

Sabbatical Report.

Sally Haughton, Wellington East Girls ' College, October / November 2012

Focus

Exploring the impact of student agency and community building enabled through organisational change in multi-cultural secondary education

Purpose

The initial aim of this sabbatical project was to explore a range of aspects of school/organisational change in multicultural secondary education with a particular focus on success strategies related to student agency, community engagement and enabling the use of ICT in these contexts.

I planned to look at a range of aspects of multicultural secondary education in Ontario, Canada with a view to identifying the relevance and value of an international perspective on multiculturalism for Wellington East Girl's College and the wider multicultural educational project in Aotearoa-New Zealand. The particular aspects of interest included: accommodation of religious diversity, student initiated leadership in school community building, and approaches to equity and inclusive education.

The motivation for the study came from my experience, as a school Principal, of the challenge of engaging all students, regardless of their cultural background, to embrace the idea of personal success.

The intention was to see a range of programs in action in the Canadian context and to consider their applicability to our New Zealand circumstances. It was also an opportunity to develop links to relevant initiatives overseas as a way to strengthen cross cultural and international conversations in a challenging area of school development. I believed it would be personally rewarding for me to meet other Principals grappling with similar issues, as well as developing a sense of where New Zealand education sits in terms of our capacity to develop insights and responses to such challenges.

The focus of the sabbatical project shifted during 2012 as the nature of the needs of my school changed in some ways. Though I remained interested in student engagement, in particular student agency in learning and the integration of ICT, and in strategies for engagement through culture in multi-cultural settings, the potential inherent in the new Master Plan for the school, initiated at the end of 2011, produced a different level of urgency in our thinking about how modern learning environments could be used to support innovation in curriculum and pedagogy. This focus was added to the sabbatical project in mid 2012.

Methodology

The project was built around face to face visits with school Principals (using them as key informants and discussants of change initiatives) and was supplemented by focused reading and conference attendance:

- School visits and meetings with education professionals in Canada and USA
- ASCD Fall Conference , Revolutionising the way we lead and learn, Atlanta USA
- Reading to support thinking about the key ideas particularly the Canadian Education Association CEA project 'What did you do in school today'

Focus Questions

- What are the best strategies to grow intellectual engagement in students?
- How do modern learning environments support 21 century learning and teaching?
- How is ICT being used to enable learning?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Wellington East Girls' College Board of Trustees for supporting this sabbatical project and for their commitment to individual and organisational learning across our school community. I would like to acknowledge the work of the Senior Leadership Team led by Ann Greenaway: we are fortunate to have such talented leaders in our school. I have complete confidence in their capacities, knowledge and ability to make key decisions. The school has continued to benefit from their leadership in my absence. I would like to acknowledge the Ministry of Education's role in supporting the work of Principals through the Secondary Principals' Sabbatical provisions. I would also like to acknowledge the generosity of Principals and staff in schools I visited: their commitment of time, preparedness to share their professional vision and development journeys and talk about the challenges they faced in leading schooling change, was very valuable to me.

Schools Visited

The schools selected met at least one of the criteria of being:

- Involved in the CEA research "What did you do in School Today",
- A multi-cultural school community
- Designed by Fielding and Nair International, Architects and Education change consultants who have had a significant impact on the current thinking about modern learning environments in NZ

Brookfield High School, Ottawa, Canada

Principal – Jane Alexander

Roll 700, Central City multi cultural, co-educational school

A Y Jackson Secondary School, Ottawa Canada

Principal – Mark Harris

Roll 800, Suburban co-educational French immersion school

Millennium High School, New York, USA

Principal – Colin McEvoy

Roll 600, down town Manhattan, on 11-13 floor of building in the financial district. Part of a project to revitalise and draw families back to the city following 9/11

School of Environmental Studies, Minneapolis, USA

Principal – Dan Bodette,

Roll 400, partnership with Minneapolis Zoo, Grade 11 and 12

Nex Gen Academy, Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA

Principal – Michael Stanton

Roll 400, city school, project based learning approach, Grade 9-12

Three planned visits were unable to be made for a variety of reasons:

- Ron Canuel, CEO, the Canadian Education Association, Toronto, Canada
- Wilf Gray, Principal, Clarington Central Secondary School, Toronto, Canada
- Tim McKorkindale, Principal, Albuquerque High School, Albuquerque, USA

Focus question 1: What are the best strategies to grow intellectual engagement in students?

