

Primary Principals Sabbatical Report

**Term 3
2010**

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Cambridge Middle

School

To investigate the emergence of GATE PODs as pathways for learning within our Years 7-10 GATE communities.

Background:

For years Cambridge Middle School has concentrated on lifting the learning of our students with a particular focus on our lower performers and catering for our gifted students in a somewhat ad hoc manner.

In 2004, I opened a GATE composite class, within our straight year level school, selecting students who scored well in either Literacy or Numeracy. In 2005, we moved to a Year 8 class only, staying with both Literacy and Numeracy for selection. This continued throughout 2006.

In 2007 we had greater input from the Year 7 teachers to compliment asTTle results, from our 2006 November data.

In 2008 we took a slightly different approach. This was the result of a number of factors:-

- We were in our third year of EHSAS Contract and GATE was a major focus of that.
- Information that we were receiving from conferences attended and other professional development, indicated to me that a shift in our approach was necessary.
- I started –
 - An Arts Academy Class and this included 10 talented students within the following disciplines (dance, music and creative textiles = 30 students)
 - An extension science group
 - A class with a Pod of 10 GATE Numeracy students
 - A class with a Pod of 10 GATE Literacy students
- The Pods were within a class of 30 and the teacher of that class had a passion and a talent within the Pod curriculum area.
- By 2009, based on our EHSAS Contract, we introduced three sets of criteria to gain selection for a Pod class
 - Parent nomination form
 - Self nomination form
 - Teacher nomination form

So, the journey continues for our GATE students and this sabbatical gave me the time and the space to review latest pedagogy and visit schools in action.

Programme Outline:

I decided to divide my time into three components:

- Visit other Intermediate Schools

- Attend a conference

- Reflect and read.

VISIT OTHER INTERMEDIATE SCHOOLS.

Over my time, I was able to visit 10 schools in New Zealand and 2 in Australia.

The New Zealand schools were all provided with the following questions outlining my investigation focus:

- Different approaches that schools are using to meet the learning needs of GATE students across learning areas.

- Are these approaches based on research?

- Which students are being chosen and why?

- How are teachers selected for these students?

- What are teachers doing to ascertain the needs of these students?

- How do you track their progress?
- How do you reach the community with your achievements?

I also asked to speak to 10 GATE students in two groups of 5. These interviews were taped.

Questions asked were:

- How does your class/school structure assist your learning?
- If you could change one thing about your schooling, what would it be and why?
- What do you enjoy most about your learning?
- What challenges have you faced?

Different approaches that schools are using to meet the learning needs of GATE students across learning areas? Which Students are being chosen and Why?

It quickly became evident that schools have a variety of approaches in meeting needs. If there was one common element that I detected, it was in the area of leadership. A large proportion of schools have a range of leadership roles for their students. One school has their students highly involved in lunchtime umpiring and organizing the sports played. It is successful but has taken a number of years to embed. Students here also have immense opportunities across the board so a number of them are constantly challenged in decision making – particularly around commitment. They are involved in so many opportunities that there are frequent clashes and these need to be prioritized/negotiated. The school invests heavily in decision making processes, respect, challenging self, resources.

Leadership is provided both internally and externally. Some external ones are by adults and in two cases, the local college was involved using both Year 9 and Year 10 students. In these cases, transition was also a motivator.

Schools who involved their community tended to provide GATE opportunities that corresponded to an outside 'expert'. These took a variety of shapes and included opportunities such as; chefs teaching budding cooks how to prepare, cook and present

cor-don-bleu dishes; students working with Olympic sports people for a period of time; having the opportunity of working with a scientist.

There were a couple of schools that operated either one or two GATE classes.

By far the majority of schools operated extension or withdrawal classes to cater for their GATE students. These students were selected in one of two ways dependent on the programmes operating.

1. Teachers who had the opportunity of working with students in either Visual Arts or Technology invited the top students to become involved in their extension programmes for usually a period of 5 – 10 weeks.
2. Students were provided with a list of opportunities and they then had to select from this list and prioritise 1-3. Most were fortunate in getting their first choice but this was not always the case.

There were also identified schools where the students needed to either audition for an opportunity or give an oral presentation if they were seeking a leadership role in their school. These schools placed a healthy emphasis on risk taking within context. Auditions were often around Performing Arts and oral presentations around Councilors, Team Leaders, etc.

One school had its Healthy Canteen under student management. Although the Principal oversaw the operation, it was the students who ran the canteen. This involves everything imaginable. They needed to order the food, come out of class to check off the deliveries, introduce new products, advertise, set prices etc. The canteen manager's position was for one term only which enabled the school to grow its leadership/management base further. It was the job of the current manager to train up the incoming manager over a three week period. There was a positive partnership here between school and home as parents had to vouch for their child around honesty and commitment to become involved in canteen work.

