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**SABBATICAL**  
**Term 3 2015**

**To investigate programmes/initiatives to  
support students who struggle  
academically.**

I will be investigating the common thread of students who struggle academically, many of them right through their time at school. How do schools identify students? Do their academic difficulties extend across the core curriculum areas of Reading, Writing and Mathematics? What strategies have the schools put in place to assist and are they working? If schools had freedom of choice and the money to match, what would they do to help these students?

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

1. My wife, who encouraged me to apply for a sabbatical and who supported me throughout, encouraging me to - '...better get started'.
2. The awesome staff and Board of Trustees of Eketahuna School. I couldn't have undertaken this sabbatical unless I was totally confident the school was in good hands. The ability of our long serving DP to seamlessly take over the Principals role and the total support of our fantastic Board of Trustees made this possible.
3. The teachers, principals and staff in the various schools I ventured into. Your help and willingness to be interviewed and to be honest is much appreciated.
4. The Ministry of Education, Teach NZ and the NZEI for making sabbaticals 'happen'.

**BACKGROUND**

When considering my application for a sabbatical I spent some time mulling over topics that would be relevant and "spin my wheels" so to speak. Several topics came to mind, but I have always had an interest in alternative curriculums and what our schools and education system is providing for students who struggle academically and socially. Part of my thinking relates to why some children misbehave and whether there is a connection between poor behaviour and academic achievement (or

lack of). Surely for some, if they can't do what is required, the lack of consistent success will lead to frustration, which leads to the type of anti-social behaviour all too prevalent in New Zealand schools.

Many primary schools prefer to integrate the "strugglers". Some have placed them into one class with more than one teacher to teach them but this is relatively rare in the primary system. The latter seems to take place commonly in secondary schools.

Schools all have their favoured programmes to assist those who are deemed remedial or just need help. For example at Eketahuna School we have invested heavily in IT to get results.

Over this sabbatical my intension is to visit, view and chat with Principals, Teachers, Special Education (including RTLB) staff. In this paper I intend to outline what measures are being taken to try to help and encourage those who struggle academically. What are the various schools (including Secondary), teachers, MOE doing and what level of success are they having. I will use the questions mentioned at the top of the paper as a guideline and will start with Eketahuna School. I have opted not to name the other schools I visited.

### ***School #1:- Eketahuna School Full Primary (103 students)***

School #1 has invested heavily in using IT as a means of improving outcomes for our students. We have leased 75 iPads and put a flat screen TV and an Apple TV box into each of their 4 classrooms to assist teaching, learning and sharing through the iPads. We use the Lexia reading programme extensively which has proven to be very successful, particularly in the first few years after they were introduced in 2009 where, along with Reading Recovery, and parent assisted reading help, reading achievement was significantly improved across the school. This year the school has purchased Mathletics and every student in the school is signed up. Teachers have also used Studyladder and find that the children are very enthused with the home and school connections that this programme makes. The teachers have found various Apps and a generous budget is set to allow them to explore and purchase as appropriate. Their use of an app called Class Dojo has engaged parents and children have been encouraged to work harder and complete homework activities as a consequence. Special Needs students are identified early and are put into the Special Needs Register. A non-MOE funded version of Reading Recovery helps catch kids early. RTLB and Resource Teacher of Literature have been employed where needed over the years with varying degrees of success. Where possible the BOT has employed teacher's aides. For instance this year there has been an identified cohort of children who have learning difficulties and a TA has been employed to work in the 2 classes specifically where these children are, to provide individual and group assistance guided by an experience teacher. This TA also spent 2 days at a SPELADD development course aimed at improving her skills.

