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Principal's Sabbatical: Marcellin College – 2012

Principal: Dennis Fahey

Time: First ten weeks of Term 3, 2012

Focus of Sabbatical

The focus of this Sabbatical was to study in depth the best means of developing student self-management at Marcellin College so that students leave the College as independent and self-motivated learners who are capable of building on this beyond school.

Acknowledgements

The University of Exeter

Doctor Kerry Chappell, Research Fellow, University of Exeter

Professor Anna Craft, Aspire Director, University of Exeter

New Zealand Catholic Education Office

New Zealand Catholic Schools Principals' Association

Executive Summary

I was granted a sabbatical to be taken in 2011 but the Christchurch earthquake, unexpected capital developments at Marcellin College and notification of an Education Review Office visit made this impractical. I am grateful that I was able to have the sabbatical deferred until 2012. The change in timing meant that I needed to reassess what I was setting out to achieve and how I would actually achieve it.

Thanks to the financial assistance gained from two scholarships from the New Zealand Catholic Education Office and the New Zealand Catholic Principals'

Association, I was able to extend my search beyond New Zealand to find suitable research material for the topic I wished to investigate.

It was at this stage I discovered the Aspiring Project being run through the University of Exeter in England. While my general line of enquiry centred on improving student engagement throughout the school, I was particularly interested in finding ways to improve Year 13 students' engagement, in particular.

We had tried several strategies over the years but had failed to discover an effective solution for a particular group of Year 13 students each year who had been engaged in Years 11 and 12 but appeared to lose interest during Year 13 and their achievement suffered accordingly. The aspect of Aspire that interested me in trying to solve this problem was its heavy emphasis on a 'bottom up' approach which empowers students to take control of their own learning and to identify the issues which prevent learning taking place. It requires a flattening of the normally-accepted school structure and its replacement by a structure in which all participants are given equal status. It does not mean that the teacher stands back and lets things happen but the role does change to one of being more of a mentor and guide, journeying with the students to better learning outcomes.

Under the guidance of an Aspire Lead Teacher (ALT), a process is followed which puts in place a team of teachers, students and, where possible, parents who will lead a particular project. The group will formulate a research question related to the issue which has been identified and work together to put in place the necessary steps to research and analyse the problem, to map out an action plan for implementation and to evaluate outcomes.

The project views the performative function of schools as important where the academic achievement of students is given priority but it also moves beyond this into aspects of the whole person which are not so easily measured. It is in these aspects, such as creativity and emotional development, that lack of acknowledgement of their importance in providing positive feedback on achievement, can often leave students frustrated by this lack of acknowledgement of their achievements.

The process is research-based and requires the careful collection and analysis of data which forms the basis of the way forward and the evaluation.

The outcome of the process for Marcellin College will, I hope, be the identification of those matters which are preventing student engagement and the opportunity for us to deal with them in a systematic way to bring about improvement for those involved.

With the opportunity to travel overseas, I was also most appreciative of the opportunity to visit St Chamond in France and visit L'Hermitage where the Marist Brothers, the founding Order of Marcellin College, were first instituted. This was where the Founder, St Marcellin Champagnat, grew up, became a priest and began the Order of the Marist Brothers. Having been a Marist

Brother myself for a time, the visit had special significance. The three days spent there gave me the time to explore the countryside in which Champagnat lived and worked and also the opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of the man, his times and his vision.

Finally, the sabbatical provided a wonderful opportunity for me to reflect on my last seven years as a Principal since my last sabbatical and to plan for the future.

Purpose:

The purpose of this sabbatical was to investigate in depth how maximum student engagement could be achieved with particular reference to, initially at least, Year 13 students and then to adapt this process, over a period of time, to all levels of the school.

Background and Rationale

During my first sabbatical in 2005, I was fortunate enough to be able to attend a course on Moral Leadership at the University of Nottingham. A key component of this course was the development of a set of Core Values upon which schools could base their development. Personally, it was a turning point for me as a leader. From this, we developed a set of Core Values which are now embedded as part of the College. The effect of the implementation of these values has been commented upon very favourably by two Education Review Office Reports and two Catholic Character Reviews.

