

AN INVESTIGATION
INTO ALTERNATIVE
EDUCATIONAL
PROGRAMMES FOR
STUDENTS THAT
PERSISTENTLY ACHIEVE
AT LOW LEVELS

SABBATICAL TERM 2 2013

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HOROHORO SCHOOL

Acknowledgements

Thanks to;

1. My wife - for offering support to me throughout the time period of the sabbatical, for putting her hand up to be acting principal and for being a great wife
2. The wonderful staff at Horohoro School - who really took on a lot of additional duties throughout this time period without needing to be asked with initiative, empathy and professionalism above and beyond.
3. My sister - for her amazing sacrifice in coming to stay with us to help with caring for our children, supporting with getting anything and everything done so that we could keep our heads above water.
4. Margaret Palmer, Principal of Waterlea School - for her advice and guidance as well as support in linking me with Auckland Schools.
5. Keith Gayford, Principal of Viscount Learning Community - for his time and energy in sharing his passion for education and his vision for effective teaching and learning.
6. The many principals of Rotorua Schools - who took the time to respond to my requests for information, for their collegiality and for providing me with detailed and informative answers to my questions.
7. The Horohoro School Board of Trustees - for supporting me to undertake this project and their patience and understanding throughout.
8. The Ministry of Education, TeachNZ and NZEI for making the sabbaticals available.

Purpose

The purpose of the project was to research successful programmes of learning making a difference for low achieving students. I was going to create a report for www.educationallleaders.govt.nz for all schools to view so that successful programmes can be shared and implemented in different schools, to bring best practice back to Horohoro School to best meet the needs of our own low achieving students and to develop my own personal knowledge of educational pedagogies.

Originally I aimed to present a document or directory that outlined a number of innovative and effective programmes - a document that would be supported by data so that principals, SENCOs and teachers could access and find programmes, practices or systems that would impact their students/learners. While undertaking my sabbatical project I came to the conclusion that due to the wide range of responses that this was not a practical or useful way to present my findings.

Background and rationale

After nine years of working as a teaching principal (4 in Taranaki and 5 in Rotorua) I have found great benefit from opportunities to visit schools for extended periods of times, learning from both principal and teacher colleagues.

I am passionate about education and working with student strengths and developing weaknesses. I have been frustrated as a professional by programmes and assistance offered to low achieving students. The plans and responses that I have seen offered to students persistently displaying low achievement are disappointing and the results /student outcomes have been poor. I would love to have more answers for these students, and be in a position to do something real about the “tail of underachievement”.

With the government and the Ministry of Education’s focus heavily weighted towards underachievement I believe that this sort of information gathering is of great relevance and importance as schools strive to lift the achievement of low achieving students.

Our school has strategically planned to ensure low student/teacher ratios and through generous grants from Iwi have developed a highly effective initiative to assist students entering school with low achievement. The New Entrants' Learning Initiative (NELI) is highly effective in addressing student needs in the first year of school **but** we don't have an effective solution for older students with low achievement. RTLB programmes, Supplementary Learning Support and various Reading interventions have all failed to have any significant impact.

My school is almost entirely Māori, and many students are transient. While we have often been able to access support for low achieving students the solutions and programmes offered or delivered have not been successful in providing those students who are persistently achieving poor results more success at school – nor are the programmes innovative or alternative in any form.

Methodology

I gathered data and evaluations of successful programmes by visiting schools and speaking to Principals / Tumuaki, Teachers / Kaiako, SENCOs and parents that have developed systems and methods specifically for catering to students with persistently low levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy. I was focussed on students in Year 4 –Year 8 who have had good teaching and interventions (Reading Recovery, SLS etc.) yet still;

- remain two or more curriculum levels below peers, *and/or*
- consistently score Stanine 1 in standardised testing *and/or*
- are more than 6 sub levels below expected progress in AsTTLe testing.

I was expecting to find two distinct types of programmes;

1. Focused literacy/numeracy teaching that is delivered in an innovative, unique or alternative way and is having significant impact on accelerating student progress.
2. Alternative programmes of learning delivered to students to develop their individual strengths (sports, cultural, or providing life skills)

Principals were approached via email, phone and in person. In Auckland I used a contact from the First Time Principals' Programme to put me in touch with other Auckland principals. From schools contacted in various ways I had a positive response rate of around 16%. The schools were diverse in size (from U1 sole charge schools through to U7 Schools) and decile (decile 1 – decile 9).