### ***School #2:- Secondary School (320 students)***

School #2 is a small rural secondary school. I interviewed the very busy Principal who had a number of students coming in and out of her office for short conversations regarding various issues. I outlined to her that I was interested in what the school was doing to help the various children with learning and behavioural needs. We spoke about identification and she emphasised the importance of conversations with Year 8 teachers and their own testing regime. The school then 'streamed' students into 3 areas essentially – The Curriculum Level 4/5 general students; the accelerated students (my words, not hers) and those who were placed in the Student Support Centre (SSC). The school also catered for those students who because of their extreme behaviour cannot be placed within the general school population (Alternative Education). Identification testing was completed through asTTle although those who were identified with learning needs were given tests such as BURT. As in school #1 Information Technology played a large part in helping students with their learning. For instance LEXIA could be part of a student's weekly programme running for 20 minutes a day, 5 days a week. One particular programme favoured by the school was SPEC (<http://www.spec.org.nz/>) which aims to help motivate students to re-engage with learning. The school has found this programme to be particularly successful with the objective of gaining students Level 1 NCEA qualifications. The

Principal reiterated that staff were always on the lookout for appropriate teaching resources and programmes. The school has developed the Year 11 Academy which focusses on certain students who are capable but disengaged for various reasons. From my conversation I gathered that the student needs to be reasonably solid in terms of their behaviour and that the focus for the Academy was practical activities with a view to a career after school. The Student Support Centre was crucial in working with students with special needs eg Downs Syndrome, Foetal Alcohol etc. Education was strongly visual with a number of computers and games in the centre. There was a large deck and BBQ's were a common event. The Centre itself was also seen as a safe place for those students, some who had mental health issues.

When I enquired whether there was a distinct association between academic difficulties and poor behaviour, the Principal believed that this was true for some but not all students. The other factors that are relevant included lack of maturity, background and transiency. We spoke of the schools Alternative Education Centre which currently had 5 students. This unit had students from Year 9 – 12. The goal was always to re-integrate these students into general school life however common sense told her that for some this may never happen. She did tell the story of one student who would have been sent there but when told of this immediately 'buckled down' and has come out of it with NCEA 1 and is well on the way to achieving level 2. Another student who was in the unit actually was re-integrated and has also achieved Level 1. I have arranged a visit to an Alternative Education class at another secondary school where I will be spending time with the Teacher in Charge which should give me a bit more in-depth information about these units.

Overall I found this school to be comfortable about what it provides for all its pupils. They appear to be continually striving for new ideas to enhance what they already have.

### **School #3:- Full Primary (Roll 120)**

School # 3 is a rural primary school in a small community which is positioned just off the state highway 1 in Hawkes Bay. The school uses a number of approaches to assist children with learning needs and children are identified using information from the local pre-school and through general teacher observations. The usual testing regimes, eg. running records, BURT word etc. also help in identifying children who will need extra help. The school has put into place a number of learning programmes they believe will make a difference. One classroom based programme is the Phonic based programmes of Yolanda Soryl - <http://www.yolandasoryl.com/> . The Principal has been very excited as regards the benefits of this programme that was introduced only at the start of 2015 and has made a considerable positive difference in the junior end of the school in particular. Another successful initiative is Spring into Maths which is a MOE recommended programme aimed at improving Number Knowledge and for this school fills the maintenance part of the maths programme - <http://mathskkps.wikispaces.com/file/view/Spring+into+Maths+Overview.PDF> . The Principal praised the BOT for funding a part time teacher who works 4 mornings a week with several small groups from throughout the school in various subject areas. This is a big help because the school has high numbers especially in the senior end of the school. Help is also received from RTLB and REAP and classes also take part in doing Reading Eggs and a Reading Mileage programme is in place. The Principal finds that many of the Targeted students have difficulties across the curriculum and that the issues of poor attendance, lateness, transience and home background are common barriers to learning at her school.

### **School #4:- Secondary School (Roll 500+) Alternative Education Unit**

Following my discussion with the Principal of School #2 regarding their Alternative Education Class, I decided it may be a good idea to further research this rather unique model favoured by some secondary schools. To do this I travelled to a secondary school in Hawkes Bay to interview the teacher of an Alt. Ed. Unit and came away impressed with the set-up, goals and outcomes that have been achieved.

