

FOCUS:

An investigation to identify the most effective teaching practices and organisational strategies used to accelerate learning outcomes for Gifted and Talented students in Wanganui District schools.

Sabbatical Report

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I was fortunate and grateful to be awarded one of the 2005 Primary Principal Sabbaticals.

I visited a significant number of city and regional primary and intermediate schools to carry out the research and investigation proposed in the sabbatical. During those visits I was able to listen to, question and observe those Principals and the teachers delivering differentiated programmes to Gifted and Talented students.

Each participating school is given a copy of the research findings. Their measurable practices in programme delivery for Gifted and Talented students are described. The report will place particular emphasis on describing their approaches to identify and assessing Learning Outcomes. No school, Principal, teacher or group of students are identified in the findings.

Beyond the scope of the process where I listened to educators talking about what they did, I was inspired by the professionalism, the dedication in the face of limited funding, the limited resources they could deploy and the immense organizational time they were prepared to spend to administer a differentiated quality programmes.

Thank you Ministry of Education, New Zealand Educational Institute, participating Principals and teachers for the opportunity I've had.

I proposed an investigation in Wanganui and region schools to collect a wide ranging, authentic base of information detailing the various ways we are meeting the National Guideline detailing requirements for Gifted and Talented students.

This information will assist our school to progress its own curriculum delivery to Gifted and Talented students.

The research report to our school's cluster group Principals and Boards of Trustees, to participating schools and to the Principals network, will constitute a data base of best practice and processes.

I hope it will form one more small promotion for the need for accelerated change in our schools and the wider Wanganui schooling sector as it addresses the questions:

- In what way are the Physical, Social and Psychological classroom used to accelerate advanced learning for these students?
- In what way are instructional techniques used to address individual learning needs, styles, strengths and preferences?
- What managerial processes are used to address individual advanced learning needs?
- What are the ways teachers apply appraisal and assessment to validate learning outcomes for their Gifted and Talented students and what are the ways they use student assessment to build next steps for learners?
- What are the ways teachers provide for Gifted and Talented learners outside the classroom?

The tables of information in the report summarise teacher practice, organisation and assessment and present collective statements that frequently incorporate more than one teacher or school's contribution.

The ways the Physical, Social and Psychological classroom were used to accelerate advanced learning for G&T students

Physical environment modifications for G&T students in study schools

Children were moved to separate generalised rooms during their G&T time. This withdrawal method was based on the "convenient empty available room" principle
Children were moved to a withdrawal space in their classroom where they were still part of the class but separate
Children worked in their classroom alongside their classmates with no withdrawal space
Children were moved to dedicated computer suites
Children were moved to generalised ICT suites
Children were moved from cluster schools to a centralised, dedicated, specifically fitted G&T room for cluster workshops with selective peers from a collective of schools
Children were gathered from across the school and combined in a dedicated G&T classroom for the year
Children worked in their everyday classrooms but the classrooms had been modified to optimise environments with managed audio systems, smart boards, specialised lighting and music. This approach was non specific to G&T students but of obvious benefit
Children were moved to specialised classrooms with setups specific to the needs of those groups. E.G. A music studio for developing musicians
Children moved to specialised out of school providers, coaches, sports clinics and Galleries during school time
Children attended specific study camps for G&T students
Summary ~ There were two common Physical Environment settings. Most visited schools ran their programme in their home room where the G&T students worked in groups parallel to the class programme. Withdrawal to ICT suites where investigations could be progressed at a high level was the common alternative ... for those lucky enough to have such richness of space and resource !

The Social classroom management for G&T students in study schools

G&T children worked in collectives where each collective held several non G&T students. The non G&T students were expected to benefit from the higher order thinking and investigations their group were undertaking
The teacher wanted face to face contact with the students rather than sending them on line for learning. The teacher believed better G&T interaction happened face to face
The teacher focused on children special ness and saw a significant feature of the school's religious education programme "caring and giving" effecting the way interaction happened
The teacher builds confidence with the children by involving them fully in planning an investigation or special event and expects G&T "experience" children to model democratic decision making and behaviour as part of an entry criteria into the group
They might be singled out for harassment and called nerdy. Safe withdrawal places needed to be available like ... Libraries
A child was identified in the programme as being very isolate and only wanting to draw self esteem from being able to master the advanced materials
(Continued) After their withdrawal sessions, G&T students were frequently returned to groups of mainstream students where they could peer mentor non G&T classmates
Children were used as councillors, had roles in assembly preparation and running and were notice carriers

The Psychological classroom modifications for G&T students in study schools

The ways teachers used instructional techniques to address individual learning needs, styles, strengths and preferences

There is one to one discussion of missions. There are problem solving clinics with children on the G&T Correspondence School programme. Children are released from the normal class programme during the relevant curriculum times and mentored by a teacher dedicated to their needs. There is regular liaison with the childrens' parents, their Correspondence School tutors and IEP reviews.