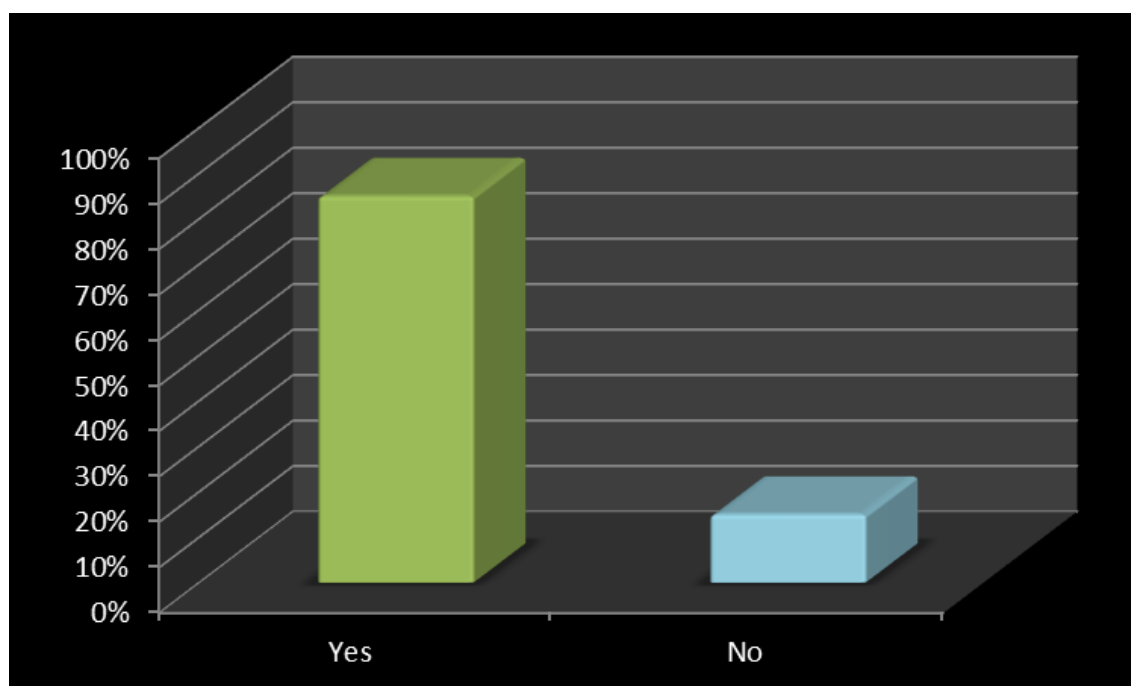
Schools were visited and Principals and SENCOs were interviewed.

Findings

I have summarised my findings in four broad question categories;

1. Do you have a group of students at ages 8-12 who persistently underachieve despite participating in usually successful interventions (Reading Recovery, T/Aide support) when they were younger?
2. What does your school do to cater for those students?
3. Are you delivering any unique, innovative or alternative programmes in your school?
4. Have you heard of something that other schools are doing that has intrigued you?

Do you have a group of students at ages 8-12 who persistently underachieve despite usually successful interventions (Reading Recovery, T/Aide support) when they were younger?



Schools reported significant numbers of students that fell into one or more of the following categories;

- remain two or more curriculum levels below peers, *and/or*
- consistently score Stanine 1 in standardised testing *and/or*
- are more than 6 sub levels below expected progress in AsTTLe testing.

Schools reported that these students made progress, but very slowly, contributing to frustrations for the schools and more importantly the students.

"We have 2 older students whose reading ages are (more than) 3 years behind their chronological age. These boys have IEPs and even though they still have teacher aide support and modified programmes, they continue and will always lag their age counterparts. They have definitely made progress albeit painfully slowly."

"I have one Year 8 student who has consistently under-achieved since beginning school. He has teacher aide hours which do not seem to make a difference. He receives extra help every year but it seems to go nowhere."

Schools also mentioned the impact of dyslexia, transience, family support and historical and on-going abuse in impacting student achievement.

I believe that the student has lost some of the brain connections for learning at a young age when (his) parents used to blow marijuana into his mouth to put him to sleep.

Many schools made the point that although we have an expectation that we don't make excuses for underachievement due to what students bring to school there was a clear feeling that ignoring the underlining factors contributing to low achievement was counterproductive.

