

Making Learning Visible in a High School: Implementing Hattie's research in the secondary school context

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Abstract

Improving the quality of student achievement is our most important priority, but finding new ways to enhance student outcomes, at both individual and school level, is a challenge. At Green Bay High School there has been interest in John Hattie's research, *Visible Learning*, because it is a synthesis of a huge meta-analysis on research about what makes a difference to student learning. This is right at the centre of our school's strategic plan. But the uptake of the key *Visible Learning* messages on a school wide level is still at a relatively early stage. This report is a summary of my reflections following some visits to other secondary schools where the *Visible Learning* approach is present in their professional learning programme, and apparently gaining traction in improving outcomes for students in their schools.

Purpose of Sabbatical

Since the publication of John Hattie's research, *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement* in 2009, many schools have adopted strategies to implement the key messages arising from that research. In particular, a number have been part of the Visible Learning professional development programme, developed by John Hattie in partnership with Cognition Education.

However, the significant uptake of this specific development programme has been by primary schools, both locally and internationally, rather than secondary schools. In fact there does not seem to have been deep engagement with the key research messages generally at the secondary level to date. As far as I can ascertain, there are only two mainstream high schools in New Zealand *actively and purposefully engaged* in implementing the ideas associated with this body of research. If there are others their work is not yet well known.

At Green Bay High School we want to take the next steps to build on a pattern of improved student achievement over the last decade. While we accept the broad messages in Hattie's work, realizing the potential of this research requires new thinking about logistics and planning for our professional learning programme. The purpose of my sabbatical was to identify some successful organisational strategies in professional learning, *developed in other high schools*, which focus on implementing the Visible Learning ideas.

Rationale and background

There were several questions driving my sabbatical investigation:

1. Would the Visible Learning research provide a new way for us to think about how to improve the quality of achievement of our students? Over the last 11 years our school has enjoyed a renewed level of community confidence, evidenced by a doubling of the school roll in that time. However, while this positive change has included a major improvement in academic results, our levels of student achievement in NCEA are still not reaching the levels of *Merit* and *Excellence* that might be expected of a school of our type, i.e. state funded, urban, co-educational, decile 8 high school.
2. The key Visible Learning message is 'know thy impact' – all professional learning begins when we can measure the effectiveness of our work with students. What does this mean in the context of secondary schools? The 'black hole' of junior assessment in secondary schools might be one of the reasons that our sector has shied away from engaging with Hattie's work. And if that is the case, what should we do about that?

3. I am acutely aware that leaders only achieve their goals through the work of others. The Visible Learning programme requires careful and measured implementation over time so its success is very dependent on the relationship between senior and middle leaders. How has this been reflected in the work of senior and middle leaders in secondary schools that have already commenced implementation?
4. As the only high school in an emerging Community of Learners group of schools, I am conscious that the language of learning and assessment between the two sectors is not the same. Because a number of primary schools in our Community of Learners have engaged with the Visible Learning research and programme, is this a way in which we could find a common language to describe achievement across our local schools?

Activities undertaken

- I visited the two secondary schools in New Zealand identified by a number of principal colleagues where Hattie's research is strongly influencing professional learning.
- As a comparison with different jurisdictions, I visited two secondary schools in the United Kingdom engaged in with the Visible Learning programme – one in Scotland and the other in England.
- I discussed the Visible Learning Plus Programme with NZ and UK based consultants – Shaun Hawthorne and Craig Parkinson respectively
- I carried out professional reading and reflection related to Hattie's research and teacher professional learning more generally.

I found it difficult to describe what *implementation* of 'Visible Learning' research means, in a shorthand manner; it varies depending on context. The Visible Learning website describes this research being about **what works best for learning**. It states that:

Visible Learning means an enhanced role for teachers as they become evaluators of their own teaching. According to John Hattie Visible Learning and Teaching occurs when teachers see learning through the eyes of students and help them become their own teachers.

