

SABBATICAL REPORT

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Introduction

This paper explores the premise that *“National Standards based assessments are removing or reducing the equity of educational opportunity for ‘at’ and ‘above’ (National Standards) learners.”*

This is a hypothesis I formed as Principal of Chelsea Primary School, Auckland after observing the change in education resulting from the introduction of National Standards by the New Zealand Government in 2010. The standards changed educational focus to an emphasis on driving up the achievement of our below and well below learners and I wanted to explore the resultant impact on other learners.

In 2015 I was granted sabbatical leave to explore this premise during a visit to the USA (specifically Washington DC).

Background

The New Zealand Government introduced National Standards in 2010 with the objective of lifting achievement in reading, writing and mathematics; to close the gap between those students who were achieving at a level which would lead to success at NCEA Level 2, and those who were failing to thrive. Whilst New Zealand scores highly on most international measures of educational achievement, against comparable countries in the OECD it has a long ‘tail’ of students failing at levels 1 – 8 (and other levels).

The National Standards aimed to provide consistency in reporting results within, and across, schools to provide a clear national picture of educational achievement across the entire New Zealand Education system. They set clear expectations for teachers, parents and particularly students of what needed to be learnt in reading, writing, and mathematics at every level from 1 - 8. The principle behind them was that achieving the benchmarks defined in the National Standards would provide confidence of success at each succeeding year, especially at Year 12. They also aimed at increasing the capabilities of “behind’ or “at” learners.

The Standards provide broad descriptions and describe reference points or signposts of achievement at each year level. Assessing progress and achievement in relation to the Standards is an integral part of teaching and learning across the New Zealand Curriculum and is based on:

- teachers' knowledge of each student from daily interactions;
- exemplars (examples of the quality of work required to meet each standard);
- assessment tools, tasks and activities.

In my years as Principal at Chelsea Primary School, learning targeted specifically to meet the needs of students of differing capabilities has been normal practice; essentially the principles behind the National Standards were being applied before their formal introduction in 2010. However, the unintended, initial impact of National standards was that the focus on raising the level of achievement of struggling learners came at the expense of more able learners.

In 2010 with the introduction of National Standards, further emphasis was placed on bringing struggling learners up to the levels prescribed in the Standards and the impact on more capable students was exacerbated. This was evidenced through teachers having greater knowledge - and communicating clearly about - the individual progress of target (below and well below) learners while they had less specific knowledge of their more able learners.

At the beginning of 2014 a concerted effort was made to address these unintended consequences by widening the focus to include identification, tracking, discussion, analysis and reporting on the progress of our 'stretch' (higher achieving) students through team meetings to senior leadership for collective analysis and tracking. This required and enabled the teachers to use their time and focus in a more equitable manner.

The changes in the approach to teaching over the years before and after National Standards were introduced - particularly the new emphasis on bringing "tail end" learners up to a new benchmark and the consequent impact on outcomes for more able learners - prompted my interest to further explore the effects of this approach. The hypothesis I wanted to explore was that

“National Standards based assessment is removing or reducing the equity of educational opportunity for ‘at’ and ‘above’ (National Standard) learners.”

I chose the USA (Washington DC) as the most relevant country to explore this option because:

- Internet research showed they had comparable national standards and/or testing in place at the primary school level.
- Washington DC used both state and national testing.

It is worth noting that nationwide in the US there are separate assessment tools for students with cognitive learning challenges and/or ESOL which is not the case in NZ, i.e. those learners in the US are not included in the general data. The inclusion of such students in New Zealand’s data tends to skew the results.

Key Question and Limitations

The teaching and learning approach at Chelsea Primary School always adhered to the general principles behind the National Standards:

- Differentiated learning is essential. It is necessary to notice, recognise and respond to the needs of all our learners irrespective of their place on the continuum of learning.
- It is important to involve the students in their learning decisions, their progress and next steps and seek to challenge and extend their learning (student voice).
- Our stretch (more capable) learners deserve the same focus, energy and time to accelerate their learning as do our target, focus and priority learners.

The key issue to explore within the hypothesis was the quantification and/or evaluation of the impact of a more prescribed and formal approach to lifting the literacy and numeracy skills of ‘behind’ learners on the more able learners. This would be difficult to precisely measure and would rely heavily on using my knowledge and observations of the impacts at Chelsea Primary School (and others within the New Zealand system) compared to a similar – but not identical – approach in another country. However, even with these limitations, I believed this would, at minimum, verify my premise at some indicative or anecdotal level (perhaps providing the basis for further quantification).

