

Sabbatical Leave Report

Term 2 2008

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Executive Summary

In this report I outline my school's involvement in an initiative entitled "Teacher Designed Schools" (TDS). As the programme name implies it provides the platform for teachers and the community to have direct and empowering input into shaping their school to meet its identified specific needs. During my sabbatical leave I visited and corresponded with other secondary schools to determine the broad range of benefits they had gained from their independent involvement in the programme. In essence the leave has provided the essential time for critical self reflection and review.

A literature search will quickly establish that the roles of Leadership and Management are quite separate. An often quoted distinction is that managers do things right, leaders do the right things. The research would also identify one essential trait of a good leader, namely they have a vision for their organisation. But having a vision that is imposed, rather than shared, we would learn is going to make the realisation of such a vision a very challenging assignment.

The TDS programme involves three well researched phases with associated ground tested and honed processes. The first phase results in the development of a shared vision for the school. The success of the process centres on one key ingredient to establishing such a vision, *ownership*. We are fortunate in New Zealand to be able to work in the relatively liberated educational environment of the self managing school. Teachers have great ideas, and enthusiastically embrace the opportunity to have them heard. Having established a shared vision for your school you can be reassured that you will indeed be doing the right things.

The second phase of the programme involves the establishment of a long term development programme and the final phase devising strategies for continuous improvement and ongoing growth.

Purpose

My school has completed half of the three year programme. After the first visit by the programme leaders the buzz in the staffroom was infectious, and the not insignificant cost to the school was seen to be well justified at that time. The next phase of the programme we were warned would be the hard yards, and this was indeed true. I chose this particular project to enable me to liaise with similarly involved schools to evaluate the impact their involvement is having on the culture of their schools, and to ascertain whether my school will complete the final year of the programme.

Background

The founders, designers, and facilitators of the programme are John Edwards and Bill Martin. On joining the programme they provided the following profiles of themselves and the overview of their programme.

Dr John Edwards is Managing Director of Edwards Explorations, an Australian based company concerned with exploring and developing human potential. He has a long and distinguished career in educational research, and has been one of the major research grant recipients in cognitive science in Australia. He is internationally recognised for his research on thinking and professional growth and learning. John is also Adjunct Professor of Education at the University of Queensland. He is one of the few top international researchers to have turned his research into award-winning practice in both education and business and industry. John is also a personal coach to a number of CEO's and school leaders around the world.

Bill Martin is the best leader John has encountered in 30 years of educational and business experience in over 20 countries. Bill is a nationally recognised Principal in the USA and his services are in strong demand. On two occasions Bill has led his staff to create award-winning schools, and these were in tough areas. Most recently, Monroe High School in Detroit won an award as one of the top three hundred high schools in America. Bill is currently working to establish an international network of Teacher Designed Schools based on his successful career in school leadership. He brings a huge store of personal practical knowledge on forming leadership teams and on growing leaders in schools.

Programme Overview

The fundamental belief underpinning this network is that the most powerful resource in any school is the experimental knowledge and values of the people who work in that school. The Teacher Designed Schools process provides teachers with the absolute ownership for the creation of the school they have always wanted. It is based on an acceptance that the most important decisions made in a school are those made daily by teachers and students. When these decisions are aligned to a shared vision their impact is significantly magnified.

John brings a lifetime of research in thinking, learning, leadership, change and communication. Bill brings a lifetime of practical experience working in, and leading, schools at the primary, middle school and high school level. They are both nationally and internationally recognised for their work. The Teacher Designed Schools process has emerged from the combination of their rich

experiences, and is centred upon their shared passion for releasing and valuing human potential.

The key characteristics of the Teacher Designed Schools process are:

- The school develops a shared vision which comes from all staff through powerful processes designed to draw on their collective intellects and values.
- Teachers are passionate about doing the necessary school-based research to turn their shared vision into their reality over time.
- A long-term school development plan based on their own research is owned by staff and leads them to perform at the highest professional levels.
- The process celebrates autonomy and interdependence at the same time.
- The process develops a culture of leadership throughout the school.
- Teachers take ownership for their own performance and for the continuous improvement of the learning in the school both for staff and students.
- The process is highly economical in that it makes financial decisions very clear and provides a seamless school-wide professional development programme.

OUTLINE OF THE TEACHER DESIGNED SCHOOLS PROCESS

There are three phases in the process:

PHASE 1 - Formation of a shared vision

PHASE 2 - Development and initiation of the long-term development plan

PHASE 3 - Continuous improvement and ongoing growth.

DETAILS OF EACH PHASE

PHASE 1 – Formation of a shared vision

This phase begins with the school gathering together the contextual data which already exists in the school on the current situation and any plans for the future. These are sent to Bill and John who design a set of eight draft Inquiry Probes.

Inquiry Probes are questions designed to tap the rich personal practical knowledge and mental models of the staff. Between them, these probes cover the key aspects of life in the school.

Bill and John spend two days in the school during Phase 1.

On day one they facilitate an Inquiry Probes Workshop. This is done using two key processes: classic brainstorming, and a consensus-generating tool (10 – 4 voting). These tools extract the collective intellect and mental models of the staff.