While the message is clear, the implementation detail can be elusive. I found the graphic, below, adapted from the work being done by the Midlothian Council in Scotland, very useful. The Council has a 'Learning to Learn' professional development project covering its whole educational district, which is aligned to Hattie's Visible Learning research. The graphic provides a concise summary of the possible strategies a school community could focus on for professional learning.

Implementation of Visible Learning approaches means:

Teachers have a deep understanding of how we learn and lead learning effectively

Students are 'visible learners' and are assessment capable

Data is used effectively to improve outcomes

Shared culture and ethos across learning communities

Effective feedback
Pace and challenge
Innovation and creativity
High quality PLD
Evidence informed practice

Develop metacognition
Are inspired to exceed their potential
Develop and apply skills for learning, life and work
Share a consistent language of learning

Shared understanding of standards and progression
Robust tracking and monitoring
Curriculum designed to meet the needs of learners
Effective transitions

High expectations and challenge for all
Positive relationships based on trust
Collaborative practice across classes, faculties and community
Leadership of learning
Learner voice central to improvement

It may be a helpful reference point for those interested in implementing this work in their own schools.

Profile of Schools

Selwyn College: Principal Sheryll Ofner

Selwyn College is a co-educational, state secondary school, located in Kohimarama, East Auckland, with a roll of around 800 students. The school community serves a diverse population. The school has strong links with the local iwi, Ngati Whatua. There is a Special Education Unit located in the school and there is provision for Adult Refugee and Community Education. The last ERO Report in 2014 was extremely positive.

Since 2008, under new principal Sheryll Ofner, Selwyn has been going through a period of transformation over the last eight years that has seen a major improvement in student achievement. While this has been a complex process, with many contributing factors, a key element has been the strong focus on providing high quality effective teaching

informed by current research – notably Hattie’s meta-analysis. Sheryll has a deep knowledge of this research which has strongly informed her change management as an instructional leader. Staff professional learning has been very much ‘home –grown’, rather than being guided by any external providers. The role of the principal and Senior Leadership Team has been crucial to the success of the transformation.

Mt Maunganui College: Principal Russell Gordon

Mt Maunganui College is a co-educational, state secondary school, located near Tauranga, with a roll of around 1460 students. The school is growing rapidly as the local population increases in this popular Bay of Plenty area. Russell Gordon has been the principal since 2012, and was previously the deputy principal for five years. The school has had a positive ERO report history and the latest report in 2016 report affirms the school’s direction stating, ‘*achievement information about students who leave the college shows that their success in NCEA has consistently improved since the 2011 ERO review.*’

At the same time, Russell and his senior leadership team want to see further improvements to the level of merit and excellence results in national qualifications results. Over the last four years Russell has led a focus on implementing Hattie’s findings, working with Cognition Education as a provider of professional learning in this area. At the same time, led by one of the Deputy Principals Alistair Sinton, the school is developing unique software to manage the data which is central to its strategy for improvement.

Tobermory High School – Isle of Mull, Scotland: Principal Craig Biddick

The Isle of Mull is located off the West Coast of Scotland. The school serves a semi-rural community in the only town on the island. It has 225 students from 3 to 18 years. Most are in the secondary school (144) but there is a small primary department and pre-school unit as well. Craig Biddick was appointed as Head Teacher in 2012. The school has a reputation for being friendly and welcoming, and students were achieving good exam results. However, academic progress across all classes and all students was not consistent. Craig attended an introductory session on Visible Learning, and thought there was considerable potential for the ‘Visible Learning Plus’ programme to be an appropriate intervention for Tobermory.

Craig and his senior leadership team have worked with Osiris Education consultant, Craig Parkinson, to introduce the Visible Learning message since 2013. Although it is too early to draw conclusions, the September 2015 Education Inspection report noted

that this professional development programme was *'beginning to impact on classroom practice and lead to improvements in outcomes for children and young people.'*

Note: Craig Biddick has recently been appointed to a role in the Midlothian Council (south Edinburgh) commencing July 2016. The traction for change at Tobermory, informed by the Visible Learning programme, will now pass onto a new principal.

