

2 Feb – 28 April**The focus of my sabbatical was to explore practical ways that schools were supporting their at-risk learners.**

During my travels visiting other schools I discovered more similarities than differences and I felt proud to be part of the teaching profession. I was privileged to be welcomed into teachers' classrooms and principals' offices and heartened to see the enthusiasm and commitment displayed by my profession. The schools I visited all showed a dedication to improving the learning of their students in a variety of ways utilising the resources available to them. Principals and teachers were very willing to share their knowledge, resources and opinions.

There was a general feeling that there are more challenges facing schools today than there might have been 10-15 years ago. The social impact on schools is significant. Schools are being called upon to provide increasing levels of pastoral and health care on a daily basis in addition to their academic functions.

On speaking with other principals who have travelled to schools in Australia it would also appear that the level of funding for schools here is significantly less than that in Australia. Funding or lack of always presents challenges for principals, teachers and boards.

I think it is fair to say that National Standards have created an additional stress for educators. I consider the early schooling years to be of enormous importance and that it is vital to establish and consolidate early learning skills and knowledge as this lays the foundation for literacy and numeracy. We need to build and strengthen these foundations before rushing through levels to meet targets and then later finding a drop off in levels as children move up to the next year level. Although National Standards may have helped to sharpen the focus, teachers and principals run the risk of being driven by data. Children are not commodities to be packaged and parcelled at the end of a production line.

I discovered a number of interesting ways schools were catering for their students with learning needs. These initiatives and resources were of benefit to all students.

Tracking/Focus

All schools visited felt that careful monitoring and tracking of at-risk students was essential, ranging from formalised testing to teacher observations and judgements. Teacher judgements were seen as very important in this process. It was important that lessons were focussed specifically on needs of the target groups and individuals.

Relationships

Teachers and principals were committed to developing positive student-teacher- family relationships in order to best cater for student learning needs. Student led conferences, an open door policy, positive feedback to parents, parent –teacher talks, community members helping in schools and children phoning home with positive learning news and class and school-wide celebrations of

success were all features of relationship building to enhance learning and in some instances bring about change. Positive relationships are important in building success.

N.I.M (Neurological Impress Method for Reading Fluency)

This simple method is used in paired reading, repeated reading and oral read along sessions and requires one fluent reader in the pair. This is helpful in buddy reading sessions and at home reading with parents.

The tutor, buddy or parent sits to the right of the child who is slightly in front. The buddy reads with the child using a slightly louder voice. It is important to read fluently with careful articulation and enthusiasm. The buddy moves his finger and the child's under the spoken words in a smooth and continuous manner matching the exact speed of the reading. The child will eventually take over the tracking. At the end of the line move the finger rapidly to the start of the next line to train the eye. Re-read to build fluency, do not correct, teach or ask questions as the focus is on fluency. Sessions should be short, 5-10 minutes. Compliment effort and progress. This is a simple but effective technique across all class levels.

STEPS Programme (www.learningstaircase.co.nz)

This is a literacy and numeracy programme which can be used in school and at home. There are a range of resources available: Memory Booster, Wordshark, Comprehension Booster, Non-fiction Comprehension Booster, Numbershark, Thinksheet and Type to Learn. This programme was developed by Ros Lugg whose son suffered from dyslexia and it caters for students ranging from 5 – 14.

Reading Eggs (www.readingeggs.co.nz)

This is an on-line programme to develop and support early literacy and phonics skills. Juniors enjoy this. It has great graphics and shared reading books within the programme. It works well within a reading programme rotation. It can be accessed at school or at home. Some schools use this as a homework activity. There is a second tier to the programme called Reading Eggspress. It caters for 5 – 13 year olds.

Rev Up Reading series

This series has high interest levels with a simpler reading level for older students.

Reading Recovery

The Reading Recovery programme is being well utilised in schools. A common theme is that teachers would like it to go for longer to ensure confidence and independence when students return to group and more independent reading and that more children should be able to access it.

Successmaker (www.successmakernz.co.nz)

This is a computer programme which is used with Year 1 -13 of any ability level. It is an individualised programme for literacy and maths.

Talk to Learn

This programme is designed to develop and extend oral language. The RTLB can run this programme. Teacher Aides can also be trained to run this with groups or individuals.

Quiddler

This is a word building game based on phonics. It is similar to scrabble only using cards instead of letter tiles. It challenges children to think and create words with three sound cards.

NZ Teachers (Primary)

On Facebook there are some useful tips, ideas and resources shared by primary teachers.

Rainbow Reading (www.rainbowreading.co.nz)

The introduction of talking pens has enhanced the Rainbow reading resource and makes it very mobile. It contains graded reading material and supporting activities. It is high interest and covers the range of primary aged readers. It can be used in two ways: as a repeated reading programme for at-risk readers and as a contract reading activity to accelerate student reading. It contains both fiction and non-fiction.

Teacher Aides/Learning Assistants

These helpers are used in different ways. Some schools have them work alongside children with specific needs whilst others have them assisting in the main body of the classroom whilst the teacher works with the slower learners. "Mother helpers" were less popular as teachers viewed them as inconsistent and not always reliable. There is also the issue of confidentiality when parents are in class.

Yolanda Sorlyl's Phonics Programme (www.phonicstraining.co.nz or www.yolandasoryl.com)

Early Words is a very useful resource designed to teach basic words and sounds to beginning readers or ESOL students and forms a sound basis on which to ready youngsters for reading success. It is a five minute daily individual programme in which a child is taught and re-taught a high frequency word at both word and sentence level with emphasis on accuracy and fluency. It is highly recommended by junior class teachers.