Approach

With two different education systems I needed to find the best basis for comparison of the impacts on evaluation and teaching methods on the full spectrum of learners. I attempted to become familiar with the rationale and thinking behind the similarities and differences between the US and New Zealand systems particularly with reference to stretch students by:

- Reading current information about The United States of America's policy, "No Child Left Behind" and how this is implemented through their NAEP (National Assessment of Educational Progress). This provided a background for looking at the ramifications of NAEP/PARK (the Washington DC, on line test) for differentiated instruction in the classroom and how this pertained to the accelerated progress of able learners. I wanted to see how similar it was to the requirements of the National Standards and so this could be a basis for comparison of the impacts to test my hypothesis.
- The Washington DC testing format was converted to an on line version (PARK) for the 2014/2015 school year which means that the teachers take no part in the marking of these online tests, information from which they could otherwise use to make assessments of learning needs.
- The Washington DC curriculum prescription is detailed and mandated and has direct correlation to the overall requirements of the testing.

Based on this information I formulated questions to explore time equity for "below average" learners in the US system and the impact this may be having on less able learners with the intention of gaining a representative sample of respondents. I also sent this questionnaire to 10 Auckland Schools for their input for comparative purposes.

Sample size and comparisons

I approached 10 elementary schools in Washington DC requesting their participation but disappointingly only three schools replied in spite of follow up emails. While not an ideal sample size, they were at least comparable to Chelsea Primary School, and others targeted in Auckland, in many respects.

- Washington DC has an international community due to the high number of embassy staff and so it simulates the profile of Chelsea Primary

School (and others) with multiple nationalities in schools, many of whom have English as their second language.

- As a separate observation - and not entirely relevant to testing the premise - the schools are in densely populated residential areas, are multi storeyed and in most cases in original condition; old and high ceilinged. Due to the paucity of outdoor space, year groups are on rolling recess and lunch breaks, supervised by their teachers
- I visited three schools and spent at least 4 hours with the Principal and/or Assistant Principal in each instance
- Two of the schools were large with 700+ students and were in high socio economic areas, equating to a Decile 10 (the same as Chelsea Primary School)
- The third school was the smallest in DC with 150 learners and was also located in a Decile 10 area. This school had an enrolment policy where out of zone students went into a 'lottery' for places

Observations

The following general observations provide context for the education system in Washington DC. This provides an overview of the learning environment and approach in which the premise is being tested including identification of major similarities and differences.

General

- Digital devices were not seen at all in the larger schools.
- Some devices were seen in the smaller school, but only in the year 4/5/6 classes.
- All devices were funded by the schools' PTA - even the Principals' and teachers' laptops. However, I did not see any laptops or desktops for staff or Principals.
- All schools are governed by the "Chancellor for Education" of DC. This position is a political appointment by the Administration of the day and has political tenure only, meaning the Chancellor is incumbent only while the current Administration is in power.
- No teachers, teacher aides or Principals have tenure and all contracts are on an annual basis.

- The lack of tenure is leaving Principals reluctant to try new things or to introduce new measures in an attempt to lift achievement and/or sense of community in their schools.
- Class numbers are set and rigorously enforced by the Chancellor's office and cannot be exceeded.
- All classes seen (probably 20 – 40 in total across all levels) had at least 2 professional staff. In most cases this was a teacher and a full time teacher aide for the class (not assigned to a particular student). In some cases there were 2 teachers and in others there were teacher trainees alongside the teacher and aide.
- Schools had as many specialist teachers as they had class teachers. These specialties included but were not restricted to Library, Art, Music, PE, Science and Spanish.

Differences from the New Zealand education system

The outstanding differences from the New Zealand system were around a rigidly prescribed curriculum with no or little regard for a child's ability to learn at the level at which it was being taught or to assist lower level learners.

- Washington DC mandates topics and content for each grade level. For example, at each school, Grade 3, (Year 4) were studying the system of Government in DC and Grade 1 were studying pollination of plants.
- During a three hour morning block in each school I saw mainly whole class lessons. There was no differentiation of lesson content observed.
- In one class Maths was being taught in 2 groups. However, learners had been equally split arbitrarily between the two class teachers rather than on learning ability or need.
- There was no evidence of pre testing to establish learning need or readiness to learn.
- Teachers did not operate as teams. Team meetings were rare and full staff meetings irregular, mainly due to the highly prescriptive nature of the curriculum leaving few decisions to be made.

