

Title:

Effective Teaching: What does it look like in New Zealand classrooms early in the 21st Century?

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Executive Summary

In order to carry out the project advice was sought concerning which schools should be visited and within the schools which teachers should be observed. Five schools were selected for visits and observations took place in thirteen classrooms.

Observation notes were taken that focussed on what was notable about the teaching practices which seemed to be enhancing the learning opportunities for the students.

The strength of the relationship between the teachers and their students was the most striking feature of the observations. The common teacher behaviours that enhanced this relationship were recorded.

Purpose

The purpose of this inquiry was to find out what is it that effective classroom teachers do that makes teaching and learning attractive and relevant to the 21st Century learner? The desire was to observe the specific techniques that make pedagogy effective.

Background and Rationale

As a principal who had been in the role for seven years in two schools the focus had been on schools' key purpose: the provision of quality teaching, the optimisation of learning opportunities and the consequent lifting of student achievement. It is this aspect of school leadership that can be neglected as a principal becomes distracted by

the necessities of school property management, problem solving, financial management, stakeholder relationship building and Ministry of Education inevitable compliance. A strong personal belief is that if the instructional leadership aspect of principalship is given its due importance and if this is effectively carried out then much of the other aspects of leadership will successfully follow.

However the time that had passed since the experience of lesson by lesson classroom teaching had been the personal daily routine meant that the reality of this demanding work was not as well understood. It was time to have a closer look at what was deemed to be excellent classroom teaching by learning leaders in other schools. In being able to observe, as an outsider, in a variety of schools it might be possible to clarify what is really working in classrooms in the 21st Century.

Interest in whether the use of 21st Century teaching tools i.e. digital technologies was essential in order to engage students was a subsidiary area for investigation.

There was also a desire to go back into two colleges where the environment was familiar from previous association but to observe from a different and more “anonymous” position.

The sabbatical time was also to be used to read the literature around the topic in order to gather the theory while observing the practice.

Methodology

Contact was made with several principals in schools that were of interest requesting the opportunity to visit and observe the teachers who the local principal might nominate as highly effective practitioners. Merle Ramsey from Support Services, University of Waikato also made suggestions of teachers who could be willing to be observed and direct contact was made with these teachers and then their principals. At one college the Specialist Classroom Teacher organised a schedule of teachers to observe in her school.

It was then a matter of coordinating a “road trip” around the country in order to visit the colleges selected.

Once in each school the observations took place. No particular data collection tool was used but notes were taken as the lessons progressed in order to record particular practices, actions, organisational techniques or interventions that stood out.

In each college time was spent with the Principal in order to discuss the project and to generally share on a collegial level.

In one college no class observations took place but considerable time was spent with the principal discussing what optimised student achievement in NCEA. This was pre-planned, not directly involved with the sabbatical project but of interest because this college's level of achievement was regularly high compared with other similar colleges.

Principal colleagues and support services advisors also recommended texts to read in relation to the project.

Findings

School 1 (co educational, rural, year 7-13, decile 4):

Interestingly in this school the principal had highlighted the teaching of three of the year 7 and 8 homeroom teachers for observation. The other two classes were at year 9 level.

In the first class, year 7 Mathematics, there was a very clear sense of purpose. It was very evident that routines were set for this class and the students were clearly very secure in knowing the routine. The culture of the classroom was extremely positive. Students were working at different levels but, at times, they were organised in "social groups with tweaks" (the teacher's description).

The lesson was chunked into sections with momentum maintained throughout.

The classroom walls were covered with student work and evidence of learning. Student input was everywhere.

The most striking aspect was the "teacher talk". It was predominantly positive. Students were kept in line with comments that referred to the impact of a negative behaviour on the teacher i.e. "I don't appreciate you interrupting" and "I don't know why you are calling out". There was in-depth questioning and the encouragement of students to think on a continual basis. The encouragement to take a risk, never use a calculator, discuss answers, and realistically comment on progress, with penalties if a student under or over estimated performance, were indicators of the expectations of the teacher of his students.

