

Sabbatical Report 2009

Rory O'Rourke

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the contribution, support and understanding of the Kaitao Middle School Board of Trustees and the work done by my two Deputy Principals in my absence

Background

.....In 2009 I was fortunate enough to be granted a sabbatical after being turned down the two previous years. The theme of my sabbatical was the same as in 2007 and 2008 and that was to investigate schools and programmes that had successfully involved communities in the learning process of their students. The idea for this had come from an Education Review Office visit in 2007 where we were reported as having strong parent engagement programmes running in the school mainly through our Academy structure which was the catalyst for much of what we had achieved. Our school was written up in the Education Review research booklet on involving parents and whanau the following year.

It was my intention to build on this by investigating other successful schools and programmes and taking the best ideas that suited our school and where appropriate incorporate them in our culture.

.....Kaitao Middle School is a year seven and eight intermediate school that applied to the Ministry of Education in 1997, 1998, and 1999 to become a middle school but eventual after being turned down three times they came in and put a moratorium on the whole of Rotorua for five years saying that no one could change class. At this stage we changed our name, however we are still not recognised as “middle” school by the Ministry of Education. This year we have a roll of 500, are a decile two school with 80% Maori and I have been Principal for seventeen years.

.....I had also decided that I would attempt to finish a degree during the year so enrolled in four online papers through the University of Waikato and to enable me to spread the workload decided to stagger my ten weeks taking three at the end of each term and leaving one for the odd day study leave as required. For me this has not worked as things at school, as they do, conspired against me, but I have an understanding Board of Trustees who are allowing a great deal of flexibility.

Travel

The conference I selected to attend was the Middle Years of Schooling Association Conference in Brisbane and I selected this because one of the strands was "engaging communities." This turned out to be not what I expected and the only workshop which was in anyway connected to the theme was around connecting parents through Student Led Conferences which was an area our school was already committed to in 2009. There were a number of other workshops and keynotes that made the trip worthwhile from an intermediate school point of view and I was able to bring back some interesting presentations which I was able to share with the staff.

Theme

....As a result of this I decided after consultation with my Board of Trustees to still continue with the major theme of my sabbatical but to narrow it down to looking closely at one effective way of involving the community ,in particular parents, in the learning of their children. We decided that we would use our school as a case study to investigate the way in which Student Led Conferencing can increase the number of parents becoming involved in the learning of their child.

The way it was

Traditionally our school has held Parent Teacher Interviews at the beginning of term two and term three with a meet the teacher evening in February and a full written report at the end of the year .This was how it was for a number of years through the late nineties and early two thousand. The conferencing was three way with the teacher taking the lead role and the parent a listener and the student speaking when asked but not really having much input. No matter what strategies we employed to encourage our parents to participate in these interviews we still, on average, only had about 50% of our parent population turn up. The exception to this was the Accelerate Academy (gifted and talented students) who would always get over 90% turnouts. There are probably many reasons for this low turnout and these have been well documented and include ; intermediate schools traditionally do not have high parental turnouts, Maori parents often had bad experiences at school, students, particularly at this age and stage don't want their parents to come so don't give notices to their parents. Teachers also have a vital role to play in ensuring that they get as many of their parents to attend and this can also be a major reason against a high turnout as teachers themselves find the process stressful and as a result do not put in a 100% effort into attracting parents to come. The Parent /Teacher Interview process would take place over a seven hour timeframe from 1pm until 8pm with a break for tea for an hour between 5:30pm and

6:30pm and each interview would be between 10 and 15 minutes. Teachers would invariably run overtime and parents would be kept waiting which is not conducive to building a good relationship with the parent when you are apologising from the start. The setting for these was generally in an attractive part of the school and divorced from the classroom which is the actual working space for the child. Teachers, as previously mentioned, find the whole thing stressful and particularly when they have a difficult parent need support from senior managers in some instances.

Increasing Student and Parental Involvement through Student Led Conferences

If we compare the traditional parent teacher conference with the student led conference we can see immediately the benefits of the latter.

.....teacher driven versus student driven.

.....short time frame conversations versus longer time frame conversations.

.....more focus on social and emotional versus focus on academic.

.....low student accountability versus high student accountability.

.....lack of real goal setting versus wider opportunity for personal goal setting.

.....auditorium type venue versus classroom environment.