Similarities to the New Zealand system

The main significant similarities to New Zealand were around language and displays. In relation to researching my premise, the one noticeable similarity was confined to one school where the Principal had undertaken Reading Recovery training. However, this was not seen to be standard and was not translated into an operating practice within the school.

- The language of learning was similar in all cases. In one school, Carol Dwek's Growth Mindset approach to learning was evidenced in the wall displays and in the language the teachers were using with the learners in some classes. This was as a result of the Principal putting the teachers through Professional Learning development using Dwek's book as the basis for the learning so that she could effect a change in attitude in both her teachers and their learners.
- One Principal had undertaken Reading Recovery training as a method of increasing the reading ability of her struggling learners.
- Classroom displays were similar to those we find in New Zealand as was the language of learning being used in the classrooms.

Testing the Premise

To test my premise that "*National Standards based assessment are removing or reducing the equity of educational opportunity for 'at' and 'above' (National Standards) learners*" I then examined specific programmes in place to assist lower level learners and the potential impact on capable learners.

What are Washington DC schools doing to address different learning abilities?

I observed some behaviour modification taking place, but saw no differentiation for learning needs at either the lower or higher level. However, the schools were waiting their test results from the Department of Education before any identification or decision making about the learning needs of their learners took place.

- Schools learn about their students' learning abilities through the PARK test results (PARK is the on line, Washington DC test) and are expected to set individual and/or collective goals according to these results.

However, this year, schools were still waiting in October for the results of the testing completed in March, 6 months earlier. Because the tests are done on line and immediately submitted, the schools have no opportunity to see the tests, and have no processes in place to use class work and performance to make interim decisions to assess students' learning needs (Overall Teacher Judgments)

- Prescribed Rubrics, which show a progression of capabilities, exist and are used to measure student achievement. However, students are placed onto the rubric summatively; the rubric is not used in a formative manner to inform teaching and provide differentiated learning springboards
- The smallest school has sought and received permission and funding from the Washington DC Department of Education to put in place this school year, a programme for gifted and talented students. However, this will be an after school programme and parent paid, subsidised by the Department's funding. This is an experiment only and is not addressing student needs within the classroom, but is going some way to assuaging expressed parental concern

What are the surveyed New Zealand schools doing to address different learning abilities?

From the 10 schools surveyed through Google Forms in Auckland, it would appear that a variety of approaches is used to target learning, but the focus is very much on below and well below learners. The comments are as stated, not interpreted.

Below and Well Below students	At and above	Well above learners
<p>What is in place</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted teaching • Maths and Literacy support • Teacher learning talk framework meetings • Curriculum achievement plan for acceleration with three 	<p>What is in place</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Upskilling of Senior Leadership Team • Philosophy for children • Google apps • Very little – tail too long 	<p>What is in place</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No resources • Should be differentiating/differentiating • Extension sometimes in some areas

<p>tiers of intervention</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • External specialists • 1-1 tuition with teacher aides • Individualised learning programmes • Regular monitoring • In class targeted programmes • Withdrawal targeted programmes (not specified) • Identification of students followed by monitoring 		
<p>Percentage of teacher time spent with this group 50 - 75% of teacher time</p>	<p>Percentage of teacher time spent with this group 30 – 40% of teacher time at junior level 20 – 30% at senior level</p>	<p>Percentage of teacher time spent with this group None stated</p>
<p>Comparison of the rate of progress Use of an effect size calculator</p>	<p>Comparison of the rate of progress None directly</p>	<p>Comparison of the rate of progress None stated</p>
	<p>Is flipped learning in place for At and Above learners? <i>An example of this would be the learners reading a text before meeting up with the teacher rather than taking learning time reading with the teacher</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sometimes	
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Deductions

From what I was able to see and research there was little or no evidence of differentiated learning or other programmes operating, at any place on the continuum of learning, within the classroom setting in Washington DC. This undermined the basis of being able to accurately test the premise.

While there were observable positives around the language of learning and growth mind-set these are not the fundamentals on which the premise was based. Further, they are also somewhat negated when set against the mandated nature of the Washington DC curriculum content versus the freedom within the NZ curriculum to cater for individual student interests and needs.

