

Sabbatical Report
Term 3, 2008

CLASSROOM
RELEASE TIME

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Principal



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Acknowledgements

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Purpose and Rationale

Purpose

To research the way in which classroom release time is implemented in a range of primary schools in the South Island and to research the impact of this implementation on the culture of the school.

To ensure that our school's approach to classroom release time involves looking at a variety of options for the benefit of teachers, pupils, the principal and the culture of the school.

Rationale

Mornington School has adopted a variety of approaches since CRT began in term 4 2005. In term 3 2005 we set up a teacher to teach drama and dance, but at the last moment she accepted a full time relieving position at another school. In 2007 our deputy principal did not have a class for terms one and two. She made good use of her talents in music and dance and this had a really positive effect on our school climate and culture. Even Al Gore would have been surprised at the climate change. But our deputy principal then won promotion. We would like to continue using CRT in this way. That is, as a way to support teachers with subjects such as music and drama. It is however difficult to find a suitable teacher. A teacher whose availability in relation to days, times and ability fits in with the needs of our school.

We try to be flexible and helpful when allocating CRT time. This takes time, understanding and patience.

Some of our pupils find changes difficult. A balance is needed. It would be worthwhile for our school and other schools to look at options for, and successful approaches to, CRT. This could prove helpful to teachers, pupils, the principal and the culture of the school.

Introduction

I have really appreciated this time to look closely at the various approaches to classroom release time and to network with principals, teachers and advisers. I am grateful to the Ministry of Education and the Mornington School Board of Trustees for granting me this leave. The sabbatical awards certainly serve a worthwhile need. The need for such an award became increasingly evident as I talked to other principals about their own needs and priorities. This award meant that I had more time to research, network, reflect and to think more clearly about the big picture.

This report is concerned with the responses of the Mornington School staff and nineteen principals to questions about the approaches to classroom release time and the effect these approaches have on teaching and learning. The report looks at the positive and negative points of classroom release time, the varying approaches, and the effect these programmes have on the culture of the school. The conclusion includes five anonymous quotes from principals



Methodology

I used my original proposal to prepare suitable material to send to the principals before visiting them. This material included a quote from the May 2005 combined NZSTA, NZEI and MOE's booklet entitled " Guidelines for Classroom Release Time", the purpose of the research, four main questions and thirteen subsidiary questions – see appendix 1. I had face-to-face meetings with nineteen principals from Christchurch to Invercargill. It became clear, in general terms, that the best approach was to first discuss the positive and negative points of the individual school's classroom release time programmes. In this way many of the subsidiary questions were covered in this initial discussion and then the four main questions were used as a focus for reviewing and summarising our discussions.

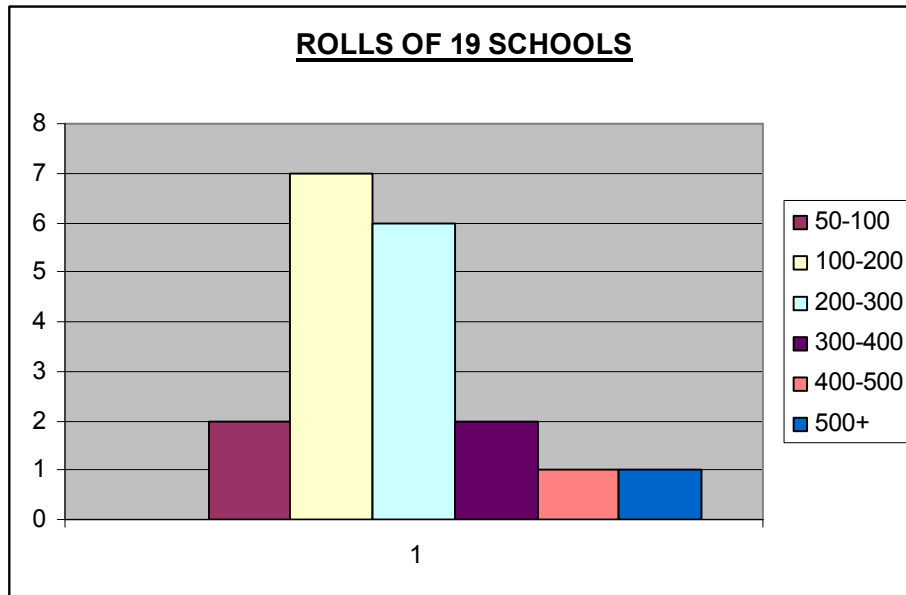
The decile rankings of the nineteen schools were:

<u>DECILE</u>	<u>NUMBER OF SCHOOLS</u>
1	0
2	1
3	4
4	2
5	4
6	0
7	0
8	3
9	3
10	2

The rolls of the nineteen schools ranged from 56 to over 500.

