

Principal Sabbatical Report

A study of how schools in the United Kingdom have balanced the requirements of national standards with the delivery of an innovative, student lead inquiry based curriculum

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Executive Summary:

The purpose of my sabbatical was to reflect on the need to balance assessment of learning set against national expectations with assessment for learning which encourages children to be “creative, energetic and enterprising” and who will be “confident, connected, actively involved life long learners.” (NZC p8)

Within the many and varied tasks a principal is charged with, it is necessary to assess student achievement in order to meet statutory requirements for monitoring progress and reporting to the Board of Trustees, parents and the wider school community. Further, in the era of self managing schools, assessment is a key factor of the school development cycle. Assessment results drive school reform, identifying areas for curriculum review, professional development and both school wide and individual appraisal goals, thus informing the 5 year strategic plan. This makes provision for curriculum and professional development spending, employment of staff to meet identified needs and, if necessary, the establishment of specific teaching programmes. National Administration Guideline 2 requires Boards of Trustees, through the principal, to report to students and their parents on the student’s progress and achievement in relation to National Standards and to report school-level data in the board’s annual report. This already creates a number of problems for schools:

- manageability of a large range of assessment tasks resulting in teacher overload
- time devoted to assessment reduces the amount of time for actual teaching tasks
- a feeling of vulnerability when reporting to the community
- establishing appropriate levels of achievement against a background of conflicting information and interpretations of what is required
- requirements to set annual achievement targets based upon this data and the expectation to effect improvement in achievement towards the targets creates additional pressure for schools

Principals now have the added task of ensuring that assessment tasks provide sufficient data to enable a measure against the newly introduced national standards. They are also charged with ensuring the school curriculum has been developed in line with the intentions of the New Zealand Curriculum and to ensure that assessment supports the goal of producing confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners.

Purpose

Key Inquiry Questions:

1. How has the need to address National Standard requirements impacted on the delivery of student lead inquiry learning?
2. What leadership structures promote the implementation of high quality, student centred inquiry learning?

Background and Rationale

Over the past decade there has been a major emphasis on the use of formative assessment to provide useful data about the learning needs of specific children. Research by Black and Wiliam (1998) Sadler (1989) and Hattie 1999) identify recognition of the desired goal; evidence about present position and some understanding of a way to close the gap between the two as important factors in raising student achievement. All three must be understood to some degree before a student can take action to improve learning. Hattie (2009) concludes that what works best for students is “an attention to setting challenging learning intentions, being clear about what success means and an attention to learning strategies for developing conceptual understanding about what students know and understand.”

The introduction of National Standards in New Zealand has lead to heated debate about their effectiveness in contributing to raising achievement as well as the effect on the ability of schools to deliver an innovative, child centred curriculum. Although, at this stage, our system is standards referenced, the potential use of national testing and standardised testing has become an increasingly heated topic of debate in educational circles, with important implications for the future.

This type of testing traditionally has strict, uniform administration and scoring procedures that rank large groups of students in relation to their level of achievement in a broad area of knowledge. The difficulty of items on a standardised test varies. Many educators have questioned whether the use of these tests does, in fact, foster improved achievement levels or if alternately they create a new culture of underachievement and ultimately encourage children to perceive themselves as failing and to disengage from learning.

It seems that the notion of National Standards has been influenced by the social theory of functionalism. Parsons, a leading American sociologist after World War II and a representative of the functionalist school, describes the goal of society as the “development in individuals of . . . capacities which are essential prerequisites of their future role performance” (as cited in Pai & Adler, 2001, p. 130). Schools act as sorting mechanisms from a functionalist

viewpoint, grouping students according to their measured abilities. Functionalism leads to a rigidly-structured hierarchical society based on merit. Standardised testing has a long history based on the need for accountability in the classroom. This changes over time as a result of a variety of complex factors: at certain times in history formal testing is emphasized. When the abuses become too apparent, the balance swings in the other direction. An example of a reaction against rote learning and formal testing is the 19th century progressive school movement in the United States which espoused natural and meaningful learning.

The Bush administration's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in the United States requires state standards and progress objectives in mathematics and reading, and annual tests for all students in grades three to eight. While there is a need for a certain degree of accountability and high educational standards, the amount of testing required by NCLB may be excessive, and counter-productive to the fundamental goals of the act. Gould (2003) observes that many of the questions on some standardised tests are "beyond the knowledge and experience of many children" (as cited in Stahlman, 2005, p. 2). This can be an extremely traumatic experience for young children, whose minds are still developing, and are not yet prepared to cope with a large range of difficulty, and abstract test questions. Some children may experience serious emotional problems as a result of being given tests that are clearly beyond their ability.

