

School Improvement Through Effective School Leadership

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Sabbatical Leave: February – May 2015

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank:

- The Board of Trustees of Tauraroa Area School for the time and opportunity for this leave. Your ongoing support is greatly appreciated.
- Peter Walton-Jones and Sue Howes (Acting Principals) and all the staff of Tauraroa Area School for ensuring the smooth running of our school in my absence.
- TeachNZ and the Ministry of Education for granting me this opportunity
- The many principals, teachers, students and board members who allowed me to observe and question them.
- The members of the NZ Area Schools Association executive who hosted me on my South Island travels
- My wife, Janine, and our family for your support and patience while I totally disrupted our finely-tuned household routines for the period of my leave!

Executive Summary

There is much evidence (Note 1) linking the impact of school leadership with student achievement in our schools. I used this time of study leave to visit 12 schools, talk to fellow school leaders, attend a conference and tackle an accumulated collection of readings to investigate possible strategies to further progress student achievement at Tauraroa Area School.

I was both inspired and challenged by my school visits and reading. It reinforced the importance of the principal's role in establishing and maintaining a positive school culture. The promotion of positive school values is something that takes ongoing, conscious and deliberate effort. The introduction of vertical forms ('waka') in my school will, I believe, support this. The role of the principal as an instructional leader was also explored.

A personal highlight of my leave was the undertaking of a 2300km solo (unsupported) bike journey around much of the South Island [Note 2]. Not only did this allow the opportunity to visit a number of schools and be hosted by principals and board members (known to me through my involvement in the NZ Area Schools Association), it was a rare chance to reflect on a wide range of topics.

Rationale and Background Information

I am the principal of Tauraroa Area School, a Decile 6 school of 500 students located 22km SW of Whangarei city. The school has enjoyed over \$5m in property development in recent years and has a strong reputation for academic achievement and excellence. A strong values-based approach to learning and teaching underpins the positive culture of the school. I am proud of the fact that my own three children are enrolled at the school and enjoy the many benefits and opportunities the school offers. However, I am very aware of my own (many) shortcomings and am focussed on continual improvement, striving to live up to our school vision: 'To be the best we can be.'

As a relatively experienced senior manager (8 years as a principal at the time of the Sabbatical), I wished to look critically at my own practices and the ideas of others to seek out better ways of doing things. Although most of my impact on learning and teaching is indirect (ie through others), it is still a significant factor in setting the tone and culture of the school. By looking at practices in other schools, discussion with principal colleagues and reading, I was able to further refine my educational leadership philosophy and practice.

Activities Undertaken

Reading

I was grateful for the chance to read a wide range of books and articles relating to effective school leadership. Some of my findings from these books are outlined below.

South Island tour

As an enthusiastic (wife: 'obsessed') road cyclist I was able to use this opportunity to get some kilometres under my wheels, explore the South Island at a relatively slow pace and visit a number of schools. The generosity of the NZ Area Schools Association executive not only provided a number of nights' accommodation, but also gave me the chance to talk through a range of strategies and directions being implemented in South Island Area Schools.

Visits to North Island schools

I took the opportunity to meet with principals of schools in the Whangarei area and further afield to discuss a range of school management topics and see these schools 'in action'. Although I had a particular interest in the value of 'vertical forms', timetabling and values education, I took the opportunity to take a wider look at the functioning and culture of each school.

Secondary Principals Association of New Zealand (SPANZ) Conference, Rotorua

This conference was an outstanding event, providing a number of world-class presenters and the chance to discuss and explore common issues with principal colleagues.

Findings

Vertical Forms

I came to the conclusion that implementing vertical forms (to be known as 'Waka Classes') at Tauraroa Area School is a compellingly good idea. Potential benefits include:

- (1) Improved tracking of all students, especially priority learners, over 5 years
- (2) Consistent point of contact for parents – particularly with siblings under the care of a common teacher.
- (3) Easier transition for siblings to Year 9, with an older brother/sister in the same class
- (4) Improved interaction between students of various year levels
- (5) Student leadership opportunities
- (6) Sense of belonging: Whanaungatanga
- (7) Easier organisation of House (Waka) activities
- (8) Stronger sense of House (Waka) identity
- (9) Academic counselling – the small number of senior students in each class is manageable, should we develop an AC model based on this
- (10) Y9 and 10 students get a taste of administration around NCEA (as do teachers), easing the transition to senior classes
- (11) Significant enhancement of teacher satisfaction, working with the same students for 5 years.

