

## **SABBATICAL REPORT**

### **STAFF WELLBEING AND PASTORAL CARE**

#### **Acknowledgements**

There are many people who deserve acknowledgement as I write this sabbatical report. First and foremost are the members of the Wilson School Board of Trustees for their immediate and encouraging support for this sabbatical opportunity and for the financial assistance the Board provided which helped me to visit a number of special schools. In my absence the school was very ably managed by our Deputy Principal and she in turn was well supported by the Senior Leadership Team and the school's administration staff. The teaching, therapy and support staff continued, as always, to give excellent service to our students.

I must also thank the Ministry of Education for providing such a valuable opportunity to rest, refresh, reflect and research. Having time out from what can be a very hectic position was an invaluable opportunity to stand back and think about why we do things the way we do at Wilson School and to contemplate areas that might change in the future.

I also wish to acknowledge and thank the staff members of the schools I visited in the United Kingdom and in New Zealand for giving so generously of their time and for allowing me to ask some searching questions. I hope the experience was as valuable for these schools as it was for me.

#### **Purpose**

To visit educational and medical facilities in New Zealand and in the United Kingdom which provide for the learning needs of students who have significant disabilities of an intellectual, physical, sensory and/or health nature. The purpose of these visits was to undertake investigative interviews with a range of staff members to determine if these schools identify similar stressors to those identified by staff members working with a similar population of students in a New Zealand special school, and to identify what those stressors are. From these interviews it is hoped that a number of successful strategies to reduce workplace stress will be identified.

#### **Background**

Wilson School is a U5 Special School situated in Takapuna, a suburb of Auckland. The school is a day school which provides education and care for students with significant disabilities. Students are funded through the ORS scheme (Ongoing Resourcing Scheme) and for the most part fall into the most disabled 1 % of the New Zealand school population. Students present with a wide range of disabilities and many have significant health conditions including epilepsy, diabetes, tracheostomy and gastrostomy as well as those who need to be supported by supplementary oxygen 24/7.

Students may attend Wilson School from their fifth birthday until the end of the school year in which they turn 21. The school currently operates on five sites, a "Base" School with six classrooms and a series of "Satellite" classrooms which are embedded in to four local primary, junior high or secondary schools. Recently, unprecedented roll growth has required the school to canvas the Ministry of Education to provide a further satellite in a local primary school. This facility is expected to be open at the beginning of the 2016 school year. The school also has plans to develop a unit, based not in a school but in a commercial area of the local community for students aged 18 to 21 years who are preparing to leave school to enter adult life.

Wilson School currently has 100 students and employs teachers, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, speech language therapists, teacher aides, music therapists and psychologists as well as administration staff. Many staff work part time hours and in total the school employs 120 staff members.

The recent rapid roll growth has placed considerable pressure on all school staff and on the school organisation and infrastructure as a whole. This inevitably contributes to the stress burden carried by all.

### **Methodology**

This sabbatical leave provided an opportunity to travel to the United Kingdom to visit a range of Special Education and Health facilities. The schools were deliberately chosen to provide a variety of educational provision, the purpose for this being the writer's hope that in this way, all of the categories of students catered for at the writer's school would be represented.

It should be explained that in New Zealand, each Special School caters for the needs of a wide and diverse range of students with disabilities. In the UK students tend to go to schools with more specialized populations, for example, students with emotional and behavioral concerns attend one school, students on the autistic spectrum a different school.

The sabbatical also provided an opportunity to produce a simple questionnaire which was made available to all staff members at Wilson School. This "Pastoral Care Survey" gave staff members the opportunity to anonymously comment about their experiences at the school and provided a vehicle for them to provide their thoughts about possible future improvements.

Before the visits a literature review was undertaken in an attempt to identify research pertaining to workplace stress, its causes and some helpful strategies to create healthier workplace environments.

What does the literature tell us?

The literature search identified numerous articles which attest to the stressful nature of teaching. Indeed teaching is identified as being among the occupations which create the highest levels of stress. In an article in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology* (Vol 2 No 2 2005) "The Experience of Work Related Stress Across Occupations" Sheena Jackson et al, describe an assessment of 26 occupations using measures across the realms of physical wellbeing, psychological wellbeing and job satisfaction to determine stress factor. The study placed teaching among the six most stressful occupations, the other five being ambulance officers, police, social services, customer services (including call center staff) and prison officers.