Amrein and Berliner (2002) suggest that standardised testing results in an increase in drop-out rates, especially among minorities, higher levels of cheating, and a narrowing of the curriculum. Too much focus on test taking skills may reduce opportunities for deeper learning.

Marshall (2005) maintains standardised graduation exams may cause students to become rote learners of facts who lack problem solving skills due to a rigid curriculum and limited experiential learning. This overuse of measurement-driven learning has been a frequent criticism of Japanese schools. The same criticisms are now being made of American schools as a result of widespread, regular, high-stakes standardised testing.

The narrowing of the curriculum is often necessary to prepare students to achieve high scores on specific standardised exams, but this may also result in a reduction of actual overall learning in all subject areas.

Flinders states, "What is tested now determines what is taught" (2005, p. 8). Ideally, what is learned should determine what is tested. If too much focus is placed on preparing for, and administering standardised tests, then learning opportunities may be lost in the classroom, and the educational experience of students may be narrowed. Teachers may have less control of the lessons they teach, and may choose to focus exclusively on test preparation at the expense of more natural and authentic learning opportunities such as class discussions, and field trips.

Current research strongly suggests that the use of standardised testing should be avoided in lower grades, since such tests are not suited to the physical and psychological developmental stage of young children.

However, research has also revealed it may be possible to have students perform well on high-stakes tests while keeping the classroom student-centered. Williamson, Bondy, Langley, and Mayne (2005) suggest the following strategies to maintain this equilibrium in the classroom: “. . . challenge students with cognitively complex tasks, contextualise teaching and learning in the experiences of home and community, engage students in instructional conversations, developing students' competence in language and literacy throughout all instructional activities” (p. 196).

Evangeline (2006) states, “Where standardised tests alone reveal only the language differences of students . . . a combination of formal tests and informal assessments can indicate their progress. Portfolios, in particular, capture both the process and products of students' learning.” Educators should view standardised test scores as only one factor among many in the assessment process.

Mirchandani, Lynch, and Hamilton (2001) assert that there are a number of advantages to using standardised testing, including the cost-effectiveness involved in evaluating large numbers of students. Standardised tests are the fastest and most efficient means to evaluate large groups of students at colleges and universities. Black and Duhon (2003) also point out that the use of standardised tests can be effective when assessing educational outcomes. However, schools must act appropriately to ensure this. Additionally, schools must also use the results of standardised testing judiciously. Nagy (2000) asserts the main functions of standardised testing should be gatekeeping, accountability, and instructional diagnosis. Standardised tests can play a role in this, but such test scores should also be balanced by other factors such as personal interviews and student portfolios.

The recent policy of National Standards is a paradigm shift in favor of a competency-based approach in the belief that it maintains expectations of accountability, improves student achievement and helps to close the achievement gap between various learner groups.

Methodology:

My original intention was to visit schools across the United Kingdom, however, initial research indicated that there are quite different systems of assessment in use in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. I therefore decided to restrict my study to England which appeared to have the most prescriptive system for assessing national standards across schools by way of national testing.

During my sabbatical I spent my time

- Reviewing the literature
- Reflecting on current assessment practices in New Zealand schools
- Visiting schools in England

Findings

Context

The English education system is divided into “key stages” - the ages described below are approximate. The tests are taken in May and many of the children will not reach the indicated age until later in that year.

Foundation Stage: 5 years. Teacher assessment of children's all-round development against the Foundation Stage profile, or the Early Years Foundation Stage profile

Key Stage 1: 7 years. National tests available in English and Maths, marked in school and used to inform assessments by teachers, who decide the level achieved

Key Stage 2: - 11 years. National tests in English and maths marked externally, school's results published nationally.

The tests are referred to by all stakeholders as ‘Sats’ which is an acronym for Standard Assessment Tasks and were practical tasks for 6 and 7 year olds, trialled in England and Wales in 1991.

These were later changed to written tests which all pupils took simultaneously.

At the time of my visit there was quite heated opposition to the tests - the Daily Express Editorial (Wednesday August 4, 2010) attributed this to “a dislocation between teachers and government, a symptom of the bad feeling brought about by over-regulation, meddling and blizzards of directives that have demoralized teachers.” Approximately a quarter of schools, including one which I visited, had boycotted them. The school in question had been given a mandate by the governors and parent body to take this action.

Research Question 1

How has the need to address national standard requirements impacted on the delivery of student lead inquiry learning?