- (12) Stagers report writing deadlines, easing the 'bottle neck' effect of writing reports for large numbers of students at the same year level.

Growth Mindset

The 'Growth Mindset' theories of Carol Dweck were explored through her book 'Mindset – How You Can Fulfil Your Potential' (2006). I strongly recommended this book to all educators. Ideas with implications for students and teachers at Tauraroa Area School included:

- (1) The importance of appropriate feedback from teachers – focussed on specifics of the task and student learning, rather than how 'clever' a student might be.
- (2) Sometimes, people with the most natural ability have a 'fixed' mindset, leading to aversions to risk, questioning and effort
- (3) Everyone is capable of learning. In fact, the more we learn, the more we are capable of learning
- (4) Accepting that failure is a necessary component in learning
- (5) It is possible to consciously change one's mindset

Area School structure

My visits to a wide range of Area Schools [Note 3], with rolls ranging from 100 – 800 students convinced me of the many strengths of the Area School model when compared with the more traditional Primary – Intermediate – Secondary pathway. Reasons for this position included:

- (1) The removal of transition points to Intermediate and Secondary schools
- (2) The long term relationships built between schools and families. There may be a 20 year span from the time the oldest sibling starts as a New Entrant to the time the youngest graduates from Year 13
- (3) Issues of isolation increasingly overcome through technology, mitigating the effects of small rolls limiting the number of subjects available on campus
- (4) Area Schools are often significant centres and gathering points of communities (particularly with the demise of the traditional NZ country pub)
- (5) Leadership opportunities for students
- (6) Learning and teaching opportunities involving senior students supporting juniors

Instructional Rounds

Based on an example from the world of medicine, teachers visit classrooms for approximately 15 minutes as a group (of 3-5) and subsequently discuss and analyse their observations. The aim is not to provide feedback to the teacher being observed but to provide a model for examination by the visitors. It is made clear to the host teacher that the purpose of the visit is professional learning, not assessment or critiquing of the teacher or students. Specific aspects of the classroom practice should be noted by the visiting teachers, such as 'What is the teacher saying and doing?', 'What is the task set by the teacher?', 'What are the students actually doing?'

Having received and read a copy Richard Elmore's (et al) 'Instructional Rounds in Education' at the April SPANZ conference in Rotorua, and read further information, I concluded that I would not adopt this model at my school.

Cornerstone Values

The Cornerstone Values approach to education, through which one value each term is highlighted, has been an integral component of Tauraroa Area School's practice since 2008. In my visits to schools, a range of readings and my own reflections, I concluded that retaining my commitment to this is a valuable and positive direction to take.

The eight values – taken from CS Lewis' writings and research, which found they are common to many cultures and religions, are:

- Respect
- Responsibility
- Kindness
- Obedience
- Duty
- Honesty / Truthfulness
- Compassion
- Consideration for others

In addition, Tauraroa Area School focuses for a term in each 9-term cycle on our school vision: 'To be the best we can be.'

In my visits to schools (and school websites), I observed a range of approaches to responding to the Values section of the NZ Curriculum. Primary schools (and the primary departments of Area Schools) appear to more overtly present desired values than secondary schools. The ERO's National Report on student wellbeing reinforced the importance of strong values within schools.

Education Review Office - National Report: Student wellbeing (2015)

Main themes:

- that successful schools had their values align with school systems, with a focus on continuous improvement.
- There are cohesive systems supporting students.
- Student voice plays an important role in functioning of the school
- School values clear to all – students, staff, whanau and community
- Teachers treat students as inherently capable.
- Students' needs vary as they grow. This has particular relevance for Area Schools, with 13+ years span the ages of students.
- Many students feel over assessed. (Am I aware of high stress levels? Am I adding to them?)

