



Walking the Talk

Pip Wells

Pip Wells started as principal at Tasman School in the last term of 2007 after six years working as an adviser with School Support Services. During her advisory time she built considerable depth of knowledge and experience around creating change in schools. She decided it was time to put the theory into practice and walk the talk and so went back to being part of a school community again. In her project report Pip describes how she managed her key priorities as the new principal.

So 2008 at Tasman School began with a first time principal at the helm, two teachers new to leadership positions and three teachers new to the school. A whole staff of learners from the outset! My key priorities as its new leader were to:

- form positive relationships with the community that focused clearly on learning
- build a strong professional team.

Make the main thing the main thing

The main thing for me was student learning. The educational leadership model in *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* shows that building trusting relationships is central to the role of being an effective educational leader. The challenge for me was how best to do this.

As a first-time principal, competing calls for my time and energy seemed to be the norm.

I was introduced to the community when I first arrived, and was actively involved in the normal cycle of assessment and reporting with our parents and families later in the term. I invited all with a vested interest in the school to meet with me during the following weeks to share their dreams and concerns about their children and the wider school.

Many took up the challenge and I was left with a list of "to dos" ranging from head lice to healing rifts.

The previous principal had been well respected and had developed strong com-

munity ties. The school had a talented and committed board of trustees. There were historical issues that had begun to surface which had moved the focus away from student learning. While there was a need to address these concerns, I believed there was a need to refocus the school and community on student learning and to make this focus the heart of our conversations and effort.

So how did this happen? The process we used over the course of the following year to achieve this is summarised here in a series of steps.

Step 1: Build community commitment

We held a parent forum in March. We enticed close to 70 people along with promises of

free childcare and fun. This figure represented 46 of our 55 school families. Teachers joined parents and grandparents to identify:

- what we did well
- what we could do better
- our dreams for and our frustrations about the school.

Over the following weeks we sought feedback from those who were absent that evening, so that all of the school parent community were involved.

We began to develop a profile of the kind of Tasman School student we would like to see leave our school. Then we prioritised the areas of greatest need.

This process set the foundations for our goal setting and future direction.



Step 2: Build the team

Meaningful consultation needs to be backed with action. This required capable, committed teachers who were able to work together.

New appointments had been made at the end of the previous year. So the next step was to build a team that would support and share their strengths, and be open to challenging areas of personal and team weakness.

In New Zealand we have been gifted a series of great resources to support our work in schools:

Quality Teaching for Diverse Students in Schooling: Best Evidence Synthesis (2003) by Adrienne Alton Lee gave us the key areas, proven to make a difference for teaching and learning.

Teacher Professional Learning and Development: Best Evidence Synthesis (2007) by Helen Timperley et al focused on what creates the best professional learning.

School Leadership and Student Outcomes: What Works and Why Best Evidence Synthesis (2009) by Viviane Robinson et al shared five key characteristics of successful leaders.

We know from the *School Leadership BES* that the leadership characteristic with the greatest effect size (0.84) is “promoting and participating in teacher learning and development”. This knowledge provided me with a logical impetus for building a new teaching team whose members would reflect on their practice and support each other to continually improve.

I set about developing a rigorous professional learning plan that focused on student music achievement and that would build the culture of professional support and challenge in which I believed.

Why music? It was a logical choice for three reasons: student achievement levels were very low in this area, it had been identified by the parent forum as an area of significant need, and it was a curriculum area in which I had some knowledge through my previous advisory role.

In building this plan I was conscious that within the staff were teachers who were passionate about music and music playing, and others who were less confident.



I was aware of the value of using external as well as internal expertise, and utilised the knowledge and resources developed by the UC Education Plus arts advisory team, including work from Celia Stewart – the primary music adviser. I was able to use the contextual knowledge of the school and much of my previous experience in developing this model of practice.

Step 3: Build the practice

Thomas Guskey (2005) talks about assessing five stages of professional development:

- I. Participants’ reactions
- II. Participants’ learning.
- III. Organisational support and change.
- IV. Participants’ use of new knowledge and skills.
- V. Student learning outcomes.

