

PRINCIPAL SABBATICAL REPORT

By increasing my professional understanding and reflecting on current leadership practices, I will investigate how to develop positive home school partnerships that focus on learning, thus improve outcomes for our students. This will be achieved by reviewing and strengthening our current school procedures, gathering information about best practice through literature reviews, engaging in reflective models, interviewing other schools, consultation with whanau and using an action research model based around the context of Summer Slide.

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During the term I visited a number of schools and I am very grateful to the principals and their leadership team members, who so generously shared their experiences and practices with me.

I also am very appreciative to the community of Ahipara-our learners and whanau for engaging with this inquiry.

Executive Summary

Summer slump, summer slide or summer set back- no matter what you call it, it's a problem for many students, communities, educators and politicians. The "summer slide" also known as the "summer slump" is the decline in reading achievement children suffer from being away from school. Often, it is the students who can least afford to lose the reading gains they've achieved during the school year who are most affected. After engaging in literature around this phenomenon, the implications of Summer Slide are far reaching. Leaders and teachers of students from low socio economic communities need to provide rich literacy experiences with the resources we have. In addition we need to share school assets and teacher expertise with our community. Because home, school and community represent the major overlapping domains in children's education, collaboration will create better educational outcomes for students.

As importantly, we need to explore the distinction between parent involvement and parent engagement. Engagement in Schools, Larry Ferlazzo and Lorie Hammond (2009) explore a distinction between parent involvement and parent engagement. Parent involvement, as they define it, starts with the school: "The ideas and energy come from the schools and government mandates. Schools try to 'sell' their ideas to parents. School staff might feel they know what the problems are and how to fix them, and determine the criteria to use in evaluating success." Parent engagement, however, begins

with the parents: “Ideas are elicited from parents by school staff in the context of developing trusting relationships. They emerge from parent/community needs and priorities. More parent energy drives the efforts.

During term three 2015, I had the privilege of visiting schools to determine how home school partnerships are structured, planned for and what were common leadership practices.

Purpose

Literacy acquisition is complex and dynamic. A number of events or issues can impact on a student's pathway to literacy- Summer Slide is one such event. At the beginning of each year I spend a lot of time reviewing school wide reading data. Students who have worked hard in the previous year to reach or move towards expected levels fall behind over the summer. Looking at our SENCO Register it seems it is our most at risk students who fall further and further behind. It is also evident that many students with little home access to reading experiences also performed more poorly across the curriculum. This shows a direct link to lack of reading experiences and student achievement which is creating inequalities. This is an equity issue with differential access to text over summer between high and low socio-economic communities and families. If socio economic status defines educational opportunities what can leaders do to buffer or lessen these impacts for our learners? With reference to my own school and experiences our school fits into the categories of most affected by Summer Slide - low socio economic communities and minority races (78% Maori). Conversely these too are the government priority groups. Our school is isolated and rural which can also impact on students learning.

The purpose of this inquiry was to increase my knowledge of this phenomena and explore and investigate ways in which I could Inform, Inspire and Incite to Action our community around the issue of Summer Slide. This sabbatical gave me the time to reflect upon my leadership, identify other leaders’ practices and to measure the impact of an initiative by engaging or consulting with students, staff and whanau. As an authentic issue, an action research cycle methodology was utilised. The objective was to **engage in new ways with the school community**, provide information and assist with resourcing, thus offering opportunities for our students and families to become motivated and participate in family literacy programmes over the summer break. Outcomes will help students to become more motivated about reading, to take more control of their learning and become more self-regulated. It will enable parents to understand the importance of home literacy and feel more confident in

helping their children. The inquiry is designed to strengthen home school partnerships with a more collaborative approach and a common focus, and centre school home interactions positively on learning, specifically literacy.

Methodology

This involved a considerable amount of preparation, consultation and actual workshops before the summer break 2015 to ensure there would be a positive impact resulting from this action research cycle, will in turn lead to improved student outcomes which will be evident in 2016 reading achievement data I used the action research spiral utilising various reflection strategies.