The rolls were:

ROLLS OF 19 SCHOOLS	
50-100	2
100-200	7
200-300	6
300-400	2
400-500	1
500+	1



The number of teachers receiving classroom release time at each school ranged from three to twenty two.

Findings

1. Responses from Mornington School Staff About Classroom Release Time.

(A) Positive Points

- ❖ It is good that this release time is available
- ❖ It is a great opportunity to work with individual children
- ❖ Teachers feel more on top of their workload
- ❖ Flexibility means that there is the opportunity to have release time when teacher and pupil benefits can be maximised
- ❖ Less teacher stress means a better classroom climate and a better school culture
- ❖ Specialist teachers can add to the school culture
- ❖ A positive effect on children's learning
- ❖ Able to work with a group that needs extra help
- ❖ Able to carry out paperwork and testing
- ❖ Working with children
- ❖ Testing can be covered outside classroom time
- ❖ Can plan with relative confidence for that release time

Some considerations within these positive points:

- ❖ It is helpful to have the same release teacher
- ❖ It is helpful to have regular times
- ❖ It is helpful if the release teacher takes responsibility for an area such as drama
- ❖ It needs to be timetabled well in advance
- ❖ The programme needs to be consistent

(B) Negative Points

- ❖ Challenging children do not always adapt well
- ❖ The quality of the release teachers
- ❖ Release teachers expecting work to be prepared for them

(C) Other Points

- ❖ More release time would be useful
- ❖ Flexibility means that we can get the best fit for all staff and fit in with staff sickness and the school programme
- ❖ The teacher and the principal keep a record of the release time
- ❖ Writing report cards is an important consideration for Term four

2. The Schools' Positive Points about Classroom Release Time.

All nineteen principals saw classroom release time as a valuable tool that offered schools the opportunity to release teachers from the classroom for the benefit of the teachers and their pupils. The effect on teaching and learning was very important. Specialist teachers could be employed. Many principals noticed a positive change in teacher attitude and approach. Teachers felt valued and they were able to make good headway on the increasing paperwork, planning and testing. Valued teachers and flexibility were often emphasised. Principals saw this initiative as a positive one. An initiative that recognised the increased workload of teachers. It was a time to share, to work and interact together, to reflect on their practice and to keep up with their tasks and responsibilities.

Comments included:

- ❖ Improved teacher attitude
- ❖ More time to focus on matters of importance
- ❖ More congeniality – teachers can work together
- ❖ Frees up teachers
- ❖ A break from the classroom
- ❖ Less stress
- ❖ Not so much encroaching on home life
- ❖ Teachers feel valued
- ❖ Teachers can recharge their batteries
- ❖ Teachers can see the big picture better
- ❖ Teachers have been given time and space
- ❖ There are opportunities to plan, test and assess
- ❖ There are opportunities to visit other classrooms and to observe and develop other skills
- ❖ There are opportunities to reflect and to pursue a line of thought
- ❖ There are opportunities to use specialist teachers
- ❖ Teachers are growing into the opportunities that are offered
- ❖ Teachers are more motivated and this transfers to the children

3. The Schools' Negative Points about Classroom Release Time.

This is, of course, a negative heading and many principals were hesitant to talk about or even to identify minus points about such a promising programme which offered so many opportunities. They wanted to get on with the job. It was something they needed to do. Many of the points noted were matters that arise with any new initiative within the school. The emphasis was on the need to have very good and appropriate organisation. Classroom release time did add to the principal's, or in the case of some of the bigger school, the deputy principal's workload. It was another task to be prepared, maintained and monitored. It involved finding the best fit for the school. It included selling classroom release time to the parents, finding suitable release teachers, finding suitable teaching and/or planning/testing spaces and ensuring that some of the more challenging children were not too disruptive or difficult for the release teacher.

