

Flemington School

Central Hawke's Bay

"Pathway to Success"

Phil Bourke

Sabbatical Report Term 3 2016

Title and focus of the sabbatical:

'To investigate the move toward creating Innovative Learning Environments (ILE) and the associated changes in teacher pedagogy required and what effect this has had on student agency.'

Phil Bourke and Flemington School.

I came to teaching and principalship later in my working life. I started out as a Shearer many years ago, running a successful shearing run for many years in Central Hawke's Bay, which has given me a wonderfully wide appreciation of working with a range of people and in a range of varied environments. After 20 odd years of doing that I went back to Massey University and gained my BEd(Tch), after which I taught at St Joseph's School in Waipukurau for 5 years and have been the principal at Flemington School for the last 8 and half years.

Flemington School is a Decile 9 full primary based in a rural community 25kms Southwest of Waipukurau, Central Hawkes Bay. It is a relatively small school of 87 students, with a fantastic community behind it, consisting of both the parents/caregivers of the children and also of the wider families/whanau who work, live or farm in the Flemington/Wallingford area.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to acknowledge first and foremost the Flemington School's School Board of Trustees for supporting my application for sabbatical leave associated with the study.

I also acknowledge Lyn Gibson for stepping up into the role as Relieving Principal and all of the other staff (Teachers, Secretary, Relievers and Teacher Aides) for the great job they did in supporting Lyn in keeping the "ship on course" in my absence. I also recognise that a sabbatical gives many staff an opportunity to "step up" and it tests the succession planning in a school – thanks to those of you who took on additional responsibilities for the term.

I acknowledge the Ministry of Education for making sabbatical leave available to principals. The opportunity to be able to take time out and look in depth at an aspect of our practice, to indulge in uninterrupted reflection and to have a period of refreshment is invaluable and highly valued by principals across New Zealand.

I would also like to thank my fellow Central Hawkes Bay principals who are walking a similar pathway to mine, who are open minded, forward thinking and act as sounding board for many shared emerging concepts and ideas. Thanks also to the schools I visited and to the many principals and teachers for giving their time in a generous and open manner, sharing what their schools were doing with passion and pride.

Purpose:

To develop, grow and support student agency at Flemington School Central Hawke's Bay firstly by improving my personal understanding of agentic learning and secondly by identifying a number of next steps for our school to take to ensure this style of learning becomes 'the way we do things around here.'

Background:

I thought about many aspects of schooling, teaching and learning before settling on Innovative Learning Environments, Teacher Pedagogy and Student Agency as the aspects I wanted to look more deeply at. I have to say that over my years of being associated with education I have found it to be an area that can lead to members of the fraternity jumping on the latest trends with gusto hoping that they will be the panacea, or alexia, that is going to provide the solutions to all of the many complex issues they, and all of us, are faced with when educating the young of today; Those who will mould and manage society, the environment and the economics of the future. Although not being directly involved with teaching all of my working life I am married to a teacher and was on a Board of Trustees in the early years of my children's education so I have had a connection with education for many years.

I have found that over my time as a teacher the level of Agency a child, or any learner for that matter, has is a crucial contributor in improving the outcomes for those children, or people, that struggle with the traditional school environment. Often in this 'traditional' schooling environment getting the correct answer is seen as determiner of being a good learner - or of being successful - or an indication of intelligence. Another aspect of this 'traditional' classroom is where the compliant, well behaved child is seen as being a good learner and a successful student. I think the 'compliant-well behaved' aspect is something that is deeply ingrained in wider society as well. Someone who asks too many questions and is argumentative can be seen as a trouble maker.

The effect a young person's level of self-efficacy, or Agency, has on their success was something that I noticed in my time as a Shearing Contractor as well - many young people that end up in that industry did not have successful schooling experiences - they didn't believe that were bright, intelligent or good learners - they hadn't had many experiences of success or believed that they could be successful. Their memories of school were often about getting in trouble for not doing their work or getting things right. I must admit that it gave a fantastic feeling of satisfaction to help some of these young people realise that making a mistake was alright and that it was a great learning opportunity; Some people need lots of these before it leads to improvement and others do not need as many.