Children were encouraged to take risks with ideas and be active programme modifiers
Children were active and valued partners in goal setting and assessment and deciding their next steps
Children appeared to be boosted in self esteem and learning engagement with one to one mentoring
Children gained esteem from being released from "normal" homework and being tasked with parallel investigations of greater depth
Quirky behaviours were accepted and seen as an indicators of their giftedness that had to be understood and used as a learning style or strength in their investigations
Understanding the child was critical to designing their effective IEP
Children were allowed to come to school late if their extensions had involved evening events
There were high expectations for the children and where accelerated change was needed it was believed that the parents were critical to that change and might need to modify their thinking and practices too
There were children who needed counselling and specific management to help them use their giftedness in positive ways rather than being class controllers or elitists
Children were required to apply for positions in G&T extensions investigations and workshops by filling an application that promoted their capability and suitability.
Summary ~ All teachers saw their G&T students as assets and living exemplars for other students. All teachers recognised and accommodated the special quirks and learning styles associated with these students. Best practice classrooms were treating their G&T students as fully collaborative partners in setting learning intentions, goals, assessing and organising resources, timetables and learning procedures.

In the classroom the teachers use differentiated programmes. The G&T children start at Level 4 Achievement Objectives. Using a Blooms model the children start at higher order thinking and questioning. They have higher level individualized investigations but work alongside the mainstream children who are engaged in the same study at a lower level. Their study asks richer questions.

In the standard classroom setting there is open questioning and the constant challenge and expectancy that children are to ask the big questions.

The enrichment programme offers integrated activities parallel to the general class topic or investigation. These integrated activities require creativity and critical thinking in classrooms. They are supplementary activities at higher level than the rest of the class.

Sound systems in each room neutralize noise and background classical music promotes ambience and relaxation. The day incorporates brain gym to promote Neuro switch-ons. Extra time is given for G&T students outside class and there is additional focus time in class. A Teacher Aide gives extensions with the G&T children. Children have to write applications stating their suitability to join such extension events as The Kids Conference.

The teacher works with them more to monitor their on task understanding of process and learning. The teacher will brief the group then keep one student to rebrief him.

There are differentiated programmes and the use of Bloom's Taxonomy so that the students are exposed to a wide range of questioning and thinking so they can write their own range of questions. Acceleration in a rural school classroom means so many students are at their own level anyway, including the G&T students. IEPs were written for every child in school but this practice might not continue because of the huge time demand it puts on administration.

The teaching style is altered with far more one to one discussion and the teacher tutors rather than teaches. There is a far greater need for more exploration of investigation issues and check ins with the teacher and independent work might actually be less independent than with non G&T children. The G&T students are expected to do the normal classroom work but have a very high standard of "product"

The teacher finds G&T group teaching much more interactive and its more challenging to plan for them because they need more on the go formative assessment and planning has to be fluid and multi layered to take account of the directions an investigation might follow.

The teacher used a card system. When the children were working on task, if they needed assistance they showed their card. Setting goals and learning intentions was very important with them. Children were involved in setting little steps to reach an Achievement Objective ~ small "Learning Intentions" were identified and discussed. Children were focused on what outcomes could be measured when they successfully met these . At end of the sessions they met as a group, revised the intentions and assessed how they met them.

On a cluster group "Big Day" for G&Ts, there would be up to five facilitators to 18 children. To optimize the benefits of a day like this it was important for the lead teachers to be able to accompany their students. Because these teachers weren't always able to be released to travel, its harder for them to follow on the ideas and developments of the students, back at their own school.

(Continued) The teacher took time to really know the students and understand their best learning style. The learning styles of the students were incorporated into every investigation where practical.

G&T children don't always come with the perfect attitude or on task capability. One child was never able to complete anything. He would loose interest quickly and never finish and it was a challenge to sustain him on task through an investigation. Another child believed he knew more than his teacher and would regularly demonstrate this and had to be maintained so that he was discreet with his knowledge. Really knowing these styles and capabilities was seen as part of good teaching for these students.