To do this, staff work in teams of eight or less, and each team is led by an internal facilitator. These facilitators are pre-trained by Bill and John, a process which takes an hour.

Overnight, three draft shared visions are written, based on this rich data. One is written by the Principal, one by John and one by Bill. These vision statements are about one page in length and are a rich description of what the school will be like when the vision is realised. They are written in the present tense.

There are two processes for the second day of Phase 1, depending on what is feasible for teacher free days at the school:

VERSION ONE – where staff have to teach for the full second day.

On the morning of the day two staff are given the draft vision statements and a summary of the data collected from them the day before. They then use a critique process to provide rich feedback on the three draft visions, choosing one as the basis for further development. After this the staff continue with their teaching for the day while Bill and John work with the broad school leadership team.

Work with the broad leadership team focuses on the key processes needed to lead the team through the next twelve months of the TDS process. We also use the staff feedback to prepare a second draft of the shared vision and we identify the emerging themes that will become the focus for the school-based research in the year ahead.

At the end of Day Two, the staff meet with Bill and John for three hours to be introduced to the key models and research tools for the year ahead. For this purpose Bill and John have designed a school-based action research tool: ELITAR (a six phase research tool: Exploration – Logistics – Information – Target – Action Learning – Review.) Staff decide on the final research themes and form their Research Teams around these themes. Commonly there are between five and seven themes.

VERSION TWO – where staff can be free for the second day as well as the first. Bill and John work with the full staff for four and a half hours, in which time the processes above are completed. So, they are free to leave at lunchtime, or to start work in their research teams for two and a half hours, and then meet with Bill and John for one hour at the end of the day. Whichever way the staff work, the leadership team work with Bill and John for three and a half hours on leading the process for the next twelve months.

In the following year, the staff drive themselves through continuing action research iterations, resulting in a set of formal recommendations for action supported by deep research. Each team appoints its own leader and has a member of the school leadership team attached as a sponsor. Sponsors ensure alignment to the vision and ensure that any necessary resources are available for the Research Team.

At the same time the staff go through continuing cycles of critique of the shared vision until genuine consensus is reached.

The leadership team are in regular contact with Bill and John, and other leadership teams in the Network, throughout this twelve month research and refining process. This commonly takes the form of a regular fortnightly contact from Bill and John and a detailed progress report from the staff and the leadership team at the end of each school term.

It is also common to build in a full day meeting between the leadership teams from each school in the region during Bill and John's visit.

PHASE 2 - Development and Initiation of the Long-Term School Development Plan.

In the second year Bill and John return for two days, one with the staff and one with the leadership team.

On Day One, staff research teams report back on the outcomes of their year-long research. This is in the form of a set of recommendations for action, with associated documentation and research justification. The staff provide

detailed recommendations to the leadership team on the best ways to implement change, and are helped to learn from their own performance as individuals and teams.

On Day Two, Bill and John work with the leadership team. This focuses on processing the experiences from Phase 1, on further developing their leadership repertoire, on creating a draft Long-Term School Development Plan from the output of the Research Teams, and on ways to design for effective implementation. Leaders are also trained in how to conduct stewardship conferences with all staff.

Stewardship conferences are one-on-one meetings held with each staff member to agree on their individual commitment to the aspects of the shared vision they are willing to create, and to agree on what the leadership team will do to help the staff member do this work and achieve their personal vision.

Once again there is usually a one-day meeting between the leadership teams from each school in the region during Bill and John's visit. There is also regular ongoing contact between schools in the network and with Bill and John.

PHASE 3 - Continuous improvement and ongoing growth.

In the third year Bill and John return for their final two days with the school.

One Day One, they work with the staff on the context that has evolved. This commonly involves further broadening staff repertoires in emerging areas of focus, on better understanding of the realities of change in this particular context, and on fine-tuning the use of processes already learned so that they are embedded deeply in the everyday life of the school. This requires the processing of deep reflection on what has been experienced over the two years to date and understanding how to adjust systems, structures and mental models as necessary. Processes for revisiting the vision at the end of year three are also explored.

On Day Two, Bill and John work with the leadership team on systems and structures for ongoing growth. Checking the alignment of all school systems and structures to the shared vision is completed. Ensuring that rich data sources are in place to ensure match between the espoused theories and the theories-in-use is central to this process. High level processes for driving action learning forward are matched against the data emerging from the implementation experiences.

Once again there is usually a one-day meeting between the leadership teams from each school in the region during Bill and John's visit. There is also regular ongoing contact between schools in the network and with Bill and John.

The initial network will consist of 52 schools: 16 each in Australia, New Zealand and the USA, and 4 schools from the UK. This network will be in place by 2007 and will continue to evolve from this base.

FUNDING

The basic cost for a full year of involvement in the Network, for each New Zealand school is AUS.\$15,200 plus shared internal NZ airfares and accommodation. This includes all costs for international air travel, meals, us working with the school for two days, a joint Network leadership day with the leaders of other New Zealand schools, all planning work, personal coaching of the Principal, and regular contact throughout the year.