The reasons that we decided to move towards student led conferencing were:

1. To further enhance the communication between the home and the school.
2. Our students were able to practice the real life skills of communication, organisation, leadership etc.
3. Student led conferencing teaches self evaluation, self reflection and goal setting.
4. The focus is on learning not the social and emotional side of the student.
5. The goal setting process has the buy in from student, parent and teacher.
6. Timetabling is easier with the ability to cater for more than one parent at one time and parents who just turn up can be catered for.
7. Provides quality time between student and parent.
8. Less stressful for teachers.
9. Accommodates parents who do not speak English as a first language.
10. Students are at the centre.

Planning when to hold the Student Led Conferences .

We made the decision to hold three conferences a year, one at the end of term one mainly for goal setting, one at the beginning of term three and one at the

beginning of term four. We decided to do away with the traditional end of year written report as we felt the information in it would be a repeat of the information in the Learning Journal which the students took home and it became effectively the report of the students learning journey. After we had decided on the timing for the conferences we needed to make some decisions around how we were going to involve our specialist staff in the technology and the arts areas. We decided that because there will be assessment information around the specialist subjects in the Learning Journals and the students should be able to report effectively on their learning in each of the six specialist areas. If a parent would like to speak to a specialist teacher then that could easily be arranged

Organising the conference

We decided that we would leave the time frame flexible and this would allow more than one conference happening at once which was possible given that the teacher was only there to facilitate and answer questions if required. In order to get as many parents to make appointments to attend as possible we had all students write a personal letter to their parent inviting them to the conference and asking for them to respond by suggesting a suitable time to attend. These letters were posted out to avoid the possibility of the students forgetting, conveniently or not, to give them to their parents. We believed that the letters which were creative, expressive and personalized were an important part of getting parents along and welcomed parents, explained the process, explained the learning journal and the importance of the conference. As with the previous parent interviews the teacher has a large role to play in ensuring they remind parents and in this case we asked that teachers phone or text to confirm appointments the day before the conferences. Parents were also reminded about the conferences through the weekly newsletter and our school radio station.

It is important that teachers spend time ensuring that the environment in their classroom is ready for the conferences by having a clean room with student work on display and a place where parents and siblings can wait which is warm with reading materials and games and possibly with some drinks and nibbles. Generally parents should not have to wait long, if at all, as there is room to run several conferences at once. Following the conference have some letters to hand out thanking the parent for their attendance and asking them to give some written feedback to their child which may be;

The thing I enjoyed most about your work was....

I was most proud of your work in.....

You produced some excellent work in.....

Keep trying in.....

You need to put in an extra effort in.....

How can I help you at home?.....

On the day after the conferences celebrate the success with the class, have a feedback session with the class and revisit each student's goals five or six weeks later

Preparing Teachers for Conferences

In order to have successful Student Led Conferences there needs to be preparation by teachers by setting common goals, deciding what professional development is required and clarifying the teachers new role as a facilitator and their place in the process .During the lead up period the teacher has several important responsibilities and they include ensuring that appropriate samples of real work are being recorded, assessments are regular and meaningful, students are aware of their learning and are able to articulate it through self reflection. Self reflection helps students to understand the learning process and to teach them to assess themselves as a learner. It encourages honest recognition of strengths, areas of weakness and the setting of better goals. Self evaluation on the other hand is the ability to assess performance against a standard in order to judge quality of performance and for this we use National Standards through rubrics. Students can be prepared to self evaluate through a variety of activities such as responding to highly specific writing tasks, drawing pictures or webbing the process, making graphs of effort, satisfaction interest and value, letters to teacher or self evaluative essays, class and one on one discussions.

Initially it is the teachers responsibility to select and collect work samples for the Learning Journal and how much to collect and a mixture of student and teacher selected sample needs to be taken into consideration. It is also the teacher's responsibility to help students to select appropriate work for review of self evaluation and to allow time to practice sharing work with peers or teacher. It is also a good idea to have a prepared script for students to follow or fall back on should they become stuck This year also we have three digital classes in our Discovery Academy who are using technology to create e-portfolios or e-Learning

Journals and in 2010 all classes will be expected to use technology to collect and display students work.

Teacher observations following the first Student Led Conferencing in April

.....Most of the students were proud in their bearing and voice, to be sharing their journals.

.....Some of the students were hopelessly tongue-tied and uncomfortable and these were usually those students who had lower literacy skills.

