



A Different Practice of Accountability

Kay Tester

Principal Kay Tester wanted to establish practices in St Brigid's School that helped teachers to articulate what they were doing in their classrooms, why they were doing it, and to learn more about the impact of their own practice. The vehicle that has allowed Kay to engage with these aims was the Ariki Project. In this report Kay explains the impact that the Ariki Project has had on her professional practice and that of her staff.

I have a particular interest in teacher and principal appraisal. This ties in with work I've been doing with Dr David Stewart and the Ariki Project – an innovative two-year Ministry of Education-funded project based around the notion of rich professional conversations and critique.

My commitment to the Ariki Project stems from my belief in its potential to improve the classroom opportunities and learning outcomes for students. It does this because it is a vehicle for strengthening two key sites for teacher and principal learning – the classroom and the school's professional community.

I wanted to establish a practice within our school that enabled teachers to articulate what they were doing in their classrooms and why they were doing it, and also to learn more about the impact of their own practice in a constant search for improvement. I also needed to look for evidence that my intentions regarding our stated school goals were having some influence over what was happening in classrooms.

During 2009 two principals groups were established in Wellington to follow the Ariki model. This enabled me to be part of the same process and protocols as the teachers; taking evidence of my practice to a meeting with the other principals and working together in a carefully structured and reflective manner.

The Ariki design in action

People like to work in groups; they enjoy problem solving and debating ideas together. The aim of the Ariki Project is to further expand and strengthen this way of working. The particular form of reflective group used in the Ariki Project is the Quality Learning Circle.

To get us started I invited David Stewart to attend a staff meeting early in 2008 and talk to the teachers about what involvement in the project would mean for them. Following this teachers were formed into groups of four or five and gathered together twice a term to share evidence of their practice which they presented to one another in professional narrative form. The teachers' meetings ran for approximately one hour and replaced syndicate meetings scheduled for that week, so that teachers did not see them as something "extra" they must fit into their busy week.

Meetings begin with each participant making a brief statement about the particular emphasis they have used in their selected interaction. Following this, two or three members of the group present their narrative in more depth. The other members

listen without interruption and then respond with questions about meaning, lateral links, existing data and validation. This taxonomy of questions has been designed to encourage the presenter to access high-order critical thinking and articulate this to their colleagues, and apply critical reflection while being supported by parameters about how to do it.

The teachers and I make selections for our entries from a concept map, which could be also be described as a conceptual job description. It captures the key activities and expected consequences of interactions around leadership, the classroom, a school's culture, professional learning and those that occur at the intersection of the other four strands. The professional standards for both principals and teachers, *Kiwi Leadership for Principals*, and key Ministry documents against which measures of teacher and principal performance can be formed, are encapsulated in this concept map.



To strengthen the critique process, new knowledge can be “added in” as teachers and principals include readings and research based developments as part of their reflection. Samples of student work, data from recent classroom assessments, and results of student interviews may also be included as a means of keeping the focus on the relationship between teaching practices and improved learning opportunities for students. Networks that provide teachers with access to expertise though an external person such as a Resource Teacher of Literacy (who uses research to question conventional practice) are established. Learning visits to other classrooms and schools may be organised as participants seek to discover more about an interaction that has been presented during a Quality Learning Circle meeting. Teachers and principals may invite another participant to observe them in a teaching or leadership situation and provide feedback on an agreed focus. Such experiences may form the basis for the next entry in their concept map.

As the year progressed we built up a portfolio of our evidence of practice and these authentic examples of daily work formed the basis of discussions at appraisal meetings. The overarching research design of the project can be evidenced in the way the sequence of activities emphasise the collection of data, the inclusion of “new knowledge”, reflective critique and then refined judgement about further practice.

Teacher professionalism

Teachers’ professional identities are rich and complex. They need to be nurtured and developed in conditions that encourage respect, mutual support and effective communication. Key to Ariki is that the initiative is placed in the hands of the teachers. They decide what is important and present authentic aspects of their work to their colleagues. They listen to other’s observations and reflect on their critique. They also get to problem-solve together, make new meaning from these interactions, and accumulate new knowledge and skill which will lead to improved professional judgment about their teaching practice.

On reflection

In August 2009 we were in our second year of Quality Learning Circle meetings and part way through the year when we received an ERO visit. One of the first conversations I had when I met with the ERO team after their first morning in the school began with... “Tell us more about these QLCs”. They also had quickly identified that here was a strong reflective process in action.

I believe our school has an obligation to provide the highest possible quality of teaching and learning experience for every student who enters our gates. The teachers and I should also be able to provide evidence that we strive for excellence to our parents and to the education community.

The Ariki Project aims to establish rigorous and consistent processes and protocols to capture and develop the professional interactions that occur in the busy hub of a school where teachers and principals are constantly making choices about what they will do in their classrooms and schools. Once established these provide a clear structure and practice whereby teachers and principals can apply high quality thinking in order to learn and improve their own performance – and eventually student performance – both within and across a network of schools.

The Ariki Project can be linked in many ways to *Kiwi Leadership for Principals*, but the most important one for me is how it enables a principal to foster a sense of moral purpose within their school. At St Brigid’s we believe that education increases both the individual and society’s potential to improve in a sustainable and ethical way. The Ariki Project is proving to play a vital role in allowing us to achieve this goal.

