

Yes, we can excel against the odds!



Janice Vermeulen

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Education is like gold – wealth you cannot buy;
Our children - the golden future.

Janice Vermeulen [photo and quote]

Weymouth Primary School

Making a difference at our school.

The impact of policy making on the governance and management in the leadership of a New Zealand primary school.

PURPOSE

During my sabbatical leave, I explored how policy making impacts on the various dimensions in leading a school: making a difference; in raising student achievement; in excelling against the odds.

I researched how policy decisions in the United Kingdom in Tower Hamlets shaped education and student achievement. I reflected on how this decision making has led to an underachieving area raising student achievement, especially in a high ESOL and transient community. I reflected on what correlations there were and what initiatives would benefit our own school community.

Ministry of Education policy making has largely shaped what, and how, I have led a school. Working within a number of Ministry of Education Initiatives to raise student achievement, I have had to constantly reflect on various ways to work within in the frameworks of these initiatives to lead a school in achieving better results for students. I am now reflecting on how policy making can further challenge me as a leader of a school to move from low student achievement results to a high performing school.

PROFILES:

MY PROFILE

I am in my tenth year as a Principal of a primary school in New Zealand. I am presently the Principal of Weymouth Primary School in Manurewa, South Auckland. -decile 2.

WEYMOUTH PRIMARY SCHOOL PROFILE

Weymouth Primary School is a decile 2 year 1 -6 contributing school in Manurewa in South Auckland. The community is changing rapidly; and over the years the decile rating has moved from decile 5 to decile 2. The community ethnic composition has changed; from 39% Maori, 35% European and 25% Pasifika in 2006 to 2010: 39% Pasifika, 38 % Maori.

Our wider community now has challenges of transient housing, unemployment, 'white collar' crime, included drugs and gangs and a high Child Youth and Family demand for services.

Weymouth Primary School is the heart of the community. Being on a peninsula with water on two sides, the school is the centre. The community supports each other well and has done so for many years. As a school we do not charge school fees. Rather we request our people to support us at school meetings and events, for example, when we have our annual gala, whanau are asked to clear out their cupboards for white elephant articles and

to bake us a cake. Our community is under a huge amount of pressure and this is often reflected in the lives of our students.

We make no excuses at Weymouth Primary School about the challenges and issues we face. We have high expectations and demand the best of and for our children and our community. As a school, we see low student achievement results as a challenge to overcome and as a collective whole, we are raising student achievement; both within ourselves as educators, from our children taking ownership of their learning and having strong partnerships with our parents and caregivers. Various policy-making has had a large impact on our results in student achievement.

The reflections and findings from my sabbatical form part of our next steps: 'where to from here' and 'how to raise the bar still further'.

INFLUENCES IN SELECTING WHAT TO RESEARCH AND REFLECT UPON

- Dr Andy Hargreaves workshop in Auckland in 2009 challenged my thinking. This workshop explored how policy making can shape the future of education in a country. Various dimensions of leadership and government policy making decisions were introduced. I now wish to explore this subject further.
- Various initiatives that I have been part of while leading a school, has impacted on student achievement. I have been part of three Enhanced Programme Funds Initiatives for literacy and transition to school in the two schools that I have been Principal of with successful results. I have also been part of an ICT Initiative.

Weymouth Primary School has been part of the Manurewa Enhancement Initiative in Manurewa and is now part of the Manurewa Literacy Cluster and the Manurewa Numeracy Cluster.

- Through the Manurewa Enhancement Initiative, our school has been part of Ian Thurlow's professional development and programme which builds resiliency and promotes student achievement. We have been part of the Affirming Works - a programme which promotes resiliency and mentoring and good role models. We have been fortunate in obtaining the services of a school chaplain who works with children and families. We are a Health Promoting School and are part of the Fruit in Schools Initiative. It is early days but we are seeing some good results. We are now building an Early Childhood Centre built on our school site to meet our communities need.