Summary ~ Again and again teachers stressed their time they spent getting to really know the students. There was considerable emphasis on the best practice model of fully involving these students in Learning Intention design and involving them in identifying outcomes that could be measured. The additional teacher time, interaction, tutoring, personal attention and understanding was just as important to the students' success as the programme on offer. G&T programmes without that additional personalized touch might not be successful. It raises a strategic issue in current allowances for teacher/pupil ratios. Could any child, Gifted and Talented or not, be accelerated by the luxury of far more teacher attention? If the answer is yes, then every child should be given an accelerated and differentiated programme tomorrow.

The managerial processes teachers used to address individual advanced

learning needs

Teachers worked with parents over a series of meetings to assess children for entry into Correspondence School G&T Classes. Writing up their enrollment submissions and their individual IEPs. was very time consuming. To be effective, dedicated teacher release time had to be supplied to support the students.

The dedicated teacher was responsible for the mentoring, assessing, monitoring progress against IEPs, posting out the learning packages and modifying achievement goals.

A three year contract provides G&T education for a school cluster. They employ a dedicated .3 teacher. The teacher visits each cluster school during the term to plan with the school staff. The teacher procures G&T facilitators. The teacher sets criteria for G&T entry into an advertised programme and sends this to schools so they can nominate children to send to the cluster event.

The teacher prepares individual PMIs to finish each day and sends these back to the cluster schools to attest their students progress. The cluster have to invest enormous time applying for and maintaining such a contestable contract.

The teachers offer classes in extension that students can apply for.

Children aren't selected because they are just good writers or mathematicians. The entry process has interactive strength because children have to write their own CV identifying their special ability.

Parent nominations and teacher observation of their learning characteristics come into play as well. The lead teacher writes a Young Achievers framework then runs meetings with staff to adapt and incorporate their special skills so they can offer learning adventures at a high level to G&T students. "If teachers have the belief that anyone can give their specialty programme a crack ... then their programme is not on the highest level" The programme is regularly revised.

In-school Newspaper adds are organized on a monthly rotational basis promoting special learning opportunities and sent home as newsletters then applications are called for. The lead teacher is involved in record keeping, selection processing, tracking and programme quality assessing for the school. Getting planning in and getting assessment in from up to 17 different specialist groups takes time.

(Continued) Children are full partners in organizing for events like the Kids Conference They have to plan their part of the event and transport and menus and have to do their own packing including vehicles. The teacher has to be a full time facilitator in childrens' planning. This process takes far more time than if the teacher did all the planning and processing themselves.

The teacher organizes adverts for Australasian exams in the school newsletter and children apply.

The teacher spends a lot of time talking and planning with parents. The more the teacher talks to the parent the better off she believes she is. Parents need to be open to ideas too and that's the teacher role.

IEPS design and writing and the design of Specific Learning Outcomes that are differentiated for G&T students takes huge time. There have to be indicators at each level for the children, pre prepared. Grouping is such a big thing and to work out how to give G&T students the appropriate extension takes time.

Making good assessment as part of a programme is time consuming because you have to involve the child in the assessing process. Finding the resources to change a mediocre to top programme takes up longer than it should and often the teacher won't immediately know where the best resources can be sourced. Personal professional upskilling so that the teacher can deliver the optimized programme doesn't always work as well as professional development should. The biggest energy drain is the RAMs process whenever an extension group leave the school. This week ... groups go to netball extension, cross country, Dare, Kids Conference and Young Leaders. The car lists and RAMs take ages

The teacher planned an art enrichment Pottery workshop with 6 sessions. Criteria had to be set. 10 students had to be selected from the syndicate and they had to meet the criteria. Children had to be able to work independently, able to work collaboratively, able to research etc.

Although the programme was run by a facilitator at a gallery, the planning, meetings and preparation with the tutor and parent facilitators were going to be nearly as big as the 6 sessions for the selected children.

Summary ~ A barrier to the provision of G&T programmes in the standard school model is the traditional one teacher, one class, one classroom, no spare time issue. Teachers working without additional staff support and release and facing the needs of big classes were pressed to run effective G&T extensions. In many cases it took as much time to build and maintain an effective G&T programme as it did for the students to take part in it. Faced with this reality the common approach was to run a standard classroom programme that expected the G&T students to turn in a "superior product"

The ways teachers applied appraisal and assessment to validate learning outcomes for their Gifted and Talented students and the ways they use student assessment to build next steps for their learners

Where students have been selected for Correspondence School Gifted and Talented programmes, the Correspondence School tutor appraised the achievement packages sent back from the children. Children receive a variety of assessment styles from their tutors including oral commentary, on line commentary, written appraisal with reference to next steps and formal written reports. There are NCEA credits available for Primary students at some levels in specified curriculum areas. Informal classroom observation of student capability with the Correspondence investigation packages is run by the dedicated group teacher at school. Half yearly formal IEP meetings were run to assess needs for next steps.

