



Sabbatical Report, Term 3, 2015

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Purpose of my Sabbatical

To inquire, identify and explore the impacts of network reviews on priority learners, their whanau and school leaders.

Levin (2000, pg. 15) argues that “education reform can not succeed and should not proceed without much more direct involvement in all its aspects.”

From my own experience in the South Dunedin Education Review 2011, very little was done in terms of consulting students during the establishment phase of the newly merged schools. However, whanau were involved in the consultation, establishment and implementation phases. I am interested in gathering student voice as to the impact the establishment and implementation of a newly merged school had on them as learners.

Kyriako & Phillip (2006, pg. 297-302) found that an “area of research that has received little attention has been teacher stress linked to the merger and reorganisation of schools.”

I am also interested in comparing my experience as the principal who established a merged school, with that of other principals of merged schools in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. Through this I will write a paper/report as a reference point for school leaders, who may in the future be establishing a merged school.

Professional Learning Activity

To investigate the impact that network reviews and school reorganisation have on:

- Students, with an emphasis on priority learners and specifically Maori and Pasifika learners and their whanau;
- School leaders, with an emphasis on how change and stress is managed.

Key Investigative Questions

- What are the critical impacts – positive and negative on learners, whanau and school leaders?
- What evidence is available of achievement and engagement for Maori and Pacific learners and their whanau?
- What are the qualities and attributes of successfully merged schools?
- What can be learned from the past network reviews that will inform and potentially support future reviews?

Activities undertaken (methodology)

- Visiting merged schools in New Zealand and the United Kingdom;
- Semi-structured interviews/surveys of students, whanau and Principals.

Acknowledgements

- Participant principals (past and present) from Taranaki, Southland, Otago, Canterbury.
- Participant families from Otago.
- Participant children from Otago.

Findings

What are the critical impacts – positive and negative on learners, whanau and school leaders?

School Leaders

Negative impacts:

It is clear from all of the responses and interview carried out, that school leaders found their reviews to be incredibly stressful. In all but one response, leaders felt forced by the MOE into the process. None were invited to be a part of the determining how the process would be implemented.

School leaders were forced into managing complex relational issues that arose with: staff; community; students; BOT; Ministry of Education; NZSTA; NZEI.

They had to manage (with little, if any MOE support) the change and in doing so supported their communities to come to terms with the change. They also had to navigate and manage the impact that the change was having on them personally. Respondents reported huge personal stress and emotional pressure. The change resulted in a multitude of outcomes for individuals e.g. appointment as the establishment principal of a new school; loss of employment; redundancy; beginning a new career away from principalship; and death (T).

For those appointed to establish and lead new schools, respondent stated they were charged with developing new school cultures but at the same time having to deal with declines in student achievement levels (O) and unhappy communities members who did not want the change to happen and in several cases people worked maliciously against the principal and/or staff to sabotage the new school. This situation was extremely stressful (T).

Staffing issues also caused a high degree of personal stress on leaders. As with all reviews unless there is a surplus-staffing situation, staff had little option but to engage with and be employed within the “reorganisation.” One respondent outlined his concern that “you got what was given” and there was no room to employ staff that wanted to be at the new school (S).

Another reported his unwilling staff publicly criticised his appointment as the new principal (and on social media), which in turn brought huge personal stress (O). At a community meeting he and the establishment BOT chair were verbally abused which and was widely reported in the media. “There was a for a moment that I considered resigning three days after I was appointed, but I thought these people are angry and hurt and therefore I need to do my best to make the new school work. I was appointed for a reason and it was my job to get it done.”

In one school surveyed the school was split over two sites for almost a year. Due to the split, staff began to develop their own culture and routines and once everyone came together it proved to be even more difficult for the principal to bring everyone together to develop a positive staff morale and development of a school-wide culture. “Many of the staff were still struggling with the merger and still resentful and negative. We were always hearing “that’s not the way we did it.” “The staff from the ‘continuing’ school totally resented the intrusion of the rest of us (from three other schools) into their territory and space.” Due to the high levels of stress the establishment principal at this school went on sick leave and subsequently resigned a year after the new school opened. The deputy principal was then appointed to lead the school (S).

Issues with workload were a consistent theme from respondents in terms of negative impact. During the new school set up, one reported that without the many hours put in over the Xmas holidays (six day a week throughout the break) the school would not have been ready to start the new school year (S).

