

**Principal's Sabbatical Report**  
***Teaching as Inquiry – An opportunity to strengthen teacher appraisal and  
changing outcomes for students***

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Principal's Sabbatical – 15 June – 4 September 2015

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge and thank the Oratia District School Board of Trustees, Ministry of Education and Teach NZ for supporting my application for sabbatical leave in 2015.

I would like to particularly acknowledge the school's senior leadership team and in particular, Tracey Gill, for making it possible for me to walk away from school knowing that it would continue to function as usual.

My heartfelt thanks go to the staff of Oratia District School who supported Tracey Gill and the senior leaders to maintain a 'steady ship'.

I am hugely indebted to the wonderfully accommodating principals of all the schools I visited and who shared their time and practice so very generously with me. I also valued the time taken by those principals who responded to my emailed questions.

Specifically, I would like to acknowledge the following wonderfully dedicated principals, reviewers and researchers:

Deidre Alderson	Willowbank School	- Auckland
Maree Bathurst	Albany Primary School	- Auckland
Janice Borsos	Holy Cross School	- Auckland
Bruce Cunningham	Belmont School	- Auckland
Justine Driver	Pakuranga Heights Primary School	- Auckland
Alan Jackson	Titirangi Primary School	- Auckland
Sandy Jenkins	Freemans Bay School	- Auckland
Richard Limbrick	Arahoe School	- Auckland
Anne Lye	Churton Park School	- Wellington
Miranda Makin	Albany Senior High School	- Auckland

Liz Manley	Woodlands Park School	- Auckland
Sarah Martin	Stonefields Primary School	- Auckland
Alison Spence	Kohia Terrace Primary School	- Auckland
Kerry Taylor	The Education Group	- Auckland
Gay Turner	Prospect Primary School	- Auckland
Debbie Waikato	Lincoln Heights School	- Auckland

Thank you also to:

Chris McLean at Core Education

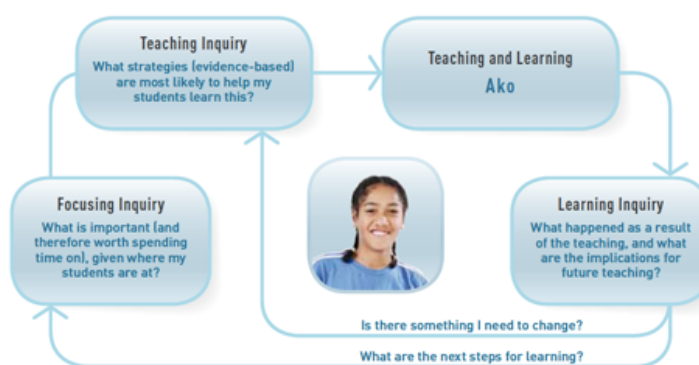
Kerry Mitchell at the Education Group

Di Moffitt at the Education Review Office

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The New Zealand Curriculum states that “effective pedagogy requires that teachers inquire into the impact of their teaching on their students.” (NZC, 2010, p.35).

“Teaching as Inquiry” in this report includes the steps and processes for identifying gaps in learning, setting inquiry questions and achievement goals, review, data and evidence collection, self-reflection and reflection in ‘open to learning’ conversations within a primary school setting. The purpose of the inquiry is to determine what works well and results in improved outcomes for students, and what needs to be put in place to advance further teaching and learning.



*(<http://nzcurriculum.tki.org.nz/Curriculum-stories/Case-studies/Teachers-as-learners-Inquiry/Teaching-as-inquiry>)*

In each of the schools that I visited every teacher was expected to engage in active inquiry into practice. In each school, systems and processes are put in place to support teaching as inquiry cycles and in many schools professional learning time and resourcing is allocated to support this endeavour. The inquiry cycles are in place to improve student outcomes and there is an expectation that teachers will learn from their inquiries and advance teaching practice.

Different conceptual models of inquiry have evolved in some schools and in the main, all use as their starting point, the Teaching as Inquiry model set out in the New Zealand Curriculum.

## PURPOSE

To find out what other schools’ inquiry models look like, how they are implemented and to see whether our cycle of inquiry differ significantly from other schools’ inquiries into teaching practice.

## **RATIONALE**

To find innovative approaches that would enhance our process of “Teaching as Inquiry” and look at how we can refine our inquiry cycle to ensure rigour.

## **BACKGROUND**

At Oratia District School we use ‘Teaching as Inquiry’ to inquire into teaching and learning. This process of inquiry is an integral part of our school’s appraisal process. Our appraisal cycle consists of a three yearly component that supports teacher registration, and an annual component that supports raising student achievement and improving professional practice.

Teachers use a cycle of inquiry, which is based around the needs of a group of targeted students in their classrooms. The students are identified based on student achievement data and other evidence that suggests a need for targeted intervention and inquiry.

