

Primary Principals Sabbatical Leave Scheme

Sabbatical Report

Marlborough Quality Schools Project Review & Reflection

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- Eric Shaw, previously Principal at Spotswood Primary, New Plymouth and Bruce Hammonds, Educational Adviser.
- To the schools that allowed time to meet with me to review their school's involvement in the Quality Schools Project.

Introduction

'To research, reflect, review and report on how the Quality Schools Project has impacted on the quality of teaching and learning both at Whitney Street School and other participating Marlborough Schools'.

In particular...

1. *What have been the key elements or trends in individual schools contributing to quality teaching and learning that have been sustained since joining the project?*
2. *Are there identifiable elements and trends across the participating schools?*
3. *Are there examples of innovative practices that could be shared with others?*
4. *To report back to the local schools initially and also use the information to fulfil the reporting requirements of the sabbatical leave provision.*

Background Information

The Marlborough Quality Schools Project had its beginnings in 2000 and was further developed in 2001. A group of teachers /principals lead by the local Schools Adviser, Darren Gammie, went on a road trip to Taranaki to visit schools who were exploring the idea of 'quality' through innovative practices. In particular Spotswood Primary stood out as a school that was 'walking the talk'.

Darren at the time stated he was "impressed with two things. Firstly the consistency I saw at Spotswood Primary. This was in relation to management, teaching and learning practices. It seemed that the school had managed to capture the fine blend between school wide expectations and individual teacher creativity. The result was a potent mix for quality outcomes for children. The second thing was the depth of dialogue and discussion amongst those participating in the trip"

The road trip and further discussion lead to the ideas forming the basis for the QS initiative:

- Quality outcomes must be based on 'doing less better'.
- Dialogue and discussion are foundational to real staff development
- Shared commitment to a common goal provides the boundaries within which quality development can be fostered
- School wide consistency of basic management and teaching practices is fundamental in the development of a school culture which supports quality
- Leadership is crucial to quality development

In 2001 Eric Shaw was invited to Marlborough to share his 'story' from Spotswood School. Whitney Street used a teacher only day and all teaching and support staff along with two Board members attended a day workshop. This provided the catalyst for our Whitney Street journey.

Eric promoted a model of quality that appealed to our school and we agreed that we would pursue the quality schools ethos. There was great value in getting the buy-in from all staff through attending the PD session together and then reflecting on our own school practices and values.

Of immediate focus was the physical environment of the school both inside and outside. The school staff along with a supportive BOT set about making changes to the physical environment to make it an attractive place to promote quality teaching and learning. Over three years we saw all classrooms refurbished, the building of a large resource room, attractive entryways into the school and an increasing amount of money in our budget being used to support curriculum.

The five strands of QS were set as:

- **A1 Standards**- promoting and valuing student achievements in their books and in the display of work. Creating a set of base standards.
- **Good Choices** – the behaviour strand. Seeking to encourage students to take responsibility for their own behaviour and learning to make good choices.
- **Goal Setting** – for staff and students. Sharing learning goals with students and encouraging them to set and strive for their own.
- **Focused Teaching and Learning**- A range of strategies to promote this strand:
 - Teach what is important
 - Share goals with students
 - Give clear instructions
 - Focus on learning needs of students
 - Do less better
 - Display the goals for everyone to see
 - Clear focused strategies
 - Model behaviours and procedures
 - Reflect and prepare for each day
 - Enjoy and celebrate successes
- **Team Work**. A focus on the relationships within the school. Staff/staff, Principal/Staff, Staff/Students, Board/Staff, School/Community, Staff/Parents
 - Enhancing good communication
 - Shared goals
 - Empowering others
 - Recognition and appreciation
 - Trusting and supporting
 - Collaboration / shared planning
 - Emphasis on modelling
 - Focused and planned meetings
 - Doing the 'Fun Stuff' together
 - Humour

Sabbatical Activity & Findings

Like other schools in the project Whitney Street has developed its own process and procedures in pursuing the QS goals. Over 2001 & 2002 all teaching staff had the opportunity to repeat the visits to schools in Wanganui and Taranaki. These visits provided the catalyst for further development in our own school and we have continued to refine our ideas and thinking over subsequent years. It has been important to re-visit our core beliefs and actions every couple of years both to sustain progress and to induct new staff who were not part of the original project.