Others talked about the issues with property redevelopment, the months of “dust” and “as tradesmen worked around children and jack hammers and machinery were clattering away all day, making teaching and learning difficult and at times impossible.” Due to a lack of space in some schools it was difficult to find places to store resources which resulted in one school having to use shipping containers.

In all responses there was a belief that the MOE completely “stepped back” from their responsibilities to support schools with the new school set-up in regards property issues (S, O). A common response was the lack of MOE support once the schools were established. The MOE did little to help, support or guide. “We were totally reactive to each situation as it arose, as there was no manual to follow and no support.

Similarly in terms of learning, the Ministry were expecting results and a positive learning environment, but supports were not available. GSE were short staffed and not equipped to deal with the issues we faced” (S). Many children needed support for their learning, behaviour and transition to the new school. In some areas such as Southland

there was a lack of support and limited resourcing, compared to smaller reviews such as that in South Dunedin.

A number of schools found that student achievement levels were quite low for some years. “It’s only after four years that we have seen an improvement in our maths National Standards data. With so many children enrolling from different schools over a two-three year period it has been difficult for them to transition to the new school and as such their learning and progress has been impacted on (0).”

This impact on student achievement, one could argue, was the most unfortunate and concerning outcomes of a network review and worthy of further investigation and research by the Ministry of Education.

Positive Impacts:

From all of the responses school leaders commented that a highlight of opening a new school was the opportunity to create a new school culture, vision, purpose and curriculum for the learners and community.

All schools with the support of external PLD facilitators and SAFs developed new curriculum plans to reflect the new school community.

The EDI and JSIF funds allowed schools to work together to implement positive initiatives in a range of areas. In Invercargill (city-wide) and South Dunedin, Numeracy Recovery Projects were developed and resulted in positive gains for many students and teacher PD and capability. In Taranaki “It really gave us an IT injection and let us focus on pedagogy around digital learning. School management teams were able to look at best practice across the country and synthesis these to enhance and grow our schools capability.”

In terms of property redevelopment, whilst it was a “dusty” process all school commented that the redeveloped learning facilities were an improvement and in turn enhanced the learning opportunities for children.

“Out of the ashes the school has become stronger, but it took about 5 years after the review to really feel like we had left the negativity behind. It was really only when the disaffected families moved on, that this happened (S).”

Similarly “the new school probably took a few years to blossom and after this time we started to see families who went elsewhere at the start “return” to us and enrol their children here and we have a parent considering standing for the BOT (O).”

Implications

The impacts of school review on communities is immense and it is clear from leaders’ feedback that many issues arise from such. In addition to the challenges associated with property redevelopment and curriculum development the importance of focusing on and developing relationship should not be underestimated.

Ministry of Education and in turn establishment Boards of Trustees are tasked with the difficult job of appointing principals and leadership teams that will ultimately match the needs of the community to create positive new learning environments.

The challenge for principals and leadership teams is to manage the impacts to enable positive outcomes for communities and students and their achievement.

Whanau

A number of whanau were surveyed and it was clear that the impacts on them and their children were immense. A strong sense of “loss of our school” came through in all of the responses. Not one respondent wanted the changes to occur, but for some the realization that change was inevitable forced people to have to begin working through the impacts associated with the respective review they were involved with.

Negative Impacts:

The “unknown” of what things were going to look like and where the new school would be located, along with who were the new teachers/Principal.

“The sense of loss of our school community that had been around for over 100 years. (0)” featured as a common theme in the responses and one that was acknowledged by all stakeholders within the network review.

“We saw the debate around the review split our community and many families attended other schools and not the merged school - where the children should have gone to(0).” This situation had a really negative impact on our children...they were unsettled and the change impacted on their achievement.”

Positive Impacts:

In contrast to the loss of school communities, whanau found that the positives whilst they did not balance and admonish the negatives, many did arise:

- We got to meet new people, friends which helped my child deal with huge change which has been something of benefit;
- The new school, new image, new community and families behind the new school.....we all saw the excellent opportunities offered to our children from combining schools and making a new one;
- It felt like a fresh start.