Annually we have asked the following questions:

- How does our current use and implementation of ‘Teaching as Inquiry’ within performance management processes differ from other primary schools, if at all?
- Which components of teaching as inquiry require specific development to impact on the capacity of our teachers to inquire into pedagogical practice leading to increased student achievement?
- How can we transform teaching as inquiry in our school’s teacher appraisal process to support the development of coaching and educative mentoring in a practical way?

### The Oratia District School context

Oratia District School is a U6 Decile 9 contributing primary school in West Auckland. Our student group is largely made up of European/Pakeha learners with 80.75% NZ European, 9.71% NZ Maori, 1.07% Pacifica and with 7.84% comprising a wide range of other ethnicities. Our community has strong historical links to the school with many families who have third and fourth generation great and grandchildren attending.

The first priority from our strategic plan is:

*“To **raise student achievement** in reading, writing and Mathematics and provide quality learning and teaching **across the curriculum** (including the arts, languages, sciences, physical education and health)”*

*(Oratia District School Strategic Plan, 2015 – 2017, p.2)*

We will know we have achieved this when:

*“Across-school reading, writing and Mathematics OTJs in relation to the National Standards are higher than 2014”*

*(Oratia District School Strategic Plan, 2015 – 2017, p.3)*

A compelling drive and search to deliver the best learning and teaching opportunities for our students means that we pay particular attention to all the aspects which we believe could deliver accelerated learning and higher achievement for our students – teaching as inquiry, resourcing, professional learning and development, moderation, home-school partnerships and teacher appraisal.

During the last two years the Ministry of Education has created opportunities for school leaders and teachers to participate in funded professional learning which support schools to refine and improve teacher appraisal. Senior leaders of our school and I participated in this professional learning opportunity and from it, we strengthened our appraisal practices and brought our processes in line with the established requirements of the New Zealand Education Council.

Like many schools and leadership teams, our continuous review keeps highlighting flaws in our teaching as inquiry and teacher appraisal processes. Each year our leadership team and staff review our teacher appraisal process and continue to look critically at student outcomes in relation to teacher practice. Most recently, our school has had an opportunity to refine our ‘Teaching as Inquiry’ process thanks to a Ministry of Education funded professional learning opportunity – *Learning with Digital Technologies*. While the context was the integration of digital technologies, the focus of this school wide professional learning was the focus on teaching as inquiry. In particular, the sharing of learning between teachers through a process called ‘Story Hui’.

## METHODOLOGY

- Undertake professional reading
- Visit a number of schools in Auckland and Wellington to interview principals. I asked them all the same questions and noted their answers.
- In instances where the principal was not available for an interview, I emailed the questions to them and received their replies, which also provided information for this research.

## FINDINGS

*Is teacher as Inquirer incorporated into the appraisal process at your school? How is this done? What does teaching as inquiry look like at your school?*

As stated above, 'Teaching as Inquiry' in the context of this work includes processes for identifying gaps in learning and teaching, setting inquiry and achievement goals based on student achievement data, review, data and evidence collection, self-reflection and reflection with 'critical friends', and engaging in open to learning conversations within a primary school setting.

- 100% of the principals confirmed that "Teaching as Inquiry" was in action at their schools.
- 100% of the schools used a conceptual framework for their Teaching as Inquiry model – some used the model framed in the NZC while others had developed their own to reflect the process in action within their school.
- 100% of the principals stated that it was a key component of their appraisal process.
- 100% of the principals emphasized the use of and reference to student achievement data throughout the inquiry process. Student achievement data included National Standards Overall Teacher Judgments (OTJ), evidence from student workbooks and digital portfolios as well as student assessment results from assessment tools such as e-asTTle, PAT, Running Records and anecdotal observations.

The process of "Teaching as Inquiry" proved to be similar across all the schools. Similarities included:

- Staff appointed as appraisers - senior leaders e.g. Principal, Deputy/Assistant Principals, Deans or Team Leaders.
- When teachers met and how often they would meet with their appraiser for the year.
- At the first meeting between teacher and appraiser, student achievement data would be analysed and from the data, individual students would be identified and achievement targets set for those students.
- The achievement targets would also be closely aligned to the school's Strategic Plan and Annual Plans. Those students would be the focus of the teacher's inquiry.
- Each teacher would begin their inquiry and at team meetings there would be sharing and questioning about target students. These discussions supported individual teacher inquiries and were seen as 'open to learning' conversations.
- 100% of principals declared that their teachers had frequent opportunities to share learning from their inquiries. This was done in team meetings and sometimes at whole staff meetings.

Appraisal cycles had 'check-points' built into the process. A range of approaches is in action across different schools – these included weekly, fortnightly, monthly or termly conversations. No school had only an annual check.

At every school I visited, teachers were expected to keep a record of their inquiry. There was a range of expectations around this. At some schools, teachers could keep their records in modeling books or in journals written by hand. At 80% of the schools there was a strong push for teachers to incorporate digital technologies as part of their inquiry. In these schools teachers use Google website, blogs, OneNote, Evernote or Trello. In each of these schools, principals described the range of teacher capacity in this area as being 'on a continuum'.

One principal commented on each teacher's blog when they updated it and shared it with her.

