The Ariki Project

This report outlines the work undertaken by Kay Tester, principal of St Brigid's School, Johnsonville Wellington, during her sabbatical leave taken in Term 3 2011. It incorporates her original sabbatical proposal along with the role of Ariki programme director undertaken during this time.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the inspiring work our Ariki Project director Dr David Stewart and thank him for his time and support. Many thanks to our President at the time, Peter Simpson, and the wonderful team at NZPF office for supporting the project and providing me with a desk and great company during this time. Thanks to all the teachers and principals that I have had the privilege of meeting and working with during this time and to my Board of Trustees, and school staff for supporting me to undertake a sabbatical and for keeping things going so smoothly in my absence.

Purpose

The purpose of the sabbatical leave was to have the opportunity to continue to develop my professional learning in the area of reflective practice with a particular focus on the four major values held for the Ariki Project:

- Collegial obligations – teachers are professionals and schools function as teams;
- Reflective inquiry and discourse is the core of professional development;
- Evidenced based and professional practice spreads across all school activity; and
- Professional discretion – the belief that there are multiple ways of thinking and many ways of achieving the same aim is encouraged and supported

Rationale and background

Over the past five years St Brigid's has been involved in the Ariki Project; an innovative piece of work based around the notion of rich professional conversations and critique and how working in this way can establish meaning and authenticate purpose for what teachers and principals do. For two of these years the project was funded by the Ministry of Education and now continues to thrive with the support of NZPF, NZEI and the 44 schools currently involved.

Activities undertaken

- Providing support for schools on the Ariki Project in the form of resource development, facilitation of staff meetings, attendance of principal and teacher QLC meetings, school visits

- Working with Dr David Stewart to further develop my understanding of school development
- Situating the Ariki project within current research on leadership and reflective practice
- Facilitating discussion on the intent and purpose of the Ariki Project for interested principals and groups of principals
- Exploring how Quality Learning Circles and classroom visits can contribute to and strengthen a school's inquiry cycle

Findings

People like to work in groups. They enjoy problem solving and debating ideas together. This has been acknowledged and well supported by the Ministry of Education for a number of years now and can be evidenced by the large number of principal professional learning groups that have continued to meet and support one another long after the particular Ministry contract that put them together has expired. The aim of the Ariki Project is to further expand and strengthen this way of working (Stewart, 2008).

The particular form of reflective group used in the Ariki Project is the Quality Learning Circle. This concept has been operating in some New Zealand schools for a number of years and has been the source of research as a model of professional development (Lovett, 2002, 2003, 2004). The teachers and principals of the schools currently on the Ariki Project are at various stages of either developing or strengthening the protocols and processes of the Quality Learning Circle as a vehicle for improving their reflective practice.

Teaching is a creative and highly complex activity. It is more than going through a series of steps to achieve an end that is already known. Recent educational reforms in many countries around the world, particularly in New Zealand have relied heavily on managerialist structures to ensure implementation and compliance (Sachs, 2001). These current methods of accountability and schooling improvement have many critics. A system of managerial surveillance and control of teachers has produced a culture in which trust is no longer taken to be the foundation of professional ethics. The potential for further erosion of collegiality and trust arises as principals are required to justify teachers' promotions and salary advancements through performance assessments. It can be argued that such forms of managerial surveillance are damaging because they discount many teachers' commitments to professionally ethical forms of accountability such as the teachers' code of ethics (Codd & Scrivens, 2005; Court, 2005). Within the critical discourse on the managerialism of education is the belief that this approach has a negative impact on teacher professionalism and teacher professional identity (Hargreaves, 1994, 2008; Sachs, 2001; Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid, & Shacklock, 2000; Thrupp, 2003, 2004, 2005; Snook, 2003).

If teaching is seen as the unproblematic and straightforward undertaking, one that can be standardised and controlled to improve its effectiveness, this perpetuates what Simpson,

Jackson and Alcock (2005) claim to be one of 'the most dangerous contemporary ideological errors which hinders students' learning and limits their lives.' What is needed in today's environment is to keep the debate going strongly about the nature of teaching and how best to deal with the challenges of working under conditions of rapid change. Teachers need new, more flexible ways of thinking about their practice. They need to build communities of practice that require sustained engagement and help them to develop and negotiate shared meanings (Sachs, 2001).

The Ariki model seeks to focus on interactions to address the question of balance between accountability and professional autonomy; between professional development and external judgement. 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 the initiative that is placed in the hands of the teachers. They decide what is important rather than being directed by some external authority. They present authentic aspects of their work to talk about to their colleagues and to listen to other's observations and reflect on their critique. They get to problem solve together; to make new meaning from these interactions and to accumulate new knowledge and skill which will lead to improved professional judgement about their teaching practice.