I believe strongly that what we do (Leadership, Teachers, Teacher Aides, Secretaries, caretakers etc) in our schools and Early Childhood Centres has a large effect on how 'successful' the time a child spends in New Zealand's education system is. Fundamental to this success are what a child believes about themselves. We have to look for the positive aspects of a child's actions and capabilities - the things that connect with their emotions and feelings. As the famous quote from Maya Angelou says - *"At the end of the day people won't remember what you said or did, they will remember how you made them feel."* Thinking, learning and actions are inextricably linked to our emotions. This is how our brains are structured. It is very deep in our makeup. It is part of our evolution as Simon Sinek, Nathan Makaire-Wallis and many others allude to.

My interest about how we learn and behave was first piqued by Margaret Thorsborne: A fantastic Australian lady/educator who has a passion for doing things that will help children, young people and adults alter the way they behave and think about what they do.

One thing that has remained with me since that time is a quote from Tom Herner - the essence of which was - *'If children don't know how to Read, Write, do Math, Swim or Drive etc then we teach them - But if they don't know how to behave we punish them'*. (Not word for word). The links between behaviour and not being good school learners are often quite strong. We need to have children engaged, motivated and excited

about learning and being at school. This is crucial for some children, especially those that are at risk of not being successful at learning literacy, maths and other traditional schooling areas.

My thinking around this was really driven home to me when I was in Lower Hutt at a *Learning and Change Network* Regional Hui and a young Maori boy who had not been a good fit in his first few years at school. As an 8 year old he was able to stand up in front of a group of about 50 people - consisting of teachers, principals and other educators - and talk about his learning. He did this with the aid of a *Learning Map* and he was able to explain the things that he and others could do, and had done, to help him become a better learner. This was fantastic and a revelation to me. This had not happened through doing an intensive literacy or maths programme but rather through building relationships and finding out what got him excited and using those things to build his understanding of learning and eventually to the stage where he believed he was a learner and could be successful.

The things that the teachers and principals talked about at that Hui were the engagement and motivation of these children: They had to think differently about how they taught, and about how children learn best. They had to think quite differently about their practice and what they thought about 'Teaching and Learning' - upskilling teachers in maths and literacy in itself was not the answer and having more focussed and intensive literacy and mathematics programmes had not been making a significant difference for these children.

These children needed to learn about learning and what it was and how it was done - they had to be interested if they wanted then to engage – then they could start to build the skills of learning. The teachers had to talk to them explicitly about learning and what things make a difference; They got their families and whanau engaged in their children's learning through things that were relevant to them; They introduced a tool 'Learning Maps' (Infinity Learning, 2016) that helped the children build a picture of this abstract concept. They could add to their 'Learning Map' as they built their own understanding of what learning was and how actions, people, technology, places etc all contribute to the overall process of learning.

This work also ties in with the concept of having a 'Growth Mindset' that Carol Dweck has researched, which is the understanding that a child and adults level of capability or intelligence is not a set entity, determined at birth but rather something that can be improved through effort and an understanding how learning works.

Everybody learns things every day and the vast majority of children have learnt how to walk and talk - and many other things whether helpful or not so helpful. Many pick up concepts pretty quickly and find school work easy which leads to teachers seeing them as being really smart because of this and they get their questions answered or are called on to answer questions. Others are diligent and do the practice and repetition that helps them learn new ideas and concepts, not necessarily knowing that these are core learning skills. While others, unfortunately, learn ways to deflect from the fact that they are not very good at reading or writing, or take longer to grasp new concepts than others, which often manifest themselves as behaviour and/or attitude issues. We need these children to know about learning and understand that they can improve their outcomes.

The more I have thought about, researched, observed and discussed the notions of Student Agency, Growth Mind-set and Active Learning the more strongly I believe that these are imperatives that need to guide what we do in our schools across the country. The children need to have more input and control of their learning and learn about the responsibilities that go with this. Alongside this we need to be planning and building the skills and competencies that are needed in the world outside of school. We need to connect them with the world to give real purpose to the work they are doing.

