

PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL REPORT

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Title and focus of the sabbatical:

Research current literature and visit other primary schools to investigate the direct impact of student engagement on achievement.

About the author:

I have been principal at St Patrick's Invercargill since term 4 of 2011. Prior to that I had been principal at Otama School and Lochiel Schools in rural Southland. I have been in teaching since 1997 and have taught at a range of levels though mainly in the senior end of the school. I also spent some time teaching in the UK.

St Patrick's Invercargill is a decile 3 school in South Invercargill with a roll of just over 300. St Patrick's is a fantastic place to work and it has a wonderful community feel to it, excellent teachers, support staff and a very capable and forward thinking Board of Trustees. St Patrick's has a growing diversity including 55% Pakeha, 30% Maori, 10% Pasifika and a growing Asian community.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to acknowledge first and foremost the St Patrick's School Board of Trustees for supporting my application for sabbatical leave associated with the study. I also acknowledge my wonderful leadership team for maintaining the smooth running of the school in my absence and especially Kath Lieshout who stepped into the principal role after only being in the school for 2 terms. I could not have done this without your collective support and capability.

I also recognise that a sabbatical gives many staff an opportunity to "step up" and it tests the succession planning in a school – thanks to those of you who took on additional responsibilities for the term. Special thanks to the Office Staff, for ensuring the school administrative side kept moving forward and for helping with the logistics.

I acknowledge the Ministry of Education for making sabbatical leave available to Principals. The opportunity to be able to take time out and look in depth at an aspect of our practice, to indulge in uninterrupted reflection and to have a period of refreshment is invaluable.

A huge thanks to those who opened their door to me and allowed me to come and visit their schools. Given the busy and hectic nature of the role of principal I truly appreciate this time. The learning I gained from you helped me to clarify my own thinking, so thank you. I would also like to acknowledge those who were part of the Ministry of Education think tank on curriculum that I was lucky enough to participate in, your passion, knowledge and enthusiasm helped to re-energise my thinking around the NZC.

Student engagement has long been at the forefront of my thinking and it has been wonderful to have the time to read, think and converse about this exclusively without the distractions the day-to-day role of being principal brings. In New Zealand we have a wonderful curriculum that encourages and allows us the freedom to ensure that children are provided with a rich and relevant learning journey. However for a variety of reasons we have not made engagement the driving force of our schools and instead have become too assessment centric. In essence we have been too focused on weighing the pig and not focused enough on what we are feeding it. It has been a breath of fresh air to stop and rethink where our focus should be.

Executive Summary

As professionals we exist in a time of radical change and challenge on the education landscape. There are a myriad of forces at play from governmental agendas and worldwide trends and patterns, to increasing socio economic pressures and technological advancements. In such times of increasing accountability and volatility it is easy to forget the sheer simplicity of what we are trying to do. From what I have read and witnessed, when we get the conditions for learning right, children can do little else than learn with a sense of wonderment and inquisitiveness. But conversely when we get it wrong and over complicate it and bog it down with accountability measures we are capable of sucking the lifeblood out of it.

As professionals on the ground, deep in the midst of the task, it is vitally important that we look to own the direction in which our profession moves. Schools should be places of excitement, creativity, community and purpose and the best resource that we have to make this possible is our people. We need to encourage innovation, energy and creativity from our people, though in order for this to happen we need to clear the way by simplifying our systems and expectations.

Student achievement is a wonderful byproduct of genuine student engagement not a replacement.

Purpose

The purpose of my sabbatical in terms of professional learning was to enhance my understanding of the direct relationship between engagement and achievement. Through research and talking to other principals I wanted to ascertain what the key ingredients were for authentic engagement. I then wanted to investigate ways in which schools look to gather information around this and how they use this to improve engagement for students, with a particular emphasis on student voice and teacher self reflection.

Activities Undertaken

I carried out a literature review to form the basis of my observations. The 2 key texts were Creative Schools by Sir Ken Robinson and Creating Tomorrows Schools Today by Richard Gerver.

I visited a range of schools across Southland and talked with principals around engagement and the roles local context, culture, ICT and student self-direction had in engaging their children and how this was reflected in the documentation and systems of the school.

I was also lucky enough to be invited to a 2-day think tank on curriculum with some of New Zealand's leading thinkers around curriculum, which was hosted by the Ministry of Education in Wellington. These 2 days were spent looking at the intent of the NZC and how we can reinvigorate its core vision of Young people who are confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners?