Professional learning is a collective good in that it needs to contribute to the individual's capacity to improve the quality of instruction within their school. School leaders and teachers who support and work with each other, motivated by a shared learning vision, finding ways inside and outside their immediate community, to enquire on their practice and together learn new and better approaches will enhance all pupils learning (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Thomas, Wallace, Greenwood and Hawkey, 2006).

Professional learning communities are a mechanism for bringing about change in teachers and change in schools. They have the potential to develop the kinds of adult relationships in schools that can support individual change in classrooms (Spillane & Louis, 2002). The pre-condition to doing anything to develop such communities and strengthen teaching practice is the existence of a culture that encourages teachers and school leaders to talk about their practice, share their craft knowledge, demonstrate openness to new knowledge and observe and celebrate the success of one another.   Key ingredients to developing this culture of collaboration are empowerment, recognition, satisfaction and success in one's work. The best way to achieve this is to be an active participant within a group of colleagues as the strength of the individual comes from the strength of the group.

There is considerable research published on the subject of professional development through professional communities and its potential to improve learning. These findings have repeatedly confirmed that professional learning communities are an effective means of improving teacher capacity and as a consequence raising student achievement (Hord, 1997, Fullan 1999, Knapp, 2003; Leithwood & Levin, 2005; Levin, 2008). The research

highlights the complexity of establishing successful professional learning communities as the findings also point out that some are successful while others have little or no effect.

The concept of a professional learning community is not a new one. However its importance can be seen in the way it forms a basis for synthesising the conceptions of writers on education for some time now. Research on effective contexts for promoting professional learning opportunities that impact on a range of student outcomes identifies the provision of opportunities to interact in a community of professionals as a key element (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007). Achieving this kind of professional growth demands that teachers and school leaders engage in reflective dialogue and sharing of practice.

Strong relationships as well as the nature of those relationships are a critical element of a successful school culture. The establishment of a collective agreement that sees everyone working towards sharing and acting on learning in order to improve their professionalism will ultimately be of benefit to students.   Such a collective focus and culture of collaboration leads to well-coordinated practices and a sense of connection, belonging and support. As a result teachers and school leaders can respond confidently to new policies and the myriad of other changes that schools today are often faced with (Fullan, 1997, 1999).

A strong culture of collegiality develops in a school because of the kind of relationships that exist among the staff. It is these relationships that define all relationships within a school's culture. The nature of the relationships among the adults within a school has a greater influence on the character and quality of that school and on student accomplishment than anything else (Barth, 2006). They have avoided the 'contrived collegiality that Hargreaves (1997) warns against; whereby people are 'persuaded to work together so as to implement other peoples' mandates'. They have instead, established a culture where teachers and school leaders talk about their practice, share their craft knowledge, observe one another and rejoice in one another's success.

They have also moved beyond congenial relationships; those that exist in abundance in most schools; interactive, positive, personal and friendly. They make a difficult and challenging job more pleasant but they do not grow or guarantee a professional learning community. For this to develop a school needs collegial relationships and these, while highly desirable, are far more complex and elusive.

The decades of research on effective schools identify that schools must have high expectations for all students and that teachers must believe that they have the capacity to teach all their students (Hargreaves, 1994, 2007; Thrupp, 2004, 2005; Robinson, 2007; Elmore, 2006; Levin, 2008). A key element of professional learning communities is the notion of a shared vision focused on student learning and the collective responsibility for achieving this (Hord, 1997). There is more likelihood of teachers pursuing their individual

and collective learning when there are supportive conditions in the school; essential to this is effective leadership (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990).

Implications

School leaders need to be looking for correlations between their own intents and what teachers actually do in their classrooms. In a distributed leadership situation the role of the principal is to ensure co-ordination and alignment with the stated goals of the school (Robinson, 2007). Activities such as professional development and collegial support need to be connected to a coherent and well espoused set of goals to have an effect on teacher practice. Principals need to master ways of talking about practice that allow for non-threatening support, critique and judgment. Creating multiple avenues of interaction among classroom teachers within and between schools is essential to achieving this along with keeping the focus on the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. By doing this leaders can build a culture of collective responsibility for teaching practice and students' learning. They can set the tone for improvement by modelling active learning, investing time in the process, showing respect for the ideas of others and actively supporting a culture of inquiry (Newmann et al, 1996; Elmore 2000; Robinson, 2007).

