Sabbatical Report – Yvonne Browning

1. Introduction

Since 2004 Southland Girls' High School has had a focus on girls striving for personal excellence. Many of our structures, such as individualized student timetables based on student demand from Year 9 onwards, multi level learning and ability grouping for Maths, Science and English have honed in on our desire for individual students to achieve more.

The question became "*how do we know that individual girls were making progress and achieving*"?

We knew how groups of girls were progressing, but not enough data was available re individuals. Two major developments helped us to see our next steps.

In 2016, we took the momentous leap forward, in dissolving tutor class system of 25+ students, moving to the increasingly popular Academic Tutor system in which teachers mentored 18-20 students, travelling with the same Academic Tutor group as the girls moved up the school.

Academic tutors became the first port of call for students and parents. Personal Learning Conferences (parent interviews) replaced the 'speed dating model' and Academic Tutors, with information fed by subject teachers, became the centralized holder of learning information relating to each one of their 18-20 girls. Academic Tutors and their girls discussed the learning information (goals, current progress and next steps) and three times a year at a student led conference, reported to their parents.

Buoyed by a wealth of research which reinforces the practice "the more girls can articulate their learning, the greater their achievement", we turned a 22% attendance at Parent Interviews to a Personal Learning Conference attendance of over 90%.

At the same time we were changing this structure, we looked even more closely at the conditions which promote good learning in the classroom. This was crucial if we were going to 'change things even more' for the girls in terms of their learning.

Having been part of the He Kakano project since 2013, and latterly Kia Eke Panuku, Southland Girls became committed and focused on culturally responsive pedagogy in the classroom. Striving for personal excellence is only half of the equation, equitable access for all to quality teaching and learning is the other half.

The key therefore to increasing the learning conditions, was growing the capabilities of the staff in a culturally responsive way.

With a strong and on-going focus on professional development came better teaching, better learning and a realization of what it takes to be culturally responsive. In essence for teachers, it was a realization that it was a 'way of being' not a series of tasks or activities. We have succeeded (as measured by the Rongiho Te Hau tool) in moving staff capability to an increasing higher level of response.

So with the new structures (Academic Tutoring, Student led PLC) and the conditions promoting learning (Culturally responsive) in place, the next step was now to find out where individual learners were at.

2. Ready, Fire, Aim

In August 2016, we drew a line in the sand. "Stop talking, discussing and thinking" about whether individual students were making a years worth of progress, and find out.

So every teacher in every subject area for every year 7-13 student was asked to identify whether or not each individual student was a risk of not making a years worth of progress at that point in time. As the Principal, I collected and collated the data from teachers. I did the analysis by hand, and while it took between 15-20 hours, it was most enlightening, valued and useful.

I now knew who was at risk (names), number at risk, which levels were most at risk, and ethnicity. Suddenly, their was clarity.

A 'way forward' became apparent. We needed to identify the needs of the individual 'girls at risk'. Looking at the data, two levels stood out – years 9 and 10. There were greater numbers at risk and more Pasifika and Maori students at risk in these 2 levels.

Predictably, the identified group included those who found learning difficult.

While we had data for all subjects at years 9 and 10, we decided to focus on Maths, Science and English at risk (of not achieving a years worth of progress) data as a way of managing and implementing the next steps.

Unpredictably and most surprising, within the mix of those identified were a number of 'bright girls' who were 'coasting/stationary' and relying on their current 'so called natural' ability to get on.

Secondly, some of the data we found somewhat worrying, particularly in terms of the achievement of our Maori students. Despite all our culturally responsive professional development and growth, we still had an achievement gap of significant proportions at year 9 and 10. This reinforced the rational for Year 9 and 10 being the main focus area.

3. Next Steps

How to 'tackle' the data in an effort to change the outcome for the girls at risk was discussed and debated at length. Firstly we held a meeting with all the teachers of Maths, English and Science at Years 9 and 10, the Year 9 and 10 Academic Tutors and the Heads of Faculty of Maths, Science and English. The 'how to' was the major discussion.

Steps Taken: i.e. Here is what we did

a) A 'google doc' was set up for each of the students at risk for the Maths/Science/English faculties to identify the needs of students i.e. where their individual gaps were.

b) Professional development sessions were held to discuss the needs and staff shared the various types of interventions they could use to accelerate the learning for the students at risk. This was then collated and given to staff.

c) Essential to the next step was to get the students to 'buy into' and partake in any interventions. We felt there needed to be a face-to-face conversation. Ultimately, in line with our culturally responsive practices, it needed to be mana enhancing and affirming for the students that together (teacher and student) a change in achievement was possible. So then we scripted a conversation and developed an interview sheet for teachers to use with the girls. It was along the lines of "*I'd like to talk about your learning….I really believe you can do better in this subject. And so I want to talk today about how together we can help you achieve better*".

