



Asking Questions About Teaching and Learning

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In this project principal Alistair Campbell writes about the process he and the staff of Maori Hill School moved through as they reviewed teaching and learning programmes in the light of the revised New Zealand Curriculum. Staff spent time considering what the implications of the revised curriculum were for their classroom practice. This process helped them to clarify and strengthen their thinking about effective pedagogy. Part of the curriculum review and alignment involved engagement with the school community.

Leadership is not separate from the classroom. We now know about the influential role school leaders play in supporting the success of their school's teaching and learning environment (Robinson et al, 2009). We also know that what happens in classrooms can make or break children's attitudes to learning and how successful they are as learners.

At Maori Hill School the introduction of the revised curriculum continued and strengthened the resolve of our leadership and teaching teams to look critically at what we deliver to our children and how we do this across the school.

Like many schools our review process began before the New Zealand Curriculum document arrived. Working with a crowded timetable meant the leadership team was already considering how to use the opportunity provided by the revised curriculum. We wanted to develop teaching and learning programmes that would better suit our children, teachers and community in a changing world.

The project

Over time we had worked on establishing learning priorities for students in a balanced curriculum. The arrival of the revised curriculum prompted us to focus on effective pedagogy and aligning the national curriculum with both the needs of the school students and the views of our community.

We focused on four main areas:

- Clarifying learning outcomes, with the bigger picture in mind (rationalisation).
- Defining quality teaching for our school (pedagogy).
- Building school ownership (localisation).
- Developing community engagement opportunities.

As a result we have produced a school-based curriculum document. In booklet form, the document provides teachers with big picture learning maps and monitoring requirements that aid clarity and consistency in planning, monitoring and reporting of information to parents and the board of trustees. These learning maps outline key learning goals across Years 1 to 6.

The booklet is a working document and teachers are required to use it to track coverage, record aspects that work and those that need changing, and also make suggestions for future changes and improvements. Each year the reflections, notes, adjustments and changes recorded by teachers are collated in order to update our school-based curriculum booklet for the following year.

Although the project focused on clarifying and strengthening thinking and actions about effective teaching and learning across the school, it also fits into our wider strategy to:

- Develop a school based curriculum plan.
- Produce school documentation.
- Develop school-wide learning goals across Years 1 to 6.
- Define and clarify what quality teaching and learning is at our school.
- Look at strategies to build school ownership and parental engagement.

The process

Schools are very busy places at the best of times, so most of the professional development activities we undertook to explore teaching and learning in our setting were completed as part of weekly staff or syndicate meetings. In these meetings teachers worked in small groups to identify what their beliefs were about effective teaching, effective learning and effective practice.



Activities undertaken to develop our thinking

- In their groups teachers responded to the starter question, “What is considered evidence of effective practice?” Each group recorded their responses on a sheet after talking and sharing together. Their thoughts and ideas were organised by priority. Recording sheets were passed to the next group for discussion where the new group agreed, disagreed or added to the ideas from the previous group. The recording sheets were then collated and fed back into further discussions and clarifications.
- Using [Skrbl](#) (a simple and easy online multi-user whiteboard) allowed teachers to contribute their ideas as individuals in their own time before getting together as a group. Teachers responded to these questions on the whiteboard:
 - What is an effective learner at our school?
 - What is an effective teacher at our school?
- At further staff meetings the suggestions and ideas were discussed, collated and used as the base to expand and document our school’s thoughts on effective practice.
- Another useful strategy for getting teacher input without increasing the number of meetings to attend was the use of [Google Docs](#). Using Google Docs meant teachers were able to contribute their thoughts and ideas at a time that suited them. They could also view the ideas of others which they could add to or disagree with. This type of interaction could run over time and be easily added to and amended.
- To extend ownership and engagement, members of the community were invited to contribute through class homework activities. This strategy provided a much higher response rate than the usual surveys or meetings held in the past. The homework activity was tried throughout the school, though the response rate varied due to teacher enthusiasm and the age of the children. However, valuable information was gathered. To collate the ideas from each class teachers used [Wordle](#), a fun way to graphically collate responses.
- Syndicates supported and further developed the ideas around effective teaching and learning through aligning ideas with current practice and considering differences and what could be done to address any gaps.

For any school the opportunity for staff to talk about teaching and learning increases the chance to build school-wide consistency, thinking and improved practice. Increasing these opportunities to share has helped to build collegiality and provide motivation and support for teachers to consider changes to their current classroom practice. Staff have distilled our many ideas into a one-page summary of key aspects of our work, including our clarification of our school vision, principles, values, and what effective pedagogy might look like at our school.

While the process has greatly improved our knowledge, we see that reviewing our thoughts about curriculum, teaching and learning will be ongoing. Any recording we do is merely represents our current thinking, which we know will change as reflection, new ideas, professional development and research influence our thinking and actions into the future. However, it gives us the ability to see where we have been and what we might wish to change as we move forward.

Final Reflection

The professional learning activities we undertook helped us to clarify our thinking about what effective teaching and learning means in our context. They also led to us successfully unpack the contents of the revised curriculum document so that we were able to develop our knowledge and understanding of its different parts to ensure the best teaching and learning for our children.

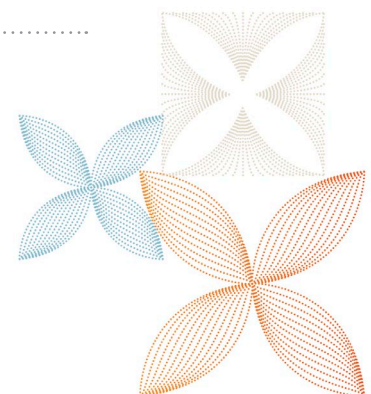
Overall this work has highlighted that these types of activities should be ongoing in our school lives. Talking about teaching and learning has helped to strengthen our teaching team across the school and has proved an invaluable aid to building school-wide consistency around effective teaching and learning. Team leaders will follow up with our school-wide ideas and

suggestions by supporting teachers through the appraisal and development cycle.

Collating notes and ideas along the way has enabled the creation of school wide documentation. This has formed an important record of where our current thinking lies.

Summary documentation will also assist with community engagement as a point for discussion.

This ongoing project has given our staff a greater understanding of the intentions and directions of *The New Zealand Curriculum* while clarifying and exploring meanings for practice. Our next step is to ensure our classroom practice is aligned with our school-based thinking by addressing the question, “How close is our school curriculum to our classroom curriculum?”



REFERENCE

Robinson, V. Hohepa, M. & Lloyd, C. (2009) *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: What Works and Why Best Evidence Synthesis*. Ministry of Education. Wellington. New Zealand.