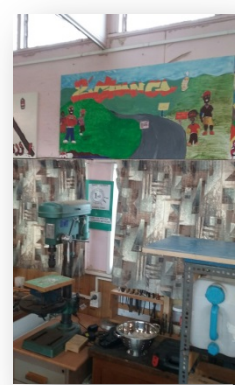
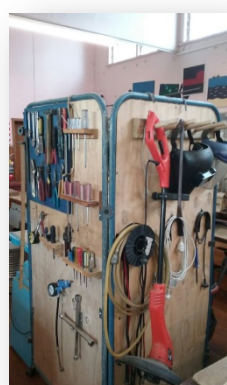
The Alt. Ed. Unit was set away from the main school (but on site) in an old woodwork double classroom block. At the time of my visit, the teachers (2 of them) had only 1 student present and I came across her first and she politely pointed me in the right direction. The unit is funded for 6 but

have had up to 10 students at different times. Under the model this unit works under it can accept only students who are 16 years old and under. The unit maintains close relationships with the host school, RTLB's, the school's Student Support Centre, Health Agencies (including Truancy) and the Ministry of Education. The MOE funds the unit at \$11,000 per student which is topped up by the host school so as to pay wages, running costs, resources etc. However it was stressed that the budget is tight and there are frequent reviews regarding the viability of the unit.

Students come to the unit for various reasons but mainly due to an inability to function according to the expectations of the class. Boredom, personality conflicts between teachers or other students, anger issues sometimes resulting from a lack of sleep, personal problems etc. are all noted reasons as to their exclusion from the mainstream classroom. The unit teachers believe conflict also arises out of frustration and the lack of money to be able to afford what others have as well as a lack of home support which totally switches kids off. Many turn up to the unit angry and the first objective of the teachers is to work at getting the student calm. They offer the student a coffee or cold drink, something to eat and if appropriate a space of their own and they try to ensure that the student knows they are in a safe place. They ensure their own safety by outlining the rules of the unit. With the major objective being to transition the students back into the mainstream, the teachers highlight the need for the student to learn respect and to focus on what they need to do. Other individual goals are set and generally these are set for a 10 week block (although many students go back to the mainstream before this time is up.) Those goals may include a look at attendance, time management, self-direction and sensible decision making. The issue of correct uniform is often cited as a reason for conflict, which is an extreme source of frustration for the two teachers as some students struggle to afford the school uniform, be it socks, shoes etc.) Of course the teachers also reiterate that the students have got to WANT to change as well.

Academic work is a priority so that students don't think they are coming over for a 'holiday'. The unit primarily uses Correspondence School to set academic work which students are expected to complete as the timetable demands. The teachers work with the school to ensure correct reading and writing levels are known. Routines are also very important to these students and this is maintained while the students are present. It is also important that the unit provides a 'point of difference' and this become apparent as I was led into the second classroom and its treasure trove of resources, many of which were picked up for a 'dollar' on Trade Me. The students have the

opportunity to fix these items up or create something of their own. One student had a school woodwork assignment but couldn't afford the money for wood. The unit teacher had pallets and using the resources they had including the full kit of woodwork equipment created a set of rather comfortable deck chairs.



Improving student's self-esteem and emphasising the importance of completing what you start are other values that are emphasised. At this age the teachers also maintained that for some of these students being listened to, and showing them that someone cares are vital and are all part of setting expectations and getting trust. Getting a Second Chance was very much part of the kaupapa of that unit.



### **School #5:- Full Primary (Roll 61)**

School #5 is the smallest school I visited with criteria being to visit only schools around the size of Eketahuna plus 2 Secondary schools.

This school had a high percentage of children (15 = 25% of school roll) on their special needs register. The principal was very forthcoming and I detected much frustration as she basically 'vented' regarding her frustrations with the system. She reiterated a number of times about how hard it was to get a definitive diagnosis on some students. Issues around who to go to, cost and follow up appeared to be major barriers she had encountered. Six students of the 15 were behavioural issues but we worked out an interesting statistic that only 2 of the 15 had actually started at the school – "very few problem children start with us – we inherit them". Some of the children she gets from other schools come in without being flagged on ENROL, therefore it is her belief that that system is not working. Cyfs also came under fire as they rarely make contact with the school; instead the school is left to chase up Cyfs to try to get answers. The same applies to parents who are reluctant to pass on information (particularly if that information involves behaviour) on enrolment. The Principal also believed that National Standards were a barrier to learning as they do not recognise progress within the categories and we both agreed that it seems to be a pointless exercise to include ORS funded students among the data.

