Sabbatical Report

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Acknowledgements:
To TeachNZ for the opportunity, the Board of Trustees of James Street School for their support of my application, my Deputy Principal, Roz Dakin, who so ably led the school in my absence and to all the staff who made it a seamless transition. Thank you to all the Principals and staff I engaged with - the generosity of your time and insights contributed greatly to the success of my sabbatical.

Purpose:
The purpose of my sabbatical was to explore "What constitutes accelerated progress for students with high and complex learning needs and how can an inclusive mainstream school report this progress to parents and whanau in ways that are purposeful and sustainable?"
I was keen to research how the sometimes minute but significant progress of students, particularly those who are nonverbal and with multiple cognitive and mobility challenges, were assessed, recorded and used to effectively plan for further development.

Background:
James Street School is a decile 2 state school with currently 14 percent of the roll (26 students of 187) classified as ORs students with high and complex educational needs. Of these, 16 students are classified as Very High and 10 as High. We are a magnet school in the Eastern Bay of Plenty for students with high and complex needs but we are a mainstream school and not a satellite outreach of any special school.
In addition we have approximately 40% of our remaining students on our special needs register, students who have a range of academic, social, deprivation and emotional learning needs.

Methodology:
During the sabbatical I visited two designated Special Schools and one each of their satellite outposts, and three mainstream schools who, like our school, had a relatively high number of high learning needs students. I discussed with principals, Sencos and teachers what they considered to be accelerated progress for these students, the assessment and recording tools they utilised and how they used this information in their Individual Education Plans and to report to parents. I was keen to learn whether there were strategies or assistive technologies available at these schools that we could utilize in our mainstream school.

Purpose:
The purpose of the scheduled school visits was to observe students similar to ours in a variety of educational settings and to learn from the principals, teachers, teacher aides and supporting professionals how they plan for, record and report on progress of their high and complex needs students. I was particularly interested in if, and how, they define accelerated learning for these students, what evidence they gather, what assessments they use and how they relay this information to families and whanau. Through reflecting on my findings I hoped to have a refreshed and expanded view of how we could further improve upon our current practices.

Definitions:
The students I was focusing on initially and in particular were those students who were verified through the ORS scheme as having very high or high learning needs, as well as those students who, for a range of reasons, do not engage without intervention in a mainstream classroom and for whom there is no definition of high or very high need as they do not fit the ORS criteria.

The Ministry of Education website states "*Each criteria in the Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) addresses an area of need. The needs are further defined by a level of need - either very high or high needs.The areas of need are: learning, hearing, vision, mobility, language use and social communication.*

"A student is considered to have very high needs when they need:
- teaching and learning programmes completely adapted to meet their needs (this is for students who have extremely delayed cognitive development), or
- specialist help to communicate with other people face-to-face — this is for students who rely totally on signing or Braille for reading and writing or help from a trained person after a cochlear implant, or

- weekly help from a specialist and/or monthly monitoring by a specialist, and daily support from a teacher aide to help with mobility and positioning or personal care (this is for students who have an extremely severe physical disability), or
- weekly help from a specialist, or monthly monitoring by a specialist with daily support by others to help with a severe disorder when using language and social communication (for example, for profound autism)."

Parallel to this focus was an interest in what schools were doing to engage, accelerate and manage the behaviour of that group of students for whom academic progress is secondary to their other more pressing needs. These students are often equally challenging to manage in the classroom setting as they do not come with supplementary assistance as of right, may have been picked up by the Severe Behaviour Service, RTLB or may attract no additional support apart from the school's own internal mechanisms, programmes and pastoral supports. These students usually also fit the Ministry definition of priority learners: *Priority learners are groups of students who have been identified as historically not experiencing success in the New Zealand schooling system. These include many Māori and Pacific learners, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, and students with special education needs.   ERO (August 2012)*

Key Findings:

Accelerated Progress:
The Ministry definition of Accelerated learning, **'***Acceleration is described as the learner's progress showing; a noticeably faster, upward movement than might otherwise have been expected by the trend of their own past learning; and is faster than classmates progressing at expected rates in order to catch them up. This rate of progress brings the learner achievement level to that consistent with, or beyond, a set of benchmarks or standards (NZ Curriculum Mathematics, Reading and Writing Standards)* is neither useful nor relevant for most students with high and complex learning needs. Schools were focused on meeting individual student goals identified in their Individual Education Plans and which were generally specific and personalised. Individual pathways were evident in IEP's with whanau involved in identifying key goals in many, though not all, situations. It is of no surprise that parents and whanau focus areas were more likely to be in the areas of self management, communication and Key Competencies rather than on an academic focus.

