

FOCUS: “Are we on the right path and how can we do even better?”

REPORT ON PRINCIPAL’S SABBATICAL 2006

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Executive Summary

In the course of this sabbatical from 28 March – 9 June I visited the United States, England, Singapore and Melbourne. During this time I attended two major conferences, visited nine schools, and had meetings with Education department officers in Chicago and Melbourne.

The aim of the programme was to inform and affirm current developments at Howick College (refer section on Purpose and Background), to learn about “next practice” and to have some time for reflection and rejuvenation.

While gaining exposure to new ideas and seeing some examples of best and next practice the programme also affirmed for me that my school and our national system in New Zealand are, in most respects, at the cutting edge and superior to what exists elsewhere.

Purpose

The purpose of the sabbatical was to answer the question “*Are we on the right path and how can we do even better?*” This question relates to the journey we are currently on at Howick College in changing pedagogy with a key focus on thinking and learning strategies in conjunction with a new appraisal system which emphasises reflective practice. The aim of this related package of developments is that we become a true learning community and that, as a result, student achievement is raised.

The specific purposes of the sabbatical, therefore, were –

- To visit schools and observe good practice relating to our pedagogic journey
- To learn more about differentiated learning
- To learn more about, and see examples of thinking and learning strategies being applied
- To learn more about the application of ICT as a learning tool
- To investigate senior vocational courses
- To have the opportunity to reflect on all of the above and the new theories and practices encountered with a particular focus on the school as a learning community

Background

I have believed in the importance of professional development for myself and staff for a long time. However, over the last two or three years I have come to the conclusion that one-day in-service training results in little or no change in practice. This, in conjunction with

the nature of secondary school students today (“digital natives”) and their whole life experience being vastly different from most of their teachers means that to achieve meaningful change and raise student achievement we have to develop a whole new paradigm for teaching and learning. A quote picked up on one of my school visits in England encapsulates this – “*What we need is a metamorphosis of education – from the cocoon a butterfly should emerge, improvement only gives us a faster caterpillar.*” (B H Bethany in *Systematic Change – Touchstones for the future school*, ed. Patrick Jenlink, 1996).

This belief has driven the journey that we are on at Howick College to change pedagogy and, in support of this, to sharpen appraisal. The key elements are –

- To use data (particularly AsTTle) to inform practice
- To develop greater differentiation in teaching and learning programmes
- To train staff in and apply the principles of AfL (Assessment for Learning)
- To develop and teach thinking skills
- To implement a school-wide metalanguage for learning (built around Costa and Kallick’s “Habits of Mind” and the principles of higher-order thinking as expressed in Biggs and Collis’ Solo Taxonomy)
- To implement a new appraisal system which is less formulaic and requires teachers to think about and apply different pedagogies and reflect critically on their outcomes

Activities Undertaken

1. Attendance at the ASCD (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) annual conference (*Constructing the Future, Challenging the Past*) in Chicago, USA and attendance at two day pre-conference Institute on “*What works in schools? – translating research into action*”
2. Meetings at the Chicago Public Schools office of ETC (Education to Careers) to investigate transition and vocational education
3. Attendance at the National College of School Leadership annual conference (*Seizing Success. Leading a dynamic school system*) in Birmingham, England
4. Meetings with Department of Education and Training Managers in Melbourne, Australia focusing on learning initiatives and leadership and teacher development
5. Visits to the following schools -
 - (i) Droitwich Spa High School, Worcestershire, England – a specialist sports and technology college
 - (ii) Etone Community School and Technology College, Nuneaton, Warwickshire, England - a specialist technology college
 - (iii) Cramlington Community High School, Newcastle, Northumberland, England – a specialist science school and arguably the leading UK school in thinking and learning
 - (iv) New Town Primary School, Singapore – to research creative learning approaches
 - (v) Balestier Hill Secondary School, Singapore – as above
 - (vi) Glendal Primary School, Melbourne – a leading primary school in curriculum integration and teaching of thinking
 - (vii) Brentwood Secondary College, Melbourne – recognised for superior staff appraisal systems

- (viii) Glen Waverley Secondary College, Melbourne – recognised as the leading secondary school in application of ICT
- (ix) Scotch College, Melbourne – ICT applications to appraisal

Findings

As stated in the Executive Summary, the experiences on the sabbatical were affirming of the direction my school is taking and of the quality of our national, state system in New Zealand.

The two major conferences attended had expert speakers who provided ample evidence that it is imperative that we change our pedagogy in order to achieve better learning outcomes and prepare students for lifelong learning.

1. Conferences

Below are some of the ideas and highlights from the two conferences I attended that focus on the purposes of the sabbatical and/or are important comment on the need for a paradigm shift in teaching and learning.