Lexia (www.lexialearning.co.nz)

This is an international programme developed in USA for children of all abilities. It is a structured on-line programme designed for children to work independently. The focus is on developing reading skills with a focus on foundation skills to develop automaticity and fluency, listening and reading comprehension skills and vocabulary. Each student follows a personalised learning path. The programme is embedded with an assessment system which provides data without the need for extra testing.

Multilit (www.multilit.com)

This is an Australian developed computer programme designed to support children in reading and has both home and school kits available. The approach is to find out which skills children have and then to fill in the gaps with the skills they are missing. It provides targeted and focussed instruction. There is a variety of programmes in the system: Reading Tutor System; Word Attack Skills; Pre-Lit programme; Spell-It; WARP – attest of oral reading fluency; WARL – a test of oral reading fluency for younger readers based on reading lists.

Joy Allcock's Spelling programme

The Switch On To Spelling kit is a useful resource when teaching spelling and phonics and helps to explain some of the quirks of the English language. It has lots of back up practice in the programme. The Word detective resources promote learning to spell and write sounds not simply letters and graphemes.

Passive Classroom

This is based on the work of Sue Larkey particularly for students with autism. It is based on the premise of positivity and writing positive stories. i.e: I did 5 sentences in writing today. I talked to 3 other children today. I made.... This can work well in a range of ways with all children in the class.

Key Links Writing Box By Jill Eggleton

This resource is marketed by Scholastic NZ. It provided a basis for a writing programme. It covers writing across all genres and has proven useful in setting up a balanced writing programme in junior classes.

THRASS

Teaching Handwriting, Reading and Spelling Skills. This is a complete phonics programme developed in Australia. It consists of CDs, charts, rhymes, workbooks, dictionaries and teacher resources. It explains many anomalies about our phonetic system and children are able to recognise sounds by referring to charts with pictures and graphemes. It is important to build this into the total literacy programme and dedicate time each day to practising the skills. This is a full primary based programme.

Experiential Learning

Digital technologies are being utilised to photograph and further research student experiences for follow up language development and writing. E.g: Environmental studies, cooking, legacy art work, shared experiences, EOTC, games, developmental time, current events, class mascots.

Developmental Time/ Tinkering Time

Teachers have observed a need to bring back time in the junior classes for students to experiment with apparatus, explore new activities, be creative and develop language through play and co-operation. It would appear that early oral language skills and co-operative skills are not as well developed as we might assume or like.

Positivity

Frequent notes, messages, texts or phone calls home to family to share learning successes help to build an importance of learning and recognition that what a child is doing is valued and supported.

Buddy Systems

Buddy systems with older or more capable students are being used in a number of ways in schools: testing words, checking work, reading to and with, assisting to organise homework tasks for juniors. Positive relationships are developed, the more able students have to think about how they assist others to learn, how they read to interest others and how to encourage and be leaders. Buddy systems can be a win all round for all involved. Careful pairing or grouping is important as is teacher monitoring.

Clear Routines

Children need to know what is expected during lessons and activity rotations so that they can work towards a measure of independence and self-reliance. It is important for students to develop reading and writing stamina and independence. Typical rotations might include: read to self (read longer each time), read to someone else in your group, listen to a story on tape/cd, apps activities on the ipad, word building activity or game, work with the teacher.

Fountas & Pinnell (LLI) Levelled Literacy Intervention Kit

This kit is marketed by Heinemann and has not yet been used in NZ schools. It is used successfully in Australia. One school I visited is currently purchasing the kit. It has been described as “Reading Recovery on steroids.” It is based on the teachings of Marie Clay and is designed for use with small groups and individuals who need intensive support. The programme is a combination of reading, writing and phonics/word study.

Accelerated Learning in Maths (www.NZMaths.co.nz)

Following this course one school re-thought their approach to maths by removing ability grouping, including more whole class activities and problem-solving. A greater student voice was noted and a more positive attitude to maths as well improved results for students.

Maths Buddy (www.mathsbuddy.co.nz)

This is an on-line maths programme designed to be used individually at school or at home. It contains tutorials and examples for students to refer to if they have difficulties. Some schools use this as a homework task. This does make the presumption that all homes have the technical capability to do this and adds to “screen time” for children.

Apps

Schools are using apps quite extensively across the curriculum. There is a cost for some but there are many free apps available, it requires time to search for them and trial them for suitability.

A few examples: **Junior Literacy** – Alligator Apps; Word Builder; Sight Words; First grade; Little Writer; Fun Rhyming; Sentence Reading magic; ABC 123; Four Letters; iWW Lite; Story Mouse; Spelling Bug; pocket Phonics. **Maths** – Cloud Tables; Make 24; Math slide; telling time; coop fractions; Freddy fractions; mathfight; mathlands. **Presentation** - Picture collage, iMovie, Comic life. **Animation**- Chatterkid; Puppetpals HD. **Research** - NZ Herald. **Inquiry** – Popplet; Wonderopolis. **Wordprocessing** – Pages. **Collaboration** – Educreationa; Baiboard.

I have appreciated and enjoyed taking time out from being a busy teaching principal to visit other schools and talk to teachers and principals about what is important. It is always the children.

Schools are using technology with increasing frequency and effectiveness, however, this is not seen as the solution to all problems or challenges. I have observed some awesome practice in schools and indeed some awesome challenges.

Good teachers are vital. Sufficient funding for staff and resources is crucial.

Good relationships are the key to fostering children's belief in themselves and a desire to succeed. We cannot give them every skill or piece of knowledge they might need in their future career paths, however, teachers do play an integral part in developing character in their students. It is sound character coupled with a basic skill set that will see them through their life's journey, enable them to meet challenges, be resilient, think for themselves, use their initiative, be creative, work in a team and be leaders.

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