PROGRAMME OUTLINE

SPECIFIC AIMS:

My application for sabbatical leave was:

- For the purpose of furthering my knowledge and understanding of how government policy-making affects and impacts on educational practices especially in Tower Hamlets in London, England.
- For a study of Best Practice in Tower Hamlets, where policy-making as impacted positively on student achievement outcomes
- To undertake a study of recent research on policy-making and the impact policies have on change in leadership practices and educational outcomes raising student achievement
- To identify strategies that leaders [United Kingdom] have applied that have had a positive effect in student achievement
- To compare how in the United Kingdom / Tower Hamlet that a community with high ESOL needs and a transient nature can become a high performing student achievement area
- To reflect on these practices observed internationally and to develop further leadership intentions to implement at Weymouth Primary School

SUMMARY OF EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES AND PROGRAMMES INVESTIGATED RELATED TO THE SABBATICAL

1. An interview with Ms Christine Gilbert, Head of Ofsted in United Kingdom.
2. Visits to schools in Tower Hamlets.
3. Discussions and interviews with Head teachers, staff and parents from these schools.
4. Discussions and interviews with the School Improvement team from the Education Department.

BENEFITS:

- This study will benefit Weymouth Primary School and the community by investigating and exploring further options to raise student achievement at our school.
- New initiatives will be implemented at our school to further this objective.
- Strategies that are used and in place internationally will be compared with current New Zealand educational practices
- A review and evaluation of current practices at Weymouth Primary School will be undertaken as a direct result of this sabbatical.
- The benefits of these strategies can be reviewed and evaluated in relation to our particular school and community and its needs. This is directly related to our strategic plan.

THE JOURNEY

From the number of schools in Tower Hamlets that I visited, from interviews and discussions that took place, from research and seeing best practice, the following characteristics of outstanding primary schools can be noticed:

Success factors include:

1. A strong and caring ethos and commitment to children from all staff, coupled with a genuine desire to achieve the very best for our children.

'[Headteacher] ... taking children to the university, to Canary Wharf; raising children's expectations all the time. Raise aspirations all the time... That's what I mean 'the class is not enough' you have got to do more [have aspirations].'

Christine Gilbert interview.

2. A very positive 'can do' culture where praise and encouragement prevail and self-esteem is high

'Making people believe, celebrating what it was when schools achieved...'

Christine Gilbert interview

3. Outstanding teaching by consistently high-quality staff who show great commitment and passion

High quality learning depends on high quality and highly qualified teacher and training.

[Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullen, 2008]

'You have absolutely got to talk about the quality of what is going on.

In an area like Tower Hamlets, I don't think it would be enough to just focus on classrooms, however good they were,..... You had to have that in Tower Hamlets - the parents really buy into the school. And believing in the school and so on. The community did help with things like attendance... it was the community that did it, not really the heads themselves.....'

Christine Gilbert interview

4. A constant focus on maintaining and improving standards of attainment, emphasising the systematic development of basic literacy and numeracy skills.

'And that's what the additional money was for. So you had schools that laid on Saturday classes... day classes... those were mainly secondary schools... all those sort of early government initiatives were grabbed in terms of the gifted and talented....gave them some money to do those extra things... but some of the extra things....we didn't go down that road.... We wanted to focus on the literacy... and getting people reading and enjoying learning.'

Christine Gilbert interview

5. High-quality planning, assessment and targeted intervention to enable all children to achieve the best they can.

[Twenty outstanding primary schools –Excelling against the odds. Ofsted: UK 2009]

A number of contributing factors lead to achieving excellence. Outstanding teaching and learning features include:

- a. Stimulating teaching which interests and motivates pupils
- b. Having high expectations

‘Getting people to expect children to do more.....

But in Tower Hamlets the focus was on just making people expect more and believe that the children could do more

It was actually the children ... they were much more street wise..... but they just didn’t have the resources...so they weren’t rich at home...it was really shifting expectation’.

On money to fund initiatives:

‘money made it happen quicker, but it wasn’t money. The big shift ... when I first went to Tower Hamlets, people said, you can’t expect anything more from these kids.... Because you don’t know what their lives are like, you don’t know how poor they are, how dislocated their lives are, they have been up all night, and it was shifting that.’

‘It has come out in the inspection... although we are focusing more on teaching and learning, they have got to get results now. We are focusing more on results now. [some schools]... they don’t really believe that these kids,, as they call them, really can achieve. And it drives me mad... because you can show them in Tower Hamlets that you can. I would say that the expectation plus the literacy are the real two pushes. And somehow in a small borough you can do things together, and you can share the messages easily, and so people can go and visit one another’s schools’.

