SABBATICAL REPORT

Title: Middle Leaders Raising Student Achievement and Reducing Variance within Schools

Author: Denise Torrey, Principal, Somerfield School

Acknowledgements:
I would like to thank the Board of Trustees of Somerfield School for allowing me the time to pursue my sabbatical. The work undertaken by myself, for the Ministry of Education and Canterbury Primary Principal's Association (CPPA) in mentoring principals post quakes, did mean the sabbatical was interrupted and drawn out. I'm pleased to present this report to complete the sabbatical.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the principals and middle leaders of the schools I visited and from where I collected initial data.

To the Somerfield School Middle Leaders a special thank you for being the 'guinea pigs' of the programme that was eventually developed for CPPA. It is clearly evident your growth as leaders has impacted on teacher practice and student outcomes at Somerfield School.

TOPIC: Middle Leaders Raising Student Achievement and Reducing Variance Within Schools

The purpose of the sabbatical was to investigate the reported effect the actions of middle leaders' have on modifying teacher practice to increase student achievement.

The investigation addressed: school leadership structures, types of learning communities, peer coaching and activities undertaken by teachers to increase student achievement, as identified in Best Evidence Synthesis Leadership (2009):
These activities are:
- ➢ Focusing teacher talk on the teaching / achievement relationship
- ➢ Using outcome data to determine effective teaching practice
- ➢ Fostering collective responsibility and accountability for student learning and wellbeing
- ➢ Sharing effective teaching practices and creating opportunities for teachers to learn from one and another.

1

RATIONALE AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The 2000 results of the PISA report showed New Zealand has a long tail of under achievement as well as high levels of variation of student achievement within the same school. The report noted variation in student outcomes to be greater between classrooms than between schools. This could be attributed to what the teacher does in the classroom. The report goes on to identify that to reduce variance schools need high quality teacher instruction across the school.

As Hattie's (2003) study shows, teachers account for about 30% of the variance within schools. According to Hattie, "It is what teachers know and do that directly impacts on student achievement." He identified that the leadership group that can have a direct impact on teacher practice are middle leaders. Work undertaken by National College (2010) identifies that middle leaders are well placed to improve student outcomes when focus is placed on addressing student achievement and teacher performance. The report further notes that middle leaders need the opportunity and skills to effectively analyze, observe and share best practice.

The Ministry of Education document, *Leading from the Middle* (2011) highlights that middle and senior leaders are a diverse group with diverse roles but all have the same purpose, to support student learning. It further identifies this group as having leadership roles that are pedagogical as well as administrative. Middle and senior leaders are well placed to achieve change in practice, as the majority of them are classroom teachers who are interacting with students.

To achieve better outcomes for students, middle leaders also need to ensure consistency in the planning, delivering and assessing learning. One way this would be achieved is through coaching, allowing time to plan and carry out professional observations of each other.

The researchers sabbatical project was to investigate Middle Leaders and their role in raising student achievement. The leaders involved were syndicate or team leaders as opposed to curriculum heads or unit holders of other responsibilities e.g. science, senior sport etc.

With this in mind Somerfield School embarked on a deliberate strategy to train middle leaders to focus teachers on improving teaching practice to improve student outcomes. Elsmore (2010) notes that to enable teachers to impact student achievement strong leadership and systems need to be in place so teachers can talk professionally. This sabbatical research project provided the opportunity to investigate and reflect on the systems other schools had in place for middle leaders and if these schools engaged in activities, which focused on student outcomes.

The sabbatical project consisted of three parts. Investigating how other schools were using middle leaders to improve teaching practice in their schools and therefore reducing variance. Secondly, design a professional development programme for the Middle Leaders at Somerfield School based on research and school visits. Lastly,

extend the professional development, if it was successful, to other schools, to build a professional learning community.

PROCEDURE
1. School Visits
The researcher carried out six school visits. The first school visit was used to refine the questions that were to be asked at the subsequent visits. Five U5 schools were then visited and the principal and Middle Leaders interviewed.

The interview questions investigated leadership structures within each school and how the schools organised groups of teachers within the school and the purposes of these groups. Also investigated was how the school and /or groups used achievement data within school to improve teaching practice and therefore student outcomes and lastly, if middle leaders were used to carry out observations of teachers in a peer coaching model.

Leadership Structures

The leadership teams in each school visited were diverse with varying leadership and management roles and responsibilities. Whether these teams lead teaching and learning, acted as mentors or coaches or led curriculum development, they all had one thing in common, they provided groups of teachers with specific leadership. All leaders were also classroom practitioners.

