to become active learners and making reflective decisions about their learning journey.

Reported impact of Student Led Conferences on/for parents/whānau

> *Parents begin to recognize their children's ability to assume increasing levels of responsibility and appreciate the opportunity to strengthen the lines of communication with their children.*
>
> (Hackmann, 1999, p.1)

Anecdotally parents/whānau commented that they were (pleasantly!) surprised by how confident their child was in discussing progress and achievement. Parents felt more disposed to support their child in achieving the goals set during the Student Led Conference as they had been part of the goal setting discussion.

Parents appreciate their children taking a lead role and can come away from the Student Led Conference with a greater understanding of their child's capabilities because they have seen them in action (*Participating and Contributing, Managing Self, Relating to Others, Using Language, Symbols* and *Text and Thinking* during their Student Led Conference)

Many parents still wanted to talk directly to their child's teacher. In some circumstances this was because they wanted reassurance that their child's learning and progress was as their son/daughter had said, particularly in relation to whether the progress and achievement with national expectations for age. In other situations, parents/whānau wanted information about attitude and behaviour.

Conclusion:

Once again, I would like to express my thanks to the Principals, teachers, students and family members that opened their schools, classes and families to me – sharing their experience and expertise with Student Led Conferencing. I was humbled by their welcome, openness and sharing. This report cannot contain all the gems and aspects of learning that I gathered during my sabbatical, hopefully I have managed to put down on paper the essence of all I saw and heard.

Na te whakarongo me te titiro ka puta mai te korero.
(Through looking and listening we gain wisdom.)

If we believe that our aim as educators is to develop reflective and thinking skills in students, then student led conferencing is a natural augmentation and broadening of this. We must want students to be able to talk about their goals, what they have learnt (in terms of skills and attitudes, with less emphasis on tasks), how this learning prepared them (or let them know what they needed to develop) for the next step – and what that step will be. The more articulate our students are in talking about their learning, the more engaged they will be in the process of learning. This can have

only positive benefits for the class and school as a whole – students are part of the process, not solely the receivers of information.

However, introducing and sustaining student led conferencing as the primary method of oral reporting to parents is contingent on certain requirements:

Conditions for Success:

- Classroom discourse and conversations must focus on the skills and attitudes related to learning (Curriculum or Key Competency) rather than task.
- Each student must be part of the goal setting process and the teacher needs to ensure that these goals are challenging yet achievable. Learning conversations need to refer to progress towards these goals.
- For students to confidently talk to their parents about their progress, learning and achievement, the language of learning must be embedded in classroom.
- Teachers need to ensure there is sufficient preparation for students to be confident to share learning with their parents/whānau
- The school reporting timeline/programme suits the demands of Student Led Conferences.
- Teachers and School leaders should review the present school reporting programme to ensure all aspects (Written reporting complements timing and purpose of oral reporting events) are fit for purpose and timings are appropriate.
- Teachers need to feel confident to support and facilitate Student Led Conferences. Professional learning and on-going support needs to be part of the school process.
- The introduction of Student Led Conferences will require a scaffolded implementation approach across Years 1-8. In the implementation phase all students will require a high level of scaffolding. As the practice becomes established and embedded into our school culture, this need for scaffolding at the Middle and Senior year levels will decrease.
- To embed Student Led Conferencing into the school culture, learning about the process needs to be included in our school induction for new staff, students and their parents/whānau.
- To ensure Student Led Conferencing continues to meet the needs and expectations of our school community, an on-going review process involving all stakeholders is necessary.
- For Student Led Conferencing to become established and embedded there must be consistency of approach across the school.

He pai te tirohanga ki nga mahara mo nga raa pahemo engari ka puta te maaramatanga i runga i te titiro whakamua.
(It's fine to have recollections of the past but wisdom comes from being able to prepare opportunities for the future.)

References

Absolum, M. (2006). *Clarity in the Classroom.* Auckland: Holder Education.

Absolum, M., Flockton, L., Hattie, J., Hipkins, R., Reid, I (2009) *Directions for Assessment in New Zealand: developing students' assessment capabilities*. Retrieved from Te Kete Ipurangi (http://www.tki.org.nz/r/assessment/research/mainpage/directions/)

Bailey, J., Guskey, T., (2001) *Implementing Student Led Conferences.* California: Corwin Press.

Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). *Inside the Black Box: raising standards through Classroom Assessment.* Retrieved from http://weaeducation.typepad.co.uk/files/blackbox-1.pdf

Cromwell, C. (2010) Student-Led Conferences: A growing trend. In *Education World*. Retrieved from http://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin112.shtml

Curriculum Services Canada. (2010). Student led Conferences: reach every child. Retrieved from http://resources.curriculum.org/secretariat/studentled/index.shtml

Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement.* New York: Routledge.

Kinney, P. (2003) *Implementing Student-Led Conferences in Your School.* Retrieved from http://mlei.pbworks.com/f/SLCPP.pdf

LOCCSD. (2013) Student Led Conferences: A Presentation to LOCCSD Instructional Coaches. Retrieved from http://student-led-conferences.webs.com/

Taylor-Patel, C. (2011) *Student-led conferences: an alternative reporting method* (Doctoral thesis, The University of Auckland, Auckland New Zealand). Retrieved from https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/handle/2292/9961

Watkins, C., (2009) *Learners in the Driving Seat*. In School Leadership Today Vol 1.2. Retrieved from http://assessment.tki.org.nz/Media/Files/Watkins-Learners-in-the-driving-seat