He recommends planning for student learning outcomes and working back up the list to challenge and strengthen teacher pedagogy.

Our professional learning process started with a challenge to teachers:

Choose five students in your class you think might represent the range of musical ability and knowledge. Make anecdotal notes over a week about their music skills.

This was a useful exercise which meant that when we started our first professional learning music workshop teachers were already talking about what the students knew and didn’t know. We gathered up the teacher questions and statements, completed a self review, then danced through the Arts section of *The New Zealand Curriculum* to unpack the structure of music learning.

I believe experiencing the learning is vital if teachers are to recognise key stepping stones and potential pitfalls for the learners they will lead. The context I used for teachers’ learning experiences was a contemporary piece of New Zealand music. We then considered What would the students say? What might they know? What language might they need? We explored our understandings of rhythm and beat, using many of the activities from *Into Music 1* (2001).

We talked of our own musical journeys. How had we built a perception of ourselves as musicians? What purpose did music have in our lives, our society? This began to build our shared philosophy about music.

At the end of the session we identified activities to trial in class. The five identified students would be our “window” for review.

Each of the four subsequent workshops over the next two terms began with sharing the achievements of the five target students in each room. This focus allowed teachers to move past what they did, to what the students learnt or demonstrated – Guskey’s fifth stage.

Teachers began to discuss barriers to learning and queries about teaching practice.

I modelled questioning as a tool to increasingly focus teacher reflection. Teachers who were confident in their own musical knowledge mirrored this. They began to lead the conversations from the “what” to the “so what” and “now what” of future planning.

The group members developed a strong degree of trust and were able to gently challenge each other’s assumptions and actions in a way that provided support for the next steps in musical learning.

When we reviewed their initial and end point data we could see that the development of teacher knowledge was huge and evidence of student learning significant.

Features of our professional learning workshops

Each workshop required the teachers to reflect on:

- their own musical learning
- the teaching content or pedagogy
- student learning as they learned to create, play, listen, analyse and represent music in a variety of ways.

Each workshop provided:

- ‘treat’ food and drink
- an opportunity for teachers to become learners through practical musical experiences
- a modelled, scaffolded, teaching structure
- resources adapted for their learners (based on the *Into Music* series,
- national exemplars and resources from TKI
- professional reading
- reflective tasks.

Between workshops teachers trialled strategies, watched and talked to each other about successes and failures. As Tasman is a small school, support was tailored to individual teachers’ learning needs so they could watch modelled lessons, team teach, and gain feedback and feed-forward about their planning and teaching.

Step 4: Review

What has changed?

We have learned that we can trust each other, support each other and challenge each other to do better.

Our students are achieving at or above their expected level in music.

We have bought class sets of ukeleles, tuned and untuned percussion, and looked at ways we can capitalise on each other’s strengths as a staff.

Two of our four classroom teachers are providing key musical leadership.

We welcome musicians to our school, and have private tuition happening within the school walls for guitar, ukelele, flute, and piano.

When parents walk through the school now they might hear “The Stray Cat Strut” belting out from Year 2 and 3 mouths, or our National Anthem being played on recorders and flutes, or our ukelele orchestra, accompanying our new school song.

We know this is the start of a new culture of change because we have listened to our community, focused on our students’ learning, have been active learners and committed to the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning.

The questions: *What have they learnt? How do we know? What do we need to do next?* can be applied to our next key focus. Our students can use them to be reflective learners.

We can use these questions for our own professional learning so that we continue to support each other and challenge our practice.

We have a strong teaching team and a supportive community. I know we will have some challenges along the way, and the odd “curve ball” but I am confident we are in a great position to continue to make learning the main thing!

Step 5: Reflect

Where to next? I am now considering how we build this capacity to reflect and challenge into the fabric of our school culture so that it will be sustained over time and throughout potential staff changes.

References

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