

Sabbatical Report

By Gil Laurenson Principal Otahuhu College Term two 2009

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the MOE for funding my sabbatical and the Otahuhu College Board of Trustees for agreeing to my taking it and financing the Harvard course I attended. After ten years as a Principal a chance to read, reflect and recharge was needed.

Executive Summary

The aims of my sabbatical were to investigate the impact of teacher coaching and to improve my leadership skills by attending a leadership course at Harvard University.

My instincts had always told me that of the things that impact on achievement which I can improve the teacher in the classroom makes the biggest difference. Therefore what needs to be done at Otahuhu if we are to move our students' achievement to the next level?

In 1993 I had worked for a year as a facilitator for the implementation of the new mathematics curriculum so I knew what made little impact on what happened in the classroom and that was a few whole days of professional development followed up by a couple of classroom visits from a facilitator. If only changing what teachers do in classrooms was that easy.

A copy of the Best Evidence Synthesis (BES) on "Teacher Professional Learning Development" landed on my desk so this became the focus of my study. Also "Visible Learning", authored by John Hattie was published and the reading of this was a very useful addition to my work.

From these publications my original beliefs were reinforced. BES told me that old fashioned one off PD sessions had little impact on what happened in the classroom and to change teacher practice takes time. Also "Visible Learning" provided excellent backup to this point of view. For there to be a change in teacher practice the professional development needs to be ongoing, include support for the teacher and focus on student learning.

The sabbatical also gave me three weeks to prepare for ERO who arrived at Otahuhu shortly after my return from America.

Harvard Course

The course began with Chris Dede updating us on some of the emerging technologies that are being used in education such as Web 2.0 and MUVE (multi user virtual environment). He really made me think about what the future of schooling might look like in 20 years time talking about the shifts in knowledge and skills society values, the development of new methods of teaching and the changes in the characteristics of learners.

Some wonderful quotes from him included:

“Often we teach what is easiest to assess”

“Teach the way they learn not learn the way we teach”

Next up was Irma Tyler-Wood spoke about the complexity of change management. It was good to be reminded about the issues that lie behind change and how difficult the transitions are. Irma had one delightful African quote “Beware the naked person who offers you clothes”.

The following day was the EOTC day which we spent team building. This was very interesting and was held in a beautiful setting north of Boston. Part of the course was a “high ropes exercise” which tested my fear of heights but I coped. Some of my team were feeble but then perhaps this reflected the lifestyle of urban Americans.

Friday had Richard Elmore a noted educationalist spoke about the need to move from an accountability model to improving instructional practice. He was thought provoking.

That afternoon we did a case study on an educational district in San Diego. The study brought home to me how lucky we are in New Zealand with our Tomorrows Schools model of school administration.

On the Saturday we began with Kim Marshall talking on the impact of assessment and again my beliefs were reinforced. Teachers need to be clear about learning outcomes as do students. Everyone needs to know what you need to do and how to do well. **“Kids need to know what kids need to know at the end of the year.”** Again effective teaching was reinforced as having a bigger impact than socio economic back-round. He also spoke about what makes for effective professional development and was for coaching teachers provided the coaches used results from students as part of the conversation. Also coaches need to get alongside and look at what works and doesn’t work and give coaching on best practice.

The next session was on strategic planning but basically it was boring and hard to relate to a New Zealand setting.

Sunday was our rest day and I went to a baseball game at Fenway Park and saw the Boston Red Socks play Kansas City. What a great all American experience it was.

The new week began with Robert Keegan. He also talked about change and gave us a template to use for our own personal development and to assist us with making changes in ourselves. Kurt Fischer followed and he dismissed many of the myths that surround the brain. A key point from him was “Emotion is important it drives learning so if students are engaged they will learn better”.

Inclusive education was the next focus with Norman Kunc giving a wonderful address which gave a clear message that people who are different for whatever reason are not getting a fair deal in education. We don’t segregate kids because it is good for them we do it because

administratively it is convenient. Karen Mapp followed on by talking about families and schools. She showed we have a long way to go in this area but we have made a good start.

Our final day centred round a case study and was run by Jerome Murphy. He was an outstanding presenter who ran an interactive session with 150 people on Leadership. His sessions were a real highlight and gave me a real dose of reality therapy.

Implications

The sabbatical has already had an impact Otahuhu with a part-time teacher coach appointed and a much more strategically driven professional development programme in place for 2010. In addition I have now visited far more classrooms than ever before and have a much better understanding of the standard of teaching that is going on in the College.

Benefits

Having my personal views gained from experience over many years reinforced by research and being able to discuss educational issues with a wide range of people at Harvard has lifted my morale and will improve my leadership of Otahuhu College in the years to come.

Conclusion

The sabbatical gave me a wonderful opportunity and has meant I will be able to continue in the job for few years longer. Having the opportunity to study, travel with my wife, see my son and cross a few things off the “bucket list” was great.

Gil Laurenson