This review has produced a number of definitions of stress:

- Unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of work as a teacher (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe 1977)
- A negative emotional experience being triggered by the teacher's perception that their work situation constituted a threat to their self-esteem or well being
- The level of pressure and demands made on an individual
- The degree of mismatch between the demands made on an individual and the individual's ability to cope with those demands
- Great pressure or force, strain (The World Book Dictionary)
- Effort, demand upon energy. The Concise Oxford Dictionary)

There is little doubt that teaching is a stressful career and there are any number of reports and articles that

identify and quantify this perception. Teachers and their co-workers, therapists and teacher aides work under a variety of pressures, within the school and from external sources such as Governmental requirements, societal and parental expectations. Further to these we can add other emotional, developmental and social issues that students bring with them into the classroom. International research describes the teaching profession as one beset by high levels of teacher stress as reported by Johnson, Cooper, Cartwright, Donald Taylor and Millet (2005). Further evidence of workplace stress due to high work demands is provided by Chan and Hui, 1995 and Gevin 2007.

As far back as 1987 Kyriacou reviewed Teacher Stress and burnout. "Teacher Stress: directions for further research" lists the following as the main sources of stress facing teachers. He quotes from Travers & Cooper 1996, Benmansour 1998, as:

- Teaching pupils who lack motivation
- Maintaining discipline
- Time pressures and workload
- Coping with change
- Being evaluated by others
- Dealings with colleagues
- Self-esteem and status
- Administration and management
- Role conflict and ambiguity
- Poor working conditions

Continuous exposure to stress is known to lead to burnout. Guglielmi & Tatrow (1998) describe the notion of teacher burnout as "a state of emotional, physical and attitudinal exhaustion which may develop in teachers who have been unsuccessful in coping effectively with stress over a long period". Burnout can result when the levels of stress are extreme and are not well managed. Maslach and Jackson (1981) described 'Burnout Syndrome' as being typified by:

- Emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalisation (towards recipients of the service)
- Low personal accomplishment

They believe that this syndrome can be caused by:

- Lack of administration support
- Salary
- Student discipline and motivation (or lack of)
- Class size
- Inadequate planning time
- Lack of opportunity for advancement
- Length of teaching experience (more experienced teachers are often more resilient as they have learned coping strategies)

The field of Special Education brings with it additional pressures as school staff inevitably take on the additional roles of family support, counselling and guidance, social work and medical liaison. Add to this the responsibility

of preparing the students for their eventual life beyond school in a community environment which often fails to provide adequate, appropriate settings for employment, housing and recreation. Teaching, therapy and support-staff work with students who have a wide range of disabilities. These staff members work to support the medical needs of young people who have extreme intellectual disability, students who often have no means of verbal communication and generally have limited cognitive understanding of verbal instruction. Many students, especially those who are on the autistic spectrum have severe difficulty with social relationships and communication and often, as a result, have extremely challenging behaviours. It is common for staff members in these environments to be physically injured in the course of their daily work. These staff members also carry the knowledge that they are responsible for the lives of young people with extremely challenging health needs. Many students require feeding by gastrostomy, some require 24 hour oxygen, and others experience severe epileptic activity which requires the administration of immediate medication. All students must be closely monitored at all times to ensure their health and wellbeing and safety and that of others. The school is not funded to employ nursing staff so educational staff undertake all of these duties in the course of their daily work. Another stressful factor associated with some of this population of students is their extreme physical vulnerability. On average at the writer's school one student per year fails to survive. Such events touch the hearts of all who work with the students and their families.

### **The School Visits**

Eight schools were chosen for the visits, all were recommended by colleagues because it was perceived that each chosen school had good processes and practices in place to support their staff members. Schools were also chosen because they represented a specific section of the Special Education spectrum and they were deliberately chosen because the service provided by each differed from each other; but found within this range of schools were students who match the description of all of the students catered for at Wilson School. There was one exception to this, a secondary school of special character which has created a "Wellbeing Programme" for staff members. The schools were situated in a mixture of large city, large urban town and small rural settings.