Wolgarston High School – Penkridge, Staffordshire, England: Principal Philip Tapp

Located in a small market town in the West Midlands, Wolgarston High School is an age 13 to 18 co-educational school. There are around 770 students, but with a relatively large sixth form. The proportion of students from minority ethnic backgrounds is much lower than the national average. The school was rated as 'good' in its last Ofsted report in 2014, up from 'requires improvement' previously, so the school is regarded as well-performing with students achieving above the national average in external qualifications.

Philip Tapp was interested in the 'Visible Learning Plus' programme as a way to improve the quality of teaching and learning in the school. Although the school has been on an upward pathway over some years he believed that there was still significant opportunity to enhance student outcomes by focusing strongly on a professional development strategy informed by Hattie's research. The school leadership team has worked with Craig Parkinson from Osiris Education in the last two years. The Deputy Principal, Barry Worth, has become a trainer in the programme, so is well versed in the Osiris approach to professional learning. I had an opportunity to interview a number of staff and students in the school, and there was a strong sense of engagement with the Visible Learning key ideas.

Findings – reflections on my four areas of focus

It may be that my observations in these schools are too limited in number and scope to be useful. Nevertheless I found the conversations that I had with the principals and senior leaders in the schools extremely valuable. There was certainly some strong commonality between the schools that added depth to the discussions – all the schools had a shared understanding of the challenges of delivering quality educational outcomes in the state education system:

- All schools were mainstream secondary schools, in that they are required to serve their surrounding community; there is no pre-selection of the students entering the schools.
- The pressure to meet nationally-set achievement targets and the tension implicit in public ranking of school results in a competitive education model was common also.

- There was strong agreement about the value of Hattie's research; that it provides a coherent and evidence-based framework to support and challenge professional practice focused on the best possible outcomes for student learning.

My general reflections on the four broad focus questions that framed my investigation follow.

Question 1. Does the implementation of Hattie's research findings i.e. *Visible Learning* make a difference to student outcomes?

There was very broad agreement that effective implementation had the *potential* to make a difference to student outcomes but in general it is 'too soon to tell'. Implementation and measuring change is a long term process linked to shifting school culture; school leaders all talked about a minimum of 5 years before real evidence of impact could be measured.

Part of the challenge of implementation is captured in this statement from the Midlothian Council in Scotland:

Hattie's Visible Learning research and its accompanying literature is not a prescriptive 'off the shelf how to do it' programme and there is no one way to address the implications inherent within it. More importantly, the Visible Learning approach invites us to consider a highly significant body of research into what works best in education. (Visible Learning in Midlothian)

Because it is not a prescription, each school has approached implementation in different ways following a detailed analysis of its own effectiveness. The approach and pace with which a leadership team might move forward in addressing the implications of the research will always be unique to the school. This of course is the appeal of this research. All the school leaders had been exposed to and were wary of the 'quick-fix' ideas and solutions in education, looking instead at how to make meaning of Hattie's work in the context of their own schools.

That said, one of the schools has been using the Visible Learning messages in its professional learning programme for eight years. Selwyn College's academic results over that time have trended upwards significantly, establishing and sustaining new benchmarks and expectations for student learning outcomes. And all of the schools I visited are seeing upward shifts in the same way. As its latest ERO report confirms, at Mt Maunganui College achievement has tracked upwards over the last few years and '*in 2015, students achieved above national comparisons in Levels 1, 2, 3 and University Entrance.*'

Whether such improvements can be attributed to one or more Visible Learning strategies (and will be sustained) is for further analysis over time, but it is clear that a

heightened focus on deep professional learning is a strong feature across all the schools. And student agency in terms of their own learning was evident in some of the conversations I had with them. At Wolgarston High School the ability of students to articulate their own learning challenges clearly and know what to do as next steps was an emerging aspect of the school culture. Such developments reflect the central message in Hattie's research – that learning happens when *teachers see learning through the eyes of the students and student see themselves as their own teachers*. Something is happening in these schools and the outcomes for students are positive.