Measurement of ability in Washington DC is through State and National testing whereas in New Zealand “tests” are only one piece of information used by teachers to assess a learner’s capabilities. This means there is little flexibility or propensity in the DC system to assess a student’s capabilities outside these testing parameters and so cater for them. So while teachers in Washington DC have one or more professionals to assist in each class - providing the opportunity for differentiated learning - this singular testing system perhaps limits the opportunities to recognise and assist individual learners of different abilities. It is not a model which predisposes teachers to tailor learning.

Further, teachers in Washington DC operate more in isolation – as opposed to operating from within a team at Chelsea Primary School (and others) – again limiting opportunities to collaborate and address different learning levels. On top of this, the whole class teaching approach in Washington DC versus targeted group teaching at Chelsea Primary School (and others) in New Zealand tends to create a “one size fits all” scenario.

Conclusion

There are insufficient similarities in approaches to address individual learning levels in Washington DC and New Zealand to accurately test the premise that *National Standards based assessment are removing or reducing the equity of educational opportunity for ‘at’ and ‘above’ (National Standards) learners.*”

While this is disappointing in terms of coming to a conclusion about the hypothesis there are however observations on approaches that are useful to apply to future learning models at Chelsea Primary School.

Where to from here at Chelsea Primary School

As mentioned earlier in the report, I had observed that placing greater emphasis on “below” or “well below” students was having a detrimental impact on other learners. The school has already actively addressed these inequities. Now and into the future, through Leadership and Assessment training and practice, our teachers will continue to place greater emphasis on teaching to needs through differentiated learning without disadvantaging against any particular group. This is being done through:

- At and Above learners are identified, monitored and progress is reported on regularly to ensure their learning is targeted to need and level
- Classes have been carefully sorted to ensure that there is at least a group of able learners together in each Space so that they have some like minds with whom to engage and learn
- As the school further engages with modern learning pedagogy in 2016, clinics differentiated according to learning needs and next steps rather than set group or class lessons, will be taken with our learners
- Current best practice from the MoE, models in place at other schools and Chelsea’s strengths and weaknesses in this area are analysed and discussed by teams to build teacher capability and skills
- A part-time teacher will run acceleration programmes for students identified as achieving significantly above their age peers in Terms 3 and 4
- We have schoolwide, Ministry supported Professional Learning Development in Gifted and Talented education for 2016. This will require all teaching staff to undergo professional development that focuses on increasing their ability to differentiate teaching and learning within their classroom programme

The framework below demonstrates how the school is responding/will respond to the needs of our gifted and talented students going forward.

Regular Classroom	Enrichment/Acceleration	Special Programmes
Differentiation:	Year level Acceleration	• After-school

<p>content, process & product. Might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning Centres/Station s • Choice Boards • Student-directed • Choice • Student passions and interests • Contracts with students • High interest & High challenge • Tiered activities • Flexible grouping including homogenous grouping of G&T children • Integrated curriculum <p>IEPs Individual Education Plans</p> <p>Distance Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as per subject acceleration <p>Classroom Environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsive to the learners' needs • influenced by 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student learns alongside their ability-peers, rather than age-peers, • The student and their family are satisfied that they are emotionally and socially mature enough • Early entrance to school <p>Subject Acceleration</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Special classes • Pull out/withdrawal • Virtual instruction • Concurrent enrolment <p>Enrichment may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mentorships • Competitions • Clubs/Electives • Cluster groups - within school and between schools 	<p>programmes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holiday programmes • Private tuitions • Clubs/associations • Community programmes • One-day school • School sports teams
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<p>the learners' ideas</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • culturally supportive <p>Classroom Culture:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • caters to the social and emotional needs of our G&T learners e.g. promotes resilience, growth mind-set, risk-taking etc. 		
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How will we know if we are successful?

We will have engaged learners who are challenging themselves within a growth mind-set framework. This will be demonstrated by the students measuring their achievement by progress as opposed to relying on success as a yard stick for their learning. We will have:

- Increased acceleration of learning for all students which will be evidenced by the number of learners moving from “at” to “above” in National Standards
- “Above” and “Well above” students will progress at equal or similar rates as they will have similar focus and learning challenge.
- Learners who will question, research and explore their passions using an inquiry process with confidence.

I wish to thank the Board of Trustees for supporting my sabbatical and also my Deputy Principals who showed excellent leadership skills and capability in my absence. It is much appreciated.

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2016