Unless school leaders can engage others in leading they will be unable to spread and mobilise the expertise necessary for improvement to happen in their schools. Schools need structures that will support this kind of development. The Ariki project provides a way of involving the whole school in the same process. It links principal interactions with teachers' work and seeks to closely align the activities that occur in the classroom to those that occur at senior level.

School leaders need to be able to articulate what they believe about the notion of 'accountability'. A high level of internal accountability exists in schools that have high agreement on their values and this is evidenced by coherence in their practices. Schools are more likely to develop this desired but elusive high internal accountability if they have knowledgeable and skilful leaders, as leadership is instrumental in developing internal accountability (Elmore, 2006). Work undertaken by Elmore and Fullan on accountability and school improvement has found that leaders who are high on internal accountability are not passive or reactive leaders. They do not do as they are told but instead make the best use of the accountability system to gain resources for their school and increase their own capacity. They are able to accommodate the "rules" around compliance into their own strategic reasoning.

Developing a professional learning community is a complex and challenging activity. While professional learning communities provide a collective process for teachers and principals to continue to improve their practices, they require structures to ensure their effectiveness. For genuine learning to take place the group must be able to become engaged with real ideas and practices, supported by friendly yet incisive critique of current

practice (Levin, 2008).

Professional communities should not be seen as an 'add-on' to a long list of school development activities but as a mechanism that can bring about change in teachers and change in schools.

More acknowledgement should be accorded to the classroom as an important site for teacher learning. Teachers, particularly those in primary schools spend the majority of their time in their classrooms so efforts to create opportunities for classroom based learning to improve practice deserve serious attention. It is unfortunate that in New Zealand along with many other countries, this powerful site for teacher learning is often overlooked and opportunities for teacher learning are usually seen happening beyond the classroom and with expertise external to the group of participating teachers. As teachers are the key agents for changing classroom practice it makes sense to provide opportunities for them to have genuine conversations about improvement. In order to improve their practice teachers have to question, clarify, consider and often unlearn and discard considerable amounts of their current understanding of content and pedagogy. This can often be an extremely complex and challenging process. Changing instructional practice requires enabling teachers to take charge of their own practice, providing opportunities for them to examine and reconstruct the practice along with the beliefs and justifications that support it (Richardson, 1990).

The classroom has enormous potential for being a powerful site for teacher learning and the transformation of teaching practice. But in order for this to happen, teachers must have strong connections to other people both within and beyond their school. They must be willing to deprivatise their classroom practice and have openness to colleagues viewing their teaching and a willingness to learn from their feedback. They must be an active participant of an effective professional community.

Conclusion

Schools have an obligation to provide the highest possible quality of teaching and learning experience for every student who enters their gates. They should also be able to provide evidence that they strive for excellence to parents and to the education community. Addressing the issue of accountability systems that function predominately in a regulatory mode needs a complete different view of what accountability is. Currently the human investment side of the work is undervalued and often overlooked. If this was addressed and more investment made in the human knowledge and skill required to form strong practices of improvement then the result would see increases in performance and quality over time (Elmore, 2006).

The Ariki project offers a practice of accountability and a network for school development. It has the potential to develop strong collegial relationships among participants as it

provides a process for connecting classroom teachers and school leaders with the knowledge required to improve their work and with other practitioners faced with similar challenges in their practice.   The processes and protocols at the heart of the programme will create an infrastructure within and across schools through which knowledge about content and pedagogy can be made available to all participants.

The necessary condition for success of school leaders in the future will be their capacity to improve the quality of instructional practice within their schools. The ability to achieve this is dependent on a practice of school development; one that is able to distribute high quality performance both within and across schools (Elmore, 2006). The Ariki project provides an effective process for distributing leadership across the school. As teachers become more confident with the processes and protocols of the quality learning circles and subsequent classroom visits and observations and school improvement advances, the leadership within the school will begin to move beyond the traditional lines of positional authority and begin to follow the distribution of knowledge and skill within all school staff.

Hargreaves (2009) believes that after the wake of the greatest economic upheaval for half a century, society is seeking a different approach to the current one dominated by control by markets and bureaucracy; to a revitalised professionalism and public democracy.   The Ariki project with its liberal, democratic approach is an example of one already moving in this direction.   Principals need a high degree of skill to help them build a professional community of learners within their schools. If teachers are provided with a greater degree of autonomy and responsibility over their instructional practices then this has the potential to increase their level of accountability beyond what a hierarchal system may achieve.

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