Question 2. Know thy impact – how difficult is it for professional staff to answer this question in the secondary context and how might a secondary school go about this task?

Central to Hattie's research is the key message that the fundamental task of educators is to evaluate the effect of their teaching on students' learning; it is an essential mind-frame for educators engaging with this work. So what does that mean in secondary schools?

There was broad agreement across all the schools that student achievement in the senior school is a much measured space, and a rich source of commentary (not always well-informed) by the media. High stakes assessment, leaving qualifications and career pathways are worried over, monitored and the subject of school rankings and ratings. The reports of the Education Review Office and Ofsted always include references to this, as they should. However, it is no wonder that *this* kind of ranking data is so much front of mind for secondary school teachers, leaders and systems. And it is no wonder that teachers *can* be cynical about assessment, and be resistant to further demands for more assessment. The ranking purpose of assessment has certainly pushed aside *assessment for learning*. The expression of such cynicism was familiar to all the leaders in the schools visited and appears to be one of the difficulties of implementing Visible Learning strategies in the secondary context.

However, if we are going to know the impact of our own teaching practice on learning then there has to be a commitment to gathering and analyzing reliable, useful evidence. This links to two additional challenges in terms of 'knowing thy impact', which all these schools were addressing.

1. In general terms, assessment practices in junior secondary education are not necessarily robust. Although there are examples of good assessment practice, the junior school curriculum can play 'Cinderella' to the senior curriculum in terms of assessment consistency and reliability. The use of nationally moderated tests such as PAT, or similar, can be helpful but in no way do such tests provide a whole curriculum picture. The curriculum silos that exist in secondary schools exacerbate the problem since there is little shared professional understanding of what successful learning outcomes 'look like' across the various subject areas.

Junior students can face a bewildering, confusing assessment regime as they move around their classes each day. School leaders commented on the troubling reality that student progress in the junior school is measured more haphazardly than we care to acknowledge openly. And then our juniors become our seniors...so how well do we understand their needs really?

2. Evidence of our impact on the learning of students clearly needs to be from varied sources – more than test results, e.g. student voice. So this another challenge since it requires professional skills and expertise that may not necessarily be well understood or trusted by all school staff, particularly in a highly visible accountability environment.

All the schools I visited had focused strongly on this issue. Without developing confidence and expertise in assessment *in its widest sense*, schools cannot know if whole school or individual teaching strategies are having a positive impact on learning. This takes time and other resourcing, but *must* be prioritized as part of any implementation strategy related to Visible Learning. Each of the schools visited had made significant progress in developing professional learning in relation to assessment across all levels of the school. In addition there had been investment in efficient digitally-based strategies for recording, analyzing and evaluating assessment data – essential for timely feedback to students and teachers. Though an appealing notion, it might be difficult to achieve this through a centrally driven assessment model; there is value in a customized response to the specific needs of the school community being served.

The importance of the place and nature of assessment in a Visible Learning school, is captured in the Visible Learning Action Plan of Tobermory High School. It begins with a summary baseline evidence statement about teaching and learning in the school, followed by a clear aspirational statement:

Students at Tobermory High School will become assessment capable learners who receive regular high quality feedback from their teachers to close the gaps in their learning and make progress. Teachers and students will take part in a dialogic process in class that enhances learning. Student progress is tracked and evaluated at classroom, faculty and whole school level to help us make decisions about how we improve learning for progression. Progress is measured across the totality of the curriculum not just in relation to academic performance in exams.
(Tobermory High School Visible Learning Action Plan August 2015)

The aspirations expressed here resonated with the vision and goals of *all* the schools that I visited. And in all cases a paradigm shift in the role of assessment as evidence for learning was underway, making it possible for teachers to see more effectively the impact of their teaching on their students. There was growing acceptance of the notion that the most effective learning, *for both students and teachers*, occurs when error or misunderstanding is identified without fear of negative reaction or

bureaucratic accountability. Such growing acceptance can only come after some careful preparation at the leadership level of a school.

Question 3. What organisational and/or structural elements need to be present in a secondary school if a Visible Learning approach is being implemented?