The Principal as Instructional Leader – a Practical Handbook (Sally Zepeda)

The School Leadership Best Evidence Synthesis (2009 Robinson, et al) confirms that 'school leaders can indeed make a difference to student achievement and well-being'. The keys to directly impacting this are found in 1. establishing goals and expectations, 2. resourcing strategically, 3. Planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum, 4. Promoting and participating in teacher learning and development, 5. Ensuring an orderly and supportive environment. Further indirect principal influence stems from: 6. Creating educationally powerful connections, 7. Engaging in constructive problem talk and 8. Selecting, developing, and using smart tools. Sally Zepeda's 'The Principal as Instructional Leader' provides a practical framework in which to work, while keeping student achievement the overarching priority in the principal's efforts.

As a principal, my time is valuable. The myriad of demands – administrative, educational and relational – can rob time from the important work of instructional leadership. The 'tyranny of the urgent' can distract us from the more important (but often less pressing) goal of students achievement. However, no matter how important this 'other' work is, "Schools are about teaching and learning; all other activities are secondary to these basic goals".

The principal must be in a position to promote continuous learning and development of teachers who are challenged to teach students to reach their potential. Zepeda stresses the importance of a shared vision and collaborative culture, with some very practical steps outlined.

Classroom observations by the principal are central to their instructional leadership practice, with Zepeda outlining a formal process of pre- and post-observation conferences and data collection. She includes some guidelines for peer-coaching and steps to support struggling teachers.

I will not attempt a more indepth summary of this excellent book in this paper. I do recommend it for all principals. In spite of its American context, it has much to offer the New Zealand principal, particularly within Communities of Learning (where much of its methodology could be effectively applied).

SPANZ Conference 'Blueprint for Excellence' (Rotorua, 22-25 March 2015)

This conference (brilliantly put together by Elizabeth Forgie and her team) again covered a wide range of interesting and challenging presentations, along with opportunities for less formal discussions among principal colleagues. Two memorable presentations were:

- Paul Porteous (Australia) – Learning connectedness and relationships
 - 'Culture eats policy for breakfast' is a simple expression capturing the important truth that leadership that builds a positive culture is much more significant than written policy (important though that is)
 - Analysis of social networking shows Democrat and Republican supporters keep to their own. Are we open to, and engaging with, only those people who hold similar views to our own.
 - Increasing capacity is not about solving problems, but about increasing problem solving capacity
 - There are risks in facing new problems with traditional solutions. Example of gorillas not able to defend themselves against guns.
 - Educational leaders must focus on discovery, not convincing others; increase problem solving capability; draw attention to contradictions; make room for dissident voices; create enabling environment.
 - The market driven context does not work in education. We must look beyond the win/lose scenarios this creates

- Dr Alec Courous (Canada) – The Promise, Power and Pitfalls on Networks in learning.
 - Digital media has a major impact on many lives, starting with the very young.
 - Access creates an increasingly participatory culture. This is more significant than the fact that it is digital.
 - Tagore: "Don't limit a child to your own learning for he was born in another time.'
 - How do we capture the spirit of open, networked and participatory communities in our learning environments?
 - Embrace connectedness in its many forms – Twitter, YouTube instructional videos etc
 - Make learning visible by sharing learning experiences
 - Empower students to express their learning in new ways (not just exercise books)
 - Guide students to build a better web and a better world (Stephen Sutton)
 - We are now living in a networked society (not functioning alone or in 'little boxes'). Challenge: How am I living and learning in our connected reality?

School visits

I was privileged to visit schools and observe many aspects of successful school management. I have listed below a single standout feature from many of schools I called in on. Each of these topics could be a stand alone topic for sabbatical study.

- Catlins Area School – (Alex MacCreadie) Maori Achievement

- Amuri Area School – (Neil Wilkinson) Timetabling solutions
- Parua Bay School – (Danny Jewell) Building positive staff culture
- Mangakahia Area School – (Phil Reynolds) Vertical Forms
- Pompallier College – (Richard Stanton) IES / Community of Learning possibilities
- Mercury Bay Area School – (John Wright) Future focused learning
- Whangamata Area School – (Ross Preece) – Catering for a diverse school population
- Te Karaka Area School – (Karyn Grey) – Using Modern Learning Environments and co-operative learning strategies effectively.