The views of education that many parents have today are well set in the memories of their own schooling and that of their parents schooling and of their grandparents schooling - it hasn't changed much for generations. The reality is that in today's world it has changed. The world is a different place now, with a big factor being the development of technology, and especially the Mobile data area. This explosion in technology has also contributed to changing societal norms. It is staggering to think that it wasn't until the

end of the 1990s that mobile phones really started to become an ordinary consumer purchase - at that time there was a change from only the 'geeks' and business people that saw them as a must have to something that mainstream consumers saw as something they would buy - to eventually being a must have item. There has never before been such an advance in technology that directly affected everyday communication and access to the world.

This heralded the age of real portability and connectivity (or so we thought). We have only really started to see what REAL portability and connectivity looks like since the advent of Apple's Smart iPhone in 2007, staggeringly that was only 9 YEARS AGO. This has seen an explosion in smart phone ownership across the world. It has fundamentally changed how not only young people, but all generations, connect with their families, peers, businesses and many thousands of others; How they learn about what is happening in the world; How they build an understanding of what they think is important in the world: How they interact with online content whether YouTube or mainstream productions - everything is instant and at their fingertips, wherever they are or whatever the time is (almost anyway).

This has created many debates about what teaching and learning should look like in this modern era - the understanding of what high quality teaching looks like and how to get into that space and keep operating in that space (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012). Whatever happens as we go forward the role of the teacher is pivotal to achieving great outcomes for all of the children and young people in the schools. As Hargreaves & Fullan lay out their 2012 book '*Professional Capital: Transforming Teaching in Every School*', it needs the systematic development and integration of the capital that teachers have (for that matter we all have) - Human, Social and Decisional. Teaching is about more than the data or the measurable outcomes - we are dealing with all the complexities that we as humans have and treating everyone the same is not going to achieve the best outcomes.

As Sir Ken Robinson (2010) says the traditional notion of teaching and learning that educators, schools and governments have has to change. We have to think about what we value and how we engage and motivate the students. We have to give them a reason for doing the things they do in the classrooms and schools. We need to include them in what we do and how we do it. Just learning stuff is not sufficient. We need to help them understand how they think, learn and interact with the world and its people. They need to have input into and be aware of this metacognitive thinking.

We want better learners and although engaging with text & numbers, visually and orally, and making sense of them is vitally important, the context in which these skills and knowledge are developed does not have to be the traditional way many adults understand and remember. As important as these fundamental skills are some other less measurable skills and capabilities - such as being able to collaborate with others, ask questions, think creatively and communicate clearly and effectively - are vital as well. These soft capabilities are indicators of a child that is actively involved in their learning growth.

The impetus for this has to come from, or be supported by, the leadership in a school or learning centre. I also strongly believe that it is more, a lot more, than having rules and administrative structures, planning and accountability mechanisms in place - it is about relationships, empathy, understanding and belief - Belief in yourself as leader, the teachers, the students/children and their parents/whanau.

Activities Undertaken:

I visited a number of schools in Wellington and Auckland, talking to principals, other leadership personnel, classroom teachers and students. These were schools who have been introducing changes to their schools, leading to greater student agency over a number of years. These changes have had to be sequential, strategic and timely so that teachers, students and parents were able to see the relevance and understand the need for the innovations. In the case of one school it was designed and established with Innovative Teaching and Learning pedagogy at the forefront of the thinking during the design and build process.

I also attended the CORE Education Ulearn conference in Rotorua along with a number of my staff. This was an opportunity for me as well as teachers within my school to hear stories of successful innovation from educators from throughout the country and the world. The benefit of a majority of the staff being exposed to the range and quality of presentations and research cannot be overstated.

I took time to relax, read and contemplate various authors' views about teaching and learning, through a range of books, articles and online blogs or forums. A significant part of this was also to reflect on the accumulation of the life experiences that have led me to the place I am in now and what has influenced my thinking and beliefs about teaching and learning along the way.