(Continued) The teacher looked for any movement within the target groups' standardized testing. The teacher looked for attitudinal change ~ bored in classroom then finding a new lease of life. The teacher listened to parental feedback. The teacher watched for childrens' apparent knowledge being shifted and questioning base leading to critical questions ~ observational. "After 4 weeks we would need to see a shift in their output and thinking"
There was no specific workshop or event entry or exit testing as such.
Task commitment, creativity, above average ability and a huge series of cluster forms to identify G@T student was the front end of their process.

Students on the G&T programme use a booklet of assessment which is completed at the end of week 4 in their special programme. It involves self assessment, teacher appraisal and interviews. In their course booklet, the Achievement Objectives are broken into targets which the children have to master under the action category "I can" The self assessment requires the children to appraise their depth of Essential Skill and their application as well during the project. The booklets are run at level 4. Mastery gives the target children a chance for the next level or extension and enrichment at that level.

The school is not a "tick book" school. Parent teacher forums and parent interviews are used for setting next steps for G&T students and PATs are run as informal diagnostics at random intervals. Parent sit downs and snap shots of student samples of achievement are used during the step setting meetings. Individual parents are brought in on an as-needs basis.

There are weekly Learning Outcome benchmarks for G&T students. They are based on Essential Skills at the level appropriate to the student. Their learning landscape involves appraisal of their use of information skills. There is student self assessment, asTTles, PATS, and EXEMPLARS are used in the reports to BOT and parents. The teacher had the advantage of a background in big school, whole school assessment of written language.

The teachers gave the students the same assessment process as the rest of the class but at a higher Learning Outcome level. Interviews with the students, self appraisal and product appraisal where the quality of investigation is assessed, were regular. The teachers didn't rely on Correspondence School appraisal and often because its later that the appraisal gets back from there the teachers gave students immediate feedback.

Children used booklets to see their expected Learning Outcomes and see their appraisal against those outcomes. The LOs were talked through with the students after pre assessment. The school had extensive benchmarks. Children are appraised against these. Success criteria require children to identify the skill or knowledge they needed to carry out a learning task, before an investigation commenced. Then after the completion of the task they have to identify the growth they achieved with that skill or knowledge.

The students were required to peer evaluate on set criteria. There was a teacher appraisal against the criteria to back up the peer system. This knowledge formed where the children needed to develop next. Their next stage was set from this. Time management goals and the way they were met was a big feature of the assessment.

Summary ~ This area is about measuring quality in depth learning. It is not necessarily about providing students with "quality experience" and measuring student Learning Outcome growth by observing their positive attitude to the investigation. I suspect even students who struggled at the pointiest end of the curriculum would show similar attitude if they were slipped into a G&T programme as a control group. Again it came down to the luxury of time and teachers had to be pragmatic but the most effective practice involved students as partners with a booklet system. It described the programme learning intentions, the essential skills, the appropriate curriculum statements and clear outcomes that both the student and provider assessed. These booklets achieved a number of very effective approaches to student appraisal, next step setting and parent/BOT communication.

The ways teachers provided for Gifted and Talented learners outside the classroom

Correspondence students had visits to Correspondence school to meet staff. They had inter-school competitions between their teams of G&T students to practice and extend their specialities.

There were Young Leaders days. There were special speakers the students would travel to listen to and work with. Being aware of what's on out in the community was a big feature teachers talked about. They would regularly network and read promotions for region events suitable for their G&T students so they could extend the children to outside venues.

Sport was the biggest and probably most traditional area where significant numbers of G&T students from most schools were being shifted out to gyms, clinics, courts, special sports camps, clubs and coaching events. Parents with coaching capabilities were often linked to a talented sports student for after school and weekend mentoring. They would facilitate that students skills and analyze their matches.

Children with G&T art capabilities were incorporated into performing arts societies for local shows. Children with Visual Arts capability were often given extra time, mentoring and access to materials to create art works for local exhibitions. Sponsorships were provided for development in Arts movement and dance.

Out of school, during school time specialist tutoring was available in second languages at levels too high for the school to teach, musical instrument teaching, and visual arts at several schools. Students were sent out to community teachers and specialists for extensions.