Once again there were similarities across the schools. Despite some quite different political and social contexts, there were particular elements that seemed to be present.

Clearly school leadership is a significant influence. In all the schools the principals had a strong engagement with professional learning. While leadership styles naturally differed, all the principals valued the instructional aspect of school leadership and prioritized this dimension within their role as principal. They were visible as drivers of, and active participants in, professional learning. This is aligned to the Best-Evidence Synthesis findings about effective teacher professional learning and development.

In many of the school-based studies, leadership played a very important role. We have identified four different roles that leaders may adopt: developing a vision of how teaching might impact on student outcomes, managing the professional learning environment, promoting a culture of learning within the school, and developing the leadership of others in relation to curriculum or pedagogy. In no core study did leaders take on all four roles. All, however, were adopted by leaders in various ways that led to positive outcomes for students. Effective leaders did not leave the learning to their teachers—they became involved themselves.
(Timperley et al p. 196)

Some of the comments from the principals reflected this very powerfully:

- *I saw it as my role to influence the teaching and learning...by developing a much greater transparency around the learning and progress that was occurring within our classrooms, as well as enabling our students to be able to take greater responsibility for their own learning, and to become assessment capable.*
- *I have made sure there is no other professional learning focus in the school – this is the only thing that we are doing as a whole school.*
- *Visible Learning cannot be a ‘rescue’ package to save the school – don’t presume that nothing is going well – the self-review framework in Visible Learning will identify where a school is getting things right and it is important to start by building on the success we already have achieved.*
- *We must own our professional learning strategy – we are not a Visible Learning school – we are a school that is using Hattie’s research to inform our own professional learning programme.*
- *It will take time, lots of time, and it is hard, so patience is essential – there is no miracle going on but rather a sustained commitment to a different approach to professional learning within a new paradigm.*

- *Leadership must be distributed – one principal’s passion is not enough and neither is it sustainable and it doesn’t change the system in which we operate. Others with leadership roles in the school need to be motivated by Hattie’s research and want to use the Visible Learning framework to support and challenge professional practice.*
- *I had to negotiate changes to the job descriptions in our leadership team to make this work effectively. First that required our leadership team to focus on what Hattie’s research could mean for us as a school, and that became the catalyst for beginning on this journey.*

Of course, these comments would easily align with those of leaders in any education setting, not just secondary schools. However I was also interested in the **strategies specific to the secondary sector** that had been implemented in some of the schools I visited. These included:

- In secondary schools professional learning is often fragmented across a number of roles and can take second place in the priorities of faculty and subject leaders. In the schools I visited, the approach to **professional learning (PL) generally needed to be refreshed** to accommodate a Visible Learning emphasis. This tended to consist of bringing together the various individuals in roles linked to professional learning in the school and re-drafting the nature and purpose of the PL team. In particular, attention was paid to leadership – this had to be firmly invested in the Senior Leadership team, and the principal needed to be actively involved. All work of the PL team was clearly articulated in the school annual plan and reflected the school vision, goals and targets. Gaps in expertise were addressed by recruitment of additional team members as needed. *The value of this approach is that it aligns all the existing professional learning in a secondary school for planning and delivery purposes. An uncluttered focus on PL priorities is therefore more likely.*
- **Building middle leadership support** was seen as crucial. While for some schools this meant including Heads of Faculty in the PL team, in others it meant broadening the definition of middle leadership to include Assistant Heads of Faculty (or similar) who could provide a faculty voice in the work of the PL team. The latter approach also provided greater scope for distributed leadership in the schools.
- All schools were stretched for resourcing, so additional funding for members of the PL teams was not always possible. However all principals were clear that they saw **team membership as career enhancing** and it certainly provided outstanding professional growth for those involved, i.e., team members were often motivated by the intrinsic value of engagement with the work. This is important because it can be challenging work, particularly at the start-up phase.
- To make progress with the PL goals then **time has to be provided** for teaching staff to become immersed in its learning programme. Most of the schools had done that, one way or another. This could involve a late start or early finish for students one

