



St Kevin's College, Redcastle

Principal's 2013 Sabbatical Report

Observations of initiatives aimed at increasing student engagement and reflections on the heritage of the *Edmund Rice* Charism

Author: Paul Olsen, Principal, St Kevin's College

Sabbatical Period: My observations were made during a 14 week around the world trip that commenced on 13 July 2013 and included both winter and spring term holidays.

Acknowledgements

I would like to formally record my thanks to the Ministry of Education for providing this sabbatical opportunity and my Board of Trustees and College Community for allowing me the leave of absence. It has been valuable for me at a personal and professional level to be challenged, energised and inspired by the experience. I am grateful to the many schools and educators who have welcomed me and shared their vision, expertise and challenges.

Executive summary

During my trip I visited 13 countries with the following two objectives:

1. As the Principal of a Catholic school in the Edmund Rice Tradition, I wanted to gain a better understanding of the heritage of our school's charism. By visiting the founder's birthplace and a number of schools in the tradition, I have gained a deeper insight into my mission at St Kevin's College.
2. I formally visited 16 schools in a range of demographics and engaged in numerous professional conversations with teachers and school leaders that all began with the following question: "Please share with me the best thing that your school does to engage students and improve achievement." The most common response was that I was asking a tough question and that they had no easy answer. The conversation then invariably flowed enthusiastically to things they were trying and that they thought helped with engagement and hopefully achievement.

The top five categories were:

- Personalising learning to the needs of the learner
- Strengthening learning relationships
- Using technology to inspire and enable learning
- Giving generous amounts of feedback and encouragement to learners
- Having modern learning environments that promoted engagement

As I have reflected on my macro observations, I see a striking resemblance to the key factors for maximising learning identified in the meta-analyses offered by the work of Hattie, John A. (2008) (2011).

After 14 weeks of travel and interaction, I was left with some lasting impressions:

- Quality teachers who can establish strong and caring learning relationships that allow personalisation of relevant programmes are central to engagement and achievement.
- The New Zealand Curriculum is rich, flexible and progressive by comparison with other countries documents.
- Overt assessment “of” learning rather than assessment “for” learning is counterproductive. I would suggest, at least anecdotally, that emphasis of a student’s early failure in testing of learning is linked to disengagement of students later in their education. We need to keep this in mind when we report learning to parents.
- As a small education system on the global scale, we are vulnerable to being seduced by the latest offerings in educational fashion. Robust debate and critical appraisal of initiatives is essential in a quality education system.
- ITC and the Internet are critical drivers for improving communication and allowing greater personalisation of education. The provision of safe, robust, low cost and easily accessible internet is pivotal to the development of quality, real life inquiry learning in the secondary environment. As a country we need to continue with these as national priorities.
- On return, I have looked pragmatically at how I can use the ideas that I have observed to improve engagement and achievement at St Kevin’s College and I am confident that our students will benefit from my shared sabbatical learning.

Purpose

To investigate and observe initiatives aimed at increasing student engagement and achievement and to deepen personal understanding of education in the Edmund Rice tradition.

Rationale and Background information

After completing six years of principalship in two different Colleges, I have been curious to see how other Colleges engage and inspire their students to improve learning outcomes and achievement. This sabbatical opportunity has been coupled with my interest in exploring the charisms of St Kevin’s College. In my travels I was keen to gain a practical understanding of a 21st century expression of education in the Edmund Rice Tradition to help me more effectively lead St Kevin’s College.

Activities undertaken

1. *To deepen personal understanding of education in the Edmund Rice tradition.*
There were four sections to this project:
 - Background reading to improve my understanding of the charism.
 - Visiting Waterford, Ireland to visit Edmund Rice's birth place and grave as well as visiting the first school that he established.
 - Visiting Glendalough and the ruins of the monastic village established by St Kevin.
 - Visiting Edmund Rice Colleges on my travels. Waverley College- Sydney, Cardinal Newman – Buenos Aires, Mt Sion – Waterford.

2. *To investigate and observe initiatives aimed at increasing student engagement and achievement.*
 - Visit 16 schools on my trip asking educational leaders and teachers to “share with me the best thing that your school does to engage students and improve achievement.”
 - Share my observations with my Board of Trustees, staff and students.

Findings

Ricean Charism

My understanding of the Ricean charism has deepened as a result of my visits to the roots of the tradition. More importantly, the conversations that I was able to share with present day staff, students and religious brothers, place the tradition in a modern context. My journey has been to explore how others work with a 21st century expression of our founder's vision, so that it relevant to our context, in our time. The Australian touchstones give one example of the many I discovered.

Edmund Rice Education Australia has produced a Charter which encapsulates, in four touchstones, many of the concepts that modern educators in the Edmund Rice tradition wish to build on.

- **Liberating Education:** We open hearts and minds, through quality teaching and learning experiences, so that through critical reflection and engagement each person is hope-filled and free to build a better world for all.
- **Gospel Spirituality:** We invite all people into the story of Jesus and strive to make his message of compassion, justice and peace a living reality within our community.
- **Inclusive Community:** Our community is accepting and welcoming, fostering right relationships and committed to the common good.
- **Justice and Solidarity:** We are committed to justice and peace for all, grounded in a spirituality of action and reflection that calls us to stand in solidarity with those who are marginalised and the Earth itself.

Noteworthy initiatives aimed at increasing student engagement and achievement that I observed from school visits.

Australia

- Ubiquitous Internet and encouragement to use it for inquiry learning.
- Strong academic mentoring programmes. Student “guardians” in a mentor and advocate role.
- School wide consolidation of classroom strategies. A deliberate attempt to use fewer strategies, more consistently, to build a more familiar and stable learning platform across the curriculum.

