

Introduction

One of the most interesting fascinations I have as an educational leader is how do you support teachers to become inspirational teachers so they transform the lives of their students. How as educational leaders do we do this? During my sabbatical I spent time reviewing current educational literature, reviewing selected initiatives at Epsom Normal Primary School where I am currently the principal, and dialoguing with other educational leaders from Samoa and Australia with a focus on ‘growing teachers into becoming inspirational teachers’. As a normal school, it is important that not only do we transform the lives of our students but that we also inspire our student teachers to grow into ‘inspirational teachers’.

Growing inspirational teachers

When transforming learning for students it is vital that school leaders have a future-focused vision for student learning. In recent years educational writers and researchers, both nationally and internationally (Bishop & Berryman, 2005; and Palmer, 2000), have argued that the essence of teaching is encapsulated in the essence of relationships between teachers and students. Whilst strongly acknowledging the importance of such relationships, of equal significance is the need for school leaders to develop teachers capable of creatively designing innovative learning programmes that will inspire students and generate high levels of enquiry and engagement (Giles & Cavanagh-Eyre, 2012).

Inspirational teachers demonstrate a preparedness to cultivate creativity and innovation (Gibbs, 2006). In New Zealand there are fine examples of inspirational teachers and Gibbs (2006) asserts that we have much to learn from these teachers of the past. Sylvia Ashton-Warner and Elwyn Richardson, for example, attempted new ways of teaching. These inspirational teachers continually reflected on their practice and cultivated a sense of relational connectedness. They demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy and were prepared to be innovative and take risks, even if this meant taking on the establishment. According to Gibbs (2006), inspirational teachers have a strong sense of purpose, and show eagerness to deal with the unknown and the unpredictable. To sustain inspirational teaching throughout the duration of their teaching careers, teachers need to be capable of developing meaningful relationships with their students and be driven by creativity (Gibbs, 2006).

Over the last two decades there has been increasing international interest in educational strengths-focused approaches. Strength-focused approaches are underpinned by holistic and humanistic imperatives; learning is embodied, relational and meaningful (Giles, 2011). Strength-focused, emancipatory and holistic approaches not only empower learners but also challenge deficit theories of education (Freire, 2003; Hooks, 2003). As teachers transform the learning for the students they too, evolve the school into a different way of ‘being’. Collaboratively staff work together generating thinking to create strategic revitalisation and change (Bushe, 1999; Cooperrider, Sorenson, Whitney & Yaegar, 2000; Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Elleven, 2007; Lopez & Louis, 2009, cited in Giles, 2014).

Growing teacher-researchers

According to Schein (2004) successful leaders must be perpetual learners themselves. Educators need to be perceptive and capable of having deep insights into the realities of the world in which their students operate. Inviting teachers to challenge ideas and thinking so they can arrive at new insights will ultimately deepen their sense of practice (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross & Smith, 1994). Over the last six years the Epsom Normal Leadership team has implemented a professional development model that is based on teachers inquiring into their own practice in order to achieve high quality learning outcomes for the students.

At the school, teachers are expected to be innovative practitioners at the ‘cutting edge’ of educational research and practice (Curriculum Design Document 2013-2015). During the research project, the senior leadership team developed a school research model to grow the strengths of their staff. In Phase One and Two, as part of their professional learning journey, staff worked in teams to conduct their own learning inquires, which focused on their using their own strengths to grow each student’s strengths. In Phase Three the inquiries were centered on developing creative and critical learning experiences for

students. As the school is 'becoming,' the shape of inquiry projects reflected new thoughts and new ideas. Known as 'impact research projects', staff work with academics from universities to identify and refine a possible research question grounded in appreciative inquiry. In Phase 4 the research project focused on 'inspiring student teachers to become inspirational teachers'. Staff present their findings at an annual in-house-conference, where visiting academics critique their work. Examples of these projects include: Intergenerational Literacy, Peer-tutoring, Embedding Critical Literacy, Developing Year 1 Students as Creative and Critical Learners, and Creating an Optimal Physical Learning Environment.

