

PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL REPORT

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Title and focus of sabbatical

To identify successful *digital* strategies that low decile schools are using to engage parents and whanau in student learning

About the author

I started at Rata Street School in 1995, and became Principal in 2002. Other than several years in the Wairarapa and Hawkes Bay, most of my teaching career has been at schools in the Hutt Valley.

Rata Street School is a decile 2 contributing primary school of 360 students situated in Naenae, Lower Hutt. Rata Street School has a diverse ethnic community including 47% Maori, 26% Pasifika, 20% NZEuro, Africa 3%, and Asian 3%.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the Rata Street School Board of Trustees for supporting my application and sabbatical leave.

My thanks to Deputy Principal, Glenda Stewart for her willingness to take over and ably lead the learning and provide effective stewardship in my absence.

Supporting Glenda were Louise Thomson, Clare Curry, and Carol Scott – my thanks also to them.

I also want to acknowledge the Ministry of Education and NZEI for providing this professional learning opportunity and, just as importantly, the chance to experience a period of personal reflection and refreshment. The time has been immensely valuable.

Pre-amble

Key ideas¹

Communication processes that take into account the language and cultural diversity of parents and whanau are successful in developing partnerships with a wide range of parents.

¹ *Partners in Learning: Schools Engagement with Parents, Whanau and Communities* Education Review Office June 2008; and *Promoting Success for Maori Students: Schools Progress* Education Review Office June 2010

Schools need to communicate with parents in ways that are timely, useful, and easily understood.

Schools need to use a variety of ways to engage parents and whanau regularly and involve them in students' learning.

Opportunities for exchanges of information need to be both formal and informal, and be appropriate for those involved.

Historically, the most challenging group of parents and whanau to engage with are those that are 'hard to reach' or difficult to involve. Schools need to make changes to practice to engage parents and whanau who are not yet actively involved in the school. There needs to be better communication, a more inclusive school environment, and increased opportunities for involvement of parents in the learning.

In broad terms I wished to look at how low decile schools are using digital technologies to engage families and whanau in student learning, and to establish which digital technologies (strategies) have had the greatest impact. How are digital technologies being used to communicate with parents, being used to make the school environment more inclusive, and being used to involve parents in the learning?

Key questions

What are the digital technologies being used and how can the use of these digital technologies get a deeper level of engagement?

What the 'emerging' digital technologies are and the implications for our school?

What are the digital technologies having the greatest impact?

Activities undertaken

Professional learning

- Attendance at two international conferences
 - International Conference on Thinking (Bilbao Spain; Theme: Thinking for Constructive Communities)
 - International Confederation of Principals (Helsinki Finland; Theme: Leading Educational Design).

Conference strands particularly relevant include: implication of the family in learning processes, the digital revolution, and parental engagement.

- Discussions
Discussion with school leaders at a local and international level
- Reflection
Analysing and reporting on the information gathered. Writing the sabbatical report and sharing the new knowledge and conclusions.
- Implementation – ongoing and not the subject of this report

Refreshment

- Personal reflection
- Travel in Europe between conferences – travelling around Europe and Scandinavia

Findings

Important ideas from the conferences included

- Schools / classrooms / students reporting to parents in a more 'dynamic' way (achievement information and successes are shared immediately and allows for a parent to respond)
- Increase the opportunities for students to be communicating their successes to parents. This will probably be in a less formal way and be happening as the achievement happens
- The importance of matching the communication method from the school with the type of digital device that the parents are using (parents preferred method of receiving the communication)

Principals spoken to all showed an understanding of how digital technologies could be used to gain a deeper level of parent engagement in their child's learning. Few Principals thought that their school was using digital technologies to good effect.

All Principals showed an understanding of the importance of ensuring that staff had a pedagogical understanding of teaching and learning within a digital environment (before the roll out of devices & modernisation of learning environments)

Most schools were using digital technologies as they would paper and pen – replicating class work or school communications on a digital device.

Most schools were using digital technologies in some way to communicate to parents and whanau. The communication was one way and was focused on information giving.

One group of schools felt they had higher parent / student engagement because of the combination of student digital devices with community Wi-Fi. They were using a Google digital environment (with chromebooks), and students were able to continue the learning and sharing at home with family.

Principals spoke of having some classroom teachers using digital technologies effectively to engage parents and enable learning to be shared. Teacher enthusiasm and capability was a deciding factor whether this was happening.

Teachers were using a large number of programmes / applications including Blogs, Facebook, Google docs, Seesaw, wiki, twitter, Periscope and Livestream (live streaming), YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and Classdojo.

There appeared to be a growing demand for (and supply of) applications that allowed students to share their learning i.e. Seesaw

Most schools were using digital technologies for communicating to parents in three broad ways

- technologies that encouraged comment i.e. Facebook, clasdojo
- technologies that showed what a class / student were doing i.e. blogs, twitter
- technologies that were static i.e. website

Family access to the internet appeared to be a major factor in determining whether the use of digital devices for learning continued outside of school. Many Principals spoke about parents having internet access via mobile devices but not a wired / Wi-Fi connection in the home. The availability of community Wi-Fi was seen as critical.

Implications for Rata Street School

Continue with a Google digital environment (Chromebooks), and as a network of schools, lobby for community Wi-Fi

Move to a system of reporting achievement that is 'dynamic' (achievement information and successes are shared immediately and allows for a parent to respond). This may necessitate a change of SMS

Allow students to share their achievement and successes with their parents / whanau as they happen

Allow students to share their learning with a wider audience (local / national / international)

Ensure school communication matches the current parent digital device use i.e. smart phone via apps