

Building Learning Power

- a strategy to deliver the key competencies/21st C Skills

Sabbatical Report (2nd May – 8th July 2016)

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Executive summary

The Building Learning Power model provides an excellent starting point for any school wishing to embark on the journey to fully engage with the 'front end' of the Zealand curriculum and purposefully help young people to become better learners and to develop the skills and dispositions they need to be successful now and in the future.

BLP has strong connection with other important research, Growth Mindsets (Dweck), Multiple Intelligences (Gardner), Visible learning (Hattie), The power of Language (Langer) to name a few and parallels the ideas in Costa's Habits of Mind.

While the model offers an "off the shelf" initiative that school can start with, what is critically important is the cultural change that needs to happen within a school and within classrooms. For schools to truly achieve the aims of BLP they need to develop their own version. Perhaps the greatest use of the BLP material is as a resource to start the debate within a school community, and as support material.

The most important thing is that schools make a start, it doesn't matter what you call the habits/skills/dispositions, the important thing is that you start. Almost every school has in its mission statement fine words about developing these wider skills but the assumption is they will just happen.

"Dispositions to learning should be key performance indicators of the outcomes of schooling. Many teachers believe that, if achievement is enhanced, there is a ripple effect to these dispositions. However such a belief is not defensible. Such dispositions need planned interventions" John Hattie, Visible learning (As quotes in The learning Powered School)

Decide on a common language, embedded it through all aspects of the school and make it a normal part of daily conversations.

Start explicitly identifying the habits/dispositions, name them when they are evidenced in the classroom (or not) and plan explicit interventions that develop the specific learning habit. We need to accept that pedagogy is not neutral, the way we teach and interact with our students has a significant impact on what they learn.

"You can teach Macbeth, and get good exam results, in a way that stretches students' abilities to imagine, collaborate and question, And you can also teach Macbeth, and get good exam results, in a way that makes students more passive, docile, and dependent." The Learning Powered school, P38

It is time to bring the 'hidden curriculum' out into the light and give it the attention it deserves.

Purpose

The purpose of the sabbatical was to increase my understanding of the Building Learning Power initiative based on Guy Claxton's work and how it is being implemented in UK schools. I am particularly interested in how well embedded it has become in the schools that have been involved for several years.

Background and rationale

In New Zealand we are seeing an increasing number of schools grappling with the New Zealand curriculum document, in particular unpacking the 'front end' of the document and looking at alternative ways of delivering the curriculum. Many schools are quite radically changing the way they deliver the curriculum and in some what the curriculum actually encompasses.

At Pakuranga College we have been on this journey as well and have been unpacking what the Key Competencies really mean and how we might teach them. However as a traditional secondary school in a conservative community we cannot simply change what we do without fully understanding the impact and being convinced it will produce better outcomes for our students.

There is considerable literature available regarding Guy Claxton's work some of which I have read but there is a lot more I had not had time to engage with fully. As a school we have been significantly influenced by his work and use many of the ideas. We have not gone fully into his Building Learning Power model preferring to develop our own.

This sabbatical was the opportunity to become more familiar with his work, see it in action in schools in the UK with the intention of deciding whether we should continue on the path we are moving down or if we should more closely use the BLP model.

A secondary outcome became simply finding out more about the UK education system. In fact to really assess the effectiveness of BLP and how it would translate to our context I needed to have some understanding of the context if was operating in in the UK.

Methodology

There were four stages to the sabbatical,

- One the initial stage –planning and start reading as well as attend a seminar run by Guy Claxton
- Two – the school visits

- Three- time with TLO and the development director Maryl Chambers discussing what I had seen in my school visits and my observation of the UK education system
- Four – more reading and then pulling the treads together and writing the report.

Findings

The UK Education System

While this wasn't the focus of the sabbatical it is impossible to look at a BLP within schools without trying to understand the context they work in. These are my observations, and are not necessarily a full or accurate representation of the system.

It appears that the system has been highly regulated/controlled centrally, the curriculum is very prescriptive and there is incredible pressure and accountability. The Ofsted reviews are used to punish and drive schools, the schools I saw (all successful) had banners out proclaiming their Ofsted rankings, it was plastered over all of their communications etc.

In most schools teachers were regularly graded using Ofsted criteria.

The schools were all about pressure to improving grades and get a good Ofsted review. Achievement data was gathered 5 -6 time a year and teacher and middle leaders were required to analyse it and have action plans to drive immediate improvements.

One head teacher commented that she didn't know of an outstanding school (Ofsted ranking) that didn't do at least 5 data dumps per year.

One positive is that the data was all value added, nationally value added data was accepted as being far more important than the raw final result. (one school I visited had two years ago been rated needing improvement by Ofsted, even though they had the best examination results in the area!)

The down side to value added data is gathering reliable baseline data. It appeared this came from year 6 SAT tests. Perhaps an indicator of where we will be at in a few years?

There appeared to be considerable political involvement in the system, the exam system is moving to a far more traditional content based model, much to the disappointment of many.

This pressure to improve results has lead schools to very tight systems with lots of 'quality assurance' (In NZ they would be seen as very draconian) ; For example every school had a detailed marking policy and there were quality assurance visits from senior staff to check that students books had been marked regularly and in accordance with the policy.