There were spells in the lesson that were silent so that "lots of work" could be done and other spells where progress was expected to be collaborative.

Students spent periods of time with the teacher at his desk checking for understanding. There was detailed feedback given individually and to groups.

There was no use of any digital technologies.

Lesson two was a year nine English lesson where the focus was on static images. Students were greeted as they entered and asked to leave "personal baggage" at the

door. Lots of banter about the sending of Mothers' Day cards lifted the atmosphere as the students entered and developed into positive repartee between the teacher and her class.

The digital projector was used through the teacher's laptop to show pre-organised images that each illustrated aspects of successful static images. This was a "checking for understanding and learning" session with multiple questions from the teacher as inquiry into the extent of student knowledge.

Lesson three was a year eight Technology class. In this class there were again clear routines. The students were used to a way of working that brought about maximum engagement. They worked at their own pace on either practical aspects of their task or the associated theory. Music played in the background (explained as the teacher's choice of music and volume).

The teacher told me that he used a "learning by doing" approach with this class that was working well. He used praise, enthusiasm and encouragement in generous proportions.

Lesson four was a year seven Mathematics class. This lesson was full of fun. It involved a multitude of activities at differentiated levels with students working either in groups or alone. The saying "success is a do it yourself project" was evident in a poster on the wall but also as the mantra of the class.

The teacher used unfailingly respectful questioning techniques and instructions for correcting off task activity. It was clear that this teacher and her class were in close competition with the teacher of the first lesson observed and his class. The friendly rivalry permeated much of what was said and done.

Lesson five was an English lesson for year eight. This lesson had a focus on literacy learning, both reading and writing. Students were working in differentiated groups for reading but all worked on the same writing tasks.

A writing challenge involved the best paragraph explaining, hypothetically, why the student had not done their homework. The best persuasive writing allowed the student off homework for the next night. The explanations written were shared and were humorous, creative, inventive and convincing.

This teacher used a very quiet voice to gain and keep attention and adopted a variety of techniques to ensure that students used quiet voices too. This led to a very calm feeling in the room.

A temperature gauge on the wall of the classroom was monitored by the teacher. She explained that, if the temperature rose above 20 degrees Celsius, she knew that the boys would become inattentive. She had control of the heat through a heat pump.

A text “How to become a recovering confrontationist” was recommended (source: www.helpbehaviour.co.nz) to the observer as a useful text.

Time in this school was joy. It was a place familiar to the observer and it was pleasing to see how well the classrooms were fostering engagement and learning. Although there was easy access to digital technologies these were used sparingly. It seemed that the basis for the quality teaching was the overwhelmingly positive relationship between the teachers and their students.

School 2 (co educational special character, urban, year 9-13, decile 6):

The visit to this school was focussed on investigating how the college had managed to maintain NCEA results that were considerably better than those for similar schools nationwide.

A meeting with the principal highlighted what had brought about this achievement. Data was shown showing results over several years and this pointed to the year when the change had begun. The principal noted that in this year a new deputy principal had been appointed and this teacher had: focussed on ensuring that students were guided very carefully towards suitable course choices; relentlessly monitored all students achievement levels; provided remedial programmes for those in danger of underachieving; had mentored personally as well as setting up senior student mentors; and, called back students before the start of the next academic year in order to allow for the resit of standards not achieved in the previous year.

These strategies, alongside strong student leadership of the college culture of achievement, had made a considerable and sustained improvement to the NCEA results.

In latter years the improvement was built on by acting on detailed analysis of the results achieved across all standards sat. Focus was put on those standards which brought about the greatest student success. Students were encouraged to sit fewer credits but to achieve at merit and excellence in the ones they did attempt. High expectations of students by their teachers, focussed teaching and a refusal to accept non achievement all added to the culture of success.