Findings - from listening, observing, reading and engaging in dialogue.

The schools I visited had different views on teaching and learning, but they all had a commitment to the view that teaching and learning needed to change and they all wanted to improve the engagement and outcomes for their students. From my observations a lot depended on the philosophy of the teachers in front of the children on a daily basis. If they had strong beliefs about building student agency and active learners then there was a high level of student autonomy evident.

There was a strong belief across the schools that the world is changing fast. The way people work together and the types of jobs and projects that people work on is morphing into things we couldn't have thought of 10 years ago. This means we have to help children build their ability to collaborate, connect and communicate with others, think critically and creatively and have a sense of community. There was a common belief that we needed to give children the ability to have choices when they leave secondary school, rather than being restricted because of a lack of qualifications, attitudes or competencies.

The backing and support of the leadership across the schools impacted on the teachers in the classrooms. The teachers who felt they had a licence to try new approaches and methods seemed to be advanced in building engaged, active learners. Some comments from the students at one school in particular alluded to how much more he enjoyed school and learning now (He had moved to the school about 18 months ago). This was due to a range of factors: He was listened to and had a say in his learning; He knew what he needs to be learning and why; He could follow things that he found really interesting; He was far more motivated to learn now. This was a Year 8 Maori boy with a strong message that he felt more in charge of his learning – he believed the teachers thought that what he thought mattered.

It was clear that the more autonomy the students had the more engaged they were but there was responsibility associated with this greater autonomy. This was not something that happened by chance - it was a result of good planning by the teachers and leadership. It was also clear that the teachers and leadership had a clear understanding of what they were trying to achieve – a strong vision that was shared by everyone.

The level of technology was quite varied as well. In one school technology was a very big part of the change that they had brought about. The connectivity and availability of devices had crossed the boundary between the school and the community. The school and community had identified it as a barrier to the children's learning, and it was. This adoption of technology got the buy in from their families and whanau and has changed attitudes and everyone's self-belief - not only in school but in the community. It also got buy in from the community businesses and they supported the expansion of the technology because it was not a cheap exercise.

In the other schools the use of technology was not quite at the same level and it was viewed as an essential tool for research productivity, connectivity and communication – but is just a tool to be used to improve the learning experience and opportunity. In these schools the level of access to devices was at a very high level with most operating at a one-to-one availability and they all had very good infrastructure in place to support the technology. There is no doubt the technology is an integral part of the modern learning environment and it must be available but it does not teach or scaffold the learners by itself – the role of the teacher was critical.

The range of physical environments varied across the schools as well. It ranged from new purpose built buildings that encapsulate the essence of flexibility, openness, space, tools and furniture through to the traditional single cell classrooms. Once again it was evident that although the physical environment can support and enhance how teaching and learning was happening, it was the teacher that still had the most impact on whether the class was following the path of building, autonomous, active learners with high agency.

Over the years education systems, teachers and schools may have taken many things for granted, especially for those children who have not been successful at school. Children often don't know about learning, or how to be a learner, even though they are learning things every day. They don't understand or make connections with the things that they do, or others do, are all acts of learning. These children often think that learning only occurs in the classroom and is something that is done to them not something they have an active role in.

A way to develop active engaged learners is to help them understand what being an active learner is; that mistakes are great learning opportunities; that not knowing something is the best place to start the quest of learning from - by asking questions and being curious; That it is alright to ask for help and talk to their classmates, peers (older or younger); That they feel as though they have 'Skin in the Game' so to speak - that what they have to say is valued and is relevant because they are saying it or asking the question.

Overall it was apparent that if we wanted to radically change the outcome for our students then there was one thing that was absolutely crucial - the learner had to be placed at the centre of our thinking - teachers, leadership and parents/whanau.

Implications for Flemington School:

Essential to any fundamental change in any organisation is Transformational Leadership. This is when the leadership leads those in an organisation to identify a need to change, develop a shared vision and guide them through that change using a combination of inspiration, support and challenges until it becomes a reality and the normal way of doing things.

