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SABBATICAL REPORT 2012
“BOYS’ LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS”

“To enable boys to thrive by creating a learning environment that suits boys.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Ministry of Education for selecting me for this sabbatical and the Hamilton North School Board of Trustees for their support. A special thanks to Leonie and Michele who ran the school extremely well in my absence.

INTRODUCTION

As Principal for 9 years at Hamilton North School, a U5 decile 3 Special School in Hamilton, I was awarded a Primary Principals’ Sabbatical Award for Term 3, 2011.

During my role as Principal of a Special School, I relished the challenge of educating students with intellectual and physical disabilities. I had developed a particular interest, in the ‘Boys’ Learning’ and how they react in different environments.

While there was the obvious benefit of refreshment from this sabbatical, the main benefits will be to use the information gained to take Hamilton North School forward in the next five years with a greater understanding of how and why boys react the way they do, and as a school, we can utilise this knowledge to create a learning environment where we understand the needs of boys. In this way, we will be able to achieve an improved and purposeful learning environment for boys and their families.

GENERAL REPORT

The sabbatical leave was for the following activities:

- Professional refreshment
- Study and research
- Visiting and attending seminars

FINDINGS:

There is a huge amount of material and information being produced on how ‘Boys Learn and Behave’ so below I have listed a number of assumptions that are commonly held by a variety of experts who had variations on the same principles which are laid out as follows:

Basic assumption:

How improving your school learning and teaching for boys, will improve learning for everyone.

- *Education has not changed. High Expectations and Work Ethic still remain the key drivers of student achievement*
- *Boys are hunters and toolmakers lost in our classrooms.*
- *Clear expectations and boundaries are needed*
- *Known and shared consequences*
- *Leadership, guidance and discipline for difficult boys*
- *Boys thrive in a competitive environment*
- *A focus on both academic and extra-curricular is required*
- *Male role models are needed that are not necessarily the fathers*
- *A growing number of boys only classes are now being established in co-education secondary and primary schools to better cater for boys.*

Research

From the readings, seminars and my own research I formed a clearer understanding of what constitutes a 'Boy's Learning Environment' and factors that would best motivate boys to be active participants in the learning process.

I have, therefore outlined below aspects of what I believe provide a positive learning environment for boys both in a Special School or Mainstream School.

The School Environment needs to be geared to the following points so that an effective boys learning programme is established:

The whole school needs to be involved in order that boys are given a chance to learn:

Actions that motivate boys to learn or be involved in learning

Role Model Ideas – setting the scene

- A TEAM approach to work.
- *Role models displayed – posters erected e.g. talked about and used:- to create a learning environment which interests boys*
- Police dog handlers, firearm, Maori All Blacks, Actors – pantomime, Musicians – bagpipes, Maori Police constable.
- 'Bushman' – performer. Career choice, stated expectations.
- Concrete/hands on activities to promote learning eg rocket.
- Short interactive activities.
- Sports Equipment – basketball goals, kites.
- Sport Waikato support eg Flipper ball.
- Alternative lunchtime environment – basketball, waka ama, extended swimming time.

Curriculum Delivery: Work ethic:

- The need to create and communicate a cohesive culture that boys want to be part of
- Where high group morale is critical for boys' success and how to improve this
- The need to adapt the curriculum and encourage areas e.g boxing, fitness programmes, endurance activities and competition amongst boys.

- Resources eg books with topics and pictures boys' enjoy.
- Pointing out male roles they will move into – connecting learning task and giving a purpose for being at school.
- Providing examples of pathways.
- Different types and more frequent community outings.

Behaviour Policy needs the following:

- Boundaries need to be short and clear.
- Some choices within the expectations of the guidelines.
- Consequences need to be short and clear with one set of rules for everyone. Boys tend to be more accepting of consequences if they are fair.
- The policy guidelines must be explained and frequently reinforced/articulated so they are well known and readily followed. This gives staff greater confidence.
- New staff need to be inducted into the school philosophy at the beginning of each year or placement.
- Leadership needs to come from the Principal (management team), Illustrations of leadership again need to be frequently viewed by students i.e. special assemblies and class visits.
- Reminders that regularly vocalise expectations of how 'a good man behaves'.
- What does a man do/look like to others?
- Look at a new Behaviour Motto that everyone can have/buy into, such as: "***In Our school we are Safe and we care for each other***" – discuss this aspect with staff/students and families so that everyone has the same aspirations.

The introduction of the Virtues Programme in many instances offers some of the following aspects:

- *Ideas Professionally Developed by all staff.*
- *Successes Celebrated.*
- *Virtues of students Vocalised.*

By introducing this programme schools were able to:

- Plan long term to capture boys' interest.
- Give boys responsibilities so that they can develop their leadership qualities by recognising their skills and responsibilities and expecting them to step up.
- The whole school staff comes on board as well as families and caregivers. Easily achieved through personal letters and newsletters written by the Principal and Board of Trustees.
- The use of male staff to capture the teachable moment and modelling good sportsmanship when interacting with the students-Male staff aware of their being seen as 'man models'.
- Female staff more supported and show appreciation of males in their roles.
- Support/backing each other on the clear boundaries.
- Older boys are challenged to become more willing role models and demonstrate their Leadership eg Basketball, kapa haka, waka, league, rugby and by leading assemblies.

Staff meetings focussed on discussion and sharing:

- Reinforcing successes.
- Sharing ideas more focussed on boys' issues
- Support for each other where challenges arose.
- Celebrating others' good ideas.
- 'Pick others' brains'.

An Effective Boys' Teacher:

In his writings Michael Irwin has listed 14 points that an effective teacher needs to address. Joseph Driessen outlines 7 Ways to improve Boys' Education in your school

Numerous other writers have introduced a variety of methods such as:
Competition,
Home and school partnerships,
Fun and learning environments
Boys' only classes

Conclusion

This sabbatical provided me with a unique opportunity to evaluate what we do at my own school and then investigate other schools and writers on the subject to see if there are other possibilities that we have missed or could use to continue our boys' development.

As a Principal of a growing Special School with over 70 percent boys, it is imperative that as a school we keep evolving our boys' learning. This time away from school has therefore given me the chance to evaluate what we are currently doing and look at ways we can grow our understanding and expertise in this particular area of education.

The most satisfying aspect of the sabbatical has been the high level of affirmation and knowledge that we are a leader in the field of boys' education, whether it is special needs or mainstream, as the same motivators are needed in both situations.

On returning from my sabbatical we have again revisited 'Boys' Learning' so that all our staff are informed and operating with the same knowledge and understanding of how boys best learn.

References;

Joseph Driessen - 7 Ways to Improve Boys' Education in Your School
Michael Irwin - Educating Boys 2009
Bay of Plenty Times- July 27 2011 - 'What's best for boys proves its worth.'

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