

PRINCIPAL SABBATICAL REPORT

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OMAKERE SCHOOL

Term 3 2006

FOCUS: Localisation and Globalisation In Education

Introduction

I had been a Teaching Principal at the time of application for seven years and a rural school teacher for quite a few more years than that. I was now spending more hours on the job and sourcing motivating professional development opportunities for myself and my staff and less on having a life beyond my career. I do enjoy the challenges offered to a Teaching Principal and resent the assumption by some that non teaching roles are “Real Principals”. Rural schools can be hot beds of innovation with small classes, experienced teachers, supportive families, positive learners and the flexibility to try things out without causing disruption to the whole school. The downside for those fortunate to be involved in such a school is the possibility of occupational ‘burnout’. Where larger schools have the bonus of a larger staff to spread the load rural school teachers and Principals rapidly become ‘Jacks of all Trades’ out of necessity most of the time.

So after completing a degree upgrade in one year as well as Teaching and leading learning I was searching for something different. I presumed rural teachers in other nations must get together as occurs at the Rural and Teaching Principal’s Conference here in New Zealand and with a few keywords in my arsenal I found the Interskola website. A few emails to the UK and the revelation that attendees came from a variety of European nations including Finland and I was on a mission. At almost every conference or seminar involving school improvement as a topic, Finland’s educational successes are always touted as what we should aspire to. However I had never received a satisfactory answer as to how high equity and high quality were both achieved and where was New Zealand falling behind in this goal. Whilst attending the 2005 RTP Conference, the lack of applicants for the initial round of sabbatical leave was publicised and NZEI delegates encouraged Principals to “Use it or lose it!” So this motivated me to put a proposal together.

I had several areas of interest apart from attending Interskola and 10 weeks was to allow me time to:

- visit France (I was teaching French as an International Language to my senior class at the time)
- set up some points of contact for myself, staff and students with schools overseas
- talk with other school leaders about the success or otherwise of involvement in Cluster Contracts
- look at the impact of the new draft curriculum on my 3 teacher school as the document was then due out in Term 2.

What seemed a reasonable proposal for the timeframe was carefully put together and I was fortunate to be one of the successful applicants.

Interskola 2006 – Ennistymon, County Clare, Ireland.

Interskola is a conference held annually in northern Europe. It runs for a week and most European attendees can get their costs met through application for Comenius funding – a huge resource available to those members of the European Community. The venue for 2006 was the Falls Hotel in Ennistymon, on the west coast of southern Ireland, a picturesque spot. Delegates represented all levels of education from pre school to tertiary and held positions of responsibility in their institutions or were heavily involved in research involving rural and remote schools. The only representation beyond Europe in 2006 were 3 tutors from the University of Victoria in Canada, a teacher from the United States and myself from New Zealand.

A strong network was already established at Interskola with many of those attending regularly or involved in well recognised research into rural and remote schools. Considerable time was allocated for discussion about educational practices and initiatives in the various nations throughout the week. The focus of attention for those interested in school improvement and quality of educational outcomes lay with Finland and New Zealand. Hence I found myself unexpectedly making an informal presentation during the week too.

The issue of equity was discussed and it was generally acknowledged that Finland led the way in this respect and that matching their achievements in this area was not likely to be matched by any of the attending nations due to national and local government policy.

Equity in Finland has been achieved as a consequence of government policy to make education free for all, in the full sense of the word: books, fees, tuition, outings and meals. Those attending from Finland were very outspoken about the high esteem in which teachers are held in their country and how some time ago it had been acknowledged that the quality teachers in the system were in the state system. Very few private schools exist and ones that those I spoke to could recall offered alternative curriculum and delivery such as the Steiner schools. Entry to teacher training was highly competitive and qualifications were at Masters level. Parents, community and the education system held their teachers in high esteem and were highly supportive of their importance to the nation's future.

Other factors contributing to equity were more to do with geographic and environmental factors. Long cold nights in winter and long days in summer where holidays are scheduled, lead to considerable involvement of the family in the education of the child. Families valued having the local school for students to attend and perceived that larger schools, as NZ was aiming for at that stage, was not necessarily better for student outcomes. Spending most of their educational life at home and being able to attend a local primary and high school encouraged close ties between home and school.

Even attendees from Finland looked up to NZ when it came to quality of programmes however and all envied the creativity of NZ teachers and the less prescriptive nature of our curriculum which they saw as encouraging this.

I found it interesting, in the informal discussions held throughout the week, to identify the significant common threads that existed across the various nations: the global economy, retaining local culture and language, resourcing and sustaining small schools.

Many European countries had much later start dates for children entering the education system. The fact that many NZ schools enrol children on their fifth birthday left many in awe and prompted many questions about how this was accommodated by

teachers but at the same time they considered this an ideal way to meet individual needs of students at such an early stage of their schooling.

The theme of the conference was Localisation and Globalisation in Education. In simple terms discussions and research presented related to how we can retain what is important to us in our region or nation whilst preparing our students to live and work in a global community. Maintaining small local schools was seen as crucial by those attending.

Second language learning was one of the topics covered and the nations having the greatest success with this introduced second languages very early in the primary schooling of their students. Most considering intermediate age too late if optimal fluency and inflection are to be achieved.

I had expected ICT to feature strongly in discussions but this was not the case. Many saw the move to voice activated software a foregone conclusion and that the need to expect high levels of performance with keyboarding unrealistic. The cost of voice over text calls also meant that the texting culture we see in NZ is not evident in Europe. English did appear to be considered the language of communication in the future and not in the pure form we use it in at present. Some nations were making strong moves to retain their native languages this was particularly evident in countries such as Finland, Ireland and Wales. All Irish teachers must be speakers of Gaelic. Wales has areas where schools, not dissimilar in approach to our Kuras, are being fostered.

