

PRINCIPAL SABBATICAL REPORT 2015

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Collaboration: What has been the impact for Teachers?

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Upper Moutere School Board of Trustees for supporting my application and sabbatical leave. Many thanks to the staff and in particular Todd Brodie for leading the school in my absence.

I wish to acknowledge the Ministry of Education and Teach NZ for the provision of sabbaticals for principals. The opportunity to take time out and reflect and re-energise is something I am very grateful for. I now just wish I had done it five years earlier!

Thanks to the principals and staff who gave so readily of their time to discuss and share their experiences and practices leading up to, during and after my sabbatical – collaboration at its best!

Stonefields School Auckland - *Sarah Martin, always welcoming and willing to share*

Breens Intermediate Christchurch – *Brian Price*

Central New Brighton (Rawhiti School in the making) Christchurch– *Liz Weir*

Pegasus Bay Christchurch - *Roger Hornblow*

Hampden Street School Nelson – *Don McLean*

Tahunanui School Nelson – *Barbara Bowen*

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Upper Moutere School – *Todd Brodie, Julieanne Mc Dowell, Jaki Van Dijk*

Background

In late 2012 the latest 5YA entitlement of just under half a million dollars, (as opposed to the previous entitlement of just under ninety thousand) provided us with the ability to look way beyond the usual room ‘spruce up’ of the past and consider how best to develop our learning environment to cater for a changing curriculum and the ever changing way students access learning. The Ministry requirement to explore and include Modern Learning Environments

had to be considered as did our long term focus to improve student's engagement, student agency, students taking greater responsibility for their own learning. It was time to really start exploring the possibilities.

Being proactive, we had already employed the services of a new Property Management Company including an architect a year prior to our 5YA due date. We wanted to work with them to develop a long-term property plan for the school to try and overcome the piecemeal approach that was likely as we acquired relatively small amounts of funding to offset the ever increasing cost of upgrading our property. We were a little surprised that the Property Managers were hesitant to start on such a plan without knowing the sum allocated yet they did so and eventually provided us with a plan.

Desks had already begun to be removed. Some teachers were exploring different learning environments, employing whatever alternate furnishings they could lay their hands on, the floor, low tables /kneelers, leaners, bean bags, and the like. Various group/ shared learning areas were becoming the major option in the learning spaces however there were still places for individuals to undertake their learning. Students were increasingly asked about their learning environments and what they believed worked best for them. With the unexpected allocation of 5YA we could really start asking the staff what this meant for them.

Staff jumped at the opportunity, there was no hesitation that this was an opportunity that should be embraced and they were keen to explore collaborative teaching and learning and how that may look in our school context. A plan was developed to explore the potential which would ultimately inform the development of a property plan to complement our needs and wants over the next 6- 12 months.

At the time of applying for my sabbatical we were still in the physical building phase but by the time my sabbatical came we were now 'living' in the spaces and collaborative teaching and learning was a reality.

The relatively short term ongoing evolution escalated by the remodelling of our learning spaces had been enlightening and exciting but it also been scary as it challenged what we had always done. Due to the new environment we were able to more readily explore further a teaching and learning style that we had been developing over several years.

This change however came at a cost. A proportion of our school community, even though it may have been a minority, were loudly voicing their opposition to the change. Why had a high functioning school radically adopted this new (or was it old...think open plan) untried approach? This occurred despite what we had thought was effective communication throughout the process. We had kept parents informed, sharing research, beliefs and understanding and building on previous initiatives that had proven successful. We did this through newsletters, shared plans and meetings including guest speakers and the like.

The team were stoic, professional and committed to ensure the students in our school had the most effective teaching and learning programme that we could provide but the opposition, the underlying negativity wore at us all.

The challenges we faced, along with a conversation had during a visit to a school in Christchurch determined that I wanted to refocus my sabbatical on just one aspect. The teachers.

The focus of my sabbatical changed to look simply at the teachers, especially in my own school: their experience and understanding of how it is to be working in open collaborative spaces; what it means to be collaborative; what is working; what is not and what possible solutions/ developments do they see as possible going forward.