In 80% of the schools, principals created time at meetings (senior leadership, team and whole staff) for teachers to update their inquiries as part of the process.

*In your considered view - is there such a thing as a 'good' inquiry? What would set such an inquiry apart from other teacher inquiries?*

100% of the principals confirmed that in their view a positive outcome would result when teachers asked quality questions focused on finding out:

- “Where are my students at and where do they need to be in terms of learning and achievement?”
- “Which strategies were most likely to help students learn?”
- “What happened as an outcome of my actions?”
- “How did my students feel about their learning and achievement?”
- “How do the parents/whanau of my students feel about the student learning and achievement?”

In response to this question, other views expressed included reference to teachers who were self-motivated, driving their own research, looking at theory, showing initiative, trialing things and being reflective. Principals also spoke of teachers realizing a ‘sense of urgency’ to change practice for a better outcome.

In 67% of the schools principals supported team or whole school inquiries. They saw this as a great way to develop capacity and to ensure accountability. In one school, inquiries are set around areas of interest and passion. In their view it has stimulated great enthusiasm for inquiries and clear gains have been observed.

*How do you know if an inquiry has resulted in a new ‘default’ or change in practice with different outcomes for teachers and students that can be sustained?*

Responses to this question varied but still showed similarities. Most principals referred to conversations and documentation that revealed sustained change to practice. Review was a key aspect that 100% of principals talked about – it was through review processes and teacher sharing that the clearest evidence of sustained change to practice emerged.

*“Some of this is reflected in their PLC minutes and reflections, some within their individual learning stories. If it has been an authentic and valued inquiry (as many - although not all as yet) the sustainability is there I believe.”*

*Auckland Principal*

*“Teachers review what happened as a result of strategies and what needs to happen next. Management seeks feedback from staff relating to aspects such as confidence to cater for specific needs, the outcome of professional development (from a teacher’s perspective, rather than an achievement data*



*perspective). One of our next steps as a school is to look more closely as what engagement looks like across contexts.”*

*Auckland Principal*

*We assume much about teachers' capabilities and skills as inquirers. What do you do to develop teachers' capacities to: question, reflect, refer to evidence, challenge, participate in open to learning conversations, make change to practice and sustain that change?*

100% of principals confirmed that they make specific time to focus on professional inquiry e.g. in departments, teams, or for teachers to update their inquiries on their own and time was made to talk with leader/appraisers.

100% of principals used appraisal conversations to support the development of inquiry skills and to model those. Every principal that I interviewed talked about how the focus was on target students and they expected their teacher to be challenged by colleagues about actions taken. Principals also spoke about using the Professional Teacher Criteria as a context for developing those skills for inquiry.

80% of principals referred to student voice emerging really strongly and the rest stated that this was a work in progress. Because the inquiry cycles typically start of the school year, some principals expect that part of the process goal is to gather 'greater student voice'

*“With senior leaders we do a lot about learning conversations, share readings, video conversations with teachers and follow a similar process as with target children. For example: What is the biggest thing that needs to change in this class? The area I want to talk to you about is... How do we have those conversations - training over time. A culture of learning and being observed.”*

*Auckland Principal*

I asked principals what were some of the key qualities that teachers needed to display to engage meaningfully in an inquiry process?

In principals' views the most important quality that teachers needed to display to engage meaningfully in an inquiry process was an openness to challenge their thinking and engage in open to learning conversations. All of the principals spoke

about their expectations that teachers would engage in professional reading to support their inquiry.

## **WHAT HAVE I LEARNT?**

- There appears to be a consensus among the primary school principals whom I spoke to that 'Teaching as Inquiry' is a process through which principals have real opportunities for impacting teacher practice and student outcomes.
- The way our school engages with 'Teaching as Inquiry' is consistent with what is happening in other schools.
- In schools where they engage in team and whole school inquiries, there is greater consistency and support for teachers to keep their inquiry reflections updated.
- Each school is wrestling with similar challenges, e.g. how do we ensure rigour, how do we support staff to develop the skills of critical self-reflection, how do we ensure greater teacher accountability and ownership of the process, or setting the right questions?
- 80% of the principals expressed the view that teachers found the sharing of inquiries to whole staff quite daunting.

## **WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS FOR ORATIA DISTRICT SCHOOL?**

It would be great to:

- initiate a whole school inquiry in 2016.
- use the 'Story Hui' that was part of the Learning with Digital Technologies PLD to share our inquiries termly.
- introduce greater student voice in the inquiry process at the start of our inquiry cycles.

## **CONCLUSION**

We work in an education system where schools have the freedom to innovate and trial processes, systems and tools in search of better outcomes for students. The New Zealand Curriculum offers us opportunities to respond to the needs of our students, our staff and our communities.

Looking at the work we do at Oratia District School through the lens of what is happening in other schools, was very affirming. It was fantastic to have the time to step out of work to do so and learn from other schools.

My findings confirmed for me that our teachers are doing wonderful work in the area of teacher as inquiry and our process is robust.

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