This was followed by 6 questions:

(i)   What helps you learn the most/best in this subject?
(ii)   What interferes with or gets in the way of learning in this subject/class?
(iii)   What will you be able to do that will help you make progress?
(iv)   What can I do to help you make your progress?
(v)   How will we know it is working?
(vi)   What are our next steps?

So now, not only did we know the names, numbers and needs, but we also had a variety of interventions and possible interventions.

d) Next, a structure of who would work with the students was developed. It was decided:
- If a student was at risk in one subject the subject teacher would set up the intervention
- 2 subjects at risk, then the Academic Tutor would be responsible for aiding and supporting the intervention to accelerate
- 3 subjects at risk, then the Year Level Co-ordinator (Dean) would follow through with the interventions.

e) 2017 Refinement and Review

What needed to happen next? Where did our thinking lead us?

1) More regular review periods. What we learnt from the 2016 work was that despite having data in August, it took until October to do the needs analysis, the intervention, professional developing and interviewing the girls. Essentially that left 6 weeks to make some difference for the girls at risk. Clearly that meant less impact than we would have liked.
Therefore we took the bold step of deciding to collect at risk data once a term. We thought that would mean earlier interventions, hoping to 'catch girls' before the achievement gap was too wide.

2) Our findings from 2016, pointed to the fact that there is no one consistent measure for all subjects to identify whether a student was at risk of making a years' worth of progress. It would be different in every subject and at every level within the subject. The first draft of at risk criteria in each subject was submitted in 2016. In 2017 with greater understanding and knowledge, departments refined their identification criteria. For some departments, it was major change, for others it was a little bit of tweaking and in some cases, no change at all.

The criteria were then collated for each subject and level and shared for current and future reference.

3) One of the findings to come out of the 2016 work was that there are in fact 2 categories for which girls are at risk of not making a years' worth of progress.
   a) Those who are already at the (curriculum) level and they are coasting / their learning is stationary
   b) Those who are below the level of learning and need to be accelerated

So when recording the data in 2017, teachers were asked to differentiate and decide what category (a) or (b) each student fell under.

4) A system for recording the 'at risk data'. In 2017, because we were in the early stages of implementing MUSAC Edge Student Information System school wide, we decided to set up a stand-alone system for recording the data. While a sensible thought, the entering of data did prove to be harder for teachers than we anticipated. However, the professionalism of the staff prevailed and data was collected 4 times.

5) Conclusion

2018: Where are we now? What have we modified? What have we learnt?

1. We do have more accurate data. It will never be perfect but in our perspective, we can say who (as in an individual) is at risk of not making a years' worth of progress. Individual teachers and Heads of Department accept that this is their role to know the 'who' and to implement interventions that will accelerate the learning in the name of equity, and in the pursuit of excellence for all girls.
2. At risk data is now being recorded on the MUSAC Edge - in one common place that is more user friendly and accessible for all, as opposed to the different separate system used in 2017.
3. The collection of data is to be aligned to the time period before Personal Learning Conferences to allow for the discussion with students and parents, and the dissection of data to naturally occur. This will then become part of the teachers work as opposed to an additional work load matter. While 2017 was essentially NNNI (Name, Number, Needs and Interventions) we have added another step in the process – NNNIR – Names, Number, Needs, Interventions and Review of the success of the various interventions.
4. The best part about the data we now have is that we all know who is at risk of not making a years' worth of progress. This information was shared with staff even if they didn't teach them in 2018, they might in the future. The goal for all of us is to get students off the at risk list. Additionally we are now thinking that if a student remains on 'the list' for more than a year, then we will have to 'step up' and deepen our interventions to lift their level of achievement. What this 'deepening' will look like is the next stage of our Inquiry.
5. Pleasingly, in terms of the culturally responsive conditions with classrooms, there has been a steady improvement in the capability of teaching staff. Using the ranking of 1-5 (1 being the lowest) we no longer have teachers in the 1-2 categories. This growth in teacher capability will help us especially in terms of supporting the learning of students who are finding it hard to meet the curriculum expected at their respective level.

This Inquiry into a years' worth of progress, accelerated learning and culturally responsive pedagogy and its impact on teaching and learning is critical to our work as educators within our school. As we continue to delve more deeply into this work, we continue to improve our capabilities as teachers, while at the same time, building stronger relationships around learning with our students.

On a personal note, this focus/Inquiry/work has been some of the most invigorating, energizing and exciting learning that I have involved myself in, in recent years. It is good work and benefits all in the long run. It is time consuming but so well worth the effort.

It lines up beautifully with the ERO booklet "*Raising Student Achievement Through Targeted Actions*".

Ultimately it gives greater job satisfaction and better outcomes for the students. After all, that's what keeps us in the job, isn't it?