day a week. Such an approach means there are various logistical issues that the school leaders have to address (bus timetables, supervision of students, parent concerns, etc.) but none reported that this had been a problem in the end. If the PL programme is clearly focused, well explained and planned rigorously, it is valued by both teachers and the parent community and the logistical problems can be resolved. Alternatively, more PL time was created by eliminating other PL not aligned with implementing the Visible Learning message. Whole school professional learning (call-back or teacher-only days in NZ or INSET days in the UK) were often allocated to this. Release time was offered for individual to do some of the work. Many faculty heads assimilated the writing of rubrics into their usual workload, seeing it as the normal expectation of their role in the school.

- A **cross-curricular approach** to implementing any change is especially crucial in the secondary sector. The silo effect arising from a faculty structure is a reality that will not disappear and impacts strongly on the way assessment and feedback are delivered in secondary schools generally. All the schools visited had created PL structures that ensured school-wide professional learning had an effective cross-curricular component. This extends well beyond the start-up phase, and is an essential element of on-going change management process in all the schools, particularly in the development of learning progressions and rubrics.
- The **New Zealand schools** focused on developing assessment strategies based on curriculum based learning progressions for **Year 9 students first**, then through to Year 10, before linking with the achievement standards in NCEA Level 1 in the senior school. Usually the creation of rubrics for one curriculum level took a whole year. This made sense to them because that is where the gap in assessment data was widest. The **UK schools** took a **whole school** approach, which may reflect the stronger focus on testing generally at all levels in the UK jurisdictions. Either way, all principals emphasized the “implement slowly” message.
- All the schools referenced the **Solo Taxonomy Model** in their PL programmes to describe the levels of complexity in student understanding of subjects. For some this was a precursor to Visible Learning implementation, while for others it came later. The consensus was that it is likely to be more useful for teachers to be familiar with and understand the model *initially*. The development of assessment rubrics was likely to be smoother with such a shared professional learning being present across curriculum areas. This is so much more complex in a secondary setting; again the specialist subjects ‘silos’ need a common language for professional conversations across the school.
- As mentioned earlier, in each of the schools I visited there had been investment in efficient **digitally-based strategies for recording, analyzing and evaluating assessment data**. Without this, timely feedback to students and teachers is very

difficult. Hattie makes this point himself in an interview in 2013 for 'In Conversation', a series of papers published by the Ontario Ministry of Education for school leaders:

When I work with schools, after a while I say, "Look, if you're going to make this happen, you'd have to appoint a senior person in the school to help you do this". I think it's unreasonable to ask teachers to be data analysts. But someone in the school can help them with looking at data, and creating a dialogue in the staff room about what evidence we have that all our students are making progress and what evidence there is about what to do next. (Hattie, 2013)

In the context of secondary schools, with the complexities arising from subject specialism, this is essential. And the implications for the workload of teachers and middle leaders are significant. The potential for this to generate unhelpful resistance and undermine the process is a genuine issue to be concerned about. It is not a place to economize if it can be avoided.

- **External consultants** are being used by three of the four schools I visited. As already mentioned, Hattie's research is not a prescriptive programme. This is part of its attraction to leadership teams who have been drowning in the 'latest new programme and/or initiative' fatigue over the last decade. At the same time, school leaders who have found the Visible Learning research compelling, are not necessarily confident about finding the right approach to using this research in the context of their own schools. This is where the Cognition and Osiris consultants have provided a foundation for commencing whole school engagement, which can save some time and create traction for change. All the leaders, however, were clear about the importance of maintaining control over the process so that any changes are powerfully owned by the professional staff of the school.

Visible Learning, as a body of research, tells us what works best in teaching and learning and why. Each of the senior leaders I met with wanted their staff and students to benefit from the key messages of this work, but were clear about some of the organisational arrangements necessary for this to occur in their schools. Beyond these arrangements, there were unique elements within each school, given the unique communities they serve, which is also the point. *It is obviously the role of school leaders to make sense of this important research in their own educational settings.*

Question 4. Are there benefits for a secondary school in terms of developing a shared "language of learning" with primary school colleagues through the application of Visible Learning research?

