

Sabbatical Report 2008

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Purpose

The purpose of the sabbatical was to provide time to conduct research into effective teacher development programmes and to see how coaching and mentoring can improve their effectiveness.

Acknowledgements:

- Aorere College Board of Trustees
- Acting Principal in my absence, Lynne van Etten, and her team Karene Biggs, Steve Boyd, Stuart Kelly, Tom Brown and Tania Whaanga
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- The principals and staff who shared their time and experiences with me.

This is mainly a report for my Board of Trustees and staff. However, readers are welcome to take anything from it that they find useful for their educational setting. There is a vast amount of knowledge, experience and research regarding these topics and therefore I have only touched elements of each of the focus areas. I have included a list of references for the reader's additional information.

Methodology

The initial plan was simple, conduct a review of the literature on effective professional development and visit schools where this was happening. The publication "Best Evidence Synthesis- Teacher Professional Learning and Development" made the task considerably more straight forward.

Time was devoted to studying the Best Evidence Synthesis, doing additional reading, reflecting on the implications for Aorere College and visiting schools.

I also attended the New Zealand Association of Training and Development conference. This was an interesting opportunity to view Training and development from a "business world" perspective.

My Learning

I have decided that the best way to summarise my learning journey is to recap the points that I think are important. Some is prior learning that has been validated and some is new learning.

Teachers do make a difference

In recent years there has been a clear message that teachers can and do make a significant difference to the educational outcomes for students. “Quality teaching is identified as a key influence on high quality outcomes for diverse students. The evidence reveals that up to 59% of variance in student performance is attributable to differences between teachers and classes,” Alton-Lee (2003) BES

While there are many factors beyond our control that undoubtedly have a significant impact on our students we need to keep reminding our staff that we do have a big influence on the outcomes for our students.

Teaching is a complex process

I think these two passages make the point that teaching is a highly complex process where teachers act to a large extent on intuition which is in turn based on their own theories in practice or mental models.

“Teaching practice can be thought of as a problem solving process: how to manage and engage students, how to teach particular content, and how to do it all within the available time and resources. These problems are resolved—usually on the run—in accordance with an integrated theory of action based on a coherent set of beliefs, values, and practical considerations. This problem solving is mostly tacit and routine, not conscious and deliberate.” Timperly (2007) BES p198

“Professional learning that seeks to change practice needs to help teachers understand their own underpinning theories of action and examine what is tacit and routine so that these theories and practices can be evaluated and decisions made about what should be changed. Without such engagement, it is unlikely that new learning will be adequately integrated with existing theories.” Timperly (2007) BES p198

To engage teachers in meaningful professional learning where they examine their own theories in action there is often a need to creating dissonance. One way of doing this is to present teachers with hard data on what is actually happening in their own classroom as is done with the observation tool used in the Te Kotahitanga project.

Professional learning and development is critical for improved student achievement

It is quite logical to conclude that if a significant proportion of the variance in student performance is attributable to differences between teachers and classes then we must improve the effectiveness of our teaching. Furthermore we need to find ways to utilise the ability and expertise within our ranks so that we can share “good practice”.

If we are serious about improving the effectiveness of teaching we need to have an effective professional learning and development programme in place. Professional learning cannot become another task for teachers, it has to be implicitly embedded in the vision for the future and the school must accept that a “fundamental collective task among teachers is to reflect on and inquire into the effectiveness of their practices, and implement alternatives that improve student learning” Anan (2003)

Effective Professional learning

The big question is, what are the characteristics of an effective Professional learning programme.

The “Best Evidence Synthesis- Teacher Professional Learning and Development” is a great resource and provides a huge amount of information on the topic. I would strongly urge Principals and those responsible for Professional learning within schools to spend some time reading it and reflecting on what it means in their context.

I would like to stress that what follows is my interpretation of what I read based on my own mental models.

Key points I took from BES

- Changing teacher practice is slow hard work. This reiterates the need for professional learning to be over an extended period of time, to include support systems and to have embedded processes where teacher’s theories of action are able to be challenged.
- Volunteering is not necessary for professional learning to be successful.
- Leadership is critical, as is embedding the professional learning in the development of a professional learning community.
- Must aim to integrate different aspect into a coherent package as opposed to learning a series of discrete skills/strategies.
- Focus on student learning not on teaching
- Be data driven - data is important to focus the professional learning and can be the catalyst to create dissonance and change.
- Aim for sustainability by giving teachers the skills and motivation to inquire into the impact of their teaching on student learning.
- Traditional one-off professional development sessions are ineffective in producing significant change in practice in the classroom. (They do still, however, serve a purpose in terms of information gathering and networking - important activities but not to be confused with professional development and learning.)
- The most important aspect is to maintain the student perspective.
- There is also a need to avoid competing priorities. This is most effectively done by not focussing on discrete pedagogical strategies but maintaining a holistic view founded on critical principles.
- Opportunities for staff to have meaningful dialogue, informed by hard data on student outcomes

There were several other sources that are worth noting as they reinforce the ideas above from different perspectives.