School 3: (Co educational, urban, decile 4, Te Kotahitanga project)

Lesson one was a year ten Art class. The students sat according to a seating plan and worked in groups. The teacher visited the groups in order to encourage progress, give feedback and to monitor the level of engagement.

The students had a task to do before they moved to the computer room to search for and collect useful images. The task involved a project for which there were exemplars

from previous years. This use of exemplars seemed to be a strong motivating factor for the students. They could see what the written, theoretical, expectations of the task looked like in reality.

A notable technique this teacher used was extended wait time after asking a question. This appeared to bring better responses than had been observed in similar classes before the start of this project.

The second part of the day was spent in a Te Kotahitanga co-construction meeting for a year 10 class. Here the facilitator, five of the class's teachers, a teacher aide and their form teacher met to discuss how to manage the class more constructively. The group shared the issues they were facing, discussed seating plans and the best use of the teacher aid. They then examined the effect of accessing year 13 mentors for this class. Finally they came up with an agreed protocol for the development of class rules with the students for each subject. Consistent use of and types of praise and use of similar consequences for breaking class agreed rules were also discussed.

This type of meeting was intended to give the teachers the confidence to tackle a difficult class and also tangible support from the acknowledgement that others were finding these students challenging.

The next lesson observed was a large year 10 Mathematics class. This teacher faced a challenging class with a range of demands. She had a very quiet manner with them and this gentleness lowered the level of agitation as the lesson progressed. One student was required to spend a little time outside the classroom to get his thoughts together. He returned after a "quiet chat" and settled.

This teacher had learned how to manage these students effectively. It could be sensed, quite obviously, that things had not been as settled earlier in the year.

The final lesson in this school was a year 11 Science class. The significant teaching technique used in this class was the degree of student choice and student teacher negotiation that took place. Students chose whether they learned an aspect through a practical experience or through reading the theory. Students volunteered to answer questions with no pressure put on those who were reluctant. Time limits for each part of the lesson were set by negotiation but were then rigidly implemented. The students knew the structure of their learning for the week and that, where work was on track, the Monday lesson would be a fun lesson involving Science quizzes.

There was considerable emphasis put on how to reach the merit and excellence levels of achievement. Students were clear in the understanding of what they needed to do to improve their level of achievement. From this basis it seemed that the motivation came from within them.

The depth of teacher questioning for understanding was impressive and a significant skill of this teacher.

School 4: (co educational, urban, decile 8)

In this school the most striking lesson of the project was observed. The display of teaching was the most memorable of all the classes observed in the schools visited. This lesson was a year 10 English lesson with 19 students in the class. These students had been placed in this specially constructed class because they had been under achieving previously but had each expressed a personal desire to achieve in the future.

Notes taken during this observation included many transcripts of the “teacher talk”, student voice comments and details of the teacher’s actions. Listing these will give the best description of the culture of this classroom:

Management:

- Very clear instructions given.
- The use of a student self evaluation sheet that stated “You MUST make thoughtful comments, tell me how well you have done and why”.
- Teacher negotiates tasks with a late starter on the assignment.
- Student off task: quick reminder given and then moved away, no discussion.
- Lots of movement by teacher around the class, desk to desk, every comment positive.
- While working with one student the teacher was obviously aware of what was going on elsewhere in the room. Brief but regular comments reminded the students of this.
- One student was moved to another desk, very quietly.
- Students had been classified into levels using a pre test. Each level had a different series of tasks from the differentiated assignment sheet. Some were doing more than was expected of them by the teacher. Tasks required a range of different skills e.g. creative writing, static image, formal writing, and cartoons.
- Students who felt they were in the wrong group could negotiate a change.
- Students could use earphones (and iPods) as long as they were working.
- Cell phones were not expected to be visible or in use. When one did ring it was put in the teacher’s drawer. No arguments.
- The tone and enthusiasm in the teacher’s voice energised the classroom.
- Many Maori words were blended into instructing sentences, greetings and feedback.