- I Identified and engaged in articles/literature which supported planning for and implementing Action research with various reflective models.
- Read further literature around home school partnerships and summer slide.
- Accessing other colleagues/experts by school visits particularly and those in our LCN cluster-looking at leadership practices that promote positive home school partnerships focussed on learning.
- Design school wide surveys to investigate ways in which the community like to be consulted-face to face-digital-what sort of help they would like-collate and analyse.
- Attended Summer workshops and spoke to library advisor about resources to assist with parent literacy.
- Facilitated staff meetings around the action plan and investigate any ideas that they may have that can assist with getting key messages to parents/caregivers.
- Design presentations and brochures for parents-display for galas etc
- Discussed and engaged with as many members of the community as possible making sure there is balance. Follow up with families who do not participate via phone calls. This is especially pertinent for those students who are targeted and tracked for reading or on the SENCO roll.
- Ran a series of workshops (Reading Together model)
- Set up suggestion box and collate information and analyse.
- Planned with Board of Trustees how we could open the library over the summer
- Assisted teachers to develop simple take home packs for their classes over the summer break.
- Reflect and identify leadership practices that promote positive learning relationships with whanau.

- Gathering information was conducted in person with individual principals within their own school environment, and in some cases, they were joined by members of their leadership team, depending on availability.
- A prepared interview sheet for recording information was compiled beforehand to use as a guideline for the discussions and to ensure a consistent approach was used for the benefit of collating results.
- A range of schools were visited

Findings

Leadership practices that promote home school partnerships

There is a huge amount of information about creating partnerships between the families, communities and schools to benefit the child, but it is more than just best practice. We have a requirement to do so as stated by The New Zealand Curriculum, MOE: Ka Hikitia Accelerating Success 2013-2017, and ERO's publication in 2013 'Wellbeing for Success: Draft Evaluation Indicators for Student Wellbeing'. It is the close co-operation between parents and teachers that ensures quality educational experiences for our students.

Many principals indicated that building trusting and learning focussed relationships within and beyond the school is central to the principal's role and creating positive links to support learning through partnerships is fundamental to a leaders practice (KIWI Leadership). To be effective as a community leader, home school partnerships need to be **systematic and planned**.

All principals stated that when these relationships are focussed on learning there is better communication between teachers and parents which helps schools in all kinds of ways, and it gives both parents and teachers many kinds of information to support children. Working together for a **common cause** brings direction and focus.

Most Principals spoken to implement a wide range of strategies to develop a welcoming ethos-open door policy, open mornings. These generally made schools a positive place to be although few said the relationship wasn't always based on learning unless there was a **focus**.

Some principals were proactive in **increasing whanau capacity** to enable increased confidence in participating in the child's learning in the form of workshops-(particularly those schools who were embarking upon digital technologies) eg tech cafes

Most principals in the LCN had positive working relationships as part of their **strategic goals** in the annual plan with some planning.

Many principals recognised that each school community developed their own kind of home–school partnerships to suit their contexts and meet their chosen purposes and need to be tailored-**not one size fits all**.

An issue common to most principals is to move the relationship from one of parents being a volunteer or audience participant to one in which both home and school **jointly find** ways in which to promote student achievement and well-being.

Many principals believed that when whanau **are interested they are very supportive** of programmes/initiatives and want to be upskilled along with their children-this was particularly evident in those schools introducing digital technologies eg chrome books.

Many principals ensured whanau have voice and realise that they have realistic and practical suggestions and ideas for how to make initiatives translate between home and school-many had **whanau representative groups** which meet regularly with the principal.

Most principals felt they **focused interactions on learning**-learning tips via a school newsletter, phone calls home, or notices via websites etc. publicize events to encourage parent involvement. Some principals stated that the students (in three way relations) drove interactions eg. blogs,seasaw etc. Most principals recognise influencing students to participate can positively impact parent participation.

Some principals stated the organization and development of programmes is better if staff members initiate it (maths workshops) but most principals stated that personal involvement can be perceived as to the **degree of importance**. Many principals talked about teams(**early adopters**)and staff members who were enthusiastic about communicating with whanau.

The people in communities are not typically of one mind in any issue with a wide range of viewpoints. Many principals positively acknowledged this diversity but finding ways to work with these groups for improved student outcomes can be **challenging**.

Some principals stated that Partnerships with families tend to be initiated by the school. The terms and conditions of these interactions are usually decided

upon without any **parental input** although many principals used summative data to drive initiatives.

Like all relationships home school partnerships take **time and commitment**. They need to be **well resourced** and **reviewed regularly** and are **collaborative** and **mutually respectful**(MOE).

Action Research Findings

Summer reading loss in early and recent research highlights two key factors: one being that the volume of reading which occurs has significant impact on student achievement; and secondly that socio-economic status affects reading achievement loss over the summer holidays.

Research tells us that the summer reading slide is of concern for many students, particularly those who come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds. In early research by Stanovich (1986), His theoretical paper on the “Matthew Effect” takes reference from the bible-that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and applies it to reading. In essence the Matthew Effect refers to the observation that children who read a lot improve and those who do not read a lot show little improvement. When schools close for the summer, the gap in reading achievement grows between low income and middle income children and those already struggling with reading. Alexander, Entwisle and Olsen (2000) refer to this as the facet theory-resourcing is turned off over the summer.