One of the six values which emerged from the development of the Core Values was: "Students are motivated to take pride in, and responsibility for, their own learning and, in the process, develop strong self-discipline". With the advent of the new New Zealand Curriculum, considerable emphasis was given to 'managing self' and we set about integrating this Value with the new Curriculum. It was viewed as most important that we concentrate on ensuring, to the best possible extent, that students leave Marcellin College as strongly independent learners who wished to continue learning through the remainder of their lives.

It was decided that, rather than attempt to address this across all levels of the school, we would begin with an area of major concern and work from there. For a number of years I had felt uncomfortable with the number of Year 13 students who had achieved well in Years 11 and 12 and then for some reason appeared to lose motivation to achieve in their final year. In 2010, with the possibility of a second sabbatical, I decided I would investigate possible methods of keeping as many students as possible engaged at Year 13.

Although the sabbatical was granted for 2011, it did not eventuate in that year. Advice received from ERO indicated that some very good work was happening

in both Christchurch and on the West Coast and it was in these places that I had hoped to carry out research. However, the two earthquakes in Christchurch made this impractical. Notification of a major building programme at our College and an Education Review Office visit in 2011 further complicated having a sabbatical in that year. Fortunately, I was able to defer the sabbatical until 2012.

In the meantime, I was able to gain two scholarships through the New Zealand Catholic Education Office and the New Zealand Catholic Principal's Association. This enabled me to look beyond New Zealand for ideas and I am most grateful to both organisations for the opportunity provided to do so. It was at this stage that I discovered the Aspiring Project which was being run through the University of Exeter in England. I made contact with Professor Anna Craft, who, along with an associate, Doctor Kerry Chappell, agreed to share the Project with me and to look at the possibility of piloting it in New Zealand. The Project appeared to provide a different way of looking at improving student engagement and, while quite radical, offered what I thought to be a workable solution which could well be of value to the whole school community.

Methodology

Initially, my intention was to research a number of possible means of increasing student engagement. However, the more involved I became in the Aspiring Project, the more I realised that this could well contain the solutions we were looking for and that I needed to spend a concentrated period studying the concepts and processes involved. Thus it was agreed with Exeter University that the following steps would be put in place:

1. I would receive and read preliminary background documents on the Project before arriving in Exeter.
2. I would then meet with Professor Anna Craft and mainly, Doctor Kerry Chappell and work through the theoretical basis for Aspiring and how it can be implemented. This would also include a visit to at least one Aspiring school.
3. I would then return to New Zealand and spend time studying the information I had received in depth and formulate a plan for its implementation in 2013.
4. Before the end of my sabbatical, I would submit the work I had completed to Doctor Chappell for further discussion.
5. Doctor Chappell would continue to offer mentoring in 2013 and assistance would also be received from St Peters Anglican School in Exeter – a very successful Aspiring school.

Findings

The Aspire process provides the strong possibility that we will be able to approach the issue of student disengagement at Year 13 from a new and challenging angle. Other methods trialled have not been overly successful. A pilot of the programme in 2013 will require strong leadership by a group of committed students, staff and, if possible, parents.

During my investigation of Aspire, I found a programme that worked from 'the bottom up'. By its very nature, Aspire starts with where the students are, rather than where staff presume them to be. It is the students who identify the issues that are most important to them in their learning. Having identified them, it is also essential that the students play a leading role in analysing the issues and then continuing in this role to formulate possible solutions.

Often the issues identified are not easily measured and demand a different approach and it is out of this need that Aspire mainly arose. The curriculum in England seven or eight years ago had a very heavy weighting towards the core subjects and the performative assessment. Aspire emerged from the belief that in such an environment, many of the creative aspects of such subjects as Drama and Dance were failing to acknowledge key elements within them.

In order to cater for the more creative aspects of subjects, it was necessary to produce a basis on which such outcomes could be measured. It would require a completely different approach from that for the more performative assessment carried out in the more traditional core subjects but it would also require an academic rigour which would validate the findings from the data collected. It needed to measure the level of engagement of students in a variety of situations and use the data collated to map a way forward.

As referred to earlier, Aspire requires a change in approach to learning. Of paramount importance is the flattening of existing hierarchies so that there is a strong sense of equality for all involved in the learning process. This does not mean that staff sit back and leave it to the students. The staff are always there in a guiding role but they are urging the students to identify the issues they see as hindering their learning.