(i) ASCD Conference, Chicago

The opening keynote speaker was renowned neurology researcher Dr Mel Levine. His address was titled *“Growing a mind: what we are learning about learning should influence what we teach about teaching.”* His basic message was that much about the way we organise schools and the pedagogy in them is out of kilter with what we know about the brain and learning. Some students’ minds are highly specialised for specific forms of learning and therefore labelling of students is unhelpful. Teachers need to be cognisant of different learning styles and ***differentiated learning and classroom environments are essential*** for effective learning.

The session on *“Celebrating Habits of Mind: Voices of the Future”* by Art Costa and Bena Kallick was particularly relevant to my focus on ***thinking and learning*** strategies. This was a wonderful session as students, staff and parents from an elementary school and an high school where Habits of Mind are embedded shared their experiences. All were unanimously enthusiastic and interestingly the parents were employing Habits of Mind at home and said they made a positive difference to family relationships as well as to their children’s learning. A fundamental strength of Habits of Mind is facilitating the curriculum mind shift from not only knowing the right answers to also knowing how to behave when answers are not immediately apparent. The Habits can be carried on through the rest of life and therefore support the mission of my school – ***equipping individuals for lifelong learning.***

Other sessions I attended were on leadership, appraisal, building learning communities and public relations. In these, the concept of ***critical, reflective appraisal*** and ***distributed leadership*** were emphasised.

The pre-conference institute was led by leading research analyst Robert Marzano. He noted that it had been commonly accepted that the school a student attended accounted

for 10% of the variance in student achievement but that new research suggests that the figure may actually be 20%.

From meta-analysis of research Marzano derived 11 factors that influence student achievement and grouped them into school, teacher and student variables. The most important factor relating to teachers was “instructional strategies” and in his unpacking of this he emphasised factors which relate strongly to our **thinking and learning strategies and the Solo taxonomy**.

(ii) NCSL Conference, Birmingham

This, the second annual conference of the National College of School Leadership, while focused particularly on some emerging issues in the United Kingdom, also had much of general and pedagogic interest.

The opening plenary session featured Dr Kjell A Nordstrom from Sweden who was recently ranked 9th out of the top 100 thinkers in the world, and 1st in Europe. He noted three key features of life today which all impact on education and social change. These are that information is the key, that everything (except raw materials) is cheap, and that entertainment is built into everything and is here to stay. A major social trend stemming from these factors is the drive to personalisation and individualisation and interestingly this is a major thrust of reforms and developments in British education.

In association with these points Nordstrom emphasised the fact that people now have great freedom – to know, to be, to go and to do. This is breaking down some of the old legitimacies, for example patients can now become ‘experts,’ via the internet, in diseases, treatments etc and therefore the former God-like status of doctors is now challenged. The same of course is true for teachers and indeed a major challenge we face is transforming our one size fits all/knowledge driven school system into one which is personalised, diverse, and through **thinking skills and the use of ICT** can successfully engage students.

An interesting workshop was “*Leadership beyond a single Institution*” which, driven by the ageing of and dearth of applicants for senior positions, has become a political agenda item and a focus for the National College of School Leadership. At this workshop, the concept of **next practice** was emphasised. Good or best practice asks what is working well? Next practice asks what could work more powerfully. It is directed at serious, contemporary problems, is not officially sanctioned (ie ahead of policy) and therefore entails some risk.

Another interesting development in England is the School Improvement Partners (SIPs) programme which is part of the government’s development of New Relationships with Schools (NRwS). A School Improvement Partner acts as a critical professional friend to the school, helping its leadership to evaluate its performance, identify priorities for improvement and plan effective change.

One workshop presenter was from the City Academy in Bristol. Situated in an area with an ethnically diverse population and high rates of crime and social deprivation, a former ‘failing’ school has been turned around through **a focus on learning and the use of**

technology including a virtual learning environment which was a catalyst for getting learners engaged in and talking about their learning.

2. School Visits

The schools visited in England, Singapore and Melbourne were generally less attractive and less functional in their physical environment than Howick College or most New Zealand secondary schools. Exceptions were Glen Waverley in Melbourne which has just had a multi-million dollar administration and classroom block built and of course Scotch College which, being a private school charging AUD16,000 per year in fees has superb facilities.

Virtually all schools however did have a data projector in every classroom and this in most cases was funded by the government which reinforced again the feeling that, apart from the laptop scheme, schools have been very much left to fund ICT themselves in New Zealand.