For Maori whanau acknowledgement of positive outcomes also emerged:

- “I believe it was a positive experience for both cultures, recognition was made regarding Maori students and how important language and culture is, by immersing it within the new school, and also setting up an immersion class (0).”
- “Both cultures are engaged within the school and Maori have been acknowledged as priority learners, and we are engaging with their whanau.”

Implications

- For a new school to be successful, whanau surveyed stated there must be: Good leadership from Board, Principal and management teams.
- The new school community needs to have everyone working on the same page and looking out for what is best for the school and the students who attend now and in the future.

- The new BOT needs to have robust processes and policies in place for sustainability.

Akonga

Students from one South Dunedin merged school were surveyed.

Those who responded were all students who were new to the merged school. Some came from one of the two merged schools (that formed the new one), some came from one of the three other schools that were also a part of the South Dunedin review, a smaller number came from other schools outside the reviewed network and some were new entrants. The students were interviewed in small informal groups and come from a range of cultural backgrounds, however Maori and Pacific students formed a large part of the cohort interviewed.

Negative Impacts:

The children spoke openly of the sadness their parents felt when their old school closed. A number of them said “Mum and Dad were sad” and “we were kind of sad, but excited too.”

“Leaving friends was sad” was a common response. Many cited that “kids were split up” because some came to this new school and others went elsewhere.

Moving to another school and the anxiety of not knowing what the “new learning environment was like with lots of space was a big change” was cited as a concern for the students. By this was negated when they arrived on their first day to be greeted by teachers they knew from their old school and lots familiar faces of children they knew from their old school and from the others schools in the area.

Positive Impacts

A highlight for the students was when they saw their old teachers on the first day at school. This gave them a strong sense of security and belonging from the outset. During their first few weeks as the newly merged school, the students said they

gravitated to their “old” teachers. One child cited “they looked after me.” Over time they commented that they got to know the other “new” teachers who they described as “nice.”

All students said whilst it “felt like a big change” they felt “safer in this new school because of AROHA (pastoral care programme) and the family environment” feel that the new school had.

One student stated “coming here boosted my confidence. I made new friends and met new people. The learning programmes and topics were/are interesting.”

Others described the new school as “having more learning here.” “ It seemed big at the start but it’s not really.” “It is a different school, with lots of different rooms and spaces to learn it.”

In terms of Maori immersion provision, several students said they were” happy being able to go into the immersion class” as this wasn’t an option at their previous school.

It seems that the positive impact on students far outweighed the negative and this was reflected in the response by one student. “Everyone was worried about the new school, but it’s OK.”

Implications

- For a new school to be successful, students needs to feel a sense of belonging and safety from the outset;
- The new school community/BOT/Staff need to have robust policies, plans and procedures in place to ensure the above occurs;
- Adults should not underestimate the social, emotional and cultural capital (strength, courage and resiliency) that children have and bring to the new school;
- Student voice should be documented to help develop the school environment, tone, culture and curriculum.

Conclusion

The impacts of school review and reorganisation on young people, their families, their teachers and the wider community is immense.

From my research it was clear that all “adults” involved with the review at every level have an obligation to work closely together to ensure learners needs are the priority and held at the fore throughout the decision making process.

The adults need to ensure that they manage the change and impacts to ensure that students’ transition from their previous school to their “new” school is handled gently and with considered thought.

The community must have discussions that are rigorous, however respectful to develop a shared new school vision, values, curriculum and pastoral care programme, to ensure the needs of the learner are met from the outset. If these pivotal statements/documents/procedures are in place and developed collaboratively the new school can only but be a successful learning environment.

During the first three years of a merged school, it is vital that all those within the community work closely together to ensure that the:

- Children transition, settle into and flourish at their new school;
- New culture is allowed to respectfully develop and grow;
- Building of positive relationships is held as a high priority.
- New curriculum is developed collaboratively and embedded gradually;
- Pastoral care programme support learners to be engaged in their new school and in turn to be motivated learners;
- Ministry of Education continues to support the school by closely monitoring developments and offering support;
- School leader(s) carefully and sensitively manage and navigate the impacts (both negative and positive) on the new school development.

References

Levin, B. (2000). Putting Students at the Centre in Education Reform. Journal of Educational Change. Volume 1, Issue 2, pp 155-172.

Kyriacou, C. & Harriman, P. (2006). Publishing models and article dates explained. pg. 297-302. Published online: 28 Jul 2006