The above does require a 'letting go' by staff but always present in the process is the requirement for all involved to work collaboratively. The process always requires student and staff participation and, preferably, parents as well if it is practical. There needs to develop among all involved a strong empathy, shared ownership and group identity. This is a journey to be shared in by all the participants. There must exist a code of ethics which all adhere to so that all know they can trust each other at all times.

Thus, the Aspire Project seeks to engage students, teachers and parents in collaborative evidence-based learning transformation. Student leadership and engagement are emphasised together with participation and person-centred management. It places student voice at the core of transforming learning

opportunities in schools while recognising the dominant model of performance as high performance.

The process and the thinking behind it:

The Aspiring project can be carried out school-wide but it is probably better trialled with a smaller group and then extended to other groups throughout the school. Each school needs to set their own goals, time limits, means of assessment and rules which best suit the strategies they are undertaking.

All staff then do not need to be involved in the process but all need to be aware of its existence within the school and of what those who are involved, are attempting to do. This is probably best done through a whole staff meeting. In England, this part of the process would probably be done in conjunction with the University of Exeter representatives. However, it is always viewed as essential that the school's Senior Management Team is fully supportive of the development and that one Senior Manager has a strong commitment to, and takes overall responsibility for, the project. It could well be this person who briefs the staff. In situations where there has not been SMT involvement, the project has struggled to get off the ground.

The Senior Manager involved then needs to set about putting in place an Aspiring Lead Teacher. This will be the person responsible for the running of the project in the school. This person will need to be taken through a more detailed description of the project and its workings. An area requiring development in the school then needs to be identified. It is then a matter of focusing on the groups of students involved (for example, Year 13 students) and finding a small group of three or four staff who teach the students and would wish to become involved in the project. The Senior Manager and the Aspiring Lead Teacher would then spend time explaining the Project in more detail to these staff. This group would then look to the student body involved for 6-8 leaders among the group but who are representative of the cross section of the students and invite them to become part of the leadership team which will set about addressing the issues involved. It is at this stage that the Day One Training Programme is set up for this lead group.

The Aspire Process in Action

The first of two training days is absolutely pivotal in the development of this project. This first training day is made up of seven sessions. While there is much to be covered, it is important the leaders of the day ensure that the sessions are not extended beyond the given time so that the participants do not become bogged down by detail. The first session concentrates on 'flattening the hierarchy' – an important premise upon which Aspiring is based. It will also attempt to link a peer mentor (a teacher) with each student. A quick exercise such as lining up according to birthdays would indicate that all have a voice to

be listened to, followed by all sharing the most meaningful learning experience they have ever had – inside or outside of school – and why it was so memorable. This is also the time for the group to set clear rules about the ethics involved in working in such a group, i.e. rules need to be set so that everyone is comfortable expressing themselves. If staff and students are going to take the risks required to fuel real progress, all need to be aware that any lack of integrity by any member could undermine the whole process. Students need to be linked to their mentor by the end of this session and to be aware that all present are now part of the Aspire Lead Team.

The second session centres on providing the group with some indicators as to the nature of Aspiring. There is a list of statements available (See Appendix 1). All are asked to comment on which of the statements describe what is happening in their school and to put them in order from those they see happening the most to the least. Some examples of statements are:

We see everyone in the school (staff, pupils, parents) as equals.

We are finding out how we learn best.

We all suggest ideas and listen to other people's ideas.

A second exercise well worth the group looking at would be the creativity axis as shown in Appendix 2. All members of the group are able to study this, place themselves on it, ask where they would like to be and how they are going to get there and then share this in the process.

This session then is about getting all to think about change and students, in particular, to begin to think about those ideas which are going to best bring about positive changes to their learning.

Having been introduced to the Aspire thinking, the next session concentrates on finding out exactly where the focus of the Project is going to be. In order to begin this part of the process, a particular tool – ‘under the microscope’ – is used. In pairs, the team begin suggesting what is right about their current learning, what could be improved and what changes they would make. Using a large sheet of paper and post-it notes, ideas are then pooled, the repetitive ideas removed along with those which have little support. With the remaining ideas, it is then a matter of coming to an agreement about which idea will become the focal point for further action. This will become the research question for this particular Aspire Project.