Implications

- Vertical forms ('Waka Classes') were introduced for Years 9-13 at Tauraroa Area School at the start of the 2016 school year. Although I believe the full benefits won't be seen for another 4-5 years as students move through the system, the transition has been well accepted and smooth.
- Growth Mindset theories have very real implications for school leaders, teachers and students. Embedding the principles and practices outlined by Dweck will be an ongoing journey in my own life and professional practice. The book has been very well received by teachers at Tauraroa Area School.
- The principal's role as an instructional leader is vital. However, it is important to avoid the risk of trying to take on everything and do nothing well, with shared leadership essential. Zepeda's framework looks effective and workable, as a practical guide.
- Changes take courage, especially when an organisation is already functioning successfully (in a crisis, people are looking for answers and change may, in fact, be more willingly accepted). The models of school management I witnessed, along with conference presentations and books read, represent some powerful ideas, worthy of further exploration and action. However, overwhelming a school with an avalanche of such thinking would be counter-productive. A measured approach – beginning with the introduction vertical forms – is required.
- The power and relevance of information technology is changing the way we live and relate to others. Schools need to embrace and channel the potential in positive ways, without 'throwing the baby out with the bath water' and discarding solid pedagogy based on learning focussed relationships between teacher and student. Technology can be a very powerful lever in student achievement and engagement, as a tool of learning and teaching. Balancing and harnessing the varying levels of commitment and ability of teachers and students (in regard to technology) within a learning environment is a real and exciting challenge.
- Clearly articulated and shared school vision and values are essential foundation stones in successful schools.

Conclusions

I am very grateful for the opportunity to undertake this sabbatical study. I have found it stimulating and challenging. The wide ranging nature of my findings and the opportunity to reflect has contributed to the growth of my own leadership, educational and personal philosophies. I trust there will be evidence that this investment has been worthwhile.

Notes

- (1) "This synthesis confirms that school leaders can indeed make a difference to student achievement and wellbeing" – P35, Robinson, et al, School Leadership and Student Outcomes: Identifying What works and Why. Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES) 2009
- (2) The 23 day cycle tour encompassed 2300km of riding (in 17 actual riding days): Queenstown – Milford Sound (bus back to Te Anau)– Tuatapere – The Catlins – Central Otago – Wanaka –

Hokitika – North Canterbury – Reefton – Punakaiki – Nelson Lakes – Abel Tasman NP – Nelson. Accommodation was a mix of home hosting, tenting and ‘back packers’ hostels. I would be happy to share more of my experiences, lessons and adventures on my journey with anyone interested (or planning a similar journey of their own).

Aside from my work directly related to my sabbatical study, I did come to some broader conclusions about things:

- a) ‘This time shall pass’ – the highs and lows of the trip were pretty intense at times, but they all passed. Even the biggest hills eventually have a summit.
- b) Live in the ‘now’. As the rhythm of the trip took hold, I found I could shift my focus from my destination (a couple of days this was over 200km away) and just enjoy the moment I was in.
- c) How little I needed to be able to live comfortably (albeit aided by technology), with all equipment – including bike, tent, etc – being flown to and from the SI under the 23kg + 7kg carry-on weight limit
- d) NZ is an incredibly beautiful part of the world. Seeing it at a slower speed, with a 360 degree view, and as part of the landscape myself, gave me a deeper appreciation of this.
- e) People are great. Travelling alone, I engaged in more conversations with strangers than I normally would. I was on the receiving end of many acts of kindness.
- f) The importance of feeling secure in one’s place on the ambition v. contentment continuum – especially as middle age starts to pass me by.

Three weeks after my return from the SI, I was involved in a cycling accident (brought down by the rider in front of me losing traction on a fast, wet corner...not my fault!) resulting in broken bones in my right arm and wrist (along with plenty of other scrapes and bruises).

Unfortunately, this had a major impact on my ability to type my notes and report. My hand and arm were still in plaster upon my return to school in May.

- (3) Area Schools visited were Catilins, Waiau, Maniatoto, Amuri, Te Karaka, Mercury Bay, Onewhero, Whangamata, Onewhero, Mangakahia. In each one I saw creative and effective responses to the needs of learners in settings with challenges of small roles, isolation and student/community diversity. Although I was particularly interested in the issues of vertical forms and timetabling, each visit was an opportunity to learn about the wider culture and operations of the school. I am deeply grateful to principals, staff and board members who hosted these visits.

References

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