Activities undertaken (methodology)

Schools involvement in the programme is by individual choice and consequently they work independently of each other. There is an opportunity to meet annually in Auckland with the other schools in the network but not all schools attend. The majority of the schools involved in New Zealand are primary schools, I restricted my investigation to the secondary schools which I subsequently visited. Prior to my visit I forwarded the following questions for discussion:

- How did you hear about the programme?
- Did you have much trouble convincing your Board to resource it?
- What stage are you at in the three year process?
- Did you have some form of teacher only day in the first year when John and Bill visited?
- If yes, one day or two?
- Assuming you invited the parents and students did many participate?
- What about Board members?
- If you are happy to share them, what were your (8?) inquiry probes that everyone worked on at that first meeting?
- What was your staff's reaction to John and Bill's presentation?
- After they left how long did it take to get to the final version of your Vision Statement?
- I'll bring a copy of our Vision Statement for you, hopefully you will be happy to give me a copy of yours.
- Ditto with Core Values
- Again if you are happy to share them, what were the research topics for the next phase?
- Were you able to create time for staff to spend doing their research?

- Was it easy getting staff in each research group to put their hands up for the roles of Sponsor, Team Leader, Recorder?
- I guess the quality of the research varied from group to group, any thoughts on what factors contributed to this?
- Any idea of how closely each group adhered to the prescribed ELITAR process?
- In comparison to year 1, how did John and Bill's second and third visits go?
- How successfully did newly appointed staff integrate into the process?
- How much contact did you have with either John or Bill between visits?
- Was this good or bad?
- How closely does today's reality align with your Vision Statement?
- Is your Vision Statement a living document?
- When do you think you will need to update it?
- In terms of student achievement, is it possible to identify if your involvement in the TDS initiative has had a positive influence?
- A tricky one: In comparison, where would the school be at today if you hadn't engaged in the programme?
- Money well spent?

Findings

Some member(s) of each participating secondary school's Leadership Team had attended a seminar run by one or both of the programme directors. None of the schools had any difficulty gaining approval from their Board of Trustees to participate in the programme.

Six secondary schools had been, or were part of the TDS network. Three had, or were completing the three year cycle, two pulled out within one year, and one had completed the second visit.

To start the programme half of the schools had two teacher only days to establish the shared vision, the others had one. Each school said the format they opted for had worked well for them.

Each school invited parents and Board members to these teacher only days, two also invited students, but each school reported that there was very limited response.

Copies of each schools inquiry probes, completed vision statement, core values and research topics are available from the writer.

John and Bill's first year presentations were seen as being superb. A staff member in one of the schools made the statement "that was the best PD I have ever had, or am ever likely to have, in my teaching career". The 10:4 voting system a consensus to quickly emerge, but it could be argued, at a cost. The brainstorming sessions raised some great ideas but the timeframe didn't allow

time for people to get their head around those outside of the square. These ideas disappeared as a consequence of the structure of the voting system.

After the first year visit staff were charged with engaging in research which would be the focus of John and Bill's visit the following year. The critical factor in quality research is time. Schools tried a variety of restructuring options to help create this time, the most common being a later start for the students for one morning a week. For some staff research was a totally new experience, and many of these teachers found this phase quite a challenge.

Finding volunteers for the roles of Sponsor, Team Leader, and Recorder in each research group varied from school to school, but a common experience was that it wasn't until things got under way that people began to realise what was involved. Not surprisingly, within each school there were huge differences in the quality of the research that was presented during John and Bill's visit in year two.

After the overwhelming success of their first visit, there was a sense of real excitement in each school as they prepared for the second visit, but in comparison schools collectively felt disappointed that the challenges to people's thinking, and to their attitudes and values was missing. As seasoned researchers themselves, John and Bill allowed cracks to develop in their credibility when they equally praised the efforts of each research team when clearly in some cases this praise was not deserved.

The Leadership Teams in each school felt isolated between visits. Quarterly emails containing updates on happenings, latest findings, and reminders were welcome, but lacked the personal touch. Some schools said that they experienced difficulties trying to make contact directly with either John or Bill with questions that needed an immediate response. When contact was eventually made things had moved on, so over time they effectively cut themselves loose, as they got used to solving problems on their own.

All schools saw their vision statement as a living document with a strong alignment to the current realities in their schools. They anticipate that a review will be needed every four to five years.

Conclusions

In terms of student achievement schools subjective response was that the TDS initiative has had a very positive influence on their teacher attitudes, values, relationships, and expectations. So while it may not be possible to link improvement in student achievement directly to involvement in the TDS programme this involvement has provided the platform for a variety of school wide initiatives to prosper. To this end most schools saw that their involvement in the programme had made a significant contribution to where their school is at today.

Bar one, all schools felt that the money spent in the first year was money well spent. Beyond that, opinions varied.

It was agreed that the New Zealand self managing school model is very unique, bringing with it certain freedoms, but also specific demands. While some imperfections in the TDS model have been discussed, the basis for the programme is extremely sound. With appropriate modifications it could be shaped into something quite fantastic that would better suit the New Zealand secondary school scene.