Innovation in New Zealand Primary Schools – case studies

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There is no shortage of unanswered needs in the world, just innovative solutions (Rushkoff, 2005)

Dream; Believe; Dare; Do (Walt Disney)

Executive Summary

Primary Schools in New Zealand are diverse in their nature. They teach from the same curriculum yet often tackle the curriculum from a purely local perspective. Each school has its own needs and challenges and teachers and school leaders use innovative practice to meet those needs and challenges. Innovation is local in nature. By this I mean that as long as something is new to your organisation then it can be said to be innovative. Innovation can only occur if the school leadership allow it to happen. External or imposed innovations are less likely to be effective than those that are driven by local need and can be modified during the course of their implementation. School size did not appear to be a factor in whether a school was innovative or not.

Purpose, Background and Rationale

The focus of my professional study while on sabbatical in term 3, 2010 was about innovation in the primary school setting. I wanted to investigate what innovation was, how it came about, who led it and how it was sustained. I was interested in this because as a leader of a small school I am constantly being required to come up with new solutions, programmes and ways of doing things that would allow a small staff to cope with the increasingly complicated job of teaching the modern child. I thought that if I could look at what others were doing it would afford me some insight into how others were coping with the need to constantly adapt and innovate and that this could help me in my own job.

Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research stresses the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Part of the research was to investigate what others had already written about the subject and to give me some theoretical understanding of innovation.

A Definition of Innovation

I had in mind what I thought innovation was before I started reading articles and throughout the literature search phase of the study I was able to modify it to fit with what I found rather than change it completely. I had defined it at the start as doing something new. How did this fit with other definitions?

Business models
Van de Ven (1986) said that innovation was the development and implementation of new ideas by people who over time engage in transactions with others in an institutional context. He went on to say that it could be a new idea or recombination of old ideas; a scheme that challenges the old order; or a unique approach that is perceived as new. For business innovation is a means to compete in the market place and a path to maintaining growth and performance. Damanpour (1992) said it was an adaptation of an idea or behaviour, whether a system, policy, programme, device, process, product or service, that is new to the adopting organisation.
A slightly loftier definition states (Amidon, 1993) that it is the creation, evolution, exchange and application of new ideas into marketable goods and services for the excellence of an enterprise, the viability of a nations economy and the advancement of society as a whole.
A very simple definition was given by Way and Webb (2006) – they state that innovation is the act of departing from the traditional.

An Educational Model of Innovation
An idea, practice or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption (Rogers, 1995).
- new learning objects
- new ways of teaching
- creation of new learning environments

Why be innovative?
In business as well as in schools there are both internal and external forces that drive the need for change.
Examples of external forces are:
- need to update practices in keeping with findings of research
- conform to national trends
- community expectations

Examples of internal forces are:
- curriculum reforms
- desire to improve student outcomes
- collective and individual teacher values

There are also imposed innovations and those driven by need. An example of an imposed innovation is National Standards. Douthwaite (2006) said that … centrally made decisions about what is good … have led to even greater wastage in resources. Most successful technologies (innovations) were the ones that were modified by the makers and the users the most – this equates to our action research model. He gave the example of the Burmese Government deciding that they needed two rice harvests a year and that they would need a mechanical harvester to do this. No discussion with the farmers was undertaken. A machine was found that had been developed as a prototype that could do the job however it was never field tested. The government ordered 1000 to be built which were dutifully made and then left to rust.

What does innovation need to occur?
Motivation – a system that isn't working; a desire to do better
Attitudinal change
Leader's attitude is important – active support and tacit approval. "No champion, no project, no exception!" (Carlson and Wilmot, 2006)

Every leader I spoke to said that they have to actively promote and support a change or it will not occur or be given any importance.

Carlson and Wilmot (2006, p157) went on to say that there must be a champion who proactively identifies with the customer (business model here) and who addresses the funding, bureaucratic, political, human and technical challenges that every innovation faces. They don't have to be the overall boss although in schools and especially small schools the mostly are. All champions need partners as do all principals. Leaders need to have every employee in every area of the organisation to be on the lookout for innovative ideas (Dundon, 2002). A democratic and participative leadership style is commonly recommended as encouraging group innovation… it is widely agreed that creativity is facilitated by a high level of discretion and that people feel more committed to change if the they have participated in decisions about them (King & Anderson, 2002). The role of the group leader is therefore to provide direction whilst allowing members as much say in decisions and as much freedom to approach tasks in their own way as is practicable.
This table shows the relationship between the phase in an innovation and what sort of leadership is required:

Innovative Phase	Leadership Style
Initiation	Nurturing
Discussion	Developing
Implementation	Championing
Rountinisation	Validation/modifying

What sorts of Innovation are Out There?
Everything and anything. Some examples I came across in no particular order:
- digital classroom
- arts based curriculum
- student council
- values systems
- a huge range of behaviour management systems
- Enviro schools – everyone different
- Clusters of schools engaged in all manner of things
- Special PE programmes
- Altered play and lunch times
- Breakfast in schools
- Specialised social skills programmes such as Kiwican
- Inquiry models
- Student retention and growth schemes
- Boys and girls classrooms in co-ed schools
- Specialist classrooms such as bilingual classrooms and Montessori classrooms on site

- Building modifications etc

There were a lot more examples of innovation and a lot more things that I didn't see.

Implications

Innovation is alive and well in NZ schools. The majority of the innovations I saw and or talked to people about were to do with meeting particular needs at the school concerned. The innovations needed the support of the principal however didn't have to be driven by the principal. They relied on trial and improvement and there was usually scope for the innovation to adapt over time as well as lapse if the need wasn't there anymore. Where innovation was external or imposed each school worked to adapt it to their own situation or to subvert it or sideline it in some way.

Research done by Collins (2003) found that principals (of small schools) who were career orientated and moved regularly for promotion were more innovative than principals who were at a school for an extended period of time. The scope of my research did not allow me to either confirm or deny this statement.

Benefits

Visiting schools is always useful. It reduces isolation, builds collegiality and both affirms what it is you are currently doing and challenges you in what you are doing as well. The benefits of innovation are in its needs based origins. Finding solutions for existing problems. Looking outside what you are currently doing. Challenging beliefs and ways of doing things. Each school meets its own needs in different ways whether they are big or small.

Conclusions

I did not visit one school that did not have innovation occurring in some shape or form. We all teach from the same curriculum however all interpret the curriculum in our own ways. New Zealand Schools adapt and adjust to changing circumstances. They find solutions to local problems. There is continual development as things change. It was interesting to note that few of the innovations were around ICT although all schools had servers and computers in the rooms or pods of laptops. I did not look at whether any particular innovation had made a difference in terms of student achievement. I know that at my own school some innovations have direct impact on student achievement especially in literacy and numeracy and others have an impact that is less easily measured. Enviro Schools is one such innovation. The impact this has is less measurable however has long term benefits in terms of attitudes and behaviour. One of the issues that State Schools face is that they continue to be at the whim of politicians. Despite this every school I visited was unique in some way. They tackled problems in their own ways by adapting other's ideas or finding novel solutions for themselves. Unless Tomorrows Schools are drastically changed by an outside innovation I can foresee New Zealand schools continuing to innovate and tackle problems in ways that suit their own students and communities.

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