Argentina

- Emphasis on building strong learning relationships between staff and students.
- Use of the Internet to support personalised learning. Internet provision was less well developed in all the Argentinian schools I visited.
- Emphasis on sport and service dimensions in a holistic approach. This is not the norm in other Argentinian schools that I visited.

America

- A charter school used psychometric testing to develop individualised programmes for students.
- Emphasis on building strong learning relationships between staff and students.
- Design of learning spaces – analogous to our modern learning environments.

Canada

- Use of extended project work in interest areas. International robotics competition.
- Use of “Harkness Tables” to encourage participation.
- Use of chairs that rotated and flexed to enable kinetic learners freedom to move as a natural part of lessons.
- Design of learning spaces – analogous to our modern learning environments.
- Emphasis on building strong learning relationships between staff and students. Students knowing that staff care about their learning.
- Use of the “Fierce Conversations” programme.
- Strong school values with a service component. Overseas expedition with service and adventure elements.

England and Ireland

- Ubiquitous Internet and encouragement to use it for inquiry learning.
- Extended projects. Building apps for smart phones.
- Use of “Learning Walls”- the whole classroom wall painted to make it a white board, floor to ceiling, using “Ideas Paint”

- Design of learning spaces – analogous to our modern learning environments. Dynamic learning environment that can be rearranged rapidly to meet the learning needs of the lesson and the group.
- Challenge based learning.
- “Change Teams” to implement school development plans around student engagement.
- STEM programme – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics cross-curricular programme that is project based, real life focused and has business and careers links embedded.
- Emphasis on personalised learning using school supplied tablets and monitored with an app.
- Strong academic mentoring and feedback.
- Emphasis on building strong learning relationships between staff and students.

Implications

There are five engagement dimensions that I have observed repeatedly in each country:

- Personalising learning to the needs of the learner
- Strengthening learning relationships
- Using technology to inspire and enable learning
- Giving generous amounts of feedback and encouragement to learners
- Having modern learning environments that promoted engagement

As I have reflected on my macro observations, I see a striking resemblance to the key factors for maximising learning identified in the meta-analyses offered by the work of Hattie, John A. (2008) (2011).

This is very much in line with current New Zealand practice and reinforces my belief that these are critical elements in development of programmes that engage students and improve achievement.

Conclusions

After 14 weeks of travel, interaction and reading, I was left with some lasting impressions:

- There is no single “silver bullet” that can be used to improve student engagement.
- There is, however, agreement about strategies that can improve engagement and achievement. Quality teachers who can establish strong and caring learning relationships that allow personalisation of relevant programmes are central to engagement and achievement.

- In talking to fellow educators, I have come to see the richness, flexibility and progressiveness by comparison of the New Zealand Curriculum. We are the envy of many countries and as educators we need to preserve the integrity of this Curriculum.
- I have also reflected on the counter productivity of overt assessment of learning rather than assessment for learning. I would suggest, at least anecdotally, that emphasis of a student's early failure in testing of learning is linked to disengagement of students later in their education. We need to keep this in mind when we report learning to parents.
- As a small education system on a global scale, we are vulnerable to being seduced by the latest offerings in educational fashion. Robust debate and critical appraisal of initiatives is essential in a quality education system. There are many ideas that teachers I talked to strongly believed enhanced engagement and achievement, without evidence. They were simply heuristic in nature and without research support.
- On return, I have looked pragmatically at how I can use the ideas that I have observed to improve engagement and achievement at St Kevin's College. A practical example involves modifying the classroom layout to allow better student-student and student-teacher interaction.
- I see the role of ITC and the Internet as critical drivers for improving communication and allowing greater personalisation of education. The provision of safe, robust, low cost and easily accessible internet is pivotal to the development of quality, real life inquiry learning in the secondary environment. The provision of ultrafast broadband and the centralised infrastructural management by the Network for Learning is central to the improving teaching and learning using the inquiry model.

References

- Hattie, John A. (2008). *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*.
- Hattie, John A. (2011). *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximizing Impact on Learning*.

Readings with a focus on the Edmund Rice Tradition

- Blake, Donal. *A Man for our Time: A Short Life of Edmund Rice 1762-1844*. Dublin: Edmund Rice Centre North Richmond Street, 2006.
- Garvan, Brother F.B. *Give to the Poor in Handfuls: Life of Blessed Edmund Rice 1762-1844*. Sydney, 1996, 2012.
- Keogh, Dáire. *Edmund Rice and the First Christian Brothers*. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008.
- McLaughlin, Denis. *The Price of Freedom*. Melbourne: David Lovell Publishing, 2007.
- Normoyle, Michael C. *A Tree is Planted*. Christian Brothers, 1976.

- Pirola, Teresa. *God is in the Ordinary: Reflections on the life of Blessed Edmund Rice*. Trustees of the Christian Brothers in Western Australia, 2000.
- Rushe, Desmond. *Edmund Rice: The Man and His Times*. Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1981, 1995.
- Shanahan, Br. Anthony J. *A Quiet Revolution*. Perth, 1981, 1996.

Schools Visited

Australia

- Waverly College, Sydney

Argentina

- Cardinal Newman College, Buenos Aires
- Uzzi College, Salta
- Santa Maria College, Salta
- San Pablo College, Salta

America and Canada

- Skagway City School, Alaska
- The Frontier Charter School, Alaska
- Lumino Christi College, Alaska
- Miss Edgar's and Miss Cramp's School, Montreal
- Selwyn House, Montreal
- Crescent School, Toronto
- Appleby College, Oakville

England and Ireland

- Bohunt School, Liphook
- King Richard Secondary School, Southampton
- Winchester College, Winchester
- Mt Sion, Waterford