Student Voice:

- “She (*the teacher*) is always so enthusiastic”
- “She understands us”
- “She always cheers us up”
- “She is the best teacher I have ever had”
- “She always respects us so it easy to respect her”

Teacher Voice:

- “Is that the best use of your time?”
- “Good word used there, well done.”
- “Can I ask you a question? Why a capital P there?”
- “Are you OK?”
- “That is annoying me.”
- “It is OK to be proud. Don’t be whakama about it.”
- “I like the use of.....it is clever.”
- “Are you alright? What do you need?” (to a wandering student)
- “What do YOU think?” (over and over again)
- “I will cry if you do not finish on time.”
- “Could you do something else while you wait?”
- “Do you remember when we....”
- “You can do this.”
- “Is that fair on him?”
- “I don’t mind if you are sharing ideas as long as you are thinking.”
- “This is your chance to show off.”
- “You set goals this time, how many a day?”
- “The ideas are fantastic but the sentences are just SO long.”
- “Five minutes to go, pens down.”
- “You need to work out what you need to do tonight for homework. Tomorrow you will be completing the project and self assessment sheet. It is your decision what you need to do before then.”
- “They caught you at a bad time.” (when the cellphone rang)

The next lesson observed in this school was year 13, level 3, English. This lesson was focussed on sentence starters and developing judgements to assist with a research assessment (AS3.7). The students were working in groups compiled of those who had chosen the same research topic theme. They were collaboratively sharing ideas in a brainstorm where every idea was recorded.

The students were fully engaged in a task that they could see offered them comprehensive support for their writing. The task asked them to link to the key words in their marking schedule which thus reinforced its usefulness. Every one could contribute

because a quantity of ideas was wanted. The quality was where it would come down to the individual's selection and then use of the brainstormed ideas.

The teacher managed this class very much like a tertiary tutorial group might be managed. It could be sensed that the students appreciated the acknowledgement of their level of maturity as young people and learners.

After this lesson the specialist classroom teacher introduced the concept of the "teachers' toolbox" on the college intranet. This held templates of teaching tools that could be used across the whole staff.

The final lesson observed in this school was a year 11, level 1, Science class. This teacher used a laptop and data projector to present nearly all the material she used whether it was providing information to students, quiz sheets, countdown timers or decision making tools. The strategies used to engage the students in this way seemed to be quite effective. The use of WALT and WILF (We are learning to, What I am looking for) appeared to help focus the students on the learning intentions.

School 5: (co educational, rural, decile 2, Te Kotahitanga project)

The first lesson observed was a year 10 Drama option class. This small class was still learning the routines set by their teacher. She was persistent in the establishment of the code of behaviour she expected from them. There was an obvious bicultural flavour to the manner in which the teacher managed the class: use of many Maori words; collaboration; agreed tasks; bicultural wall decorations; and, dramatisations based on a Maori author's writing on a Maori theme (Whale Rider).

The pace of the lesson was a little slow but this was driven by the students' reluctance to meet the expectations of the teacher. The relationship between the teacher and the students was not fully established but showed all the signs of developing into a strength for this group's future work together.

The second lesson was a year eight Mathematics session. As seen at a previous school the strong routine in the lesson organisation, led by a very experienced teacher, provided a firm foundation for maths learning and enjoyment. The lesson started with a "Do Now" sheet. Key words used throughout this lesson were: listen, focus, co-operate, quiet voices. The broad list of tasks for the lesson was written on the whiteboard.

There were incentives for quality work with the gathering of marbles in a jar whenever a commendation was given. Once the jar was full the whole class would be rewarded. This gave a sense of purpose for all students in the class and some peer pressure in a positive way. All students were working on the same level of work. One was assisted by a teacher aid. Fast finishers were given extension tasks to attempt.