The categories of schools are as follows:

- Special day school for students with emotional and behavioural needs
- Special day school for students with moderate to severe learning needs
- Special day school for students on the autistic spectrum
- Hospital school for students with medical or surgical needs
- Short term residential placement for students with mental health problems
- Primary behaviour service delivering "in house" teaching and itinerant support to mainstream schools
- Mainstream high school with special education needs provision
- Mainstream co-ed secondary catholic college with a recently developed "Wellbeing Programme" in place (this was the only school which did not have a Special Education flavor).

All but one facility generously made their time available. As a point of interest the eighth school, on the day before the planned visit, asked that the visit be cancelled because pressures within the school did not allow the Principal the freedom to accommodate the previously planned meeting.

It should be noted that the special schools in England operate under a different model to those in New Zealand, the greatest difference being that NZ special schools are arranged with a number of satellite classes in

local mainstream schools, supported by a Base School where a proportion of students also attend. (Students at the Base School tend to be students with the most challenging behaviours or the students with the most fragile health). This trend, which operates so successfully in New Zealand is almost non-existent in England, in fact of the schools visited, only one had established such classes. Students attending the schools visited presented with similar disabilities to the students at Wilson School, with two notable differences:

1. Students with the profound and multiple disabilities such as are seen at Wilson School were not seen in the schools visited. In the UK these students attend schools delivering the curriculum to this group of students alone. A visit to such a school would have been beneficial, but this was the very school mentioned earlier which found it necessary to cancel the visit. There is definitely greater differentiation of population across the schools in the United Kingdom, which, as explained earlier, creates more homogenous groupings of students within each school, whereas in NZ a wider spread of students and abilities will be found in each school. It would seem that this difference is due to economies of scale within the population which allows for such differentiation within the United Kingdom.
2. It appeared that the cognitive level of the students observed was considerably higher than many of the students at Wilson School. There are two reasons for this, a). the previously mentioned differentiation of student population across schools in the UK and b). in New Zealand, even though students have achieved ORS Verification, many of students with higher cognitive ability receive their education in mainstream classes, at least through their primary school years if not beyond. This is a choice that is freely available to the parents of students in this country, but not so available in the UK.

### **Findings from School Visits**

Staff interviewed during the schools visited were asked to identify the major stress factors they perceived were present in the day to day running of their schools and to comment on the effect these elements have on the mental wellbeing of staff members. In almost all cases the same issues were identified and here they are listed as direct quotations received during the interview sessions:

- Unpredictability of student behaviour
- Habituation to challenging behaviour
- Challenging behaviour involving violence
- Unpredictability of students
- Lack of adequate budgets
- Impact of recent budget cuts with consequential cuts to staffing
- Pressure from the "Standards" agenda which has led to League tables being produced
- Needing to "teach to the test" because of the impact of the standards agenda
- Less scope for creativity because of requirements of the standards agenda
- Perception that there is no realistic "future" for students when they leave school (what are we educating them for?)
- A school experiencing extreme roll growth where systems that have worked in a smaller environment are no longer adequate
- Constant change imposed upon the school by the introduction of changes to education policy
- The increasing pressure of paperwork

An interesting observation is that the stressors identified by the Special Schools do not directly match the list described earlier, which research was pertaining to regular education rather than special education. This is not to say that the earlier list does not apply to this group of employees, rather that these are additional stressors created by the special nature of the work these employees undertake with their very special students.

## **What has Worked for the Schools Visited?**

The schools described a wide range of strategies to support their staff members. All, without exception, commented on the importance of creating and sustaining a positive and supportive culture within the school, one in which staff members felt valued for the intense work they carry out and that their opinions and interventions were appreciated. Following is a selection of suggestions from the schools.

One school had provided a vast amount of professional development around the creation of a positive school culture. All negativity is banished and staff are encouraged to have a culture of gently challenging “negative speak” from their colleagues when they encounter this behaviour in their daily work at school. All conversations were expected to be solution focused, positive conversations rather than conversations about “problems”. The attitude of the senior leaders within this school is “Don’t come with a problem; come with possible solutions for discussion”. In this school all staff members are expected to be problem solvers, the school philosophy is based around the concept that “this is our school and we are all equally here to resolve the issues”. Long gone was the attitude where the senior leaders of the school were expected to have all the answers. Distributed Leadership was fully embedded into the culture of the school.

