

What Beliefs and Actions are Schools Taking that is Leading to Accelerated Progress and Achievement of 'At Risk' Students?

Sabbatical Report - December 2016



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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our Boards of Trustees for their commitment to our ongoing development. We would also like to thank all those staff members who have 'stepped up' during our absence.

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Executive Summary

Schools that are focusing on accelerating the learning of their 'at risk' students have a rich assortment of stories about their approach to acceleration, their experiences of acceleration and the impact of their interventions.

The analysis of our interviews and professional reading led us to identify four key features of successful acceleration programmes. They are:

1. Deliberateness was a feature of every programme. School leaders thoughtfully selected teachers to be involved in acceleration programmes. Teachers chose students to include in their programmes with care and they planned and delivered programmes they believed would accelerate the learning of their students.
2. Resourced. Every intervention was resourced in a way that was designed to meet the identified need.
3. Building teacher capability and knowledge was seen as an important key to raising achievement.
4. Engaging Programmes were vital to ensuring students were active and willing participants in the learning programmes they were a part of

Background and Rationale

Two of our three schools have been involved in either Accelerating Learning in Literacy (ALL) or Accelerating Learning in Mathematics (ALiM). We have seen first-hand the impact of the interventions on our 'at risk' students.

Our sabbatical study set out to discover what other schools were doing to accelerate learning and to apply that learning to our schools.

Methodology

There were three stages in our study.

Firstly, we interviewed ten principals or literacy or numeracy leaders in schools undertaking ALL or ALiM. Our interviews sought to discover what schools knew about the needs of their 'at risk' students, what they did to accelerate their learning and what they thought about the impact of their interventions.

Secondly, we reviewed six sabbatical reports submitted by principals in the last two years that made reference to accelerating learning.

Thirdly, we reviewed several key pieces of literature.

An analysis of our interviews and documents follows.

Findings

Part One: Interviews

An analysis of the interviews identified four significant themes.

1. Accelerating learning often involved a whole school focus
2. Building collaboration (with and between staff) is important
3. Building teacher knowledge and capability is vital for acceleration
 - a. Of the learner
 - b. Of the curriculum
 - c. Of teaching strategies
 - d. Of assessment practices
4. Programmes that interest, engage, teach and support students are critical

Acceleration Often involved a Whole School Focus

Although varying in size most schools worked hard to ensure acceleration was a whole school focus.

- School wide professional learning
- Building collaborative educator communities within schools
- Sharing practices (both successful and unsuccessful)

Building Collaboration

Building collaboration among staff was seen as important to accelerating the achievement of learning. This included things such as:

- Staff understanding that it is not 'my' students or 'your' students but 'our' students
 - through sharing practice
 - by unpacking successful strategies and unsuccessful strategies
- Regular monitoring of target students
- Including whanau
- Shared (and genuine) high expectations for improvement
- School wide focus on acceleration
 - PLD
 - progress reporting

Building Teacher Knowledge and Capability

Undoubtedly teachers are a vital component in the acceleration process. It is important for teachers to:

- Build their knowledge of
 - New Zealand Curriculum
 - National Standards
 - other important support documents (e.g. Literacy Learning Progressions, NZ Maths & PACT)
- Build their assessment capabilities
 - increased ability to analyse assessment data
 - skills to track progress

- Increase their ability to describe students and their achievements
 - the issues
 - blockage to progress

Programmes that interest, engage, teach and support students

Programmes play a key role in acceleration. Schools had thoughtfully developed the way they interacted with their target students. Programmes were:

- Highly interesting for students
- Included an oral language focus
- Development students vocabulary
- Were purposeful (students understand the 'why' of the learning)
- Provided a scaffold and support for the learning

A prominent theme of programmes was the notion of front loading skills that students would be exposed to in class.

Part Two: Analysis of Sabbatical Reports

The analysis of the sabbatical reports identified four connected themes. They are:

- Leadership
- Teachers
- Students
- Programmes

Leadership

- School Leaders must be involved
- Building teacher pedagogy and content knowledge is an element that leaders must pay attention to through relevant PLD that includes:
 - knowledge of students
 - knowledge of usual pattern of progress
 - range of instructional strategies
- Leadership is responsible for ensuring there is a clear vision and strong school culture for acceleration
- School wide there is a language among staff around acceleration
- Leadership maintains an unrelenting focus on student achievement

Teachers

The role of teachers was strongly identified in the analysis.

- Detailed planning was vital (clarity about what is to be learnt)
- Clear high expectations from teachers that students will make accelerated progress
- Strong relationships between student and teacher was key
- Teachers needed strong assessment and evaluation capability
- Knowledge building inquiry cycles helped teachers continue to meet the needs of their students
- Teachers needed current curriculum capability
- Time to analyse and plan was important
- Collaboration among staff impacts on the practice of all teachers
- Reflective practice strategies led to better programmes

Students

Accelerating learning is all about the students. Schools noted the following:

- Regular detailed feedback to students about their progress had significant benefit
- Strong sense of involvement by students supported engagement
- Effective home school partnerships

Programmes

Schools had a lot of observations about the programmes they offered including:

- Importance of regular lessons
- Group work helped some learners
- Explicit teaching of skills
- Highly engaging programmes had a positive impact on student involvement and interest
- Responding to students learning process (style) helped some students progress
- Learning built on student prior knowledge

Implications

When considering the analysis above four key ideas arose.

1. Deliberateness

Accelerating achievement requires deliberate actions to be undertaken. Our analysis focused on ALL and ALiM. These are two kinds of deliberate programmes. So is Reading Recovery or operating a daily phonics programme. The key here is that schools took action. There was a reason for the action and carefully considered response.

2. Resourced

The intervention was resourced. This may have been staffing and or support material. Whatever was provided was as a response to the identified need.

3. Building teacher capability and knowledge

Teachers hold an important key to raising achievement. Building their assessment capability, their curriculum capability and their teaching capability will lead to better outcomes for their students.

4. Engaging Programmes

Students learn far more when they are interested and engaged in the learning. Therefore, teachers have an important role in developing programmes that capture the imagination and interest of their students. Equally, students know what they like and don't like and should be included in discussions around the context of their learning.

Conclusions

It is clear from our investigation that a focus on acceleration is having a positive impact on students and their teachers. However, raising achievement through accelerated learning requires an 'all-out effort' by school leaders, teachers, whanau and students. It requires careful and thoughtful planning and the regular analysis of the impact of the intervention.

Critically, while the interventions have their primary focus on students the evidence in our research clearly shows that building teacher capability was a cornerstone of successful interventions. Building teacher assessment capability, their curriculum knowledge and their teaching capability was very evident in our conversations with school leaders.

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