I must add that these issues are not only experienced by this school. At the last school I was Principal of we often lamented the fact that we were 20kms from Massey University inhabited by some of the brightest people in the country, but we sometimes seemed to be 'banging our heads against a brick wall' to get a diagnosis and recommendation for help for some of our troubled children. The principal acknowledged the use of the RTLb, RTLit and the MOE who helped when needed.

A programme she used called Toe by Toe (<http://www.toe-by-toe.co.uk/>) was recommended to me. The Principal said the programme was very structured and took 10 minutes per day per child and is run by a teacher's aide.

It was an interesting visit and certainly gave the experienced Principal an opportunity to express her opinions, many of which I agreed with.

### **SOME OBSERVATIONS TO CONCLUDE:**

\* Primary Schools appear to be trying their best in providing for students with learning difficulties. They are always looking for new ideas and continually using their budgets to provide human resources. Students with behavioural problems provide major challenges, not the least in ensuring the safety and well-being of other children.

\* The systems used by the two Secondary Schools I visited worked very well in providing for the behavioural and academic needs of their students. Units run by qualified specialists provided individualised programmes aimed at their needs.

\* Questions have been raised over the educational policy of 'inclusion' in terms of students with extreme behaviour and those who have learning needs that are not always catered for adequately in Primary Schools. Some students require specialist teachers who have been trained to deal with the learning needs. Despite their best efforts a general classroom teacher in a class of 25+ just cannot adequately provide the specialist attention needed for a special needs student while also providing equitable time with the rest of their students, remembering that a teacher aide is NOT a teacher.

\* The general consensus is that National Standards are of little use to children with learning difficulties. The biggest problem seems to be the inclusion of ORS students which seems to be a pointless exercise as many are stuck in the Well Below and Below categories. Often schools, because of their reporting systems, have to find imaginative ways to record this fact on school reports (another requirement). Inevitably issues regarding self-esteem occur when students get rated Well Below (for example) consistently on school reports, despite possible positive improvement for the individual through the year. The ratings are simply, according to many colleagues, unfair.

\* The RTLB system is becoming bogged down with paperwork and RTLB are just not spending enough time in schools - this from RTLB themselves.

\* Teacher capability (or incapability) is frequently mentioned as a growing problem in our schools. Since Massey University has changed its teacher training system from a 3-4 year degree to the 1-2 year graduate model schools, particularly in areas that are traditionally hard to staff, are employing grads that are incompetent and poorly prepared, especially when it comes to professionalism. In talking to Principals many grads are going into schools without even the basic knowledge of how to do running records; they have no time management skills; they have no understanding of the commitment or the time they need to put into their profession and their lack of skill in classroom management is most noticeable. Some are also just not suitable for teaching. Add the inevitable children with behavioural and academic needs into the mix and the problems multiply.

\* It has been pleasing to note the current government review of access to services and subsequent support for schools with students with learning difficulties. This is a step in the right direction. I have an idea which I have outlined below:

### ***AN IDEA TO FINISH***

Schools are screaming out for teacher's aides to be funded outside the Operational Grant ie for them to be salaried. The more the merrier, especially as the need for them is becoming greater each year. Perhaps the idea of grading schools for TA funding could work: A 3 teacher school gets 1.5 fulltime TA's; a 6 teacher school gets 3 TA's; a 10 teacher school gets 5 and so on. The government has stated the need to get people back into work. Why not promote the teacher aide as a **genuine** career option. Train them properly, pay them properly and provide a degree for them. Go outside the current square and train them on Reading Recovery (what a difference that could make to literacy in NZ) and many of the programmes mentioned in this paper that WORK for children. But get them into the schools to help in the classrooms. That way everyone becomes a winner – the Teacher Aides, the schools and the students.

Nick Beamsley

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