

FOCUS:

Observation of educational issues in the UK and US; school organisation and student management in large schools; discussion of educational issues with an academic, and related reading

**Sylvia Burch
Hutt Valley High School**

SUMMARY OF SABBATICAL ACTIVITIES

A Executive summary

This has been an excellent opportunity to stand back from the day-to-day pressures of leading a large school and to take stock, personally and professionally. Travelling overseas was for personal pleasure rather than any work related goals, but it was impossible to escape discussion of educational concerns. The opportunity back in New Zealand to spend time with fellow principals of large schools was invaluable, and I will return to my school refreshed and enthused.

B Purpose

There were three main thrusts to my planning for this period of leave:

1. To travel overseas, principally for my own enjoyment. While in the UK, to get some sense of what was going on in education, as we seem almost inevitably to follow in their wake
2. To spend time with the principals of large Auckland schools, to compare notes on aspects of school organisation and student management
3. To discuss educational issues with Dr Elizabeth Rata at Auckland University, and to follow this up with related reading.

C Background

As it was 7 years since my last trip to the northern hemisphere I was keen to return, to re-visit familiar places, meet old friends, and also to discover new cities. I had intended to visit a few schools in England where I had

personal contacts, but for a variety of reasons none of these visits eventuated.

Hutt Valley High School, with a roll of 1800, is the largest school in the North Island outside Auckland. As the roll has grown we have refined and modified our systems and procedures, but I felt it was important to compare notes with those who have been operating schools of 1800+ for some time, to learn from their experience.

Earlier in the year I had had some discussions with Dr Rata, and was interested in her research and findings.

D Activities undertaken

With my husband, I spent time in Shanghai, Munich, Salzburg, England, Riga, Tallinn, St. Petersburg and New York.

After a week recovering from the northern hemisphere, I went to Auckland, and visited 5 large schools– Avondale (2650), Mt. Roskill (2300), Pakuranga (2100), Rangitoto (3500), Rosehill (1900) – and Alfriston College, a new, state of the art secondary school, opened in 2004.

I spent some time with Dr Rata at the Faculty of Education, Auckland University, discussing her research, her paper presented to the principals' conference (The Subversion of Democracy in New Zealand Education) and other issues. In the following weeks I read some recommended related works, and a range of other books linked to the theory, practice and history of education.

E/F Findings and Implications

1

In England there was a lot of adverse comment in the papers about state schools, the latest scandal being the rape of a teacher by a student. When I said that I was a secondary principal, I was viewed with some awe. I spent a lot of time explaining the New Zealand system, and was proud to say that it was still the case that you could expect as good an education from a state school as from a private one.

While we were in England, a shopping centre decided to ban hoodies, a move I see has now spread to New Zealand. This whipped up a storm of comment about “yobs” and a determination to “teach respect”. The most perceptive insight on the matter, in my view, came from a youth who pointed out that respect is a two way process, and that labelling a whole group of young people “yobs” showed little of that quality. One of the key elements of schools in New Zealand is that the students are treated with respect, that we do not simply bark at them and ignore their views. A former teacher at HVHS, now working in a Sixth Form College in outer London, commented on the fact that the majority of their students arrive with quite negative attitudes to teachers in general, because of the way they have been treated at school. We must never go down that road.

In New York, Mayor Bloomberg was hailing the latest SATs results as a vindication of his decision to do away with social promotion in the city’s schools. His spin on the results was that the vast majority of students were now performing at the levels they were capable of, rather than settling for an easy time. One swallow does not make a summer, but it is food for thought.

Another interesting dilemma highlighted in the New York Times concerns pressure being put on students to volunteer for military service. No Child Left Behind, which was passed by Congress in 2001, mandates that school districts can receive federal funds only if they grant military recruiters “the same access to secondary school students” as is provided to colleges and employers.

2

Principals were very generous with their time, and I was able to gain a clear understanding of their schools and how they are run. For most, space was not an issue, and there were excellent specialist rooms and sports provision, sometimes developed in partnership with community groups.

They all have a large number of international students – over 100 is not uncommon – and as a result can call on cash reserves that other schools cannot match.

In each school there was a very clear awareness of the importance of achieving top honours in sporting, cultural and academic achievement. I was keen to see how the size of the school impacted on school spirit, and what strategies were used to foster this. Some schools have vertical forms, and house systems; some have horizontal, year level structures. The key element seems to be the sharing of good news and the

acknowledgement of student success, be it by a weekly newsletter, by large, central, dedicated noticeboards, constantly updated, or by constant assemblies.

On the whole I was reassured that the systems and practices we have in place are heading in the right direction. There is no single approach that is more effective in a large school; the vital factor is to have good systems, with the right people in key positions, who have a time allowance that will enable them to do the job well.

It was a pleasure to visit Alfriston College, and see a lot of innovative ideas, both in terms of facilities and of curriculum delivery, in action.

3

Dr Elizabeth Rata has done a lot of research into the way ideologies and politics influence the effectiveness of our schools. She presented a thought provoking paper to the Principals' Conference in May, entitled "The Subversion of Democracy in New Zealand Schools".

I am fascinated by the wider question of what schools are really for – the individual or the national economy.

In the weeks following my Auckland visit I read quite widely and hope that I will be able to continue with this. To have time to indulge in thinking, and to read related texts without pressure of time or deadlines is immensely valuable. (Reading list attached)

G Conclusions

I feel physically, mentally, professionally and intellectually refreshed. I appreciate most the opportunity to read, think, discuss and consider the broad picture of education, and I know that this will enhance the work I do.

I have no great insights, no new theories to present, but I do feel privileged to have had this opportunity. Principals make a difference to schools, to students and to communities, and carry a huge responsibility. Thank you for recognising this.

S. Burch

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