Standardised lesson planning templates were common (and checked on).

Some of the down side of the pressure that schools were under, is the reduction of school to just the things that happened in lesson time and what is in the exam. Co-curricular activities as we know them were limited and in most cases the staff were paid to do them.

The pressure on staff is intense and in one school the principal spoke of an annual staff turn over of staff of 25%! (every year)

School Funding Models

The UK government has been using a number of different models for schools, Free Schools, Studio Schools, Academies and multi academy trusts. While I didn't really have the time to fully understand all of these models the most common were the Academies and the Multi Academy Trusts. Most of the schools I visited were Academies and often the lead school the Multi Academy trust.

It appears that the education bureaucracy was based on Local educational Authorities who to a large extent were like our MoE , funding and resources all went through the LEA and they managed many things for the schools eg payroll, support services, infrastructure, etc.

The Academies are a lot like our Charter(partnership) schools they were given the resources directly from central government, including property funding and the ability to pay staff what they wanted. The big difference appeared to be that they didn't get curriculum freedom. The Free Schools appear to be a step further and they have no constraints. Although there is intense interest in how they will do, (I visited the first free school to be set up and their first cohort were coming up to GCSE exams – there was intense pressure for the results to be good)

The Academies have started to cluster and form Multi Academy Trusts to leverage the economies of scale around administration, HR, Payroll and the provision of PLD. Basically they set up a trust each school pays a percentage of its funding to the trust and the Trust provides support (leadership) for the schools. Usually there was an executive principal of the trust overseeing all of the schools, with a principal in each of the schools.

Just before I arrived in the UK it was reported that the government had said that all schools would be in Academies (excluding Free Schools and studio schools I assume) within the next couple of years.

Schools that were seen to be struggling are directed to join a Trust they become an academy but have to be 'sponsored' by one of the other (successful) schools in the trust. The sponsor school and the trust then become responsible for improving the struggling school.

The principals reported that in the early days of Academies there was a lot of extra funding when you became an Academy but that is being systematically reduced and most were looking for ways to save money.

Another significant aspect of the UK system is what appeared to be a major change in initial teacher education. It is no longer the preserve of the universities, many of the schools I visited were accredited initial teacher education providers in partnership with a university, but the schools were heavily involved in recruiting and training teachers.

Building Learning Power

The reading I have done has given me a far better understanding of the work and the strong links it has to other research. Eg Growth Mindsets (Dweck), Multiple Intelligences (Gardner), Visible learning (Hattie), The power of Language (Langer) to name a few. It also parallels the ideas in Costa's Habits of Mind.

There is a lot of material available to support schools and the UK schools get significant support from TLO. The TLO website has many resources that can be accessed for free, and they have consultant who work with schools.

One of the key messages, that I picked up from my readings and from Professor Claxton himself at the seminar I attended was that it doesn't really matter what name you give the skills/habits just get on with explicitly talking about them and teaching them. (It is easy to get caught up in an endless debate around the various names different researchers give to the skills/competencies/habits/dispositions without actually doing anything about them)

In Claxton's work he does recommend that in the latter stages of embedding the Learning Habits, schools should take ownership and define them for themselves. It was interesting that in most of the BLP schools I visited they were still simply using the material 'straight out of the box'. The one school who said that they have moved on beyond BLP had personalised the ideas and developed their own vocab, however a key part of it was simply another 'out of the box' commercial product.

The concept of using student voice hadn't occurred to most of the schools and where they were involving students it was at the end, not in the development of a personalised school vocab for learning.

The schools I visit all had a commitment to wanting to do more than just prepare students for examinations, they were committed to developing effective learners. (or as we might phrase it "to develop confident, connected, actively involved life long learners")

However in most cases, while I saw very good schools (most were rated outstanding by Ofsted) what they were doing in terms of BLP was mediocre at best. Some who though they

were doing a brilliant job, I thought were weak. Interestingly my thoughts were confirmed by Maryl Chambers from TLO.

While there was something to learn from each school there was not the 'knock out' example that would suggest we should copy.

Implications/ Conclusions

Observing the UK education system was extremely interesting, particularly in terms of the parallels that can be drawn to some of the changes that are happening in NZ and it will be interested to see how much is 'copied' by our politicians.

The opportunity to visit a range of successful school was invaluable in terms of the myriad of small ideas that I picked up and the reassurance that what is happening in New Zealand is as good or better than anything I saw.

The research around Building Learning Power has convinced me that this approach is right, but what is important is the underlying principles – having a common language of learning, explicitly name the habits when they are seen, explicitly teach the habits.

BLP is about a cultural change in schools, a journey that Pakuranga College has been on for the last 7 years. Our direction is compatible with the BLP model and we can easily transfer ideas across.

The BLP model provides some very good resources and ideas for the practical implementation, the "Teachers Palette" provides a good framework that we can use.

The literature provides good ideas (with resources available) around the vexing issue of how do you measure student progression.

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TLO – numerous resources from their website <http://www.tlold.co.uk> and <https://www.buildinglearningpower.com/product-category/secondary-cpd/>