Secondary schools generally operate in splendid isolation from their contributing primary schools, particularly in urban areas. There are many historical and logistical reasons for this, but it is largely because the two systems are staffed by professionals

who may have different mindsets about the nature of teaching and learning and what kinds of student outcomes matter. This is not a good or bad thing...just a thing...just a fact of our education system. The self-governing and managing model of our system since 1989 has increased the isolation of principals from each other even more, also just another fact.

The recent shift in policy, 'Investing in Educational Success' (IES), demands that the various education sectors work more collaboratively. The earliest expression of this policy shift is in the development of Communities of Learners (CoLs), linking primary, intermediate and secondary schools that serve a specific community and provide a learning pathway for students in that community. Each CoL is required to develop achievement challenges for its learning community and a plan to address these challenges. Significant professional development resourcing follows the setting up and approval of each individual CoL.

It is early days, but one of the immediate issues has been the lack of shared understanding of success criteria for students within all the various levels of our national curriculum. This is not just between primary and secondary colleagues, but also between teachers of specialist subjects in the secondary school, and between colleagues in different primary schools. For the IES policy to have real influence, all parties need to know the impact of their teaching practices on student learning outcomes. This is a huge and extremely important learning challenge for our education profession.

Is there a place where the application of Visible Learning research could be helpful by developing a shared language of learning and assessment across all curriculum levels? Since it is not a prescriptive programme as such, each community could respond to the research according to its own context. The responses to this broad question from the principals in the four schools confirmed that this was clearly a potential benefit where vertical education communities existed.

Tobermory High School in Mull, Scotland, has an attached smaller primary section. For that school, shared understanding of success criteria across the curriculum came naturally since there was already a sense of, and value placed on, working together in a vertical learning community. Craig Biddick's leadership team was inclusive of all levels and faculties, and the professional development programme in relation to Visible Learning was whole-school focused. As an example of this shared learning, the adoption of effect size calculations at the primary level were used as a model for the secondary level. No doubt this is the kind of professional collaboration that is anticipated in the CoL model for New Zealand.

Phil Tapp, at **Wolgarston High School** in England, is preparing for the emergence of a federation model in his local community. This is where a group of schools (vertically or horizontally) become a local authority-maintained federation, working collaboratively in the interests of their identified student intakes. If this sounds a bit like the IES model,

that is so. It provides an alternative to the academy model that has been the preference of the current government in England. Wolgarston has committed to a vertical model and Phil sees this as a great opportunity to improve achievement outcomes for local students, with the Visible Learning approach having the potential to strengthen collaboration between professionals in the sectors.

Selwyn College in Auckland is currently in the process of developing a CoL with local primary schools. As part of that process, it has been vital to share student achievement information across the schools involved. Informed by Hattie's work, Selwyn College has gathered significant assessment data related to student achievement. Sheryll has been able to offer a considerable amount of information to show the progression of students from entry to high school, through Years 9 and 10, and onto the senior school across ALL curriculum areas. This is an advance on the data that other high schools might have available, but Sheryll has noted that there is some resistance to accept the validity of data that is not nationally benchmarked. Clearly this a challenge that all high schools will have to face shortly. The success of across community collaboration will depend on building relational trust, which often starts with a shared and trusted language for the work that matters.

Russell Gordon believes that the emerging CoL in the **Mt Maunganui High School** area will really benefit from the Visible Learning informed work being done in the secondary school. Like many high schools, there are some students entering at Year 9 who are achieving well below the expected curriculum level, some at Level 2. So the high school teams have had to develop learning progressions that are more common to their primary and intermediate colleagues. This is new work they are now sharing across the school professional community for the purposes of critiquing and review. Conversations are now starting to happen between teachers and schools that directly benefit the students in their community.

Ultimately it does not matter what vehicle for shared understanding is used. The point is that collaborative practice requires a common language. A Visible Learning approach across a community could provide that.