Comments included:

- ❖ Can be disruptive to both the classroom and release teachers
- ❖ Parents have taken a while to get used to these changes
- ❖ Parents, teachers, principals and children have needed to adjust
- ❖ Another task for the principal
- ❖ Available space for the teachers to work, sometimes the staffroom is the only available space
- ❖ Forever changing circumstances within the school and with the release teachers
- ❖ Maintaining a constant approach
- ❖ Some teachers not being flexible
- ❖ Release teachers not planning or tidying up
- ❖ Availability of relieving teachers
- ❖ Ability of relieving teachers

4. The Schools' Approaches to Classroom Release Time.

Classroom release time is an opportunity for principals and teachers to consult and to work together to prepare a suitable programme for their unique school. Each school is different. Schools are self-governing. This means that there is not necessarily a single best option. Principals need to get the best fit for their school.

The nineteen principals have taken a consultative and considered approach to the use of this classroom release time. The school policies and/or procedures have been prepared in consultation with staff members. The policies are reviewed on a regular basis. All the policies that I cited included some of the following quotation from the NZSTA and NZEI's 2005 booklet.

“The intent of classroom release time is to address teacher workload while maximising benefits for student learning. Emphasis should be given to identifying and implementing the use of classroom release time so that it is professionally useful for the school's teaching and learning programmes, the teacher's professional growth and the learning needs of the students.” (2)

The nineteen principals use a variety of approaches in working on these intentions. Nine of the nineteen schools employed specialist teachers. These teachers were able to offer help in a variety of subjects and the principals saw this as having great benefits for the children, the teaching and learning situation and the culture of the school. Music, Te Reo and Physical Education were the main specialist subjects. Other subjects included Visual Arts, Inquiry Learning and ICT. Other principals said that they would employ specialist teachers if there was a need in the school or they could get suitable teachers.

The classroom teacher's time out of the classroom varied from one and half hours to a full day. Principals were flexible in timetabling this time but there were varying views on the

advantages of one and a half hours, half a day or a full day. In spite of new NZEI legislation making it difficult to employ a teacher for one and half hours, four schools use such blocks of time. Teachers used this time for:

- ❖ Assessment
- ❖ Event planning
- ❖ Planning, testing and evaluation
- ❖ Preparation of resources
- ❖ Personal professional development
- ❖ Professional development
- ❖ Programme development
- ❖ Reporting
- ❖ Running records
- ❖ Reading and research
- ❖ Observing other teachers
- ❖ Working with groups of children
- ❖ Syndicate planning
- ❖ Whole school planning
- ❖ Any other use agreed to from time to time by the principal and the teacher

Syndicate and whole school planning, in some cases, involved using five of the ten classroom release time hours for the term to prepare and plan ahead. In the case of one of the smaller schools the principal and staff saw this as their opportunity to work together, to discuss progress and to plan for the term and beyond. They indicated that this was useful as they did not have the same informal discussion time as larger schools because playground duty meant that there were few in the staffroom at one time.

One of the larger schools uses five hours of the ten hours for the term to plan ahead. This is generally carried out in syndicates. It is seen as an important opportunity for teachers to work together and to be well prepared. They have time to work and plan in a co-operative manner. In the future it is hoped that the emphasis will have moved from resources and management to the planning of specific goals that lead more directly to the raising of achievement and standards. This will involve time and patience.

One school includes peer coaching as part of the classroom release time. Other schools, through the use of extra release time, ensure that teachers from the same syndicate are able to be released at the same time. One school has a classroom release time data sheet where teachers record the date and time that the teachers need, the purpose and the learning outcomes being enhanced. Timetabling in the nineteen schools is carried out by the principal, the deputy principal, the administration officer or a combination of these people. Timetables are generally prominently displayed. Many schools encourage teachers to work at school and to inform the principal when they are working outside the school.

Many principals talked about the importance of teacher observation. This involved observations in other schools. It was concerned with time and money, but principals could see real advantages in teachers observing outside their own school.

The role and ability of the release teacher is really important. Some schools were lucky enough to have release teachers of high calibre who knew the school, the children, the teachers and the school's procedures. All principals agreed on the need for as few as interruptions as possible and for as few different release teachers as possible. One principal said that he did his best not to disrupt teachers during their classroom release time.

