

FOCUS:

How are schools dealing with the overcrowded curriculum, and to what extent is inquiry learning being emphasized?

COLIN DAVIDSON TIKIPUNGA PRIMARY SCHOOL

Executive Summary

Colin Davidson, Principal of Tikipunga Primary School, secured one of the Primary Principals' Sabbatical Awards for term three, 2005.

His proposal was based on visiting a range of schools within New Zealand to look primarily at ways schools were dealing with the overcrowded curriculum, and to what extent inquiry learning was being emphasized.

Having completed directorship of an ICT-PD cluster in 2004, this principal had been exposed to high quality contemporary educational thinking and there was a resonance between his own school's curriculum design, and that thinking which sought to encourage the paradigm shifts needed to prepare today's children for tomorrow's uncertainties.

This ICT-PD project provided a critical contract for the recipients' proposal and schools suggested by educational consultant Trevor Bond, formed the basis of the visits made.

The Tikipunga Primary School Board provided a modest budget for the project supplemented considerably by the recipient himself. There is a comment about the funding within the body of the report herewith.

A total of 26 schools in the following regions were visited.

Whangarei	(2)	- over two days
Auckland	(4)	- over three days
Waikato	(4)	- over four days
Nelson	(6)	- over four days
Blenheim	(2)	- over one day
Hawkes Bay	(8)	- over five days

In addition to the school visits, the recipient attended the 3 day U-Learn Conference (much of this was relevant to his project) in Auckland, and two full day inservice courses – one on health and safety issues and one on educating boys and attendant implications.

A total of 26 school day equivalents was thus expended.

Not included in these figures is the time expended on travel, organization, general administration (letter of thanks, photocopying, printing of photographs) or report writing ... at least another 7 day equivalents.

The requirement to expend at least half the time on the project was superceded, and had the budget provision been greater even more could have been done.

Outcomes of this project will clearly benefit the school and as a pioneer of this award, the recipient's experiences should be at least of practical value to future recipients.

General Report

It is with considerable pleasure that I submit this report. I have no real idea of what is expected and so have attempted to follow the guidelines in the award brief.

The views and opinions expressed in this report are mine and do not reflect those of my colleagues or my Board.

Background

My schooling began in the winter of 1952. I have been "at school" from that time. Having been "in teaching" since 1965, I guess I am very much in the twilight years of this vocation. For many years I have envied teachers in other countries who have been provided with opportunities for service or study leave so the opportunity for sabbatical leave as has been recently negotiated was something I could not ignore.

Our involvement in an ICT-PD contract has exposed me to powerful contemporary thinking, and coupled with my deep aversion to the national curriculum that was dumped on us in the nineties, the superficiality it generated with its "balanced coverage" requirement (be it real or imagined) and plethora of achievement objectives, choosing a study topic was never going to be a problem.

Our school was due for a visit from the Education Review Office, and with no indication of the visit occurring in the third term, I chose to apply for leave in this quarter. I was hoping too that the minimal timeframe would be a barrier to other applicants, and thus increase my chances for a successful application ... not much confidence in self or topic! We have attempted to reconceptualise our school curriculum by adopting a slim line approach and provide relevant learning experiences (and as it turns out, have made a good deal of progress) but something was missing, not the least being the paperwork that the Reviewers need to satisfy their briefs.

So, in simple mercenary terms, a dual purpose for this application existed, neither particularly relevant, I am sure, to the real reason for the sector providing these opportunities. I needed to improve the paperwork pending a Review, and I desperately wanted to see what others were doing with regard to their curriculum construction.

With thirteen and a half years in my current position behind me and the debilitating cumulative effect of the pressures that come from trying to make a difference for increasing needs from decreasing resources, I knew I was putting in more time each year just to maintain the school's position let alone make progress. This sabbatical leave has certainly come at an opportune time for school development, but more so, for my own benefit. I believe this is a feature that needs to be quietly promoted and for males who are in the system continuously, the time out, albeit so short, can only be of benefit.

Reflective Opportunity

I spent the bulk of the holiday period preceding term 3 at school trying to get things in order for the Acting Principal so there was no easing into this leave. From “all go” (I have worked a 60 hour week for most of the past three years) to total “whoa” was a real shock. It took me the best part of 3 weeks to stop feeling guilty, to stop hiding from neighbours and friends who think teachers have it easy at the best of times. I could not get into anything. I could not read. I started little projects but could not complete them. In short, I was going through a “cold turkey” withdrawal process. (My wife informs me that I was unbearable during that period too.)

It was not until the fifth week when we were in Nelson that she noted a difference and even I felt that I had been able to let the school go – not completely, but sufficiently so to be able to enjoy every day from the time I woke up.

I began to look at myself. I have never been afraid of work and with a background of distance running have an ability to exclude peripheral distractions and maintain the focus. My method of dealing with bigger workload is simple – work more hours! My family speaks of me going into a trance-like state when I am reflecting or cogitating on something which had happened, was going to happen ... or worse still, might happen. I know of many occasions when I have been talking with someone, a task which I had to perform or should have performed has “flicked” into my mind. The rapidity of day to day activity and the constant juggling required to keep the balls up in the air was having a silent, probably invisible but nevertheless debilitating effect on me.

I am not one who necessarily buys into the notion that stress *per se* is killing our principals, and have had little time for the marketing of anti-stress workshops. These are surface solutions and do nothing about the problem. To my mind, most of the pressure we bring on ourselves is because of our inherent goodness and as Dewey said, our innate desire to please. Teachers of the last decade or so, have strived to please the authorities, and to comply with and to fulfill directives. I assert that much of what has been done in our schools has been done not so much as to make a difference to the children and best equip them for an unknown future, but for compliance reasons to get a good Review. We have bent over backwards to consult our communities, and to do what they request, yet so often, this is the antithesis of the competencies children need to acquire for their futures. We have bought into assessment regimes, which have the potential to denigrate the craft of the teacher to being of lesser value than the computer software. We should be rejoicing in our subjectivity, our idiosyncrasies and pushing our passions. We need to ask ourselves “if I don’t do this, what is the risk to our children” ... thanks Tim Jenkinson.

