

PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL REPORT

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To investigate successful processes and techniques that schools use to facilitate long-term positive changes for children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) in order to manage difficult situations so that their impact is reduced, and energy is concentrated on enhancing student achievement by increasing positive engagements in learning.

He moana pukepuke e ekengia e te waka

A choppy sea can be navigated

Acknowledgements

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Thank you also to Dean Paton, Deputy Principal at Leeston Consolidated for leading the school so superbly in my absence, and to the Leeston School staff who supported Dean over the term I was away.

A special thank you to my Principal Colleagues, for their time and experiences so willingly shared, and for allowing me the wonderful opportunity to visit their schools.

Auckland Region: Daniel Birch; Hobsonville Point
Sarah Martin; Stonefields
Jane Danielson; Hingaia Peninsula

Tauranga Region: Richard Inder; Gate Pa School

Wellington Region: Lesley Murrihy; Amesbury School

Nelson Region: Don McLean; Hampden Street
Cleve Shearer; Waimea Intermediate
Isaac Day; Enner Glynn
Peter Verstappen; Wakefield School
Michael Harrison; Motueka South

Canterbury Region: Roger Hornblow; Pegasus Bay
Bruce Topham; Halswell School
Brent Rees (Acting Principal); Waimataitai School
Shayne Gallagher; Highfield School

Otago Region: Richard Newton; St Clair
Tony Hunter; Tahuna Intermediate
Jennifer Horgan; East Taieri
Michael Brosnahan; St Mary's Mosgiel
Rod Galloway; George Street Normal

Purpose

“Viewed from an educational rather than a managerial perspective the work of creating a safe and orderly school is fundamentally about increasing the physical, emotional and cognitive engagement of students by meeting their needs for caring relationships and for control over and success in their learning”. (Robinson 2011:142)

The purpose of this sabbatical was to:

- To take time to visit other schools to investigate successful processes and techniques that schools use to facilitate long-term positive changes for children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) in order to manage difficult situations so that their impact is reduced, and energy is concentrated on enhancing student achievement by increasing positive engagements in learning.
- To use the knowledge gained on how schools work to engage these children in their learning and minimise their behaviours, and to work with the leadership team and in particular the Deputy Principal, to implement similar successful practices at Leeston Consolidated School.
- Visit schools to look at effective ‘innovative learning environments’ and how they are used to help increase positive engagements in learning, and minimise challenging behaviours, with the idea of incorporating aspects of successful design into our own new build

Rationale and Background Information

Professionals working in and with schools are familiar with the complex demands created by students with challenging behaviours. Unacceptable and disruptive behaviour in schools ranks as one of the most pressing concerns of the teaching profession, in fact the single most common request for assistance from teachers is related to behaviour and classroom management (Rose & Gallup 2005).

This is reinforced by McFarlane (2007) who notes that since systems of compulsory education began, the debate regarding how best to manage students presenting with behaviour difficulties has been raging. Evidence from many countries supports the contention that the profession of teaching is becoming increasingly more complex and demanding.

Disruptive behaviour not only takes a serious toll on the child, it affects their peers, their educators, their parents and their families. It also affects student learning and achievement. (Ministry of Education 2013).

We know that engagement and retention in all forms of education are critical for success, as these reflect whether a student has a sense of belonging and connection to the school. Our children's wellbeing is central to their success as confident lifelong learners (Education Review Office 2015). But in our complex and changing society, children and young people face an ever increasing number of issues that can seriously affect their wellbeing.

Within this group is a growing sub set of students who present as exceptionally difficult to manage. There is often something more complex underlying their situation which means that many widely used behaviour management approaches and systems tend to have minimal impact.

We know that children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD) can present unique behavioural and academic challenges within the school environment (Haraway 2012). So too can children who have suffered abuse and neglect, which can have a long lasting impact on their overall development, reducing their capacity to concentrate and learn, and often leading to trauma and disturbed attachment disorders (Child Safety Commissioner 2007). These children and young people often defy rules and authority, can be verbally and physically aggressive (without obvious triggers) and can provide many challenges when it comes to forming and maintaining constructive relationships.

The purpose of this sabbatical was to investigate and research successful approaches and techniques that facilitate long-term positive changes for children experiencing behaviour difficulties in a main streamed school setting. How do leaders create inclusive and safe environments, while managing these complex challenges? What strategies and approaches work best when responding to children with these complex behaviour difficulties? What impact does the physical environment have on encouraging students to become self-motivated and self-regulated learners? How can we 'navigate the choppy sea' and really make a difference for these children, and the children around them?

It is my belief that being able to understand and support the emotional needs of these students in school is the starting point for creating opportunities for these students to experience success.

Activities undertaken

Over the course of the sabbatical term, I visited nineteen schools throughout New Zealand. This was an amazing opportunity to not only discuss these big questions with other educationalist, but to see a diverse range of strategies and approaches in action. I also had the opportunity to read a number of books, and review the literature around these big questions.

Findings

What makes a difference for those with challenging behaviours?