5. The Culture of the School

Sections one to four show that classroom release time has both a direct and an indirect effect on the culture of the school.

Culture is a complex term which is open to various interpretations. In the school situation culture is concerned with what happens at school and why it happens. It is concerned with the subtle and the symbolic aspects of school life. It is about what is valued in the school. Deal and Kennedy note that strong cultures provide the internal cohesion that makes it easier for teachers to teach and for students to learn. (3)

The main emphasis should be the teaching and learning situation. My discussions with the nineteen principals were concerned with teachers, students and teaching and learning. Principals acknowledged the link between the classroom release time programmes and teaching and learning and, therefore, the culture of the school. There were outward signs of this link. These signs included improved singing and instrumental work in assemblies or the increased teacher and student confidence in using Te Reo. There were, however, many subtle examples of the influence of classroom release time on the culture of the school. Teachers had less stress and they felt valued. Teachers had time out of the classroom. They could reflect, research, observe, test and plan. The effect on the culture of the school was not always transparent but, as noted earlier, there were many positive points arising from this time.

Two principals talked about the two-way influence of the school culture. Classroom release time had an effect on the school culture but the way the classroom release time was organised was because of the existing school culture within the school.

6. Conclusion

Classroom release time offers schools the opportunity to give classroom teachers purposeful out of classroom time while replacing the teacher with a suitable release teacher who can prepare, plan and teach a learning area that is appropriate for that particular classroom and for the individual school. It is a wonderful opportunity, but it is one that requires time and energy to ensure that it is the best fit for the school. Principals need to look at the strengths, weaknesses, needs and priorities of their own schools. Principals need to consider questions such as what do the staff want, what staffing is available, what are the needs of the school and what is the best fit for their schools?

There are many very good and very different programmes in place. There is not necessarily a best option rather – like other new school initiatives – there are options from which principals can get ideas that fit in with the needs of the individual school. There are many factors to consider in the organisation and implementation of classroom release time. The different approaches are concerned with the best use of this time after giving consideration to such matters as employing specialist teachers, the best use of this time by classroom teachers, the release teachers and continuity, the availability of space, time blocks, the welfare of the students and teaching and learning. There are links to other school matters such as staffing, banking staffing, teacher responsibilities and available funds. Classroom release time, to varying degrees, has an effect on teaching and learning and on the culture of the school.

Some of the principals were keen for this initiative to be extended. They saw advantages in the availability of more classroom release time for teachers. It would allow more time for observations, particularly in other schools. The opportunity to visit other schools was seen as important. Others saw further time as an opportunity to give more emphasis to student achievement and to achieving higher standards.

“Classroom release time is not really a lot of time, but when it is used well, it is a great tool for teachers.”

“Classroom release time is a positive initiative that just needs to be used more efficiently.”

“A less stressed teacher makes for a more effective one.”

“The professionalism of teachers is being affirmed.”

“Teachers are growing into the opportunities offered.”

References:

- 1 & 2. 2005 NZSTA, NZEI and MOE – Guidelines for Classroom Release Time – page 4
3. 1983, Deal and Kennedy – Culture and School Performance; Educational Leadership 40 (5)

Appendix One

“The intent of classroom release time is to address teacher workload while maximising benefits for student learning.” (1)

MAIN QUESTIONS

What are some of the best approaches to CRT?

What are some of the priorities and/or considerations when implementing CRT?

To what extent does CRT affect teaching and learning?

To what extent does CRT affect the climate/culture of the school?

SUBSIDIARY QUESTIONS

- 1 What do you see as the positive and negative points of CRT?
- 2 How does your programme work?
- 3 Who keeps a record of the CRT time used?
- 4 Do you employ release teachers who can provide specialist teaching – for example, music or drama?
- 5 Would you like to employ teachers who can provide specialist teaching?
- 6 What do the teachers use this time for?
- 7 What are your main priorities when preparing the CRT programme?
- 8 Is it difficult to get a release teacher?
- 9 Are teachers allowed to have less than a day at a time?
- 10 Do teachers nominate their own release time?
- 11 Are your teachers happy with the present system?
- 12 What impact does this have on classroom programmes, teacher attitudes and the school culture?
- 13 Could you please add any other thoughts/ideas that you think might prove helpful in my research and/or in schools.