The next session concentrates on investigating all aspects of the chosen question. This can be achieved by setting up a game of Snakes & Ladders. The sheet is already drawn up with the numbers, snakes and ladders on it and given to half the group. It is their task then to draw up lists of both the challenges/ negatives and the existing positives in the school that relate to the chosen question and then to place them on appropriate numbers on the ‘board’. While this is happening, the other half of the group gets their first taste of a very important aspect of Aspire. They observe and record the discussion, noting

what the participants say and how they interact (use Appendix 3 for observation and recording of data). They are beginning in their roles as researchers. The groups then swap roles. At the end a debrief follows so that the positives and negatives are clear to all and the subsequent observations are kept aside.

The fifth session builds on the work done in the prior session. Again, half the group takes the list of positives and negatives posed by the research question and maps out on a sheet of paper which of these ideas need to be factored into the planning. As further practice in recording data, the other half of the group use the 'involvement' scale (see Appendix 3) as such observations are going to play an essential role later as the group looks to use data as the basis for changes that will be required. The groups again swap roles. What has been happening in these groups are what the Aspire Project terms 'learning conversations' where the interaction is focused, respectful and participatory by all involved. The debrief at the end of this session centres on sharing what was observed about the learning conversations as well as the content of the conversations.

The next session returns to the matter of the ethics involved in the process. All have had, by then, a taste of the Aspire process and will have seen the necessity for all to be totally trustworthy in their dealings with each other. Not only is this important within the lead group, but it will also be equally important when observations outside the group will be required to collect data.

The penultimate session centres around the planning that will be necessary so that a start can be made on how the research will be carried out and by when and whom. Thought needs to be given to how the changes that emerge from the research will be actioned through the setting of manageable goals and how what is achieved will be evaluated. The debrief for this session could centre on further discussion centred on the Aspire axis and whether there has been any movement by those involved during the day.

The final session will be the longest of the day – about an hour in length. During this session there needs to be drawn up a list of what needs to be done, by whom and by when. This needs to be committed to paper in an agreed structure. Central to this is what data needs to be collected relating to the research question, how it will be collected and by whom – all of this will lead to Aspire Day 2 which will be incorporated into the planning. The conclusions from this data will then be used to identify the changes necessary, how they will be implemented, what data will be required and how it will be collected and used to assess progress made.

The Aspire process is not something that can happen overnight. It is incremental by nature and should be broken down into small manageable steps. Understanding the process itself takes time and different people will do this at different rates. What makes it different is that it is primarily the students who have identified what they view to be a particular barrier to their learning and they have been instrumental in formulating and implementing the solution.

Implications

1. The Aspiring process will need to be adapted to New Zealand conditions and, in particular, to the current needs of Marcellin College.
2. Previously, the introduction of Aspire to schools has been done in conjunction with the staff of the University of Exeter. This form of support will not be directly available and will need to be replaced with the mentoring of key staff by University personnel.
3. For the project to be successful, the recruitment of receptive and energetic staff will be essential.
4. The funding required will need to be budgeted for and approval sought from the Board of Trustees.
5. The project will commence with a particular issue in mind which centres around a particular year level within the College.
6. It will be included in the school's 2013 – 2015 Strategic Plan under the student engagement initiative and evaluated accordingly.

Benefits

1. The time to learn about, and reflect upon, the Aspiring process has provided me with the opportunity to approach the issue of student engagement from a completely different angle.
2. The Project has also challenged me personally to move out of my normal comfort zone into a far more student-lead approach to learning.
3. It has also made me far more aware of the need to collect data carefully as a means of measuring not only performative achievement but also of how important it is to be able to measure the more creative aspects of the curriculum which also form an important part of students' lives.
4. There are four major initiatives selected for Marcellin College over the next three years. One centres, as previously mentioned, around student engagement and two of the others, the development of thinking skills and student leadership, tie in very neatly with what Aspire seeks to achieve.

Conclusion

This sabbatical has provided me with a much-needed opportunity to fulfil more than the purpose stated at the outset. The chance to investigate the Aspiring Project was most definitely the highlight of the sabbatical and I appreciate greatly the assistance of the staff involved from Exeter University in allowing the process to be trialed at Marcellin College in 2013. Their willingness to provide mentoring is much appreciated also. It is very much an added bonus that this work on student engagement fits in so neatly with two other major initiatives at Marcellin on thinking skills and student leadership.