.....Students who had siblings attend the interviews were frustrated with the interruptions of their brothers/sisters while they were trying to talk about themselves and felt it was their moment to shine. To overcome this we decided that next time we would have a designated area where siblings could play, read or watch TV.

.....The drinks and nibbles available before the event seemed to break the ice and was a good starting point for the conferencing.

.....The teachers reported being far more relaxed and entered the conversations when requested to do so by the student or parent or if they felt the student was appearing out of their depth or the teacher had a special comment to make.

....."The atmosphere in the classroom was pretty neat and the students were really excited about showing their parents the work they had been doing."

....."Our focus has been on helping our students to understand where they are and what comes next in their learning....this isn't as simple as it sounds... what we have to become really good at is motivating students to learn.

....."It was amazing to hear students talking to their parents about maths stages and what they have to do to get to the next stage; they explained what inferencing was and what they had achieved in reading. I left here last night thinking how much more effective it had been compared to the old fashioned parent interviews."

....."I take Student Led Conferences very seriously and have a three way process firstly invitation letters are posted home...secondly I confirm by phone or text two days prior to evening and thirdly on the day I follow up any sick students with a new appointment. This ensured a 95% turn out."

What the parents say about Student Led Conferences

As part of the initial process parents attending were asked to complete a brief survey and some of their responses were;

.....“my child is more reflective, more self confident, self directed and owning their own work.”

.....“I am so impressed with the enthusiasm my son has shown for his learning and understanding of his schoolwork.”

.....“I stay at the conference for much longer because they are so informative.”

.....“I am pleased to see that my son knows what he needs to achieve to improve his grades”

.....“I am ashamed to say that this is the first time I have been to a parent evening but I will be attending more now that I have seen how proud my son was of his work”

..... “I am now able to see what I can do to help my daughter at home.”

What do the students say about Student Led Conferences

One of the most important participants in the conferencing is the student so what did they say about it?

..... “I love it...it encourages me to be more organised”

..... “It helps bring out the best in me.”

..... “I enjoy creating my own learning journal as I am in charge of my own learning”

..... “My mum now knows how to help me at home.”

..... “ I enjoyed sharing my learning with my dad and we were able to set goals for my future learning”

Student Led Conferences and the National Standards

The National Standards require schools to report to parents against the National Standards twice a year in a format that is easily understood by parents. Student Led Conferencing still has a place and we decided as a school that a simple report format indicating the student’s position in relation to national standards in reading, writing and mathematics could be given at the mid and final conference.

Turn-out by Academy

At the beginning of the year Senior Management had high expectations for an increased level of parental involvement through the Student Led Conferences and

we hoped, through refining the processes, that the percentage of parents attending would increase. This did not happen but the process did teach us some valuable lessons on the way and we look forward to 2010 with confidence. Our school is divided into Academies which are designed to build on students' preferred learning styles:

Accelerate Academy is for our gifted and talented and students sit a test to get in. Discovery is for students who enjoy working with technologies and has a science emphasis.

Expressive is for students who learn best through music, arts, drama, and performance.

Challenge is for students who enjoy health, sport, physical education and fitness.

Adventure Learning is for students who are reading three years below chronological on entry to our school and do not have a choice of Academy.

Enterprise is a business model, careers, environmental and Primary Enterprise Programme orientated Academy.

ACADEMY	TERM ONE	TERM TWO	TERM FOUR
ACCELERATE	96%	75%	74%
DISCOVERY	49%	47%	40%
CHALLENGE	48%	40%	27%
EXPRESSIVE	47%	42%	50%
ADVENTURE	75%	78%	83%
ENTERPRISE	30%	40%	36%
RUMAKI	20%	25%	8%

Of note is that the two Academies that performed best were the two at the opposite ends of the academic ladder.

Conclusion

2009 has been a learning experience for us all in regards to Student Led Conferences but for those who have been involved they have proven their value in a number of ways and we can look forward to 2010 with confidence and an understanding of what we need to put in place to ensure that we get a higher turnout than we did during the last conference sessions of the year. All of the

feedback we have had regarding Student Led Conferences has been positive and there has been no negative feedback even from those teachers who were originally sceptical. There has been a growing realisation from all stakeholders that this is the only way that we can put the student as the learner at the forefront of the process and ensure that they know where they have come from in their learning, where they are now and where they are going.