

Primary Principals' Sabbatical Report

Jo Buckley - Term 2 2018

Title and focus of the sabbatical

The purpose of this sabbatical was to spend time visiting other schools, reading and reflecting on what we are doing and what we can learn from others to enhance the educational achievement and outcomes for Māori and Pasifika learners. I was particularly focused on our high proportion of Pasifika students who are English language learners and what we can do to improve English language acquisition and therefore educational achievement and confidence.

This has led me to ask the more focused question -
How can we be more deliberate in our teaching to provide learning experiences that improve the oral language of our students including vocabulary and structure?

About the author

I became Principal at St Bernadette's School in 2005. St Bernadette's School is in Naenae, Lower Hutt. Our school has a diverse multicultural community with a large proportion coming from Samoa and Tokelau. We also have students from refugee backgrounds originating from Sudan, Colombia and Myanmar. Many of our students are English language learners.

Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to my Board of Trustees who supported me and released me to take this term of learning and reenergising. Many thanks especially to Nella Stowers who took on the role and responsibilities of principal through this term. I am also very grateful to the whole staff team who continued their passionate work to keep the learning as the focus at St Bernadette's School.

I acknowledge the Ministry of Education for making these sabbatical opportunities available to principals. This time of reflection and rejuvenation has been a wonderful opportunity to step back from the work and look at things from a refreshed view.

Special thanks to the Principals and Schools that welcomed me to visit and shared what they were doing to promote and enhance oral language learning. These

schools were generous in sharing their time and learning, to support me in my learning.

Executive Summary

At St Bernadette's School we have a high proportion of Pasifika learners. It is a privilege to work within this community and with our students. For a while now we have been concerned with how passive our learners can be. We know that for our students to be successful in the future they need to be agentic learners. We know our students are sent off to school by their loving families and told to be good and listen to the teacher. We also know for them to be active learners they need to go beyond listening passively to the teacher.

Over the past few years we have been more deliberate and explicit about what we mean when we say active learning. At St Bernadette's we now have a "High 5 of active learning". The high 5 are – curiosity, challenge, courage, create and communicate. For this sabbatical I am narrowing my focus to the topic of communication. I want to focus on how we can be deliberate in our teaching to support our students to be effective communicators.

It is my thinking that if our students leave us as confident, articulate, life-long learners we have done a good job to set them up for their future.

Oral Language is an area of concern for many teachers. We recognise the link between oral language and written language yet we spend the majority of our deliberate teaching actions in the area of written language. I am not sure we know how to deliberately teach children to talk coherently and communicate their wants and ideas effectively.

Talking and listening are fundamental skills for life and learning. They allow us to function within our society and connect with others. Talking and listening is how we get to know others and share ourselves. We talk to get our needs met and communicate our ideas.

In many schools children enter at the age of five knowing how to speak well and hearing good models of language all day every day. In a school where the majority of learners are English language learners this may not be the case.

Betty Hart (1995) identifies the 30 million word gap in her work on the impact of poverty of vocabulary. As a school with many English language learners we need to do all we can to close the gap for our students.

What we say and how we say it is how people will judge us. The graduates of our schools need to be articulate and effective communicators to reach their potential and make the most of opportunities presented throughout their lives.

Methodology

Through this sabbatical I have been doing a lot of reading on this topic and visiting schools who have been taking a range of paths to meet the oral language learning needs of their students.

As a teaching team we are also participating in the "Developing Mathematical Inquiry Communities" professional development offered by Massey University. This is focused on using dialogic pedagogy in maths.

Findings

I have particularly benefitted from talking to Jannie Van Hees from Auckland University and reading her books. In her work there is a lot of emphasis on teachers scaffolding and extending the language of their students.

It can easily become normal to simplify language and interpret full sentences and phrases from one and two work utterances from our learners. It is a shift in thinking for teachers recognise themselves as gifters of language. Having this foremost in our minds though would hopefully prevent us from dumbing things down.

Jannie Van Hees has developed an "Intensive Oral Language Programme" for teachers of junior students. This is deliberate in getting children experiencing and making meaning and growing their language. In watching these lessons I was struck by the high level of vocabulary and structure in the language the teachers and students were using.

My greatest find in my sabbatical and also my greatest area of guilt. Expanding Oral Language in the Classroom – Jannie Van Hees 2007 has been sitting on my shelf for a few years waiting for me to read it. The gift of time during this term has allowed me to read this book and reflect on the implications for our students.

“Having or not having the oral language resources with which to fully express oneself and to participate influenced almost all other aspects of self” (Van Hees, 2007, p.3)

Reading this book really got me thinking more and more about teacher vs student control of talk in the classroom. To learn anything we need to practice and the person getting most oral language practice in most classrooms is the teacher.

“Developing mathematical inquiry communities” also focuses on students doing the talking and making meaning. Using this model teachers are carefully and deliberately planning tasks that will enable students to explore a particular mathematical concept. It has been exciting to see just what students can do when they are given the opportunity to make their own meaning through talking and interacting with mathematical concepts.

It has been a privilege to visit schools and see the variety of strategies schools are implementing to enhance oral language. During my visits I have been struck by some practices that are evidently having a positive impact on student learning;

- Teacher valuing of student voice
- Wait time and thinking time
- Deliberately and explicitly growing vocabulary
- Students experiencing and talking
- Sophisticated teacher language – implicit high expectation of language
- Limited questions and no hands up
- Using “Talk Moves”
- Expectation that anyone and everyone is ready to share

Conclusion and Implications for St Bernadette’s School

I am keen for the teaching team at St Bernadette’s to collaboratively work through Jannie Van Hees book – Expanding Oral Language in the classroom. I think at the beginning the descriptions are quite close to what is happening in many classrooms. I believe that by exploring together the assumptions we are making we can find ways to change and improve our practice.

One simple and big idea I have been doing a lot of thinking about is teacher control of talk in the classroom. It is easy for the teacher to keep control of the talk in the class of children that are respectful and focused on listening to the teacher. We want our active learners to fully participate and make their own meaning. This means they must share control of the talk in the classroom. For our learners to be

confident and capable talkers they must practice, practice, practice talking. This does not happen by listening to the teacher.

The other main idea that I am focused on is that teachers need to be skilled in extending and gifting language in the classroom. This is not an easy thing to do and will require deliberate focus in the classroom. It is important that our learners are not just given simplified and basic language. Vocabulary and language structures are so important and must be deliberately modelled and practiced and grown in every lesson.

Schools visited

St Joseph's School, Otahuhu, Auckland

St Claudine's Thevenet School, Wainuiomata, Lower Hutt

Holy Family School, Porirua, Wellington

Holy Cross School, Mirimar, Wellington

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