So after a week in Ireland including visits to the Arran Islands, the Burren and Bunratty Castle it was back on the plane to London.

Rest and Relaxation?

Arriving in London, after the worst of the heatwave fortunately, I was to find myself very busy attending shows, museums, walking through parks and historic buildings like the Globe Theatre, visiting markets and dining at a variety of ethnic restaurants. Spending the opposite end of the accommodation scale curling up on a mattress in my daughters flat in Wimbledon was an interesting experience. In no time at all I had the London Underground sorted as well as overland transfers and cheap deals on the national network. This saw me head off to Brighton, Norwich and a much shorter trip to Hampton Court. All of this saw me on my feet for at least nine hours of every day and only one of those days was for shopping! In between I managed two midweek breaks to Europe.

My first visit was to Amsterdam. Rest definitely happened here. Sailing along the canals, strolling along the quaint streets, Anne Frank's house and inhaling massive amounts of second hand smoke during the process which had me enjoying the deepest sleeps of my life! All too soon I was back on the rapid transit train to Schiphol Airport.

The second break was to Paris via the Eurostar. I am sure Parisians never work. Even an ice cream shop near Notre Dame touted as a 'must do' in the tourist guides was closed for their summer holidays! I couldn't quite see the same happening in NZ somehow. I was surprised how well my basic French got me by over the few days I spent in the delightful Mouffetarde area of Paris. The Palace of Versailles, The Louvre and The Eiffel Tower will be sights I will long remember along with gun toting soldiers and quaint patisserie.

London was to have the last word with the terrorist threat raising its ugly head again and security in the extreme being invoked at Heathrow Airport. At least by the time I

left I could take a book on board as well as my small handbag. The free toiletries supplied on board for passengers ran out before Hong Kong!

Cluster Contracts

On my return I saw the error of my ways in allocating my time for my leave. Five weeks left and so much to do. This part of my proposal was not anywhere near as comprehensive as I had hoped it would have been. However I did manage to speak to a number of principals, ICT and literacy leaders from a number of schools in my region. Having been involved in several long term contracts myself I'd observed some schools making substantial gains and being very positive about their experience whilst for others the opposite was true and gains were short lived. What characterised schools who gained and sustained whole school improvement?

- A motivated Principal who supported the lead teacher if they were not one themselves
- Respect for the facilitator of the contract (based on their enthusiasm, knowledge and experience coupled with the ability to communicate this to participants in a clear and succinct manner)
- Willingness of all staff to come on board
- Ability of Principal/lead teacher to support and encourage those less confident
- Having clear goals entering the contract for areas needing development
- Using the contract to create practical solutions for their own situation
- Retention of key staff involved in the contract in the long term, to bring about an established change in the school culture
- A commitment by individual staff members to ongoing professional development rather than school directed.
- Schools saw the financial backing provided by some contracts as a means to achieving school goals not just as a means of free professional development
- A culture of sharing of ideas and strategies amongst staff and in some instances amongst schools.

Curriculum Draft

In my absence the draft curriculum arrived in the school – a little later than my proposal had anticipated. With my staff well aware of the content of my proposal they scheduled in a teacher only day before the end of the term so I could facilitate the discussion around the document with some assistance from Massey University staff. The day was informative and thought provoking and issues were raised from differing perspectives.

Relievers were concerned about how the document might impact on teaching practice quite differently between schools and how that may impact on them if they were employed on a short term basis in several schools.

Teaching staff were pleased at the reduction in achievement objectives and the curriculum being collated into one document. The Key competencies appear to fit well with our current attitudes and values programmes with a slight variation in some of the vocabulary used.

Teaching staff did however find a lack of clarity particularly with the Learning Languages area. Currently we deliver Te Reo (whole school) and French as an International Language (senior school only). Try as we might we could not find a clear

statement which showed if Te Reo is considered to be an “additional language”. If it is, what happens to those families who wish their children to learn another language? We decided to consult with our community on the draft document and in this area there was a 3 way split between Te Reo/French/Chinese as a preferred language for their children to be learning at primary level. Making a decision in future as to what is offered could be interesting.

A concern was also raised with regard to implementation the Arts curriculum for which there is so little long term professional development for teachers, in what are highly specialized fields of music, dance and visual art development. Most felt drama was within the capabilities of most staff with peer support.

The vision statement presented in the document provided intense debate over interpretation of the characteristics of our young people of the future. Are schools going to develop their own expectations for these or will the Ministry provide more prescriptive detail for us to aspire to?

Advice for future applicants

Don't over commit your time. Especially if traveling overseas. Things are likely take longer than you anticipate and other options that you want to take advantage of are also going to arise.

For those in need of 'R and R' – it isn't easy returning to the job at the same pace you left it!

It would be helpful if the Ministry list of data sent out to all successful applicants contained an indication of what others were focusing. (I would have been in touch with Peter Hansen, who was also looking at the quality and equity issue in Finland, earlier if I had known and it may have made a difference to what we both achieved in this field.

Timeframes and organization at the time of applying, can end up different than planned due to circumstances beyond your control especially if your leave is scheduled later in the year.

Conclusion

So what did the Sabbatical experience provide?

- The opportunity to reflect on my career and set new goals in that respect
- The ability to see the need for balance in my life
- Opportunities for dialogue with people working in similar situations in different countries
- Time to take part in professional discussions without the worry of what was piling up in the office
- The opportunity to participate in rich learning experiences for me
- Senior management experience for staff in my absence
- Links with several schools and colleagues in Finland, Poland, England, Ireland and Wales.
- The chance to practice what I preach to my students every day and that is “To go out and take advantage of the wonderful opportunities that are out there and give each one your best shot.”
- Insights into what contributes to high quality/high equity education

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