Evaluation of Assessment Data and Teacher Practice, to Increase Student Achievement

Best practice involves teachers reflecting on their own practice and having professional conversations about their practice. Hattie (2009) notes that educational leaders need to be focusing on the things that our best teachers do which make a difference. He identifies that change comes not from handing resources to people; it comes from teachers thinking differently about teaching and learning.

For the schools in the study there was variation in the way team leaders dealt with data and the professional conversations they had about data. One school did have clear systems and directions for their staff and was timetabled. But in most of the schools there was no clear/ documented guidelines given to middle leaders, as to how to deal with data or what the conversations about data should look like.

Another school, despite timetabling, tended to have meeting times dominated by organizational matters. Team leaders were reluctant to have extra meetings.

Overall across schools, senior syndicates found it most difficult to focus on data discussions largely due to the extra number of activities undertaken, in particular sport organization.

Individual leaders within schools had developed some thorough systems for data collection, goal setting and coaching. But it was clear that in most cases there was variation between teams within schools. Team leaders within the same school were unaware of the actions taking place within other teams and were surprised and interested when a collective discussion were held.

Two schools had clear links in their school documented achievement targets and teams contributed to schoolwide data through a clear action plan.

All schools seemed to operate a high trust model with principals not micromanaging. Principals sought to have discussions with their team leaders focusing on data and organizational matters.

Learning Communities

The schools visited had a variety of learning community structures, some based on Teaching as Inquiry, where teachers methodically and systematically inquire into the impact of their teaching on their students. The various structures were called teams, syndicates, Quality Learning Circles (QLC) and Professional Learning Groups (PLG). The most common structure in all schools visited was the syndicate. This is where planning, organizing or discussing data generally took place.

In most cases the learning community had different purposes at different times. As DuFour(2004) and Robertson (2012) identify, learning communities are not just to ensure that students are taught but ensure they learn. In the learning communities teachers share practice, ask each other questions to help solve challenges they face as practitioners and proactively seek to improve their practice.

Different schools had different learning communities for different purposes. Four of the schools visited had teams or syndicates groups based on the Ariki model. This model is designed for shared practice, with initiative being placed in the hands of the teacher. Research by Tester (2012) showed that this initiative allows teachers themselves to decide what is important to discuss within the learning community rather than being directed by some external authority. When the Ariki model is used teachers present authentic aspects of their work to their colleagues who listen. The teacher then reflects on the critique their colleagues provide. Ariki allows teachers to problem solve together, accumulate new knowledge and improve professional judgment about their teaching practice.

Peer Coaching
Peer coaching is generally a confidential process where professional colleagues work together to reflect on current practices. They might expand, refine, and build new skills; share ideas; teach one another; conduct classroom research; or solve problems in the workplace.

The researcher was interested to know if schools had any form of peer coaching to help teachers reflect and improve on their practice and whether the middle leaders had a role in the peer coaching.

A professional culture among teachers has benefits for the development of positive student-teacher relationships. (Robertson 2008) identifies that developing a peer-coaching climate in schools leads to a professional learning culture.

Timperley (2008) identifies that there are four components of effective coaching. The coach:-
- gives suggestions for improved practice that link to an analysis of an observed lesson, and are jointly analyzed with the teacher.
- gives explicit, helpful suggestions so that teachers clearly understand the relevance of the suggestions to their practice.
- should link his/her suggestions to other professional learning opportunities that the teacher has experienced.
- should do more than suggest "next steps" for teaching, if learning is to be sustained. Teachers need to be helped to set explicit goals for themselves and to develop strategies for monitoring their progress towards those goals.

Of the schools visited one school did have extensive Professional Learning for team leaders covering topics of peer coaching, data collection and analysis with teachers. Another school had started training middle leaders in peer coaching but was interrupted due to the Christchurch earthquakes. In the other schools there was nothing specifically targeted or undertaken in developing coaching skills with their middle leaders.

Overall Findings of School Visits

Key practices identified as having an impact on reducing 'in school' variance happened in all the schools to a greater and lesser degree. Different schools had different leadership structures but all the middle leaders were classroom practitioners and all led teams.

All schools visited had practices which focused on raising student outcomes but there was variation in these practices between teams at most schools. This fits the 2000 PISA report findings. In general, practices to raise student outcomes were not explicit or documented with clear guidelines, therefore interpreted differently within the same school. In two of the schools the practices were coherent but in the other four they were adhoc and practices varied between teams. Teachers were often surprised at what other teams were doing.

All schools had professional learning communities/systems in place. Most had different learning communities for different purposes. In the schools that had Ariki, principals identified that teachers had a high level of awareness about their teaching

practice. Teachers helped each other with the challenges of their practice as well as making links between practice and research.

One school had a clear system of peer coaching built into their professional learning programme. Several of the schools had various practices of peer coaching but tended to be less systematic.