All of the schools visited held firm to the philosophy of keeping the child at the center, not the programme or the procedure. Staff members are constantly encouraged to consider that there will be several ways to achieve the same aim. These special students learn in different and individual ways and the responsibility of the staff is to be creative in investigating these ways.

This expectation of creative problem solving was a highlight of another school visited. The leadership of the school had imbued the culture of the school with a philosophy of “yes and” as a way of encouraging creative and problem solving thinking among staff members. No idea was disregarded without being investigated to see if it could be made to work. No idea is considered in a negative light. It should be noted that not all suggestions were put in to practice but all were considered in a positive light.

Celebration is another strong theme coming through in all of the schools visited. All achievements, from both staff and student were lavishly celebrated, as were special events in the lives of staff and students.

Appraisal and Mentoring were discussed by most of the schools and this was the general consensus about these two processes. Mentoring and appraisal should be kept separate. Appraiser should not also be the mentor as the two roles are not conducive. Mentoring is about problem solving and learning new skills, appraisal is this also, but the appraiser also needs to be able to challenge inappropriate behaviour or poor performance. One principal was quoted as saying “Mentors are essential for new staff members. However most of our staff feel that mentoring loses its effectiveness over time. We feel that it is a particularly effective tool for teachers who are new to the school.”

“Mindfulness” was a concept that was under trial at one of the schools. One staff member had undertaken training in this technique and was providing professional development for staff members within her school. The training was undertaken by staff on an “opt in” basis and as more staff members took up the opportunity to train, attitudes within the school appeared to be becoming more positive as staff learned to “live more in the moment” letting go of the negative experiences of the past and looking towards a more positive future. The emphasis of the programme was learning to stop “ruminating on the past”.

The following is a further list of comments gained from the schools:

- “Students, their families and staff are all highly valued. A clear culture has been created that indicates that if staff members don’t value students and each other they are probably in the wrong job and perhaps they should be persuaded to leave”

- “Support staff are encouraged to keep learning. Several past teacher aides have been encouraged to train as teachers or therapists. Where possible we support them with placements and where possible, funding to make this training a possibility”. (In the UK some schools can partner with institutions to provide some of the teacher training on site under an internship programme)
- “We emphasise encouraging staff to keep learning with time given to allow study and fees paid for appropriate study.”
- “Staff who are passionate about an idea are encouraged to pursue this and share the idea.”
- “We have an expectation that staff will practice reflectively. This skill needs to be taught to staff and practiced until it is embedded.”
- “We are a Health school which operates on multiple sites. We expect staff to meet together to retain a sense of school community and common purpose.” (Note that this is a practice that is firmly embedded at Wilson School).
- “Annual day long workshops are held with all staff to develop ideas for change or improvement. These ideas must link with the strategic or development plan with the school”.
- “There must be clarity around role description – this school is adamant that teachers teach, they don’t do social work, social workers do that. All staff need to be clear about where their job ends if they are not to become overwhelmed by the enormity of the job.”
- “We encourage staff to visit other settings. We have links with organisations in other parts of the world and it is common for these schools to organise staff swaps with our staff. This provides a strong platform for sharing professional ideas.”
- “We constantly ask the question “What can we do to make this a better work place or to make the job easier?”

In all of the schools staff absences are closely monitored, in many cases using the “Bradford Index”. This gives a clue to problems arising with staff members who have regular absences or show emerging trends or patterns to their absences and opens the way for a discussion about issues that may be distressing the staff member. These issues might be school related or home related but they need to be addressed. One school spoke of a staff member who had a significant lifestyle problem that was addressed following this level of scrutiny which probably helped to save not only the staff members career, but quite probably their life.

In all schools staff can be distressed when it becomes necessary to rotate workers from one area of the school to another. This can be because staff feel uncomfortable about the new role for which they may feel inadequately trained, but more often the discomfort is because a team in which they were practising comfortably has been broken up. One Principal said when asked about this “we are here to teach students, not to keep staff with their friends. People can be supported to learn the new skills that they need to learn.”

The final generalised comment that came through from all of the schools was that the greatest challenge but the most difficult task was to “keep the energy up”.