I believe that much of our workload has been coming from unproductive activity, and our willingness to please merely exacerbates things. However, herein lies the frustration. To stand outside the square, to challenge and question, to swim against the current requires tenacity, self belief and an ability to soak up the pressures that come from adopting such a stance. This is where I am struggling. Should I capitulate, take the easy options, not rock the boat and retire gracefully, or should I accept the pain and loneliness that is an inevitable consequence of acting on my beliefs.

The term’s leave has helped me understand why I feel the way I do, why I do what I do, and given me the confidence to keep questioning.

“The issue is not about whether we are getting our money’s worth, but whether or not the money is making a difference to people’s lives.” *Dr John Yu, Chancellor, University NSW*. We can modify this to “whether or not our efforts are making a difference to children’s lives.”

Project Purposes

The underlying purpose of my study was to refine my notion of curriculum design and inquiry learning and to be in a better position to influence teaching staff in my own school and thus benefit children attending our school.

The Approach

The approach used was far from scientific and simply involved seeking permission to visit a range of New Zealand primary schools, talking to/with the principal, briefly touring the school and the classrooms, and concluded with another chat with the principal.

I am indebted to Trevor Bond for suggesting a list of schools I could contact, for without this, I doubt my term would have been as productive.

I have mentioned elsewhere the time which needs to be given to organizing visits and I grossly underestimated this component. My plan of having a week visiting schools followed by a spell back home was sound and I was able to arrange the following week's visits in that period. I could not help but be impressed with the efforts colleagues made to welcome me, and for their willingness to share their experience, and experiences.

It would be fair to say I was on the lookout for ways to help us with a challenge our school is facing (the arrival of the ERO team in November) but it was not long before I realized there is no "solution" to that pressure. My approach did not include collecting data and was very much predicated on building impressions and reflecting on the feelings I formed.

It goes without saying that I picked up a heap of useful ideas and got something of value from every single visit I made. Even my wife was impressed with the range of photographs I took, and grudgingly conceded the digital camera we recently bought was justified!

Findings

The first decade of Tomorrows Schools has left its legacy in educational confusion in our primary schools and it is my belief that only in the past five years has the situation begun to improve.

I discovered more of a fraternity amongst principals than would have been evident five or six years ago when inter-school competition would have been evident. Some readers of this report may recall the Saatchi & Saatchi speaker at a Palmerston North NZPF Conference promoting "grow your school at the expense of your neighbours". I did not detect that competitive feeling ... in fact in several areas there was a discernible tightness.

I observed high levels of principal pride and commitment to their schools – something you do not think about when you are doing the daily business. There was passion, energy and a sense of service that was simply humbling.

The classrooms I visited exemplified all that we take for granted ... lively places of learning, with the emphasis on learning, not merely "doing". The standards were not only high but universal.

Almost without exception principals were concerned about the overcrowded curriculum, and were hopeful that the curriculum stocktake would improve things.

Of significance to me were the pressures that were unique and common to low-decile schools, and the way these pressures were faced. Although stresses clearly existed across the decile spectrum,

they were different, and highlighted the flaws of a one-size-fits all delivery/support/review mentality.

Implications

The consequences of this leave have already for me been significant, and while no one school had any greater influence than any other, the collective impressions have been powerful. Things that we had been dabbling in now have meaning. I am totally convinced that our four strand curriculum approach has merit, and since returning to school have a much clearer concept of what a “Learning School” might look like.

We have begun to reconsider the traditional three R’s ... replacing them with Resiliency, Resourcefulness and Reflection. Their implications in developing a true learning community are huge, but without paying attention to them, lifelong learners will be no more than a meaningless slogan.

Conclusions

- The sabbatical award is long overdue and will be a significant benefit to principals nationally both personally and professionally.
- I recommend that the award system be reviewed with fewer principals receiving the award and a budget of say \$3,000 be included in the award. It is my view that the gloss of the opportunity has been significantly diminished by the impositions on my Board ... and my own pocket.
- This country should be proud of its teachers, its principals, and its primary schools for the commitment to their children.
- Principalship is a very lonely job and very demanding most of the time, but the willingness of colleagues to give the recipient their time was humbling. Almost without exception, principals felt that some of the collegiality that existed prior to Tomorrows Schools, was returning.
- Pedagogy was seen as the critical ingredient of a successful teaching/learning environment. A common thread across many schools was that increasing hardware resourcing was not the resolution to addressing the paradigm shifts required in pedagogy – indeed in most of the classrooms where inquiry learning was being implemented, computers were not heavily represented as critical resources.
- In the majority of schools visited there was a strong connection with ICT-PD clusters where pedagogy is being accented, involvement in Atol, the Numeracy Projects, and involvement with facilitator/consultant Trevor Bond.
- The differences between high and low decile schools were both minimal and major ... teachers and principals were committed regardless of their situations, but the day-to-day issues faced by low decile school leaders were very different from their high decile counterparts. As one low decile principal remarked “we expend a high amount of energy each day to keep things stable. There’s no time for easing up – the wheels can fall off very quickly – so when we want to make changes, it has to be well planned, well executed, and well worth it”.

I am fortunate to have been granted this leave at this time. I am quite sure that had I not “done it”, early retirement, perhaps precipitated by illness, would have been inevitable.

I have been blessed to have had a very pleasant learning experience and hope that many colleagues in the years ahead enjoy similar opportunities.

C G Davidson