The Canadian Education Association, CEA, has been working on a project to look at the design of learning environments that promote deeper engagement with learning as a reciprocal process. The project, "What did you do in school today" uses a systematic approach to identifying and understanding the role of 'student voice' in enhancing engagement. Data for this initiative are collected through surveys.

The CEA project identified 3 dimensions of student engagement which I think are useful for looking at levels of engagement and disengagement for our students. The research has identified characteristics and outcomes at each level.

Engagement dimensions

1. Social Engagement – Meaningful participation in the life of the school
2. Academic Engagement – Active participation in the requirements for school success
3. Intellectual Engagement – Serious emotional and cognitive investment in learning

Understanding these dimensions has enabled me to see that one of the challenges for WEGC is how to move our students from the second to the third dimension. It is this third tier engagement that is, in my view, the key to success in a 21st century learning environment. Thus, I believe we need to seek to develop and reinforce kinds of pedagogies and practices that are designed to influence intellectual engagement at this level.

The CEA report identifies the following as factors influencing student intellectual engagement.

- Instructional Challenge
- Individual and collective knowledge building
- Effective learning time
- Positive classroom disciplinary climate
- High expectations for success
- Positive relationships with teachers

The report also notes five key elements of classroom practice that make a difference to student engagement and in particular to intellectual engagement. These include:

Design intentionally for today's world

First and foremost, effective teaching practice begins with thoughtful, intentional designs for learning – designs that deepen understanding and open the disciplines to genuine inquiry. One of the hallmarks of the new science of learning is its emphasis on learning with understanding. This means that teachers must go beyond developing techniques to implement the curriculum. Curriculum topics are not objects that can be disassembled and treated as if they were authentically learnable, independently and without regard to the relationships among the parts.

Make it mean something

Secondly, the work students undertake also needs to be relevant, meaningful and authentic – in other words, it needs to be worthy of their time and attention. Too frequently, the work students are asked to do does not allow them to use their minds well or to experience the life and vitality of real, intellectually rigorous work. Once

fragmented, school work loses its intrinsic, disciplinary and intellectual meaning. In this form, the work cannot have any meaning or value to students beyond the achievement of high marks. A number of researchers (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Dweck, 2006; Fried, 2001; Jardine, Clifford, & Friesen, 2008; Schlechty, 2002), and students themselves, are clear that the work students want and need to do should be intellectually engaging.

Effective teaching is characterized by the thoughtful design of learning tasks that have these features:

- The tasks require and instill deepthinking.
- They immerse the student in disciplinary inquiry.
- They are connected to the world outside the classroom.
- They have intellectual rigour.
- They involve substantive conversation

Use assessment to improve learning and guide teaching

The third feature of effective practice is teachers' use of assessment to improve learning and guide teaching. Research in the field of assessment for learning clearly indicates that effective teachers intentionally design assessments into their practice to enable students to think deeply about their own learning. They use the assessment process to help students collect their thoughts, articulate what they have found, and speculate about where they are and where they might go – equipping their students to become more self-directed in their learning.

Build relationships

The importance of relationships of various sorts cannot be overlooked in a discussion of effective teaching practice. While a number of factors contribute to building effective relationships in a classroom, one factor stands out above the others in our research – the importance of a positive classroom disciplinary climate. Students who describe their classroom disciplinary climate as positive are one-and-a-half times more likely to report high levels of interest, motivation, and enjoyment in learning

Improve teaching practices in the company of peers

Finally, research is clear that teachers improve their practice, and hence their effectiveness, when they have opportunities to practice – and become practiced – in the company of their peers. Again, this is not about practicing disassembled parts, but about opening up and entering a living field of knowledge, articulating what you find, and listening and speaking to others in that field about knowing the way around. (Canadian Education Authority: *What did you do in school today?* First National Report. 2009; pp 33-37)

These factors link closely with the work we have been doing to clarify and refine our vision and values and in particular the 'How we learn at East' work which looks at values to establish a common approach to teacher and student learning.

Focus question 2: How do modern learning environments support 21 century learning and teaching?

I visited three schools designed by Fielding and Nair. Millennium High School in New York used spaces in traditional ways. In the other two secondary schools the spaces supported curriculum integration.

At the School of Environmental Sciences and Nex Gen Academy the integration involved both junior and senior secondary, the integration of 3 previously distinct curriculum areas, team teaching approaches with large groups of students. The student numbers were more what we would associate with 3 classes. Teachers planned together in workrooms in close proximity to the students they were teaching, they worked in longer period blocks, 3 hours and in both schools did not have another teaching programme. Both schools used adaptations of project based learning in various ways. Both schools continued to offer other subjects in traditional classroom formats.