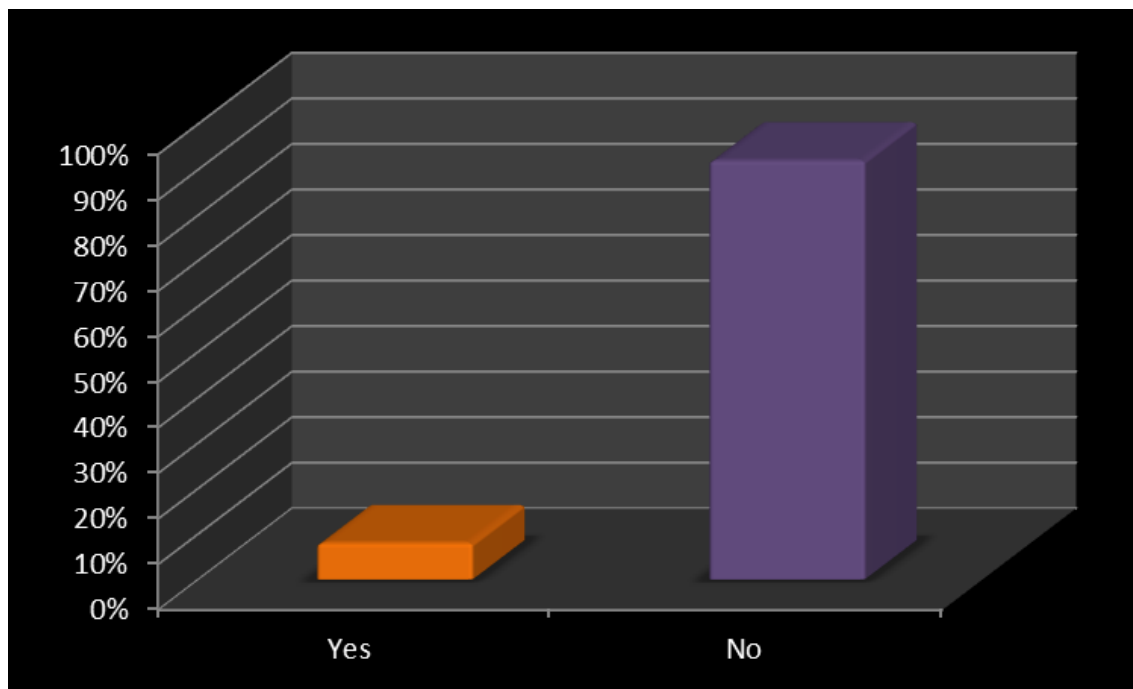
What does your school do to cater for those students?

School listed some broad strategies to assist students including;

- Ability grouping
- Teacher aides working with groups of students to take pressure the classroom teacher. Some were working with more able groups to allow the more expert teacher to work with students with more complex learning needs
- Students have an IEP which is monitored by staff
- Extra teacher time using Rainbow Readers
- Extra reading and writing 1:1 time in class
- Use of Resource Teachers of Literacy for assistance and advice

- Suggesting to parents they pay for private lessons at school with tutors
- Use of volunteers
- Learning more about catering for children with dyslexia
- Providing extra quality teaching
- Teachers having the pedagogical content knowledge required
- Skilled at differentiating the learning within a group
- Be aware of gaps in children’s knowledge or understanding
- Reading Together™.

Are you delivering any unique, innovative or alternative programmes in your school?



Schools mostly reported they were not trying anything innovative or unique. There were a few things mentioned that were worthy of reporting.

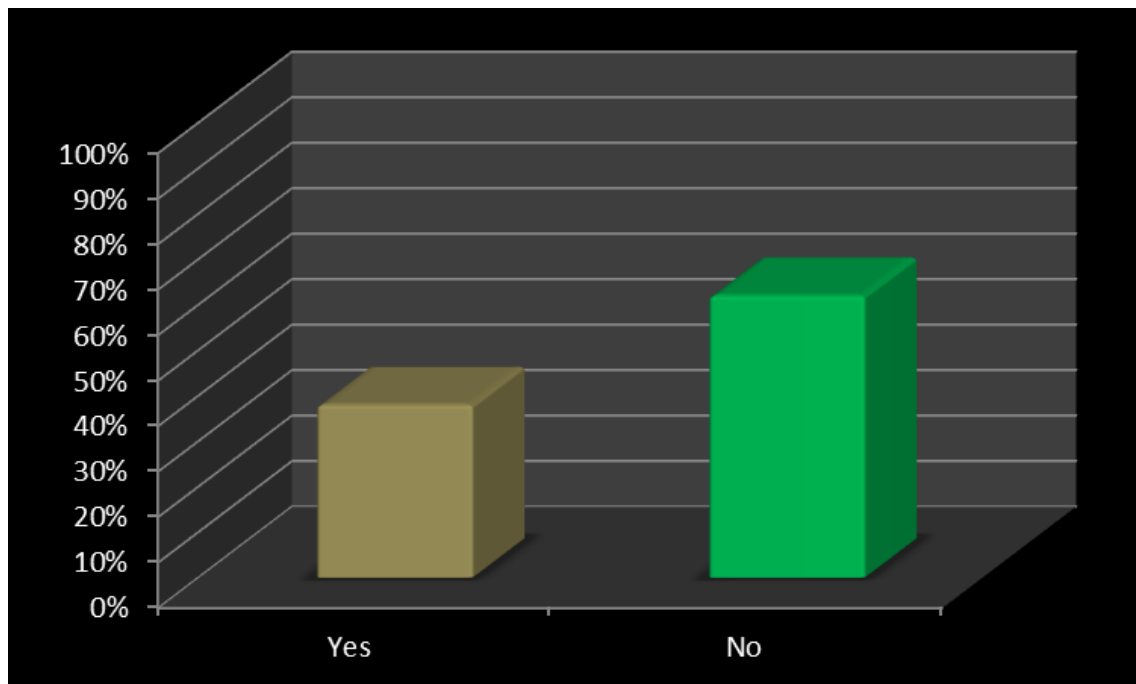
Several Rotorua Schools mentioned that they had screened Year 4 students for Irlen Syndrome (Asfedia). This had stunning results in that the majority of students required further testing and a significant percentage of students required Irlens lenses or other assistive aids.