The Performing Arts were the major winners across all schools. It was obvious that a large amount of resourcing goes into this and schools are acknowledging the importance of this in the school curriculum. The self-esteem amongst students within the Performing Arts Schools was of a significantly high nature. (The schools operating these were predominately high decile schools, although one was decile 4. It would be an interesting exercise to carry out research around this with our Middle Years students!) These students were often involved in Stage Challenge, choir, orchestra and a myriad of other activities. These schools invariably seemed to do well in competitions. They were always looking for another opportunity to provide for their students. The whole school seemed to become driven by their success and craved more. This

infection spread amongst the students and it almost becomes a blur between the students driving the teachers or the teachers driving the students.

One school divides itself into three Academies of Learning: Sports, Creative Arts and Science and Technology. Students have the opportunity of selecting their academy.

Another school has their GATE students placed carefully within classes. This involves the top 6% of students in that year group. This gives them approximately six such cluster groups in each year group. They operate differentiated learning programmes. Within their structure they have Withdrawal Programmes operating one afternoon a week facilitated by an 'expert', who may or may not be a teacher. Programme lengths vary but are generally one term in duration.

Of those schools who operate GATE classes, they invariably keep the students together as they move from Year 7 to Year 8. This was irrespective of straight classes or composite classes. The teacher also moved with the students. This was seen as a strength of their system.

One of the schools operated both High Ability classes and Enquiry Classes. If students are offered placement in both of these classes then they are given the freedom to select their preference. Traditionally it has been the High Ability class that has been chosen.

Are these approaches based on research?

Whilst most schools articulated their philosophy and pedagogy was based around notable academics, there was only one school that openly displayed how their school aligned itself with researched data. This school had a comprehensive pathway which outlined where parts of its structure originated from or was based upon.

How are Teachers selected for these students?

It was fairly universal that teachers were selected because they demonstrated a talent in a particular area of the curriculum. This is pretty obvious when looking at the withdrawal programmes.

The difficulty for Principals was how to resource the release time. The bottom line appeared to be that if we believed in what we were providing then the funding stream was always there.

When it came to GATE classes, teacher selection was around knowledge base, passion and rapport. Whilst one school ensured they rotated teachers so that no one became

too fixed, others kept the same teacher whenever possible. Reasons were not always the same. It allowed one school the luxury of focusing their Professional Development with those teachers and thereby making them their experts in GATE. Others saw no need in changing it if it wasn't broken. However; it was widely acknowledged that if outcomes for students was the bottom line, then it was paramount that the interaction between student and teacher had to be outstanding. The teacher had to understand the peculiarities that GATE students often exhibited. That they needed to be able to think outside the square and to realize the importance of challenging the emerging adolescent and the importance of listening and providing time to discuss/debate issues they see as extremely important.

What are teachers doing to ascertain the needs of these students?

It seems that because the teachers already have an aptitude for GATE students, they also know how to read them and to be able to provide the necessary programmes.

One school gets their incoming Year 7s, current year 6's, to write a letter to their Year 7 teacher. This is a simple but highly effective communication tool. These letters are given to the teacher and they then have the advantage of knowing something about their students before they even start the year. The letter has certain criteria so that relevant information is included. *What an awesome idea. I get our students to do something similar but it is more of just a writing sample. This is one idea I will certainly be using in future.*

When it comes to extension programmes, performing arts etc then the needs are already established as the teachers have been able to observe the students as and when they teach them in their specialist area.

How do you track their Progress?

As expected, there is a variety of tracking. It would be fair to say that with some activities there is no tracking or follow through. This is in Stage Challenge, choir, orchestra, athletics etc. In other curriculum, there is a variety once again. The more common tests used are asTTle, STAR and PAT. One school still uses TOSCA as an indicator of giftedness. Most schools participate in Otago Maths.

Where there are teachers specializing or cross grouping then they operate systems ensuring that class teachers receive the necessary test results. Pre and Post testing is most common in Mathematics.

Once again, there is no consistency with school wide testing/tracking. Some test all students both February/March and again November, whilst others test February only for Year 7 and then November for Years 7 and 8. One school mentioned that once National Testing is embedded they hope that they can stop testing Year 7 as they will have just been tested in November the year before.

One school tracks their students three times a year in February, July and October.

How do you Reach the Community with your Achievements?

This very much depends on the type of work that the students are doing. Things like the Performing Arts etc, the community comes along and watches. Core curriculum is different. Some schools make wide use of portfolios and these have entries demonstrating achievement and progress made over time.