Observations from school visits:

- The specialist status that schools in England may apply for really helps schools to develop and expand strengths through the funding and professional development available (eg Droitwich Spa High School receives 160,000 pounds for its specialist sports college status)
- Schools in England and Melbourne are much more data rich and data driven than schools in New Zealand. The downside however, is the 'league table' application of some data which is a major cause of resentment and perceived unfairness by most people in the school system
- There is more centralised control in all places visited than we have in New Zealand. However, in the case of Victoria there is also much more rich material and support from the Department of Education and Training than we have from the MOE in New Zealand and they have a real focus on learning and achievement. It was wonderful, for example, to see the décor in the entrance and foyers of the DeT building which had key words and phrases related to thinking and learning and the names of educational gurus painted on the walls and doors.
- A school-wide approach, backed with extensive in-house PD is necessary to successfully implement a new pedagogy based on thinking and learning (as opposed to the 'old' content driven model). Where this happens (as for example at Cramlington High School and Glen Waverley Secondary College) there is dramatic improvement in student achievement. Where it does not then "the quality of teaching is variable" (to use the phrase formerly beloved by ERO).
- "Leaning to learn" programmes that stand alone in the timetable are not considered effective. Rather, the principles need to be embedded in practice across the curriculum.
- Education in New Zealand, thankfully, is more secular than in England, and less nationalistic than in the other places visited and there is a stronger trend towards 'values education' in all of the places visited than is the case here.
- Appraisal systems (except in Melbourne) are more formulaic and dictated by central authorities than ours. In Singapore appraisal also results in performance

bonuses which are funded by the MOE but determined at school level by the principal. In Chicago and Melbourne “experienced classroom teachers” now have a three year rather than annual appraisal cycle.

- School review is moving to a four year cycle in England and Victoria compared with our usual 3 year ERO cycle. Ofsted (the British review organisation) gives ratings of 1 (outstanding) – 4 (poor) for all elements of their reviews. In Victoria schools are in one of three categories which determine the nature of the review (the top category comprises about 16% of schools and they have a “negotiated review” which means that the school determines what it wants reviewed, while the bottom 10% have a review that focuses on improving the areas of poor performance). Reviews are carried out by contracted consultants rather than a central organisation.

Implications

As previously stated I believe that we have nothing to be ashamed of in our system and in fact, as a total entity, I consider that in New Zealand our system is better than in the USA, England or Singapore and probably quite comparable with Victoria but with slightly more autonomy here. At a national level I think the following would be helpful –

- (i) a more practical focus in the MOE. I think we have too many “policy analysts” and other bureaucrats and not enough educationalists. I like the Victorian Department of Education and Training model whereby the department has two branches – the Office of School Education which deals with resourcing, property, accountability etc and the Office of Teaching and Learning which deals with that.
- (ii) If we are serious about using ICT to enhance teaching and learning and to produce ICT literate young people there must be a greater level of government funding. In my own school ICT has virtually totally been funded from international fee-paying student income. This is not an option for government schools in England, Singapore or most in Melbourne yet they are ICT-richer than us.

For my own school I see no implications for significant change as a result of my trip. Rather, I am affirmed in my belief that our unified approach to change in pedagogy, ICT and appraisal will result in us becoming a true learning community and fulfil our aim of further raising student achievement.

Conclusions

Apart from the findings reported above some general observations are as follows –

The USA, whilst being the home of much leading research and theory, is struggling at grass roots level to maintain a good system. There are two key reasons for this. First, they do not effectively have a national system of education. Rather there is strong state and district central control which mandates most of what happens and employs huge bureaucracies which consume much resourcing which might be better deployed in schools. The level of resourcing too of course is strongly affected by socio-economic factors. Second, the NCLB (No Child Left Behind) policies of the federal government have, in the space of two or three years, extinguished much curriculum

innovation as performance in state wide tests has become the priority for schools and districts because their funding depends on it.

In England, while some aspects of the system remain more draconian than in New Zealand there has nevertheless been considerable loosening of central control in the last two or three years. For example the QCA (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority) which just three years ago was rigidly controlling curriculum has now embarked on action research with 50 schools and wide consultation on curriculum innovation driven by acceptance of the need for 21st century education to be different from that in the 20th century. They are supporting the development of 'next practice.' Flexible times and timetable structures are encouraged, the move to integrated studies rather than 'subject silos' is gaining currency, and there is a big push for vocational and technology education.

There are, nevertheless, some worrying trends in the UK also. For example the concept of "extended schools" being mandatory by 2010 which means that schools will be required to be open from 8.00am until 6.00pm and to provide, or provide access to, health and social services. The current push for shared headship – driven by a political cost-saving agenda but also the declining number of applicants – seems to fly in the face of all of the theories and research on leadership and team building.

Finally, I should like to thank the MOE for making Principals' paid sabbaticals possible and I extend special thanks to my Board of Trustees for the generous support of my sabbatical. The opportunity for learning, reflecting and rejuvenating is wonderful and was greatly appreciated. From what I saw, heard and learned in schools, at conferences, and in meetings with education officials I am confident that that we are "on the right path" and there is much of value I can bring to "our journey."

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