The opportunity to travel to France and L'Hermitage also provided me with a fresh insight into the charism of the founder of the Marist Brothers and this was a source of personal fulfilment I had not originally expected to receive from the sabbatical.

Finally, I am most grateful for the opportunity to step aside from my duties as a Principal for a second time. It has allowed me to reflect on what I have been doing, where I hope to go in the future and to relax.

References

Kerry Chappell, Aspire Research Fellow & Anna Craft, Aspire Director, Aspire Final Report, Aspire South West December 2008, University of Exeter.

Kerry Chappell & Anna Craft. Creative Learning Conversations: producing living dialogic spaces, University of Exeter.

Reflection on Visit to L'Hermitage

Personally, the trip to St Chamond was firstly, an opportunity to visit the area I had heard and read so much about from the time I first attended Xavier College in Christchurch, through my time as a Marist Brother until my present position as Principal of Marcellin College. Furthermore, I had the time to reflect on what I saw and heard and to form some conclusions – whether they be valid or invalid. I was privileged to have the services of an Australian Brother, Brother Neville, who was very much steeped in the history of the area and times which he shared freely.

The first point that struck me was that Marcellin Champagnat was responding to his times rather than to the poor alone. Marcellin came from a reasonably well off family and that they did not have a great amount of money was more the

result of mismanagement by his father than of actual poverty. The villages and homes in the area around L'Hermitage were not those of the poor and they are not now either. The situation Marcellin found himself in was the result of a political situation which left many French people unable to practise their religion or gain an education as consequence of the French Revolution.

Marcellin saw the need to provide the young with a knowledge of God and an all important education that the state was no longer providing. Thus he set about providing schooling opportunities for the children of the local area and the Marist Brothers were founded accordingly. It appears that in this process, Marcellin made it very clear that the educational opportunities he was providing extended to all children of the area and that it was particularly important that all children have equal access to them and that special care be given to the most disadvantaged.

In responding to the needs of his local area in France at the time, Marcellin created a clear vision on which the Marist Brothers would be based. The need for religion and education were by no means restricted to France at this time and the growth of the Marist Brothers was a response to this need and thus they spread to many countries to bring God and education to all those who needed it.

Marcellin, then, identified a need in his times and responded to it. Would he ask that today's Marists, both religious and lay, also identify the needs of the times and review the vision keeping in mind especially those who do not have an equal opportunity to participate in society?

A second insight gained was into the person of Champagnat himself. His father was a skilled craftsman, businessman and politician. He was a leading figure in his community and the house the family owned was by no means that of a destitute family. What Marcellin lacked was the education that his father had received and utilised all his life.

Marcellin may have struggled academically because of a lack of literacy skills but this is not an indication that he lacked ability but rather that he lacked the opportunity to develop it. Marcellin's father ended up bankrupt with little to show for his life. The same cannot be said of Marcellin. He did not repeat his father's mistakes. When he started out, Marcellin bought and paid for the first house in La Valla and took out a small loan in the process. The Brothers he trained did not get a free ride when they joined either. They were expected to contribute to their upkeep at La Valla and later at L'Hermitage. Champagnat gained support from the local community for his work and funds were donated accordingly. While he had a great faith in Jesus and Mary to provide, he was also a shrewd administrator who took the practical measures required to help finance the projects he undertook.

Marcellin's success was based not only on his business acumen but also on his ability to lead the way with the physical work required. He involved himself as a craftsman and a labourer. The labour demands of L'Hermitage must have been huge with amount of local rock involved in the building of it.

Thus my perception of Champagnat has changed from one of a person mainly renowned for a legendary work ethic to a person who was both astute and shrewd in administrative and financial matters and who used these qualities to advantage the foundation and establishment of the Marist Brothers' Institute.

Thus the opportunity to visit L'Hermitage and the surrounding area was a very beneficial by-product of my travels to the University of Exeter providing a much-appreciated opportunity to see and hear about the environment in which Marcellin Champagnat lived and worked and the time to reflect on this.