- “There is compelling evidence that if we want to change classroom practice, the most effective and direct way is to work in class with a teacher ..” Hill (2002)
- “Professional development needs to change classroom practice and it needs to be linked to improving outcomes for students” Hill (2002)
- “ The evidence is clear that quality professional development happens on-site, where teachers have access to the ongoing support and encouragement of their colleagues” Hill (2002)
- Professional development must be informed by research and theory and focused on the individual knowledge, needs and aspirations of the teachers and the students” Education Associates (2006)
- From the Department of Education and Training in Victoria, the Principles of Highly Effective Professional Learning are
 - Focussed on improving student outcomes
 - Focussed on and embedded in teacher practice
 - Informed by best available research
 - Collaborative involving reflection and feedback
 - Evidence based and data informed to guide improvement and to measure impact
 - Ongoing – fully integrated within the operation of the school
 - Individual/collective responsibility at all levels of the school

Much of the other material I read on effective professional learning and development also supported these key themes.

Professional Learning community

My reading and reflection lead me to consider the concept of a professional learning community and its implications in developing a professional learning programme.

The term “Professional learning community” is used widely to describe all manner of groups, Dufour (2004) suggest that the term is “used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning”. It is therefore worthwhile defining what we mean in our own context. I found Dufour’s 2004 article useful in that it clarified my own thinking.

He argues that a professional learning community is based on three “Big Ideas”,

- Ensuring that students learn,
- A Culture of Collaboration, and
- A focus on Results

Ensuring that students learn means that we need to focus on learning rather than on teaching. This in turn means that we must change the focus of our professional learning programme away from teaching staff set skills and the use of alternative pedagogies. We must first focus on the student in the classroom. What are they doing? Are they learning? From this perspective a teacher may need to go on to develop some different skills but we need to stop assuming that if we give the teacher the skills, the students will learn.

“The powerful collaboration that characterizes professional learning communities is a systematic process in which teachers work together to analyze and improve classroom practice.” Dufour (2004). We need to put in place structures and expectations that de-privatise the classroom and engage teachers in meaningful dialogue about student learning and classroom practice.

A focus on results means that teachers “must stop disregarding or excusing unfavourable data and honestly confront the some-times-brutal facts.” Dufour(2004)

A results orientated professional learning community takes collective responsibility for the results of the students. Data is welcomed but more importantly it is analysed and turned into useful and relevant information. One of the challenges is to decide what data is important (schools are awash with data) and decide what it actually measures and means.

Te Kotahitanga

The Te Kotahitanga project incorporates many of the ideas above, in fact it was one of the key case studies in the Best Evidence synthesis.

Having read more about the project and visiting some schools involved I am convinced that it demonstrates the way forward for schools. The foundations of the project are not radical or new. Many of the ideas can be found in the Aimhi project. It does however take the ideas and puts them into a very cohesive package that produces results.

I cannot summarise Te Kotahitanga here but I would strongly urge readers to read the case study in the Best Evidence Synthesis and the project reports. There are however

some elements of the project that I would like to highlight as they can be applied to any context;

- Confront deficit theorising regarding student achievement
- Defining an effective teacher profile
- The Classroom observation tool, which gathers hard data on student engagement, teacher behaviour, and the cognitive level of the lesson.
- Coaches/facilitators who help teachers engage with the data
- Goal setting
- Shadow coaching
- Co-construction meeting with the teachers of a target class

All of the schools that I visited are very enthusiastic about the project and are seeing very positive results. The formal programme evaluations show a significant improvement in the results of Maori students, a significant improvement for Pasifika students and in fact all students benefit from the project.

Coaching and Mentoring

One of my aims was to investigate coaching and mentoring programmes. The first thing that becomes clear is that there is no clear definition as to what is coaching and what is mentoring. The names get interchanged continually. The most sensible comment I read or heard came from a speaker at the NZADT conference who recommended, “make up your own definition for your organisation and make it clear to all.”

The literature around coaching and mentoring is all fairly consistent in one respect. For coaching or mentoring to be successful the participants have to want to be involved and must also be self reflective. The problem I have with this, in the context of a busy secondary school, is that the staff who are already self reflective have generally already developed mentor relationships with other staff without knowing it, or giving it a “flash” name. These staff members are generally our high flyers and we do try to see that they are supported. Undoubtedly we could do more and possibly a formal mentoring programme may be useful.

What I was hoping to find in the literature was a process where by we could engage and support the rest of the staff in gaining the skills and motivation to become self reflective. While disappointed in what I found when looking specifically at coaching and mentoring, I do think that an effective professional learning and development culture can deliver the benefits I was looking for.

What I think makes an effective Professional Learning programme

Professional learning and development is a critical part of our core business, however it is not so much the need to develop an effective Professional learning and development programme it is more about developing a professional learning and development culture within the school.

Key element of this culture has to be the development of a learning community –

- Ensuring that students learn,
 - Data gathering related to what students are doing in the classroom
 - Listening to the students voice
 - Targets and expectations- a commitment to ensure all students achieve

- A Culture of Collaboration,
 - Cross curricular groups of staff working together
 - Opportunities for staff to observe each other
 - Opportunities for staff to work together
 - Opportunities for collaboration on learning outcomes for groups of students
 - Support through facilitators or coaches
 - Sharing of best practice

- A focus on Results
 - Gathering hard data on what is happening in the classroom – student engagement data
 - Analysis of achievement data for targeted groups of students

In addition to these three big ideas there is a need to create time within the week for professional learning. Many schools like Aorere College use a late start or early finish, which ensures that professional learning is something that happens continually.

The professional learning activities must focus on deep learning that seeks to expose teacher's theories in actions to critique.

Traditional off site professional development courses have to be focused on the schools and/or the individual teachers professional development priorities.

Where are we at?

Where to for Aorere?

I have not published these last two sections as they are obviously only relevant to Aorere College.

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