Through a regional evaluation some of the recorded project achievements have included:

- Quality focus-quality moved to the centre of school practice. Debate and dialogue about what quality is and what it is not emerged. Shared understandings were created. Children began to absorb the 'language of quality'.
- Educational partnerships-created with some great practitioners and educational thinkers around New Zealand
- School visits between participating schools-these saw many teachers taking the opportunity to get out of their schools and into those of others. Teachers reported that they were affirmed, challenged, and took away good teaching ideas.
- The Taranaki Tour- over three years 70 teachers were able to take part in this professional development opportunity
- Whole School development-the project has taken schools through some fairly distinctive phases. These have included environmental change, shared language, systems refinement, consistent practises and the drive towards school distinctiveness. Central to this development has been the notion that a whole school approach is critical.
- Over the last few years Marlborough Schools have hosted over a hundred teachers/principals as we have shared our story to a wider audience.
- School distinctiveness-the QS project has not sought to be conforming in its approach to quality. Rather to the contrary it encouraged diversity of approach. What does quality look, feel, sound like in your school? The answer largely has been a reflection of the mix of principal/teachers/students/parents that make up the school community. For some it has meant collaborative learning, others thinking skills and others relationships.

Other Initiatives

- The local Principals' Association have promoted aspects of Quality Schools through their annual conference over the last three years.
- A series of Glasser courses have been promoted in the area.

- A Marlborough pilot project around the proposed Key Competencies was undertaken in 2006. Most of the schools involved in the QS project were also involved with the KC project
- Three school principals (Whitney Street, Springlands & Fairhall) contributed to the digital stories on Leadspace (www.leadspace.govt.nz)

As part of my sabbatical activity I visited 5 of the original 7 schools in the project. In two cases there has been a change of principal. What is clearly evident from my interviews with school principals is that seven years on, while the journey may have taken slightly different routes, there is still a strong commitment to pursue the quality schools ethos. The effect has been strongest in those schools that pursue whole school development and have revisited their core beliefs and values. For some the route has been slightly longer as they firstly had to focus on things such as building staff relationships before they could begin to encourage positive change.

Principals reported that involvement in the QS schools project had:

- sharpened the focus on teaching and learning
- encouraged quality professional dialogue amongst staff around teaching and learning
- improved the quality of relationships in the school between the various stake holders
- enabled schools to set high standards and expectations
- encouraged high standards in the presentation of the environment inside and outside classrooms
- enabled them to align key aspects of the Best Evidence Synthesis with their school practice
- recognised a bigger awareness of their role as a leader

Teachers spoken to report that for them being involved with QS had:

- provided opportunities for powerful professional development experiences
- having a clearer focus in their management of curriculum delivery
- allowed the opportunity for shared professional dialogue and discussion around things that make a difference for their students
- strengthened relationships in their workplace
- more opportunities for shared leadership
- linked staff appraisal to school wide goals
- enabled teachers to develop their own quality beliefs that are linked to their school's mission statement.
- enabled a greater focus on student needs (Quality v Quantity)
- empowered them to help drive the school vision

Implications

There have been a number of 'barriers' to overcome. My own personal experiences at Whitney Street reflect some of those identified in an article in the NZ Principal magazine by Darren Gammie (June 2002).

'Schools are not very good at letting go' Schools including Whitney Street found that initially the QS goals were being pursued along with the huge range of other expectations with curriculum reform. It took time to learn that some things had to go. This was a learning experience for principals (quite steep for some!) and staff but as they refined their own school goals and worked out what was important to them, then focusing on key changes became easier.

'We may never get past the obvious' Initially schools focused on the visuals such as classroom and school environment along with presentation in books and display of students work. Quality conversations began to occur around what teaching and management practises were required to support effective outcomes. This dialogue continues to provide the focus for school development.

'We will lose our focus' Being involved in the QS project has enabled schools to maintain the momentum in continuing down the quality path. By having a clear focus it has enabled them to filter out what is important for their school.

'It will get too hard' Perhaps the biggest issue for schools has been staff turnover. In two schools about a third of the staff changed in one year and in two (about to become three) there has been a change of principal. Schools report that because their quality focus has been clearly articulated often teachers applying for positions are already up to speed with how the school operates and how they can contribute it. Principals new to positions report 'business as usual' in terms of the quality ethos. The re-visiting of key beliefs mentioned earlier will be a critical activity to ensure that systems are sustained.

'Compliance will stifle intuition' Despite the 'self managing school' concept principals report a significant amount of compliance activity which can take them away from their core business as a leader of teaching and learning. Again this is about having quality systems that will minimise the impact of compliance on core business. Teachers can regain control over the teaching craft not pursue a compliance model.

Conclusions

- Schools need to regularly revisit and refine their core beliefs.
- Quality professional dialogue is an integral and vital ingredient to school success
- Involvement of the school community is important to success in achieving quality outcomes
- The schools involved in the QS project feel they are much more confident in implementing the new curriculum because many of the processes they will need to go through to do so are part of their current practice
- There is increasingly a focus in the schools on research based teaching. Using data to drive teaching practice.

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