Newsletters are a major source of information. The newspapers are there to help celebrate too but it would be fair to say that this is easier to achieve in the smaller centres. One school produces a school magazine which allows them to celebrate the past year. This is a comprehensive magazine with over 80 pages and is sold to families at a cost recovery rate. What an awesome idea and demonstrates the commitment to the teaching and learning evident here.

The School's Prospectus although an indicator of rules, regulations and programmes also provides a vehicle to show case achievements both academic and cultural.

Student Voice:

What a disaster. I was using a new tape recording device that I was confident I knew how it worked. Wrong assumption!! When I'd completed all recordings, I took it to school for my secretary to type up and there was only the last recording there!!! Luckily I'd worked every night after a visit and redone my written notes. Unfortunately, I have missed quite a few gems.

The answers from all students were extremely similar with variations only pertaining to individual school situations.

I've quoted the common elements that were reported by the students.

How does your class/school structure assist your learning?

It helps us work well with other people.

It helps us improve in team work and our school values.

It involves our school values so we work with our values in our learning.

It puts us together as like minded.

By grouping us together we can relate to each other better.

We get to work faster and I don't have to help the slow people now.

I get to learn things I'm interested in.

If you could change one thing about your schooling, what would it be and why?

I'd like to stay longer at this school because you do such cool things.

Have more computers.

Like to spend more time on discussion.

Have more science because I love science.

There were the obvious answers about uniform, canteen etc but I'm not interested in these as part of my study.

What do you enjoy most about your learning?

The fact that I'm always learning something new and interesting.

The teacher is really interested in my learning.

My teacher understands that I talk too much and we are trying new strategies.

We get heaps of opportunities.

I'm listened to by my teacher.

My teacher has a good sense of humour. We can always have a good laugh, and when it's time to work we know this.

It's exciting and I can't wait to get to school most days.

What challenges have you faced this year?

To be a leader around the school.

Try to use all of the school values.

To talk in front of the whole school when I run assembly.

Time management. I'm not very good at this but I am improving now.

To not pick so many things to be involved in.

I am working on being more specific when I write, I don't need to write lots but I do need to write intelligently.

Conference:

I attended the 11th Asia Pacific Conference on Giftedness in Sydney July 29th-August 1st.

Four very full days and a school visit day on the fifth day.

Key Note speakers were:

Dr Maureen Neihart. The revised profiles of the gifted and talented: A research-based Approach.

Professor Paul Chandler. Prodigy or problem: Challenges with identifying aboriginal giftedness.

Ms Michele Paule. Smart girls waving or Ophelias drowning? High-achieving girls in education and media.

Dr Laurence J Coleman. Passion for learning: the experience of being consumed by learning.

Schools visited were:

James Ruse Agricultural High School. A Selective High School. (Year 7-12) An extremely high performing school full of high performing selected students. This year, 679 students nominated James Ruse as their first choice for 120 available positions. Their cut off IQ is 142 with majority 155+.

The school offers a differentiated curriculum with a wide range of enrichment, extension, acceleration, student leadership and co-curricular programmes for highly gifted students.

All faculties employ quality teaching practices based on differentiated curricular in which elements of the Maker and Williams Models, and Blooms Taxonomy are combined within the Quality Teaching Framework. Particular attention is paid to personalized and independent learning.

Their vision is to provide both national and global leadership in the education of the gifted.

North Rocks Public School. An Opportunities School. (Ages 5-12) they operate two Opportunity Classes. Programmes are compact and accelerated. High use of Blooms and Gagne. Working both Creative and Critical Thinking.

Read and Reflect:

Gifted. July 2009. Issue No 153 ISSN 1038-5266

Differentiation Through Learning Styles and Memory. By Marilee Sprenger

Educating the Gifted Learner. Wilma Vialle and Karen B Rogers

ERO. Schools Provision for Gifted and Talented Students.

ERO. Managing Professional Learning and Development.

Conclusion:

It is evident that GATE takes many forms throughout the school day. Students are faced with amazing opportunities and the decisions they face are almost overwhelming for some. The number of Principals and their staff taking up the challenge is refreshing to see. Those schools that clearly embrace giftedness are in a privileged position because they are the ones experiencing improved attendance, improved outcomes for learning and improved community partnerships.

I realize that the talents within the Cambridge community are not being utilized enough and that we have such a wealth of sporting excellence right here on our door step. We certainly cater in our Performing Arts and Visual Arts, but we need to move into sports and EOTC. Although we have ample opportunities for music and dance, we need to embrace sporting opportunities associated with our Olympic sportspeople who abound here in Cambridge. One of the challenges facing us will be how to include more into the week that currently appears full to overflowing. Maybe it's time to extend our Academies to now include sports? It is a discussion I'll happily take back to our community.

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