We use the Alpha to Omega program specifically designed for students with dyslexic like reading problems. Pupils are withdrawn for 30 minutes, four times a week to work one on one with trained reading tutors. The program is over-seen by a full-time, Reading Recovery trained teacher.

We give (low achieving) students ...a really good programme in what they are good at. (One) student is now a top boxer in his age group. He has won every fight he has been in. I believe it is a matter of maximising strengths rather than focusing on weaknesses.

Boxing has made his whole family proud of him and they support all of his tournaments.

Have you heard of something that other schools are doing that has intrigued you?



Schools mentioned various commercial programmes had been investigated but none had been purchased or trialled. These included the Lexia Reading programme and Comprehension Strategies Instruction (CSI-literacy).

Also school-wide models of teaching were outlined including team teaching.

The Ministry of Education's programmes *Accelerated Literacy Learning (ALL)* and *Accelerated Learning in Mathematics (ALiM)* and *Reading Together™* were highlighted by many schools as being very worthwhile programmes.

Conclusion

When I undertook this sabbatical project I hoped that I would have many schools enthusiastically sharing some "out-of-the-box" thinking. However I had no response whatsoever to initial emails from schools outside of Rotorua, and only via follow up emails or phone calls did I receive any invitations to visit schools. This makes it difficult to draw too many conclusions as I received so few replies. At each school I asked the question ...*"Have you heard of something that other schools are doing that has intrigued you?"*. I was given some leads but when I followed up on these I was told that the programme had been discontinued or in one case the school had no idea what I was talking about.

Most schools report that there is a significant group of students that continue to achieve at low levels despite good teaching and usually effective interventions such as reading recovery.

Schools are concerned about this group and are implementing a range of familiar strategies to meet these student needs. **All** Schools are attempting to cater for these students and in **most** cases reported progress in student learning. What I found that the programmes being delivered were very similar to what had already been tried with failing students, but with a less trained person (a teacher aide or volunteer) delivering the programme to individual students or small groups.

In terms of unique, innovative or alternative programmes being offered I saw very few being used and no schools reported having tried anything unique. What was interesting is that only one school reported that they had stopped offering any extra assistance in areas of weakness to focus on areas of strength.

Schools reported that programmes like ALL, ALiM and Reading Together™ had had significant impact on students and teacher quality but these programmes are targeted

on students that are below National Standards and not students that are well below National Standards.

I hope that if anything good comes out of the implementation of National Standards it will be to highlight children that are falling well below National Standards and have been consistently achieving at this level all through school. A recent Massey University study asserts that of students going to Reading Recovery 20% fail to make suitable progress. The Education Counts website states that 85% of students are discontinued from Reading Recovery at a satisfactory level.. In either case I don't think that the figure is too high. It is important to remember that only students who are failing to learn to read within their first two years at school can access reading recovery (somewhere between 10-16% of New Zealand students are taken on to Reading Recovery) and if 80% of them are making progress and catching up with peers that's a fabulous success rate. The question I hoped to answer through this sabbatical project remains unanswered...what do we do with the 20% of that 10-16%?

I acknowledge that our current education system is effective for most New Zealand students but I am concerned that as an education community we are failing these failing students by not trying something different – these students have already proved our teaching methods are not suitable for them. I am hoping that over time schools and helping agencies (like Resource Teachers or Literacy and Resource Teachers of Learning and Behaviour) will develop more flexible approaches to student learning.

The following quote from an Intermediate School sums up the issue quite succinctly;

...by the low levels of literacy and numeracy of pupils coming to (our) Intermediate as year 7 students from contributing schools, I feel they really have to up their game. Pupils we take can't form letters correctly, can't spell 2 and 3 letter words, have a b/d confusion and have no idea of the short sounds of the alphabet.

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