There was a strong sense of purpose in the lesson, as well as a feeling that maths was fun, “doable”, useful and relevant. The relationship between the teacher and her class was positive. There was a sense of pride in the class who were all achieving together and a shared enjoyment of the busyness in the room.

The following lesson observed was a year seven Science class. These students were working on a topic concerning climate change and were using resources developed by The Forest and Bird Society for the Kiwi Conservation Club Children’s Project. There were a series of tasks for the students to complete and each one had clear instructions on the whiteboard. The lesson was somewhat disrupted by students coming and going from the laboratory for a literacy learning support class. This challenged the teacher by making it difficult to keep all students moving through the tasks at a similar pace.

A code of behavioural expectations for the room was listed on a wall poster and was referred to regularly with reminders of what these expectations looked like in practice.

The final lesson of the day was a year 10 Social Science class where some of the drama students from earlier in the day were seen in a different learning environment. The lesson started with the teacher congratulating the students for their work ethic and cooperation for a relieving teacher in the week before. She showed genuine pride in her students and one could sense their pride in themselves as a result of this acknowledgement. Following this there was a prolonged question and answer session between the teacher and the class. The questions were deep and open ended questions that required analytical thought. The students were able, and willing, to provide parts of the answer in order to build the full response between them. This was an impressive technique that involved everyone and all seemed willing to take the risk to add their view.

The next part of the lesson involved students completing tasks from the material that had been generated by the question and answer session. All were on task. All were visited by the teacher. Students were encouraged to tap into the skills and knowledge of those around them. The last resort was to ask the teacher for help. When the teacher was asked for an answer she gave the student the means to answer it themselves. She never gave a direct “spoon feeding” style of response.

While the students were working the teacher moved around the class giving back essays that had been marked. She made the time to give each student feedback and engage them in seeking how they felt they had done. At the same time she was aware of the dynamics in the rest of the room, gave reminders and thanked students for helping others. There were very clear commonalities between this lesson and the year 10 English lesson observed at school 4. It was impressive teaching.

Implications

The purpose of this project was to observe quality teaching. The expectation was to see use of digital learning tools and a significant style change from the teaching of 10 years ago. The reality was that the teachers who were recommended for observation made little use of digital tools but did reflect a style of teaching that might have been less prevalent in the past.

It was the relationships that stood out. A personally held view that it is the teachers who relentlessly work towards building strong relationships with their students that are the ones who have the platform on which to ground quality learning opportunities. The teacher actions or traits that were observed in this project that seemed most likely to be building this relationship were:

- Individual and genuine interest in the students.
- A regularly articulated teacher's personal desire for the students to achieve.
- Every student responded to in the same manner, none allowed to be anonymous.
- Energy and enthusiasm.
- Clear and consistent expectations and routines that built student confidence.
- Positivity.
- Evidence of preparation of materials in order to meet the needs of each level of student ability.
- Each individual treated with unfailing respect.
- The trust that was given to students to manage themselves, make their own decisions and to work constructively with others.
- The teacher taking the role of learning guide rather than the holder of the knowledge.
- Acknowledgment of what the students already knew or skills they might already have.

The use of digital tools in order to enhance learning for the 21st Century student could be said to be only effective if a positive learning environment is established first.

Benefits

The sabbatical leave allowed an investigation to take place that clarified a view of effective teaching. It allowed a principal who had spent more than seven years as a learning leader in two schools to examine quality teaching from the position of an anonymous observer. This would have been impossible within the principal's own schools.

The time to read extensively away from the relentless business of school leadership was also invaluable in order to extend the theoretical base of understanding.

Conclusions

Principals as the leaders of learning in their schools must continue to focus on the development of strong relationships between students and teachers. This basic requirement must not be lost in the drive to implement curriculum changes and pay attention to NCEA reviews. Professional development; peer observations and feedback; the use of and attention to the findings of student voice; and, the leadership by experienced staff who have the appropriate relationship building skills are essential in the achievement of this focus.

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