### **What do schools do socially to support and encourage their staff?**

Schools had a number of creative ways to support staff morale, some paid for by the school and others funded voluntarily by staff members. Here is a sample of the suggestions:

- Reflexology
- Head and shoulder massages
- Mid-winter staff events
- Christmas celebrations
- Drinks at half term
- Celebrations at special times

- Walking club
- Yoga

Other strategies employed by the schools to support the mental health needs of staff members:

- Counselling if required. This is available to be purchased from the Local Authority in the United Kingdom. In New Zealand counselling is purchased by the school from a number of EAP (Employee Assistance Providers) providers.
- Social Worker who is available to the school helps staff members by working with families and providing some in school professional development and mentoring for staff (this was paid for by the Local Education Authority)
- Distributed Leadership was seen by all schools as vital to a successful school culture. It must be embedded at all levels and in all parts of the school. All staff who work in schools are leaders and all are responsible for solving problems. These problems must be solved in a positive way. As one Principal put it "Senior Teachers don't own the problem, staff do – it is our school, our problem, come with solutions for discussion."
- Identify great practice or great ideas and advertise these around the school. Invite and facilitate staff members to visit and observe exciting, innovative and creative practice.

### **Wilson School Survey Results**

The Wilson School Pastoral Care Survey has indicated that most of the staff members who took the opportunity to answer the survey find the school to be more, rather than less, supportive with 96 percent rating the school as "more than supportive" or "very supportive". Only 4 percent rated it as "quite supportive" and none scored it as "not supportive". Several important messages were expressed in the survey and they are paraphrased below:

- Senior staff sometimes judge before listening/supporting. Teachers have had to defend themselves because senior managers did not have a clear understanding of, or the full picture of the teachers perspective of the incident
- Good, new and innovative ideas are sometimes "shut down" before they have been fully investigated
- We are good at dealing with issues like stress after death in the family (of a student or a staff member)
- Perception that we are not so good at dealing with issues when support staff have problems working with teachers
- Some staff were not aware of who to turn to if they felt they had an issue that needed to be discussed or addresses
- Others believed the support would be there if they knew who to approach and who could be trusted with their concerns
- There is a perception from some staff that Senior Leaders are too involved with activities that have little to do with the "real work of the classroom".

Nagel and Brown (2001) assert that "a key for teachers to remember is that much stress is within their control". It remains the individual responsibility of each individual to establish methods to deal with their own levels of stress. It is important that the culture of the school allows staff members to acknowledge when the stresses are becoming a problem for individuals.

National Association for Self Esteem (2002) lists the following A B Cs of stress



## ABC of stress

A. Acknowledge

B. Behaviour modification e.g. through exercise, meditation, breathing

C. Communication - to prevent or minimise the impact of stress

In her article "Stress, Burnout and Self Esteem Among Teachers", Doris Rosenow highlights the use of the following to alleviate the impact of stress:

### Self Esteem

1. Use affirmations to boost self esteem
2. Associate with positive people
3. List your past successes

### Conclusion

While there is a plethora of research identifying workplace stress in teaching and identifying the reasons for this, there is little, if any, literature of an empirical nature that provides positive suggestions to alleviate this stress. It falls upon the leadership of each individual school to create a culture of support which will develop an emotionally and physically healthy workplace for the staff. As stated in the section on purpose, the decision was taken to use the sabbatical opportunity to enter into discussions with a number of Special Schools to discover how these schools identify the elements which cause the most stress and what measures these schools have put in place in an attempt to alleviate pressures and to create workplaces that are as healthy as possible.

There are several important findings from this research opportunity

1. It is helpful to have research evidence that teaching is a stressful career. With this knowledge schools can be better prepared to recognise the signs of staff members who are not dealing well with their stress levels and can put measures in place to help these people to manage their workloads and achieve a more healthy balance.
2. Through the Wilson School Pastoral Care Survey most staff members at Wilson School perceive the school to be above average at dealing with the pastoral care and wellbeing needs of staff members but they have noted a number of areas where systems could change or improvements could be made. These will be discussed further with school staff.
3. There is evidence in the literature that each individual staff member is responsible for monitoring their own health and learning to manage stress levels is an important part of this. Staff members who feel that this area of their lives is out of balance should feel free to discuss this with a staff member within the school who can assist them to find solutions that are personal to them. It is important that people know who to go to.
4. There is evidence that embedding Distributed Leadership throughout the school rather than just within the senior leadership team would help more staff members to understand the role of the Senior Leaders and the issues they grapple with. This model also gives more people ownership of not just the issues but also the solutions. Discourage a school culture that assumes that senior leaders should be the ones to solve the problems.
5. Develop more of a solution focused culture, e.g. "this is OUR problem, how will WE solve it, instead of