Relationships, relationships, relationships

- Knowing your learners.
- Knowing where they have come from, their interests, hobbies, likes, dislikes.
- Spending time with them.
- Having the same teacher for more than one year can be helpful.
- Taking time to form the relationship.
- The importance of transitions in building relationships. Half days may be desirable in the beginning.
- Matching teachers to the needs of the child.
- Involving parents early.
- Working with staff to build relationship skills.
- Understanding the importance of culture.
- Understanding the importance of professional learning for staff.
- Behaviour is educative – approached in the same way as reading and writing. If a child is struggling they need to be explicitly taught and nurtured.
- Trying to get behind the reasons for the behaviour.
- Emphasis on reducing ‘wasted’ time. 15 minutes on the mat and then away. This relies on knowing exactly what is to be taught instead of building up to it.
- The establishment of Nurture Nests – quiet and calming sensory spaces where small groups of children are able to go to talk about concerns or to calm down if something has upset or angered them. The focus is on helping children to develop secure and trusting relationships with adults in the group while still being part of a ‘mainstream’ classroom.

The Environment

- Challenging play areas.
- Mini stations – basketball beat board, skipping etc.

- Lots of play equipment (uni-cycles, skateboards, rip-boards, scooters, millions of balls). Introduce new equipment throughout the term so that boredom doesn't creep in.
- Quiet room (Lego, connect four, chess etc) during play breaks.
- Highly organised games with teachers.
- Landscaped play areas incorporating quiet spaces, adventure spaces etc.
- Children are encouraged to be active.
- Principal, DP having a big physical presence in the playground.
- Presence in playground needs to be stepped up at end of terms.
- One school had play first, then eating, then back into class. This worked well as the energy was released during the play break.
- Structured play.
- Using buddy classes regularly (once a week for half an hour).
- Children having alternative afternoon programmes – ranged from visiting buddy class, helping with gardening, to having a teacher in a purpose build room for alternative curriculum.
- Class teacher using others (children in class/buddies etc) to support that child.
- Having different intervals from the majority of children to ensure these children have success.
- Looking at how to enhance in-school and community connectedness, and exploring ideas for how space could be used.
- Flexible learning environments meant one teacher (usually the adult with the key care responsibility for that child or their teacher aide in some cases) was able to work with the child and help them self-regulate while other teachers maintained a stable learning environment.
- The creative use of furniture (different seating options and learning spaces) is a key factor.

Consistency

- School wide understanding of systems, and behaviour plans, so that everyone is on the same page, and supportive.
- Consistency is key.
- New induction for new staff.
- No surprises – teachers complete contact sheets when they meet with parents, and forward a copy to the Principal and vice versa so everyone knows what is happening.

School Culture and Values

- No more than three key values.
- Consistent and school-wide emphasis.
- Displayed everywhere and referred to often.
- Well accepted and valued.

Staff

- Support staff were a big part of the equation.
- Regular meetings with TA, SENCO, leadership team, pastoral support personnel.

- Being able to read the signs and de-escalate behaviours.
- Trying to get behind the reasons for the behaviour.
- Using the creative thinking of the whole staff for approaches that may work to turn that particular child around.

Agencies

- Tap into agencies straight away (don't delay).
- Intervene early: immediate intervention. Each child is a case by case basis and it is important to have a team approach.
- If a diagnosis of ADHD is made, medication may be an option for families.

Nifty ideas

- Having a 'guidance and well-being programme' instead of 'behaviour programme'.
- Bikes for teachers to ride around on duty if they wish.
- Published book of real pictures outlining values eg "We use our listening ears". Each class had a copy. New enrolments got a free one in their transition pack.
- Using art work of values and printing onto canvas to display.
- Little shade 'huts' or 'tents' used for quiet areas.

What does the literature tell us?

The Education Review Office (ERO) in their Draft Evaluation Indicators for Student Wellbeing 2013, have identified five principles as common themes in the evidence and research on effective programmes and initiatives that promote and respond to student wellbeing.

1. Positive and Trusting Relationships

ERO maintains that these are at the centre of effective efforts to promote student wellbeing, creating a sense of connection and belonging within the school community. This is supported by Macfarlane (2007) who argues that effective classroom management and disciplinary strategies continue to be a vehicle for establishing positive classroom climate where students feel valued and motivated. Fundamental to student motivation is effective communication, based on positive and reciprocal teacher and student relationships. Positive relationships are in turn integral to effective classroom management, because the strategies a teacher employs are more likely to be successful in a climate of mutual respect.

Looking behind the behaviour, and knowing your students well are essential skills to allowing teachers to avoid or avert an escalation of behaviour. This is supported by the Ministry of Education in their publication "*Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): A resource for educators* (2015). This document outlines a number of strategies which are most effective when used in the context of good planning, knowing your students and what makes each of them unique, setting goals, and regular inquiry into what works and what doesn't.

2. The strengths of students and their whanau are valued and used as the basis for promoting and responding to student wellbeing.