Professional development for middle leaders was variable depending on the school. Three schools had used external coaching for their middle leaders. In one school this was ongoing and systematic.

2. Somerfield School Middle Professional Development

In 2011 Somerfield School had six middle leaders, each with responsibility of 2-5 teachers. These Learning Communities (modules) were led and facilitated by middle leaders (Module Leaders). All teachers participated in "The Teaching as Inquiry" Professional Learning Communities (PLC) which were based on the Ariki project but with a far more defined focus on school/ teacher goals.

A change was made to Module Leaders job descriptions clearly outlining the guidelines for the use data / information. These guidelines gave a clear system to enable sharing of effective practice to improve learning outcomes for the students in the teams.

Over two years the Module Leaders undertook extensive professional development. They have also formed their own Professional Learning Groups (PLG) for support and to share challenges they encountered as middle leaders and as a way to build shared understandings of effective teaching and learning across the school.

Key Professional Development Activities – Somerfield School

All the professional development was evidence based. An external provider carried out some of the professional development and in doing so supported messages given by the principal.
The Professional development topics were: -
    Using research to inform practice
    The purpose of a learning community
    Qualities of effective teaching and high quality instruction
    Peer and instructional coaching
    Observation skills
    Running effective meetings
    Data analysis
    Dialogue and discussion
    Tough conversations
    Teaching inquiry – looking at own information setting teaching goals

For further professional learning the Module Leaders identified a need to address deeper discussions about making direct links between data gathered and changing teacher practice. Undertaking critical talk discussions with their teachers was something the Module Leaders found difficult. This was partly due to conflict in their changing role within the school. Leadership is about support and challenge (Timperley and Robinson 2001). Up until recently the middle leaders role had been mainly to support their teams, as their role was primarily administrative and organisational. Module Leaders and their teams were adjusting to the "challenging" part of the role.

As part of their professional development in 2012, the middle leaders carried out a leadership inquiry and which focused on using data to identify effective teaching strategies to improve student outcomes. As part of their inquiry the researcher observed module leaders undertaking discussions with teaching staff about data results and teaching practices.

Key Observations of Team Discussions

Discussions with teachers in the modules had a clear focus on student achievement and its links to teacher practice.
- Initially leaders found it difficult to challenge the teachers to look at teaching practice. Team members wanted to focus on the child as being at fault in some way, but during the observation teachers showed a willingness to discuss their practice. This was a major shift in attitude.
- Discussion was focused on specific students and their specific needs. The discussion at times was very detailed.
- One of the four teams used two NZ ministry documents to guide practice (*Best Evidence Synthesis Mathematics* and when *Effective literacy Practice)*.
- The Module Leaders all role modeled what they were doing to change their personal practice.
- Teachers pulled on PLC group inquiries, their own teacher inquiries and Class Release Time (CRT) observations to help brainstorm and develop strategies teachers might implement in their classes.
- Two groups came up with organizational strategies to improve outcomes e.g. they would send home something for parents to work on to support the children's learning. After feedback from the researcher the Module Leaders and teachers redirected attention focussing on instructional strategies.

As part of their changing role the Module Leaders undertook peer coaching. A model of observation was developed as part of the professional development and in their own PLG they developed observation formats. They then carried out observations of teachers focusing on one of the following areas- teaching inquiries, school goals, or achievement data discussions. Module Leaders then analyzed teaching sessions, co-constructed the feedback with the teacher and established next steps.

ACTIONS UNDERTAKEN

Canterbury Primary Principal Association (CPPA) Middle Leaders School Programme

The researcher presented her findings from the school visits and provided a summary of the Professional Development programme implemented in Somerfield School to the CPPA. The CCPA decided to support the development of a programme for schools in the Canterbury region to grow middle leaders. This programme was to enable Middle Leaders to help reduce variation of student achievement within their schools. This could be achieved by providing quality leadership professional development for middle leaders. The programme aimed to give middle leaders clear guidelines, set expectations and provide them feedback about in their role in improving student outcomes. The programme also created opportunity for them to inquire into their practice as middle leaders. Findings from the Somerfield programme showed the need for professional development to be ongoing; to be carried out deliberately and systematically; and facilitated both internal and external.

In 2012 the Canterbury Primary Principals Association funded a Middle Leaders Professional Development programme based on the preliminary results of the sabbatical study. The association acknowledged that they have a role in developing future leaders.

The programme was comprehensive. Schools were required to send all their middle leaders to participate. This was to ensure consistency and reduce variance within schools. A wide variety of skills and practice sessions were part of the five-day professional development programme. Each participant had to carry out a teaching and leadership inquiry based on class and school achievement data.   These leadership inquiries were presented to the whole group and the principals of the participating schools at the end of the programme. Professional Learning Groups across schools were developed early to share effective practice and provide feedback on the leadership inquiry. A website of resources was also developed with supporting material.