- a culture that asks “what are the Senior Managers going to do about the issue”
6. Creating positive cultures where people have fun is important to building healthy workplaces.
  7. Clarity around role descriptions is important. Because in special schools staff members are involved in all aspects of the students’ lives it can be difficult to recognise where the job actually ends, especially when there is significant involvement with outside agencies.
  8. Creative ideas should be more fully explored. Not all will be introduced to the school and there will be a variety of reasons for this, but all should be accepted and discussed. Develop more of a culture that investigates “how can we make this happen” rather than a “yes, but this might be a problem” culture
  9. Practice greater celebration of all the exciting and positive things that happen in classrooms every day. Find more ways to share these good and creative ideas
  10. Consider a “Mindfulness” programme, in which staff members get in touch with “the moment” as opposed to ruminating on past wrongs or issues that can’t be resolved. Learn to “leave it behind” (see “A Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World”)

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## Appendix

1. Bradford Index
  2. Wilson School Pastoral Care Survey
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### Appendix 1

#### Bradford Factor

Definition from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

The **Bradford Factor** or **Bradford Formula** is used in human resource management as a means of measuring worker absenteeism. The theory is that short, frequent, and unplanned absences are more disruptive than longer absences. According to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development the term was first coined due to its supposed connection with research undertaken by the Bradford University School of Management in the 1980s. It was developed as a way of highlighting the disproportionate level of disruption on an organisation's performance that can be caused by short-term absence compared to single instances of prolonged absence. It was originally designed for use as part of the overall investigation and management of absenteeism. In contrast, if used as part of a very limited approach to address absence or by setting unrealistically low trigger scores it was considered short-sighted, unlikely to be successful and could lead to staff disaffection and grievances. The use of the Bradford Factor often provokes heated debate.<sup>[1]</sup>

#### Calculation

The Bradford Factor is calculated as follows:

$$B = S^2 \times D$$

where:

- B is the Bradford Factor score
- S is the total number of spells (instances) of absence of an individual over a set period
- D is the total number of days of absence of that individual over the same set period<sup>[2]</sup>

The 'set period' is typically set as a rolling 52 week period.

For example:

- 01 instance of absence with a duration of ten days (1 x 1 x 10) = 10 points
- 03 instances of absence; one of one and two of two days (3 x 3 x 5) = 45 points
- 03 instances of absence; one of one, one of three and one of six days (3 x 3 x 10) = 90 points
- 05 instances of absence; each of two days (5 x 5 x 10) = 250 points
- 10 instances of absence; each of one day (10 x 10 x 10) = 1000 points

The Bradford Formula is used to calculate an "attendance score".

**Note** – The writer's school does not use this scoring system.

## Appendix 2

### PASTORAL CARE SURVEY

1. What are the Major Stressors that you encounter in your work at Wilson School? Please list them. (These will be different for everyone).
2. What (if anything) happens within the culture of Wilson School to reduce stress and to support staff?
3. If you need help or have a problem does anyone in the school help? Who and how?
4. Where do you rate the support structures (Pastoral Care) at Wilson School? Please circle your answer.  
Not supportive    1            2            3            4            5    Very supportive
5. What do we already do well?
6. Can you think of ways we can improve our Pastoral Care?
7. Can you think of social events or celebrations that would help to build morale within our school?
8. What have we missed? What else would enhance the wellbeing (Hauora) at Wilson School?
9. Do you have any other ideas to make our school a more supportive work place?
10. And finally, it is a sad reality of our school that from time to time we lose a student. This has happened twice this year. It is always difficult to ensure that we inform and support everyone appropriately. Please tell me how these two recent events have been for you and most importantly if there is anything we could have done better.