Young Leaders teams went out to events like the Kids Conference. It's about careers and whole person development. It's about children learning through the Arts. It's about experts and mixing and workshoping. The school involved their students in Matthex. Speech Competitions and sporting through development squads.

Top Sailing achievers were sent to special Wanganui Sailing Club events or their junior club membership was paid for a year.

After school classes were run at several schools where specialist workshop curriculum extensions were available to applicants with the appropriate skill level. EG After School photography.

Students were sponsored by schools and local trusts to the Auckland University childrens' G&T extension school holiday courses.

Summary ~ We have a national obsession with sports. Every school has nurtured their sports teams and sports students of merit with coaching, uniforms, additional equipment, weekend school staff and frequent Principals in attendance, weekly, after school and weekend meets, interschool competition, fiercely loyal parent transporters and supporters, visiting sports heroes and heroines who promote the virtues of their sport ethic, newspaper tables of inter school achievement, trophies and assembly adulation.

What a shining model of best practice to apply to G&T programmes in any other curriculum area. Imagine the effect on our national psyche if that same mobilization and massive resource was given to Technology or

Mathematics. No current G&T programme in any school I visited started to match the resource flow and commitment that is given to produce sports children.

Conclusion

The opportunity I had to visit so many Principals and teachers involved in delivering differentiated programmes to their Gifted and Talented students, focused a number of critical common issues.

Programme provision :

- Although a number of teachers and Principals believed they had only moved a small way to formalising dedicated delivery for their G&T students, they were able to list numerous examples of specific whole school and individual class events, fixtures, coaching and mentoring they were making available.
- Beyond Matthex, Chess and Speech competitions, sports coaching and camps for G&T thinkers, a number of schools have commenced specific whole year programmes of differentiated teaching. Their identified students are offered menus of high level adventures in extended learning with rigorous expected outcomes.
- Nearly all the programmes teachers ran were being delivered to middle and senior school students. The few working at a junior level and running a differentiated programme for G&T students had a distinctive volunteer parent support group enabling their projects.
- A number of teachers did not have a specific G&T programme in place, instead they expected their G&T students to deliver a “superior” output and product in their normal every day class missions.
- There were schools, and numbers of teachers delivering indistinct G&T programmes. In many of those classrooms, hard working conscientious teachers were so engaged in the process of professional delivery to big classes where there were children with high needs at the lower end of social and academic scale. These student needs dominated the teachers’ planning and delivery time.

Time and Cost :

- The dedication required to set up any differentiated programme is enormous. Many teachers talked about the time it took them to liaise with parents and providers, find, collate or write resources and plans, staff them adequately and then facilitate and assess learning when the student was finally able to enter the differentiated programme. And all this while doing the every day classroom teaching too !
- Nearly every teacher reflected on the “more” they felt they would like to be doing. National guidelines are in place and there are strategic new requirements for the programmes we deliver.
Best quote of the sabbatical.
“It’s a shame then the guidelines requirements don’t deliver a way of painlessly doubling and rewarding teacher output” Most of the teachers in the survey were already working more than 10 hour days.

Identification and Assessment :

- The majority of schools had instigated a long term development of G&T education and were working towards useful, reflective, meaningful identification and planning for the provision of their students. They demonstrated strong assessment focus on entry criteria for students. Assessment focus on student learning outcomes and the way those outcomes were used as indicators of new learning level attainment, was still under development in most schools.
- A significant number of teachers relied on observational characteristics and anecdotal commentaries to assess outcome success for students.
“His parents said he got so much out of it“
“They enjoyed the day so much and they’re just different children”
“She has a whole new vocabulary and wants to be a Taxidermist tomorrow”
There’s a probability that any student involved in the intense, enriched theatre of G&T learning would be likely to say the same things, gifted and talented or not.
- Only a few schools had a rigorous assessment strategy in place that fully involved the students as partners in appraisal.
The students were aware of the essential skills, knowledge and capabilities they needed to demonstrate by the end of their programme and were partners in assessing those. Their continued placement in such programmes relied on growth and achievement they and their providers could measure.)
- Many schools are still relying on annual cycle standardised testing to assess students for placement and to assess the efficacy of their G&T programmes.

If Gifted and Talented students are to receive quality differentiated opportunities and if the National Guideline requirement for that delivery is to be put in place adequately, I believe the study indicated one final element.

The few schools with advanced projects for their G&T students had Principals who could provision release time, funding or responsibility

units to their staff to manage the programmes. An extra requirement for teachers working hard now to deliver quality basics without that support, is just that ... an extra requirement with no extra support.