Christine Gilbert interview

- c. Consistency in quality of teaching across the school
- d. Developing good learning habits and attitudes
- e. Structured approaches to reading, writing and mathematics; strengthen basic skills; writing for a purpose; children communicating their understanding
- f. Well planned lessons which cater for diverse needs eg gifted and talented etc
- g. Stimulating classroom environments; well planned for visits and inputs; activities that widen pupil’s interests
- h. Praise and valued reward system
- i. Trained support staff
- j. Monitored learning, with effective marking and assessment

[Twenty outstanding schools. Ofsted: UK. 2009]

Common threads through all schools that I visited included:

- Leadership staff had high expectations and were relentless in raising student achievement results.

'All the different personalities are different, big figures, quite quiet people, but you absolutely all fired up believing that their kids can do this. Kids will do it; there is always a way. Trying to find an answer. That's really strong. There is a whole staff issue.'

Another thing; really good schools work with teacher training. Handpick the staff as they employ the students.'

Christine Gilbert interview

- Leaders provided guidance and support for staff.
- Staff were appointed explicitly to raise student achievement and to deliver a high quality standard of teaching and learning.
- To sustain excellence, schools placed emphasis on early years education as an important foundation for student's further achievement.
- High performing schools had a strong partnership with families to support their children at school. This was key to gain maximum participation and support for school programmes.

On parent involvement:

'No, not parents not in Tower Hamlets... it would often be an older brother or sister, that would come to school, it was essentially school driven....'

The parents were ambitious for their children, but didn't know how to go about it. And so some work was done, but many of the parents couldn't speak English, and so found all that very difficult. And some of the most successful schools though, they communicated well with parents, gave parents evening and so on, that was not the major driver.

They did want their children to succeed. All the Bagladesh families hoped it would deliver for their children.

Success breeds success.

But it is as you will know, very fragile in an area like Tower Hamlets a change of head, govt putting different pressures on, could all lead to different things.'

Christine Gilbert interview

What works in raising student achievement.....

'when you're praising one school in a borough that is very small, then you are saying that school is achieving something that other schools in the borough

aren't achieving and that was a terribly strong incentive particularly when the literacy strategy started and the impact on the SATS ...example... when 100% of your seven year intake could read and the school up the road had the same intake.... The governors and parents would start to say: " Those children are reading. Why aren't our children reading? ' I don't think you can underestimate the pressure of that. An absolute powerful driver.'

Christine Gilbert interview

Some thoughts from discussions with Education Authority school improvement staff in Tower Hamlets:

- Know your school
- Have a stocktake day- advisors, leadership team, speak to teachers, pupils etc.
- Write a termly plan. Choosing two or three things to aim for. Whole school to be aware of.
- Training/ professional development, targeted to needs. Eg guided reading- see good examples in other schools, then work with teachers, professional development. Monitor term by term together. Another stocktake each term on these objectives. Alongside to this assessments and tracking are important. Teachers have termly meeting with leader or curriculum leader regarding children's progress. Separate interventions.
- Cluster of schools get together to focus on one particular problem. Strengths are shared eg lead teachers, or another strong school joins in to share expertise. Good clusters can impact positively on student achievement.
- Tapping into skills the parents have eg sewing classes-sew and have coffee. Then 'drip feed' school matters when they are comfortable.
- Find new ways of getting parents back to school. Example: 50 ideas of things to do with your child eg going shopping and finding goods on the shelf etc.
- Ten hours per child extra tuition if the need extra support; your child has a tutor to help them. One to one. Contract drawn them. Draw them in with eg football and do some work with them at the same time.
- Excursions outside the area so that the unknown becomes part of the known.
- Positive role models needed. Find them in the community eg Somalian teacher etc.

At Weymouth Primary School, we move forward – boldly.

1. In the past ten weeks we have had our official WOW [World of Weymouth] television programme launched.
2. We have celebrated our Science Expo with a strong e-learning focus.

3. We have started a free community programme. Every week we have a student achievement meeting for parents/caregivers. We offer free courses for our community on subjects as varied as bread making, ICT, CV's, to healthy lunches. We offer clubs for groups of our community to join others eg grandparents raising children club.
4. Every Monday is an Open Day at our school so whanau can join us as their children learn.
5. We have started 5plus a day. Five new vocabulary words introduced every day.
6. Our school syndicate model is focussing on refining practice.
7. Our leadership team structure is evolving to meet the new challenges of the future.
8. We have initiated a new Numeracy cluster with other schools.
9. We continue to work with a few schools in a cluster to focus on leadership and Written work. A separate cluster focuses on Literacy and Reading in particular.

Onwards and upwards.

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