Most schools I visited were still working from very much a subject focused approach, often with children moving between rooms and teachers for each subject – particularly for children working beyond the foundation stage. I have therefore decided to list my impressions of the commonalities I observed across schools which may or may not be a result of a curriculum driven by the need to ensure children achieve at the expected level as measured by standardised testing.

Teaching to the Test

All principals I visited admitted that this was certainly an issue. Despite what they believed about effective teaching and learning programmes, the high stakes nature of national testing, where the reputation of the school was on the line, contributed to the pressure they felt to ensure their pupils were as successful as possible. It also meant organising their schools in a way in which they could spend considerable time in preparation for the tests. National testing is in May and by at least the beginning of April, all normal curriculum teaching had finished and schools went into revision mode, previous papers were used to practice and all work covered was thoroughly revised.

I was given examples of schools spending a disproportionate amount of time teaching something they knew would be in the test eg: spending most of the year teaching narrative with 2 characters as this was a known test item. One of the principals I spoke to was his LEA's (Local Education Authority) Leading Head Teacher with a great deal of insight into what was happening in schools. His own school was in a low socio-economic area and very obviously had a philosophy of teaching and learning to meet the needs of these children. However, he was concerned that many schools in similar areas were teaching to the test from day one, thus denying these children the rich and diverse curriculum which they needed to succeed.

I observed one of the most innovative teachers I have ever seen who obviously ran an exciting, child centred programme where children were thoroughly engaged and very obviously learning. I asked how national testing requirements affected his teaching. He informed me that all his teaching becomes revision and repetition prior to the tests and he is unable to teach in the style he likes and which he knows works for his pupils.

The need to prepare children for the logistics of testing was mentioned by all principals. Children spent time sitting mock tests in test conditions. Because the tests are taken at the same time by all pupils in a controlled environment, pupils needed to become familiar with sitting at desks in a large space, eg: the school hall, and understanding the requirements and test conditions.

All principals expressed concern at the amount of learning time devoted to preparing children for the test but acknowledged that the school's results had huge implications for their school and personally for their employment.

Parent and Pupil Anxiety.

This was very apparent amongst the pupils I spoke to who were in their 'Sat' year. They talked about 'Sats' often and expressed their nervousness about sitting the test and their fear of failure. Many of them related their older siblings experience and it was obvious that there was a great deal of pressure for them to succeed in this year. Some principals informed me that a number of parents employ a private coach to ensure their children pass their test or achieve a higher score.

Parents whom I spoke to felt strongly that they did not want their children judged against others, they were concerned it did not acknowledge individual effort and was demoralising for some children who worked hard but were still unable to achieve the standard. These parents were impressed with the formative assessment strategies, self, peer and teacher assessment against criteria, which was being introduced and felt it was far more relevant to them and their children.

Narrowing of the Curriculum

It was felt that National Testing had narrowed the curriculum, that many schools neglected diversity and creativity and neglected the arts, they were content driven and did not link or integrate the Key Learning Areas. Lessons were driven by the need to cover the curriculum and whole class teaching appeared to be the norm with a very prescriptive lesson by lesson approach. Diversification of the curriculum by targeting instruction to the learning needs of groups of children was only observed in one school. Interestingly this had been introduced at the foundation school level by a New Zealand teacher who had convinced the school to make this change. Many of the staff in this school took the time to tell me how wonderful this was and how they admired our system. Most schools used subject-specialist teachers in many areas and children changed rooms or teachers during the day.

OFSTED Reliance on Test Data

All principals reported that OFSTED (Office For Standards in Education – the English equivalent of the New Zealand Education Review Office) was data driven and examined very little else when assessing schools. All schools are "scored" by OFSTED with a weighting for advantage or disadvantage. There is no recognition for "value added." One school in a low socio-economic area had raised their score from 40 to 80 with good leadership but was still perceived as "failing" by OFSTED. The on-going ramifications of this rating through league tables produced huge pressure for principals as they sought to maintain their school reputation and viability. On a personal level there was huge pressure in terms of their own job security.

ICT Skill Teaching

It was very obvious that ICT was not used as a tool to support learning. I did not observe any computers (apart from the teachers laptop) in classrooms as permanent fixtures. In only one school did I see laptops being used in a lesson to support the learning. All schools had computer labs and classes had timetabled sessions, often just once a week. It appeared that these sessions

were to teach a checklist of skills eg “insert a picture” but these skills were taught in isolation and bore no relationship to the content of the classroom programme. This approach took me back about 12 years or so when that was the accepted way in New Zealand.

