

SABBATICAL REPORT

TERM 2, 2007

FOCUS: *As a College how do we make the best of the Middle School Years in light of the new Schooling Strategy and Draft Curriculum*

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my thanks to the Ministry of Education for making Principal's paid sabbaticals possible – they are an extremely valuable time for reflective practice. I also acknowledge a special thanks to both the previous and new Board of Trustees for the generous support of my sabbatical. The opportunity for learning, reflecting, and rejuvenating was greatly appreciated. Finally I am extremely grateful to Elizabeth Hill and the Senior Management Team who took on extra duties and experienced extra pressures during my absence – their generosity of spirit and willingness to get on with the job showed that they are a great team!

Executive Summary

In the course of my sabbatical in the ten weeks of Term 2 I visited the United Kingdom and Sweden, a number of middle and secondary schools in Auckland and Wellington and attended an International Conference on Thinking in Norrkopping Sweden and a Leadership Seminar at the Auckland University Leadership Centre on “Resiliency for Staff and Principals”.

The aim of the sabbatical was to inform and investigate the possibility of reorganizing the structure of a Year 7-13 school in light of the Schooling Strategy and the implications of considering a Year 7-10 (Middle School) and a Year 11-13 (Senior School) concept.

In the course of the research and investigation I was able to discern that many of the Middle School concepts and pedagogy are already in place at St Dominic's College and it is a matter of refining and “tweaking” our structures to ensure that the best of Middle and Senior School concepts are visible and practiced within the parameters of the Schooling Strategy, including the key competencies and values of the new curriculum.

Purpose

The purpose of the sabbatical was to reflect on our current practices re' pedagogy and classroom management in light of the Middle School and Senior School and what we are doing to ensure that we are meeting our Strategic Plan which states that St Dominic's College will “*within the Special Character environment provide a high quality curriculum programme, based on the national Curriculum Framework, which fosters high achievement based upon the recognition of each student's needs.*”

Our development as a staff over the last three years has been to focus on classroom practice, including developing school wide literacy and numeracy practices, using achievement data to inform practice, developing differentiated learning and raising the achievement of our Maori and Pasifika students through these practices. These targets have also been included in each teacher's appraisal and our ongoing whole school staff development plan.

The specific purposes of the sabbatical, therefore, were –

- To visit middle schools to observe and discuss the pedagogy of middle schooling and to observe good practice.
- To visit secondary schools to investigate Year 9 and 10 learning skills and pastoral care programmes.
- To learn more about the Thinking Skills curriculum and its relevance to the new draft curriculum.
- To investigate the benefits of and a strategy for implementing a school wide thinking skills programme.

Background

I have come to the conclusion over the last few years that to effect change in a secondary school there needs to be a number of factors that work together to ensure that the change is effective and sustainable. This includes:

- A vision that is accessible and understood by all staff
- On going school wide professional development that involves all staff
- A school wide commitment to the efficacy of the change and its importance to the students.
- Benefits of the professional development are apparent in appraisal and they are part of both the Annual Plan and the appraisal programme.
- The belief that our students are being prepared for a future that we are not yet aware of hence the need to develop their skills and abilities to enable them to be adaptable, life long learners, technologically competent and to develop an understanding of relationships and inter relational skills that enable them to work in a society that is global and international.
- That change must be based on credible research and hard data and this needs to be disseminated to all those who will have the responsibility of leading the change, for effecting change and those instigating the change in the classrooms.

Thus, change can only come about through sustained professional development which includes all staff.

This belief drives the journey that we are on at St Dominic's College which is to always ensure that we at the cutting edge of sustainable educational developments and to ensure that we are challenging our students to achieve excellence within an environment that supports and meets their learning needs.

Hence the key elements are:

- To use data, in particular, asTTle to inform practice
- To develop greater differentiation in teaching and learning programmes.
- To develop and teach thinking skills school wide (including developing a common learning language based around Habits of Mind)
- To develop sustainable middle school practices that reflect the learning and pastoral care needs of the “emerging adolescent”

Activities Undertaken

- Attendance at Auckland University Leadership Seminar “Resiliency for Staff and Principals”
- Attendance at the 13th International Conference on Thinking in Norrköping Sweden.
- Visit to the National Agency for Education (Skolverket) Sweden – an agency which has supervisory role to ensure that the provisions of the Education Act are being complied with

and that the rights of the individual student are respected, it is currently re-structuring along the lines of our Education Review Office.

- Visits to the following schools:
 - i. Papatoetoe Intermediate – one of the larger intermediates and the Principal Dr Brian Hinchco’s thesis was based on Middle Schooling.
 - ii. Kristin School – a Year 0 – 13 school which is divided into a Junior, Middle and Senior School.
 - iii. Albany Junior College – a Year 7 – 10 purpose built college
 - iv. St Mary’s College (Wellington) – a Catholic Girl’s College with specific Year 9/13 Leadership programmes.
 - v. Wellington High School – Year 9 Learning Skills programme.
 - vi. Montessori School, Stockholm, - a Year 0 – 6 school
 - vii. Alston Middle School, Stockholm, - a Year 7 – 10 school.
 - viii. Twynhickam Community College Andover, a Year 7 – 12 College, this College has strong pastoral care programmes.