We know that effect-size change is greatest when leadership is involved in professional learning but as a non- teaching Principal I have not experienced daily, front-line challenge of living through the change as the classroom teachers have; so what is it like for them?

My sabbatical has provided me this time. Also while researching prior to finalising our property plans we visited a number of schools to glean as much as possible from them. Something that struck me on several occasions was the turn-over of staff in some schools. One relatively new school shared that the turn-over was due to teachers not ‘enjoying’ the collaborative teaching experience despite being excellent single-cells teachers.

Methodology

Regrettably on most visits to schools I usually was hosted by the Principal and finding the opportunities to speak to teachers face to face was not always possible; I understand this. I have been fortunate to have had a number of teachers who have been willing to share their thoughts via email and these largely make up the quotes below.

I had many questions I wanted to investigate but I took the advice of a well-respected colleague and narrowed my questions to the following four.

What is Collaboration?

“Collaborative teaching is combining differing, abilities, strengths, vision and personalities to best create a learning environment and culture that meets the individual child’s needs both academically and socially”

“Making joint decisions about all aspect of the classroom programme, planning, implementation and assessment.”

“Ongoing daily discussions about teaching and learning, problem solving.”

“Teaching together and separately, supporting each other.”

“Together providing the best learning opportunities for the students.”

“Working with others to achieve a shared goal; to facilitate the development of a learning community where everyone is the both learner and teacher.”

“It goes beyond just the collaboration between teachers. It is at its best when it involves everyone who is part of the learning community. This includes teachers, teacher aides, other staff, caregivers and most importantly the students themselves. This process is definitely prompted and facilitated by the teacher but is greatly enriched by each new person that contributes.”

“Making sure that everyone who works with children during their day understands the goals for learning.”

“A conscientious effort to develop the home/school partnership by sharing the learning” both in the immediate future and immediate past.”

Observations/ points to note:

- Early on individual staff were asked to draw what their collaborative teaching and learning space would look like. Comparing these somewhat tentative drawings with the comments above shows a growth in understanding and knowledge as well as a growth in confidence in self, a clarity in belief and a purpose or direction for going forward.
- In class collaboration is seen holistically; between, teachers, support staff and students. This was made clear to me during a visit to a school in Christchurch. When I questioned a staff member about their schools “Power of Three”. The staff member quickly said that they did not believe that was the working model anymore. It now is the “Power of Five” growing to include the two support staff working alongside the three teachers in the shared space.
- Involvement of parents in the collaboration is also key. Teachers need to ensure communication with parents is not hindered by the fact that more teachers are working alongside their child throughout the day. Parents must see the strength of having a greater skill set working with their children and this can easily be lost if the teacher they make contact with does not have the knowledge of their child’s progress at hand. I have heard of some creative solutions to this. My belief is that teachers need to be constantly talking and reflecting on all the children, so everyone has a working knowledge of the student’s achievements in their space. This can be achieved relatively easily in our two teacher spaces. We would need to adopt different approaches if our spaces were double this.
- Communication is paramount. Making time for everyone to share is a must. Establishing an agreed expectation that determines when and how this is going to occur ensures everyone buys in and is accountable. My team visited schools in Christchurch on my return from sabbatical and saw examples of this shared understanding. This is something we are keen to develop both across the school as well as within the specific learning spaces.

- Some have questioned how a teacher can get to know so many students in a learning space. I have been impressed from my own observations as to how this can be achieved. To date our largest number of students to teachers has been 57:2. Again communication is the key, ensuring there are set times to talk about students. Teachers then need to have the ability to be flexible and make necessary changes on the hop.
- Cheryl Doig uses the analogy of a ‘Mousse’ for Collaboration; the blending of several ideas or concepts into one that is not able to be separated or returned to the original parts - an idea to be further explored.

What is working well, what are the positives from working collaboratively?

“Individual teaching practice is lifted through peer reflection, discussions and on the fly mentoring/adjusting in a supportive way – iron sharpens iron.”