The progress of priority learner status students whose high learning needs stemmed from factors other than cognitive or physical impairment, were assessed using a range of relevant data. Noting that there were often complex and interrelated socio economic reasons why these children were identified as having high learning needs, the accelerated

progress for these students was on how quickly they could re-engage with their teachers and peers in a mainstream classroom. Priority is given to understanding the neuro - socio-emotional factors required for learning, and while these students must necessarily be reported against National Standards benchmarks for academic progress, this was not a first up priority. Feedback from whanau was highly regarded as evidence of progress, reflective of student integration in family and community settings. The use of behaviour data, attendance data, engagement data, positive communication interactions, self esteem scales and reduction of critical incidents were all seen as legitimate indicators of success and were used to evaluate both progress and next steps.

Benchmarks of Achievement:
There are no predictive 'standards' by 'time at school' for the extensive range of cognitive and physical disabilities of these students although all schools use some form of identification of which particular Literacy, Numeracy, Key Competency and Social skills have been attained and at which stage, from pre Level One to Level Two of the curriculum, where relevant. The breaking down of each aspect into 'phases' enables incremental progress to be recorded. In one school, the expectation is that one 'phase' per year would be expected progress. Most schools had not identified any 'expected levels of achievement' per se, but focused on the SMART goals of the IEP's. Self management goals are given a high priority for many secondary aged students as the long term goal is to enable students to be independent, self managing citizens. In some cases use of specialists, e.g. an occupational therapist, has identified incremental steps for high sensory needs students against which their progress can be measured and recorded.

Reporting to Parents:
Reporting student progress to parents took several forms. In most instances the IEP meeting with parents and whanau is the most comprehensive and informative method of sharing student progress. The evidence of progress was, in most cases, presented through student portfolios with a learning story and photos to illustrate participation. There was surprisingly limited use of video to illustrate student engagement with the learning and where Google Docs was used as the sharing platform, this provided an opportunity for whanau feedback.

Records of Achievement:
All schools kept a cumulative record of acquisition of skills for each student. Because of the nature of the elements of each phase, this was personalised to each student and each school used its own method of recording this information, often through use of Excel database and/or a visual progression where schools used a coloured highlighter to record mastery of an element. There were varying degrees of sophistication and purpose in recording

achievement information. While these students still have to report against National Standards, in some instances they are unidentified in reports as student identification becomes an issue and this aspect of compliance was considered of no use to the schools, the students or their parents. However the use of a database provided opportunities to gather schoolwide data by gender, ethnicity, year groups etc for statistical information, reporting to Boards of Trustees and to fulfill compliance requirements.

Resourcing:
There remains a high demand from schools for resourcing to support individualised programmes for students with high and complex learning needs. While ORS verified students all receive teacher aide hours to support their learning, non special schools in particular were conscious of the often annual reduction in allocated hours, and ever increasing demands made on ever diminishing financial resources –an expectation that more will be done with less pervades and is the source of frustration for both management and teachers. However there are many examples of assistive technologies supporting students in a range of areas from appropriate seating on transport to school and in the classroom, to a variety of digital technologies supporting curriculum learning.

Implications for James Street School:
- Progress our work on recording of student progress and achievement steps and gather feedback from parents and whanau as to the usefulness of this information from their perspective
- Continue our development of digital evidence to support progress towards achievement of IEP goals and to share those increments of success with whanau
- In our IEP meetings, consider in what settings our students might best be placed to experience success; maybe some time of the day in a mainstream class, some time with specialist teacher, some time in community activities etc
- Further develop ways of 'Telling our Stories', the progress and sometimes small measures of success of our students for whom academic and social learning are challenging.
- Ensure all learning support staff are well supported through professional learning opportunities to increase their effectiveness in supporting our learners.

References:

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