There is a need to make sure that there is a shared vision and understanding of why children need to be active learners and have high student agency and what the role of the teachers is in achieving it. This is almost a three pronged action with the staff, board and wider parents group all being stakeholders in what happens.

Knowing about learning is a cornerstone of achieving active learners with a high agency. Talking about and exploring **learning** needs to be an everyday conversation between the leadership & teachers, teachers & children, children & children and parents & children. We need to build strong links between home and school.

The relationships teachers develop with learners, leads to improved knowledge of the things that have helped mould that learner - their attitudes, beliefs and understandings - the things that make them who they are and how they think.

This goes hand in hand with building strong communication links between school and home - it is essential that all involved know what we are trying to achieve and what the child is working on to achieve the best outcome possible.

The attitudes and beliefs a child has about themselves and schooling can be formed very early in their time at school. They need to have success at learning; they need to have fun learning; they need to build an understanding that they can influence their learning; they need to learn that mistakes are alright – it is what you do then, that matters. The first few days, weeks, months and years at school are crucial in setting long term attitudes, self-belief and learning habits.

Learning about letters and numbers is a crucial aspect of early schooling but it can't be done in isolation. They need to have lots of fun, lots of experiences, lots of activity and also opportunities to work with older children in the school - in fact all of these things should be an integral part of learning about literacy and numbers from an early age.

If we want to have high student agency we need to listen to the students - not just in a cursory manner but really listen to what they have to say and be willing to accept what comes out. Students will need support to take more ownership of their learning - it will be a guided process not a 'let go of the reins and go for it approach'. There still needs to be accountability for the students - They need to know what skills or knowledge they are learning. They need to learn how to think and talk about their learning. They need to be able to understand what they need to get better at and what things will help them do that.

As mentioned earlier, technology is having an increasing influence on our lives and education. The availability and use of tech devices has exploded over the last decade. The ability of learners to access what they are working on at school from home, or anywhere for that matter, is a matter of course now. They can access information or learning support tools anywhere in the world instantly - it is not dependent on what is available in their local context anymore. The teachers have to take this into account and plan for this change in access and removal of barriers to support more autonomous learning. The idea of each child following their own learning pathway is becoming more and more a reality. The challenge is to set up the workshops, learning centres etc that will support the students in doing so, either as individuals or as part of a collaborative group. The challenge is for teachers and school leaders to open our minds to this change and its implications.

We have travelled some distance down this path at Flemington. The challenge now is how can we keep improving, refining and implementing what we have been doing to help all children achieve the best possible outcome they can. The focus on improving their self-efficacy as active learners who know how they learn and that they can improve their capabilities has achieved improved outcomes for many but there is always more road to travel and unexpected bumps along the way.

Summary

As Edwards & Martin (2016) say humans are a social being. Our evolution has set in place very deep and strong drivers of wanting to learn with others. Learning is an interactive process where ideas and knowledge are contributed and reshaped into new knowledge with others - not as an individual.

We are not islands adrift hoping to catch the secret of new knowledge and understanding - rather we are a village working together to find new solutions to new problems. This is more of an imperative in the 21st Century than in any other time in our lives so far. We need to prepare the children of today for the challenges of tomorrow.

This also has implications for the teachers and leadership in our schools - we need to be improving our knowledge of how to best achieve good outcomes for our children - Is what we have always done going to be good enough to prepare the children for the years ahead of them?

It is a challenge and can be quite intimidating for teachers and leaders in today's schools. Do we have the belief and courage to let go of some of the things we have done in the past and try new ways and new technologies. We need to base what we do on research and not just a whim. In the last 20-30 Years the MRI has allowed the research into how the brain works to where it has never gone before and has been very enlightening. It has given us a glimpse of the fantastic organ the brain is and fundamentally changed the thinking about how the brain works, grows, deteriorates, is influenced by our emotions and hence how we learn.

“The answer is never absolute or complete but rather the basis for the next question.”

A list of some of the Books, Readings and Links that I have enjoyed engaging with.

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