“Developing new skills as teacher’s expertise is modelled and practiced.”

“Individual interests can be explored further and developed within the programme.”

“The input of two teachers means OTJs and next step learning for individual students.”

“Having the ability to share in the joy and the frustrations.”

“The ability to work with small groups of students in workshop type setting knowing you will not be interrupted.”

“Trust is built between teachers, we are on the same path, and it isn’t frightening to ask for help and honest about where you struggle. It makes you feel like you can achieve anything when you have someone on your side with the same goal as you.”

“Sharing strengths builds greater strength across the class; positively effects teacher moral, student success.”

“Finding teams that work together is like gold- precious and should be looked after!”

“We both like working closely with another teacher. We have found two brains are far better than one for absolutely everything when it comes to running a class programme.”

“The advantages of being able to divide up the workload... we divide up the tasks that aren’t enhanced by collaboration, such as putting away reading books.”

“We find that with both of us working on a task, like report writing, we produce an end result that accurately reflects our combined view of a child.”

“Quicker/ more efficient planning, sharing the workload.”

“Two teachers for each child, being able to connect with learners.”

“Two minds to remember everything!”

“One teacher can react/ act on a situation immediately while the other covers the learning in class.”

Observations/ points to note:

- The strength of two or more teachers is a consistent positive response to working collaboratively. In doing so you have the input of two plus professionals
 - into class and individual programmes
 - sharing their strengths/ knowledge/ abilities/ passions
 - providing ongoing constructive feedback
 - providing immediate Professional learning
 - responding and reporting to parents needs
 - responding more readily to Special needs/ Behaviour issues
 - “Sharing the load”
- Having more than one teacher allows for greater flexibility in teaching approaches. This enables more effective ways of facilitating learning often in a larger space
- With the employment of a Provisionally Registered Teacher in a collaborative space, working alongside their Tutor teacher, seamless more effective mentoring achievable. With planning and assessment shared as well as completing other school wide documentation together, the tutor teacher is not ‘doubling’ up, or required to find time to check; it is just part of what they do together.

What have been the negatives... what has been difficult?

“The only negatives have been the attitudes and beliefs of some parents.”

“There have been teething problems that we have navigated through rather than difficulties resulting from negatives.”

“Different strengths and weaknesses, which can also be seen as a positive.”

“Different organisational skills?”

“Outside groups observing us when we are still new to collaboration and don’t have all the answers”

“Probably the most difficult was the first couple of months working closely with another teacher. We found that working was not so much a process of adapting to each other’s way of doing things but was more about developing a shared pedagogy and joint approach to running a class programme.”

“Initially we spent a lot of time discussing everything in great detail so that there could be no confusion. Hours were spent communicating; this was often frustrating as we felt that we weren’t being very productive at times. Having said that, this time was not wasted as it allowed things to generally run smoothly and meant that we were able to give consistent messages to the children and their parents.”

“Things like report writing and learning conferences are quite a drain, we write the reports together and are both present at each child’s learning conference. The time spent on these things is essentially doubled from a single cell class of 28 children through to our MLE of 56 children. At this point in time we still feel that it is important for us both to be fully involved with every child’s report and learning conference, in the future we may come up with a more time efficient approach.”

Observations/ points to note:

- Allowing the time to get to know each other both as individuals and as professionals and developing Trust, knowing that this is going to need greater time to communicate and share initially is a must.
- Ultimately to aid this process teachers need to be given opportunities to observe and talk with other teachers already experiencing working collaboratively. Although each team will have their own strengths and weaknesses, I believe a lot of anxiety and time can be saved by funding professional learning prior to setting up a collaborative space. By sharing, teachers can scaffold on others’ frameworks and try to navigate away from tensions.
- Establishing shared beliefs, shared expectations and shared ways of working is necessary from the outset to try and develop cohesive effective teaching and learning where everyone feels ‘safe.’
- Parent buy in has been a real cause of angst in a number of schools where a collaborative approach has been introduced into a well-established ‘successful’ school structure. Parent Education prior to the introduction needs to be carefully developed. In our own case we thought we had provided considerable information in a variety of ways but we still met with considerable back-lash once the structure of the school was changed. As can often be the case, the minority became the loudest heard and as the year evolved it became obvious that a number of parent/student issues were too readily attributed or perceived to be the result collaborative environment which from experience we knew was not the case.
- Recently Cheryl Doig suggested a more structured approach based on personality types to try and engage with all members of the community. Hindsight is great!
- Teaching Staff need to be protected, reassured and given ongoing professional learning opportunities to enable them to transition confidently and professionally.
- The comment on increased workload regarding reporting to parents is not the case for our team. Shared report writing and a slight tweak to our Student-led Conferences has meant the time and effort spent has decreased rather increased.