The programme started with 21 participants from 8 schools. Nineteen of the participants completed the programme. Two middle leaders from different schools did not complete the programme for various reasons and the evaluation showed this impacted on the variance of implementation in their specific schools.

Middle Leaders Professional Development Programme (2012 Canterbury) Survey Results

Programme participants position

Assistant Principal   12.1%
Deputy Principal   42.1%
Team Leaders   36.8%

Areas of growth identified by participants
- Applying the leadership qualities essential to a middle leaders into practice e.g. problem solving, looking at data, making connections
- Using student data/ information more effectively
- Using research

Findings of Leaders self review of changes in their leadership practices
- Setting clearer expectations
- Discussing student achievement data/ information
- Supporting and challenging teaching practice
- Engaging in critical talk
- Using research on a regular basis at meetings and linking to current practice
- Exploring differentiated learning

Survey Discussion

Participants found the professional development effective in a number of ways. They were able to develop a network with another group of teachers from within and across schools. They felt sessions were effectively facilitated and appreciated being given time to practice new skills. All participants indicated they would have liked more than the five days offered, allowing even more practice time. They also all indicated they thought the programme's requirement to carry out a leadership inquiry impacted directly on teacher practice and student outcomes in their teams back at school.

One of the requirements of the programme was that schools send all their middle leaders to work on the programme together to ensure consistency across the school. Participants identified that this was important for consistency as well as providing collegial support back in their own school. For those schools where middle leaders did not complete the course, participants felt there was less coherence in their school.

It was clear from the feedback from participants and their schools that the programme should continue. CPPA decided to continue funding this programme. as it is committed to the development of middle leaders in Canterbury.

The researcher recommends that in the future an independent research project be undertaken of this programme.

Conclusion

This research fully supports that under achievement in New Zealand schools and the high levels of variation of student achievement within schools, can be addressed by effective and competent teacher instruction. Middle leaders are a group pivotal in achieving this by being able to directly influence classroom practitioners in best practice. If changes in practice are needed to address disparity in student outcomes, Leading from the Middle (2011) identifies middle leaders as the group that can communicate changes to those involved. They can also negotiate the processes and support those needed to implement the change. Middle leader practitioners and are able to role model changes and undertake learning conversations that need to take place to ensure best practice.

Middle leaders can only be successful in enhancing student academic and personal outcomes when school's have a culture that is collaborative, innovative and supportive. Schools need systems in place to provide teachers with opportunities to share and challenge practice. Middle leaders can help lead teachers to do this. In turn middle leaders need opportunities to effectively analyze, observe and share best practice. To enable them to do this, schools need to provide them with clear expectations, opportunities to carry out peer coaching and ongoing quality professional development. The researcher encourages schools to carry out ongoing professional development for middle leaders.

The Canterbury experience shows a programme of professional development across schools can also be successful. Therefore this researcher would also encourage other Principal Associations to consider providing a professional development programme for this important group.

References:

DuFour, R. (2004). *What is a Professional Learning Community?* ASCD Educational Leadership. May 2004/Volume 61/ No.6

Hattie, J. (2009) *Evidence-based Leadership. Address to First-time Principals Programme Residential Course, October.* Centre for Educational Leadership. Faculty of Education. University of Auckland.

Hattie, J.(2003)*Teachers Make a Difference: What is the research evidence?* Australian Council for Educational Research Annual Conference on: Building Teacher Quality.

Ministry of Education. (2011). *Leading from the Middle Educational Leadership for Middle and Senior Leaders.* Wellington: Ministry of Education.

National College for leadership of Schools and Children's Services. TDA (2010) *Reducing in- school variation. Making Effective practice standard practice.*

Elsmore, R. (2010) Ontario Ministry of Education, (2010). "Leading the Instructional Core: an interview with Richard Elsmore. In *Conversations.* Summer, Volume 11, Issue 3.

Robertson, J. (2008) *The 3R's for Coaching learning Relationships.* Policy and Practice. PDT. Educational Leadership website.

Robinson, V., Hohepa, M., & Lloyd, C. (2009). *School Leadership and Student Outcomes: identifying What Works and Why: Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration (BES).* Wellington; Ministry of Education.

Tester,K. (2012). *The Ariki Project. Sabbatical report.*

Timperley,H. (2010). *Using Evidence in the Classroom for Professional Learning.* Paper presented to the Ontario Research Symposium.

Timperley, H. Robinson, V. (2001) *Achieving School Improvement through Challenge and Ganging Teachers' Schema.* Auckland. University of Auckland.