Findings

Resiliency Seminar

The Auckland University Leadership seminar on Resiliency was focused on exploring a range of strategies to foster resilience for Principals and to strengthen the sustainability of our learning community. It was designed to make us think about the need for and ways to building staff and students who are adaptable and able to cope with the changes that are part of our daily lives in education. The seminar also addressed the factors involved in organizational change and the impact that this has on school culture. For me this seminar highlighted the importance planning for change, involving the key people who will be affected and ensuring that the changes are open and transparent. This linked with the process of change that would take place if the school were to restructure into a senior and middle school or even take on whole school developments.

13th International Conference on Thinking

The second part of my visit to Sweden was a week at the 13th International Conference on Thinking. The theme for the conference was “Curious Minds Think and Learn by Exploring the Unknown”; Building relationships and establishing networks between persons with different backgrounds and views, different positions and ambitions, support confrontation with the unknown and enables rethinking and learning. It was a mass of academics from different fields, a variety of professionals, intellectuals and ordinary laymen.

The conference included well known people specialising in the area of Thinking, Developing Thinking Skills and Developing Thinking Skills Curriculum in schools. They included such people as Edward De Bono, Art Costa Bill Martin, Bob Schwartz and Howard Gardner all whom are ‘leading lights’ in the development of thinking skills in the field of education.

The workshops that I attended were based around thinking skills curriculums and how various schools throughout the world have introduced them school wide. From both the key note presentations and the seminars I found that there is growing evidence that the development of a thinking curriculum focusing on teaching students how to think deeply leads to them becoming more successful in external examinations but more importantly life long learners who can take responsibility for their decisions

On reflection, the Conference challenged me to think about what we are doing about thinking skills within our own College and how the development of critical thinking skills is particularly important in

assisting our students to become effective, creative problem solvers and informed, skilled and compassionate citizens who value truth, openness, creativity, interdependence and balance. This again fits into the developmental stages of young adolescents between the ages of 10 – 14 years of age and also one of the key competencies in the draft curriculum which to me is an umbrella competency.

As Millie Millnert, Rector, Linköping University wrote in her introduction “The lust and desire for knowledge, for understanding and interpreting the world and exploring the unknown is a fundamental driving force for man. Creating a culture that promotes this is vital, not only for a successful university but for an open and thriving society as a whole. Creative ideas make the world grow, expanding reality”.

Implications

After exploring the concept and pedagogy that forms the basis of a middle school I have concluded that in the middle school area our programmes should be based on:

- Students learning through experience and service learning in the community
- Students being coached to learn how to learn
- Students doing investigations and projects that they help to design
- Students developing skills and attitudes to be independent students developing as reflective learners and critical and creative thinkers
- Students learning responsibility through experiences that schools organize
- Students attaining high standards of achievement by setting goals and doing self directed learning
- Students achievement progression in literacy and numeracy across the curriculum and across Years 7-10; and
- Schools helping students and parents to see how cross curricula learning is a good preparation for specialized learning in the senior secondary school

For my school it means that we need to look at these implications in terms of what is all ready current practice at our school and if there are further concepts and or practices that we could implement that would further the achievement of our students.

Conclusions

Apart from the above findings reported some general observations are as follows:

The middle school years are an important time of development and it is about pedagogy and approaches to learning.

“Adolescence is one of the most fascinating and complex transitions in the life span; a time of accelerated growth and change second only to infancy. The events of this crucially formative phase can shape an individual’s life and thus the future of our society” *Carnegie Council*

In a Year 7-13 school there is an opportunity to develop cross curricular approaches and integration of subjects with a focus on how to learn in preparation for the senior years. Particularly as the Year 7-10 students have the immediate Year 11 -13 students as role models.

The draft curriculum presents us as Year 7-13 schools with a unique opportunity to have a head start by developing a structured Year 7 -10 curriculum which ensures that the thinking competency is an umbrella to teach and implement the remaining four competencies, managing self, relating to others, using language, symbols, and texts and participating and contributing.

Year 10 can become the transition year that focuses on preparing students for the senior school with the bonus of having the senior school visible and acting as role models. Year 10 can become a time when expectations both academically and socially can be increased through leadership opportunities, NCEA programmes such as literacy and numeracy and an increasing social awareness programme.

Finally from my observations the middle school years are a pivotal time in the development of our students and it is important the we as Principals in Year 7 -13 schools are aware we have a prime responsibility to capture the essence of the middle school years and ensure that our schools reflect the pedagogy and practices that create the best learning environment possible for our students.

References

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