Moving Towards a New Approach

Only one of the schools which I visited appeared to be developing a contextual approach to the curriculum, as yet they have not developed an inquiry learning approach but had started to develop a “thinking curriculum” It was evident that thinking skills – Blooms, Tony Ryan’s Thinkers keys and De Bono CORT thinking skills – were being introduced to pupils.

All schools were at the beginning of a change cycle. In 2008 the previous government had undertaken a major curriculum review, initiated by the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, Ed Balls and lead by educationalist Sir Jim Rose. Ed Balls had asked him to propose a curriculum which would inspire life-long learning while reducing prescription and giving teachers greater flexibility. The aim was to create a less “overloaded” time table and move to a “skills” based rather than a content based curriculum. The up to 14 subject areas were to be reduced to 6 broader learning areas. The resulting curriculum with its emphasis on holistic learning supported by ICT was very similar to the New Zealand Curriculum and was due to be introduced in September 2011.

My observation was that the schools I visited were using the new draft curriculum and were now beginning to introduce pedagogical approaches which had been promoted in New Zealand schools for the past decade or longer generally through the ICTPD programme. The impression I got was that teachers and principals were excited by the freedom they would now have to teach in ways they believed were best for children.

In some schools this approach was still at the level of cross-curricular activities ie: the “topic” approach which was popular in New Zealand over 10 years ago before curriculum integration and inquiry learning was fully understood.

At the time of my visit in 2010 there had just been a change of government and all principals I spoke to expressed their fear that the new curriculum, which they found exciting with the scope it gave them to be innovative, would be sidelined by the new government. By September 2010 this had, in fact, happened.

Research Question 2

What leadership structures promote the implementation of high quality, student centred inquiry learning?

In only one school was I able to identify the deliberate identification of a key player to drive the inquiry learning and integration of ICT. This school, and one other, had a principal who was passionate about teaching and learning and appeared to take the lead role in this area themselves. In all other schools visited, the management structure was concerned more with the sharing of administrative tasks. The role of the deputy principal was, in most

schools, to oversee assessment, particularly in regard to national testing requirements.

Implications and Conclusions:

New Zealand has moved a long way in the last 10 years, drivers such as the ICTPD contract and the Laptops for Teachers scheme have promoted a strong understanding of pedagogy as well as promoting teacher competency in ICT. Curriculum innovation has been a natural progression and culminated in the introduction of the revised New Zealand Curriculum in recent years. New Zealand schools have developed holistic, child centred curriculums which are skill based and encourage student inquiry. This has been accompanied by a strong emphasis on assessment through the AtoL programme. The power of formative assessment, against clearly defined learning intentions and success criteria, as well as thorough data analysis to set the next learning steps in partnership with pupils is a key approach which has proven to improve student achievement. As New Zealand schools are self governing and there was no requirement to conform to national testing, schools have been able to develop their teaching philosophy without hindrance.

It was very evident that schools in England are only beginning along this path and most principals stated that they have only now had the freedom to change their approach from content driven to skills based curriculum. This was a reaction to the curriculum review instigated in 2007, the direction indicated by Ed Balls had inspired principals to allow teachers teach in ways which they believed were best for children. This led to many schools arguing that national testing did not support this type of learning and the eventual boycott of the 2010 tests by almost a quarter of schools.

All principals and teachers I spoke to were dismayed to hear that New Zealand was introducing National Standards. They commented that they held our education system in high regard as being a world leader with an innovative curriculum. They cautioned strongly against allowing national testing to be introduced and were convinced that this approach had done harm to their education system and had held it back for many years.

The first duty of educationalists is to “Do no harm.” Participants in my research all felt that national testing was harmful to children.

I would agree, from my observations, national testing is harmful – it narrows the curriculum, detracts from teaching time as teachers feel pressured to “teach to the test” and creates unnecessary stress for children instead of prompting a joy in learning and a feeling of success as they achieve their next goals which are carefully scaffolded by a teacher who uses data wisely.

“The anxiety children feel at constantly being tested, their fear of failure, punishment, and disgrace, severely reduces their ability both to perceive and

to remember, and drives them away from the material being studied into strategies for fooling teachers into thinking they know what they really don't know." (Holt, 2009)

The challenge for New Zealand educators and administrators is to ensure that the richness of our curriculum is balanced by the judicious use of assessment based on evidence. This should be used in a formative way with students to involve them in their learning. Ideally it should enrich learning conversations between students and teachers in order to progress the learning. We must be very clear about the purpose of the assessment, avoid the labelling of children in such a way as to disengage them from learning.

We must also resist attempts to turn assessment into the high stakes model, whereby schools are judged solely by their results without attention to the effectiveness of learning programmes as measured by the progress of individual and groups of students.

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