How can you minimise these negatives?

“The key to minimalising the negatives seems to be communication, communication, communication and a large degree of flexibility. We have many conversations during the day as things are continually evolving. In a single cell classroom the teacher changes their mind about the programme without needing to confer with anyone else, making autonomous decisions isn’t advisable in a shared teaching space as it is important to make sure all teachers are in agreement.”

“The noise and the busyness in an MLE is just a fact of life. Collaboration is a noisy business, we have tried many different approaches to reducing noise levels and have come to the conclusion that an MLE will be different to a single cell class and the best thing that we can do is adapt.”

“The whole collaborative teaching thing is still fairly new to us, no doubt it will be a continually evolving process and we may well view it quite differently a year from now.”

Observations/ points to note:

- “Communication, communication, communication” I think this sums it up. Also a shared understanding and beliefs across everyone involved in the space is the key to successful collaboration along with an honest, respectful and professional approach to sharing concerns openly.

Where to next for Upper Moutere?

To keep developing what we are already doing, constantly looking at more effective ways we can provide an engaging, effective teaching and learning environment where everyone “Strives for Excellence”

We have now appointed three teachers to our collaborative teaching teams however when we started initially all of the team were experienced single classroom practitioners of 11 to 35 plus years. One school shared that they now hold an ‘Open Day’ for intending applicants so they are aware of exactly what environment they will be joining. This approach should reduce the turnover that other schools have experienced. I have tried a more informal approach by inviting applicants to visit however this proved to be a little disruptive as I did not limit this to a set day or days; something more manageable needs to be considered.

Continue to make ourselves available for other schools to visit and critique, encouraging them to look at the pedagogy as well as the environment, as often the latter can be readily be the focus. Continue to work with UC Education Plus to provide a place where their students can experience a collaborative environment as part of their training.

To develop greater collaboration in our senior area which is currently two single cell classrooms. This is to be achieved while still retaining the special character of our year 7/8 class as this is a community expectation.

Our Upper Moutere Curriculum needs to be reviewed and updated to include our evolving beliefs of effective teaching and learning, incorporating our collaborative approach and structures to develop and sustain this.

Conclusion

On the whole the teachers working in collaborative teaching positions who I did get to ‘talk’ with, either face to face or via email, are very positive about their evolving roles.

Yes it is daunting to begin with as teachers are on a steep learning curve, not only getting to know and develop a relationship with students but also another teacher or teachers who may have differing beliefs, ways of working, planning, expectations of students, of self, of the job.

We have been fortunate to have had the opportunity and support from other schools who have allowed us to observe and ask questions. We have had some structure and guidance on which staff can base their practice. Visits to school both here in Nelson and in Auckland prior to embarking on the approach and just recently to Christchurch after we have been living it for the past twelve months have been inspiring, reassuring, reflective and vital to enable us to undertake a positive considered approach to build on and sustain.

What is crucial for collaboration to be successful; “Like Gold”; is that the individual teachers *want* to work this way and the right ‘mix’ is achieved.

I have been extremely fortunate that my team decided from the outset that together we would meet this challenge. I believe that more than ever experienced teachers moving into collaborative teaching and learning need to be nurtured. Ongoing budgeted support and professional learning with opportunities for open, honest sharing across schools must be fostered. This should become more readily achievable as more schools develop a more collaborative school environment.