According to Cooney (2013) it is the strengths and interests of these children that will make the difference in their lives. It is their passions that will keep them from opting out of life. Cooney advocates three areas which are vital to behaviour management success:

- Positivity – negativity must stop and be replaced with positivity in any way – just smiling at the child – not because of something done correctly, but just because.
- Strengths – Do we know their strengths, passions, skills, talents? All teaching and most learning situations should make constant use of the child’s strengths and interests
- Passion – regardless of the difficulties experienced in childhood, successful people who have had ADHD or learning difficulties have invariably firstly followed their passion, and had an adult who either helped them discover their passion and strength or helped them get involved in it or encouraged it in some way.

3. Cohesion across policies, practices, intervention and initiatives contributes to an integrated, joined up well ‘glued’ and seamless approach to promoting student wellbeing.

Given that behaviour difficulties exist and need to be managed across all contexts within a school, Bennett (cited in Macfarlane, 2007) considers policies that inform a whole-school behaviour management programme need to support, promote and encourage good behaviour, and should also provide opportunities for teaching and reward it. He also maintains that it is necessary to clearly outline the expectations as well as the boundaries, including distinct consequences should breeches occur. In addition, shared ownership of the policy and programme is crucial, and must evolve through a process of wide consultation so that everyone with involvement in the school feel that their views have been heard, fairly considered and incorporated.

ERO (Wellbeing for Children’s Success at Primary School 2015) found that primary schools that had an extensive approach to student wellbeing had woven this cohesive approach through all their actions. Although diverse in context they all shared the following features:

- Goals for students underpinned all actions.
- Wellbeing of all students was actively monitored, with timely responses to meet individual needs.
- The curriculum was designed and monitored for valued goals.
- Students had the power to make decision related to wellbeing.
- Students, teachers and leaders clearly understood the school’s relationship with the community.

4. Inquiry is dynamic, considers the school context, utilise a wide range of information sources and acts upon findings to improve student wellbeing, driving improvement in both learning and teaching contexts

Macfarlane (2007) reinforces the importance of evidence-based practice in finding the links between differing teaching approaches and the learning and behaviour of students. He acknowledges that it is extremely useful in guiding the management of behaviours, if teachers have some knowledge of the origins and interpretations of behaviour difficulties. What we believe about the behaviour of students affects how we respond and act towards them. Without theory, we may continue to respond to new situations with past models when new strategies are needed. To that end, Macfarlane (2007) maintains that it is important for educators to have a sound understanding of the various influences that explain and help us to understand the sources of the problems and the types of behaviours that exist.

Howard (2013) also contends that an explanation of the basis for such behaviours helps schools effectively manage these students. Howard maintains that by examining the science behind attachment theory, the neurobiology of behaviour, and the manifestation of disorganised attachment in the school context, this helps educators minimise challenging behaviour and manage crises and disciplinary responses effectively.

5. Collaboration enables the inclusion and involvement of students, teachers, leaders, parents, whanau and community in promoting student wellbeing.

Inclusive education is where all children and young people are engaged and achieve through being present, participating, learning and belonging (Inclusive Education-Guides for Schools). Schools that are inclusive use innovative and flexible practices that respond to the needs of all students. Getting to know the student, and taking an evidence-based approach to identifying where they need support is key, as is working in partnership with the student, their whanau, and those with expertise and experience.

Macfarlane (2007) supports this and notes that student engagement in school indicated strong links to home support, supportive friendships, and having interests that extended to individuals.

Evidence has shown in the United Kingdom (Department of Education 2014) that an effective approach to promote positive behaviour, social development and self-esteem is to couple positive classroom management techniques with one-to-one or small group sessions to help pupils identify coping strategies.

Nurture groups (Nurture Group Network) have been identified as one way to foster collaboration, and build positive relationships. They are founded on evidence-based practices and offer a short-term, inclusive, focused intervention that works in the long term. They are groups of classes of between six and twelve children, supported by the whole staff group and parents. The group is run by two members of staff, and children attend these groups according to their learning, social and emotional needs, while remaining an active part of their main class group.

Conclusion

The purpose of this sabbatical was to take time to visit other schools and conduct a literature review investigating successful practices and techniques that schools use to facilitate long-term positive changes for children who experience complex behavioural challenges.

It was also an opportunity to look at different learning environments and investigate how they are used to help increase positive engagements in learning, and minimise challenging behaviours, so that some of these ideas could be incorporated into our new building design.

Our children's wellbeing is central to their success as confident lifelong learners, and in our complex and changing society, children and young people face an ever increasing number of issues that can seriously affect their wellbeing.

Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorders (ADHD) and Reactive Attachment Disorders can present with unique behavioural and academic challenges within a school environment, and many widely used behaviour management approaches and systems have minimal impact.

Key factors that make a difference to children presenting behaviour challenges are:

- relationships
- the school environment and culture
- committed and dedicated staff
- the provision of professional learning opportunities to provide teachers with proactive strategies
- valuing the strengths of students and using these as a basis for promoting and responding to student wellbeing
- cohesion
- collaboration
- inquiry

It is also important to utilise the strengths and expertise of different agencies, experts and trained professional colleagues, and to do this earlier rather than later.

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