The Intergenerational Literacy Impact Research Project involved a parent who could not speak English. She attended her child's writing lesson with the teacher each day. By the end of the year the child's learning had accelerated and the parent became a confident speaker and writer of English (Giles, 2014). This programme has continued. Creating an Optimal Physical Learning Environment Project involved a teacher and the property manager of the school. On the school's journey of 'becoming' the property manager, senior leaders and trustees modified existing classroom blocks into modern-learning environments where teachers work in team-teaching situations in variable learning spaces. In this impact research project, the teacher and property manager researched how to provide optimal learning spaces for students. New furniture was purchased and feedback was sought from students on how best to utilise the furniture and learning spaces. Students reacted positively in making decisions about their teaching environments, adapting the environments to best meet a particular learning context.

A significant research finding was that these impact research projects have impacted on student achievement results. The 2013 Education Review Office reported that *Teachers are supported to research areas of educational interest that impact on student learning. Evidence of the positive outcomes of these projects is visible in students' achievement results* (Education Review Office School Report, August, 2013, p.2).

When teachers critically inquire into their own practice and their students' achievement it is one of the most powerful means of shifting professional practice (Darling-Hammond2008). One of the senior leaders at ENPS completed her research on our ENPS research inquiry model. Colby's(2015) findings reported that teacher reflection was central to the work of the teachers and researchers and shifts in teacher practice occurred when teachers and researchers had time to explore the theoretical ideas associated with their particular topic. They developed their capability as researchers, contributing to their professionalism as practioners and were open to trialing new ideas based on their findings(Colby,2015).

Students and teachers alike have gained from the ripple effect that the Impact Research Projects have had on the school with improved outcomes for student, student-teachers, teachers and the school. The major findings from Colby's(2015) research found that where teaching staff form a community of critical professional inquiry, the teachers' sense of their professional role and identity lead to better quality teaching and learning in classrooms(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Hopkins, 1993, Fishman & McCarthy, 2000).

The ENPS BOT provides generous resourcing for teachers to be released in their research groups for observations of teaching in the school, analysing student data and time to present their own findings at our own ENPS conference at the end of the year. The impact inquiry research projects create opportunities for staff to participate in a generative process where their creative endeavours have a direct impact on student learning. Participating in the process of on-going research inquiries enables staff to incorporate an ideology that fosters sustainable practices (Meighan, Harber, & Siraj-Blatchford, 2007).

Dialoguing with other educators

Lingard, Hayes, Mills & Christie, (2003) believe that the central purpose of leadership in schools is to maximise a student's academic and social outcomes via improvements to teaching practices. Educational leaders need to work creatively with complexity, if schools are to meet the goal of providing the most equitable ways possible for all students to achieve (Lingard et al, 2003).

This study also explores the views of educators in Samoa and Australia about what they believe is the best ways to grow teachers in order to achieve the most equitable ways possible for all students to

achieve. The dialogue with the educational leaders focused on 'leading teachers to be inspirational' so to transform the lives of their students.

From dialoguing with these educational leaders emerging themes came out of our discussions. Firstly they agreed that a clear vision for transformative learning needed to be clearly articulated and underpinned by sound educational research. Once the vision was developed, the leaders' roles were to support the organisation to realise the vision through strategic intent, which focused on a relational approach to leadership. Giving prominence to growing teachers strengths so they can generate creative ideas that are aligned to the vision, ensures the school is always in a 'growing phase'. Secondly the vision can be realised through school leaders making structural changes; for example the implementation of a team-teaching approach or a school-wide timetable. Another critical strategy for leaders is to carefully select professional development opportunities that link theory with practice and robust self-review that challenges teachers to think deeply about how they inspire all students to achieve well. The educational leaders also believed that school leaders need to act as a 'change agents' challenging not only how we teach but what we teach.

The education leaders agreed that the shared wisdom of 'significant others' supports a school on its journey of transforming learning for students. Dialoguing with selected academics from local, national and international universities provides rigorous debate with a school and enables staff to develop a reflective yet deliberate approach aimed at progressing a change agenda. Sharing the experience of re-telling the school's storyline provides school leaders with on-going renewal and reflection. Careful selection of significant others, namely external consultants, supports school staff to self-review school practices and processes, and purposefully plan the next steps of the school's journey. As 'significant belongers' the collective wisdom of the students, trustees and the parents also guide the day-to-day decisions staff make about curriculum design and programmes of learning.

Conclusion

Leading transformational pedagogical change requires educational leaders to challenge the 'existing way of being'. Freire (1975) argues that education should be a liberating process that exposes dehumanisation and unjust practices in the world. Teachers should be driven by a moral and visionary imperative that empowers students to become confident global citizens who can think critically so as to make a positive difference in the world (Giles & Cavanagh-Eyre, 2012).

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