At Nex Gen in New Mexico the students designed what they call “the need to knows”, this meant that students were requesting the learning they needed to complete the projects, teacher planning was then based on the student requests for knowledge/skills/experiences.

Nex Gen is part of the New Tech Network. These are not for profit partnerships with industry and business designed to transform schools into innovative learning environments. New Tec began in the mid-90s in Napa, California. The local schools were meeting education standards. However, local business leaders remained concerned that meeting basic standards would not be enough to ensure that students were graduating with the skills needed to meet the needs of the new economy.

These business and community leaders decided to get involved in education. Working with the local school district, they began researching innovations in education to re-imagine what a truly great school might be like. In 1996, the Napa Valley Unified School District established Napa New Technology High School with the first class of 100 students.

Nex Gen was a digitally rich school and attracted some staff for this reason. All students are loaned laptops, they work in a wireless largely paperless digital environment, but have reintroduced traditional versions of fiction.

Nex Gen, while using open central learning spaces did not have flexible spaces which could be opened up. The classrooms were large and designed for collaborative, team teaching of groups.

The School of Environment Studies in Minnesota was opened 17 years ago in partnership with the State of Minnesota Zoo and the School District on land given to the school board by the zoo. The partnership was formed in response to a need to create smaller learning environments providing authentic learning experiences. It is known for its' interdisciplinary and experimental curriculum. The learning takes place through an environmental lens using broad themes related to the essential understanding of the environment and related issues. The partnership with the zoo had been difficult to maintain despite the proximity and highlights difficulties in sustaining organisational collaboration.

Students are taught in houses, integration called House was across the traditional disciplines of English, Science and Social Science. House took place for half a day with 3 teachers to 100 students. The school operated around a central “Town Square” with classrooms and individual student work space upstairs.

Visits to these schools provided a very useful forum for the discussion of issues around senior subject integration and the flexible use of space in particular. Both schools had cross curricular work space which facilitated the shared planning approach required for their integrated curriculum. The teachers were surprised by my questions about the integrated work space because in the context of their schools it provided a structure which supported their pedagogical approach

Focus question 3: How is ICT being used to enable learning?

ICT where it was used was used to support collaboration across the school community, to promote engagement with parents in student learning, as digital resources for materials and for creative projects.

It was used to support the anytime anywhere approach to learning.

All students at Nex Gen Academy were loaned a laptop for their schooling that provision ensuring equity and standardised equipment. Some staff and students were drawn to the school because of the digital environment.

Schools faced similar issues with equity of provision and central resourcing experienced in NZ schools. The new schools in the US were significantly better resourced and didn't reflect the conditions in other schools across the state.

Some students were drawn to attend schools because they were perceived to be ICT rich environments.

ICT was used most powerfully in settings engaged with curriculum and pedagogical innovation.

Additional comments

In addition to the School visits, I attended the **ASCD Conference (Atlanta, Georgia) 2012: Revolutionising the way we Lead and Learn**

The focus of the conference was leadership for change.

I attended sessions on professional supervision, developing and sustaining teacher leadership, levers for improving student learning, how great principals inspire action and sustain leadership including the following:

- Proficiency for all Children
Jeff Howard - Efficacy Institute
- Seven Ways for Teachers and Students to Win at Learning
Bob Darnell
- Balancing Innovation and Accountability through 21 Century Leadership
Nicole S Clifton – Principal Prince Georgia School
- Leadership and the Common Core
Panel discussion
- Global Perspectives and Strategies for Success
Will Parker and Wagner Marseille

Key Ideas Explored at the Conference

- In our drive to transform the quality of teaching and learning in our classrooms, why haven't we seen the progress we want?
- Best practice pedagogy is important but not enough?

- A complete reform package includes a leadership psychology and a pedagogy. it's not the obstacles stopping us. it's the psychological reactions to the obstacles that stop us
- Adult proficiency - Advances the proficiency of students/Leadership Proficiency - advance the Proficiency of adults.

Conclusion

Overall, the sabbatical experience provided rich learning opportunities both in relation to what I was able to see and observe in practice in North America, but also in relation to what I learned about our approaches in New Zealand through engaged self-reflection as I compared aspects of what I saw, read, and heard about in North America with what we are looking to develop at Wellington East Girls' College.

Reading list

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