Research shows that reading regularly over the holidays can curb the summer slide. However, equal opportunities, such as, equal access to books needs to be provided for. In a Study by Karl L. Alexander et al (2000), when testing reflected mostly classroom learning, the socioeconomically disadvantaged students kept pace with their more-advantaged classmates. He makes reference to students’ learning slips during the summer - low-income children fall further behind than their classmates. He also made mention of “The Harry Potter divide” - the summer learning among students in relatively well-educated, economically secure homes who effectively made gains whilst students in lower-income, less educated families had reduced during that period.

Further research also claims that merely increasing reading over the break is not enough; students need scaffolding in their reading, particularly low ability readers. This then leads to a need for effective partnerships between parents and schools. Results from a study by Kim & White (2008) suggest that a mileage based intervention is not sufficient to improve reading achievement. This research is also supported by the work of Celano & Neumen (2008) who stress that parents need to be coached in how to read with their children. Many educators believe that voluntary reading programs improve reading ability. The message in research by Kim & White (2008) is that the details of such programs matter and further, highlights the importance of parent involvement in their children's development of reading skills over the summer break.

Most families want to provide a home environment that will allow their children to achieve. Sometimes circumstances often make this a difficult reality to accomplish. Some of these circumstances may make literacy challenging for some families. Barriers to reading at home may include parents' lack of awareness of the benefits of reading to children and lack of confidence in reading, particularly in the case of adults who have low literacy levels. (Mraz & Rasinski, 2007). The sharing of expertise and resourcing can support this eg open school libraries over summer.

Summer slide has been a problematic issue in the USA and its validity is supported by much international research. Domestic New Zealand research substantiates this international research and is identifying this as problematic in New Zealand.

The summer reading slide is a concern facing many schools, students and parents. If schools and parents can work together on a summer reading programme to curb the loss of learning over the holidays, it would be a tremendous step in closing the reading gaps which exist in many schools.

Some key ideas

- There are many opportunities that exist for building positive engagement in spaces that are already in place at schools. These include sports events, PTA meetings, Parent/student/teacher interviews and gala day. Using both formal and informal opportunities to get the key ideas and messages.
- Being visible at as many school-related events as possible help parents make connections and provide opportunities for open conversations.

- When the learning is challenging, relevant and authentic it allows for common focus and direction. Co-creating knowledge that is site specific, which focus on teaching and learning, facilitates all stakeholders to feel positive about school home communications.
- The reciprocal nature of partnerships- there is much to be gained for both parties. Family and community involvement is an essential component of a successful school and when parents are engaged around learning everyone benefits and our schools and their communities become increasingly rich and positive places to teach, learn and grow.
- The ideas around distributed leadership, reflection models and the space in which to reflect individually as well as on system change is vital as a leader. The notion of learning being distributed in the community and not the sole responsibility of the “expert” allows the possibility for great potential of improved relationships with parents and improved student outcomes.
- The engagement around learning partnerships where whanau are active partners requires systematic and planned collaboration.
- The reporting back of findings is important it’s the dialogue that’s important.

Conclusion

- This action research was big and took on a momentum of its own, the hardest part was continually narrowing and focusing on what leaders were doing to change practice.
- Building trusting and learning focussed relationships WITHIN AND BEYOND THE SCHOOL IS CENTRAL TO THE PRINCIPALS ROLE (Bryk&Schneider,2002 cited), and creating positive links to support learning through partnerships and networks is fundamental to our practice(KIWI Leadership).
- To be effective as a community leader, home school partnerships are integral to a schools vision and need to be a central cornerstone to a schools culture.
- A true partnership is reciprocal. “Successful partnerships are strengths-based and equitable, with two-way communication. Teachers’ and leaders attitudes to the idea of a partnership and the ways in which they are willing and able to share power are critical. Teachers and parents

need to understand the joint purpose and their complementary roles. Partnerships that are actively planned, reviewed, and revised, deliver greater benefits” (Ministry of Education, 2012).

- Having the opportunity to visit schools in varying locations and socio-economic areas has given me an improved understanding of how schools structure their home school partnerships. I am fortunate to receive this valuable knowledge and experience from the principals with whom I spoke.
- As there is no one model to adopt, schools need to be responsive to their own community context-focusing on learning relationships. It is the close co-operation between parents and teachers that ensures quality educational experiences for our students. Everyone has a role to play in educating children- as the old African proverb says-“it takes a village to raise a child.”

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