Implications for practice

Where a secondary school is considering a whole school approach to implementing the Visible Learning research, some key elements need to be present:

- Commitment to action tempered with patience – the most consistently delivered message was that this approach requires time to embed. It is about shifting the professional culture of a school slowly but firmly into a different paradigm for teaching and learning, where assessment is for improvement, not for rating or ranking.

- Leadership, both senior and middle level, which is fully involved in both understanding the theory and implementing the strategy associated with the research
- Willingness by all professional staff to see such an approach as the driver of whole school (and on-going) self-review – it never stops
- Resourcing, especially of professional learning time and data management, to ensure that engagement with the research is prioritized
- A cross-curricular strategy – crucial in a secondary school.

Secondary schools with an interest in Visible Learning need to collaborate more and maximize the potential for learning together:

There is no doubt that the broad challenges of organisational change management in a school are much the same. The devil, however, is always in the detail and there is so much of this to consider in a secondary school context. An opportunity to discuss implementation challenges with other secondary schools would be very helpful, but there are few secondary schools in our jurisdiction to which we can refer.

Despite our differences, there is still very much in common between mainstream secondary schools in New Zealand and the United Kingdom. During discussions about this with Craig Parkinson (Osiris Education Consultant), he suggested that an online link up of such secondary schools may be a start towards building a community of interest. He is intending to explore and/or arrange some next steps in this regard.

The Ministry of Education needs to be clear about plans for nationally benchmarked assessment of Years 9 and 10 in New Zealand:

This is an essential piece of work that is missing in the New Zealand setting, certainly in terms of assessing against curriculum levels. Motivated professionals in secondary schools all around the country are beavering away at this task in isolation. They are doing so because ‘know thy impact’ is not just a catch cry from Hattie’s research...effective teachers really DO want to know if they are making a difference. However to expect each school to develop this capacity on its own seems to set up unnecessary opportunities for failure.

Firstly, not all teachers in all secondary schools have strengths in assessment. It has taken considerable time to build confidence in this space at the senior levels where there are high stakes qualifications in place, so assuming that this is a simple task with junior assessment is naïve at best.

Secondly, as we move into CoL arrangements driven by achievement challenges that are informed by data, schools need to trust the information we are sharing with each other. The need for consistent quality is essential or the whole notion of working collaboratively is undermined right at this start of this new policy direction.

Finally, it is clear that there is ‘something’ on the horizon in this space if various references coming from the Ministry are to be believed. There are highly motivated,

leading edge and influential practitioners in our secondary system who have already done a lot of work to develop assessment data strategies informed by the Visible Learning research. This work might be seen as 'wasted' if it does not align with any Ministry initiatives that might be in the pipeline. A clear message from the Ministry on this issue is essential.

Conclusions

Visible Learning may not be the 'Holy Grail, as some suggest, but it certainly provides us with a strong foundation of evidence-based education research. It should be informing the work of educational professionals, including those in the secondary sector. Schools using this research systematically are reporting positive outcomes.

That this research has been slow to gain traction in our high schools is a reflection of the complexity of managing change in this part of our education system. In particular, the understandable focus on high stakes qualification in the senior school, diminishes the focus on evidence-based practice in Year 9 and 10 assessment and feedback. Hattie's research challenges us to think about this critically in terms of 'knowing thy impact'. If we cannot measure our impact on our students in the junior school effectively, we cannot help those students to learn effectively. I suspect that few of us would disagree that building success starts at the beginning of the journey, not the end. More purposeful leadership in the secondary sector in relation to junior high school assessment is crucial.

Engagement with Hattie's research challenges our perceptions of what effective learning looks like, supporting our profession to be learners as we teach our students to be learners. This means we may have to reprioritize how we resource our current secondary school PLD programmes. As the new Communities of Learning start to form, with extra PLD resourcing available, there is a prospect for some re-thinking. Perhaps the move towards a more collaborative professional community will provide opportunities to engage with Hattie's work, both within secondary schools and across the whole education sector.

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