Findings – Research

I can recommend both texts as easily readable and very informative for anyone wishing to rethink curriculum and schooling in general. Both books emphasized the importance of looking to enhance the inherent interconnected nature of learning and ensuring it was children that were at the heart of class and school wide strategic decisions around learning.

The model used at The Grange Primary School where Richard was the principal had children at its heart. It looked to, much as the NZC does; to put an emphasis on the skills and disposition required to be an effective learner and a good citizen. Learning was integrated across the curriculum to highlight the interconnected nature of learning and wherever practical the focus was on developing and applying skills and competencies in authentic contexts.

He looked at the importance of developing the whole child and the role of teachers as inspiring children to learn, to inquire, to create, to make decisions and to be imaginative. He even went as far as asking his staff how they could make their school more like Disneyland to children, in terms of children desperately wanting to be there and to be fully engaged.

Knowledge was seen as important but only in context, knowledge for the sake of knowledge, or for the testing of that knowledge was a waste of time. He also talked about our preoccupation as a profession in dissecting the learning to the detriment of the learner. In doing so we run the risk of losing the awe and wonder that is inherent in new learning. An example was the fractured manner in which we isolate aspects of a text rather than allow the narrative to take children to imagined worlds and entertain them.

Sir Ken Robinson stressed the importance of providing an environment where students will want and be able to learn. This was not just the role of the classroom teacher, but the principal and policy makers as well. The skills required to be a high functioning adult in the world of tomorrow can not be developed by a back to basics 20th century stand and deliver system.

He argues that we need a system that encourages and celebrates imagination, creativity, adaptability and resilience. One that is diverse and multi-faceted in which students are more able to pursue strengths and interests. Curriculum needs to move from subject-based silos into more contextualized and relevant contexts centred on personal, social, cultural and economic needs.

He also argued the importance of engagement and for student centric learning environments where teachers teach in the way children learn best and not expect children to learn in the way teachers are most comfortable teaching.

However the two texts that I based my research around also both bemoaned the fact that Britain and the US have unfortunately gone down a low trust high accountability model of education that is not based on the needs of children but narrow, yet measureable, outcomes driven by political ideology. They outlined the issues of engagement caused by an environment where testing regimes reigned supreme and governments that had a preoccupation with non-contextualized international measures such as PISA.

I don't wish this to be the focus of my research but it is hard to ignore given the current political climate in New Zealand and the increasing levels of political interference.

Both texts mentioned the New Zealand curriculum, among others, as one that was looking to be innovative, though Richard Gerver also acknowledged that we were turning away from this. I can only hope given discussions at the curriculum think tank, which was organised by the Ministry of Education, that maybe the winds of change can be turned and the NZC can once again take its rightful place as front and centre. Only time will tell.

Findings – School Visits

Following on from my literature review I developed a set of questions to ask of fellow principals to ascertain how they ensured that learning was rich, real and relevant to students and that they were achieving the stated vision of the New Zealand Curriculum of Young people who were confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners? I also asked what considerations they made at a school wide level to engage children in learning and how this was reflected in the key documents in their school.

The areas we discussed were:

- Localizing of the curriculum to ensure authentic context
- The cultural background of the children
- Student voice/choice/direction in the learning process

- The role of ICT in engaging children
- The greatest barriers to engagement of children in their school?
- How they looked to minimize or overcome these barriers?
- Whether curriculum design was driven more by achievement or engagement?
- How does assessment impact on engagement, either positively and/or negatively?
- How regularly they collected student voice on engagement and how they did this?
- How they used this information?

In visiting schools it was particularly heartening to see such a variety of approaches and interpretations around these aspects and of the NZC implementation. Different schools had different drivers dependent on both community and educational philosophy. Of particular note was how child centric these visions were. Children were really at the heart of the matter.

Both the cultural make up of the school and the local physical environment were big drivers in terms of contexts for learning. The more the relevant the learning was to the children's lives the greater the levels of engagement. It was interesting the note the diversity that existed within and across schools and how what was important had been teased out and shared with children. In some cases children had been directly involved in shaping their own contexts for learning.

Some schools were driven more by big ideas/concepts, some by specific curriculum focus areas and some more by learner dispositions closely aligned with the Key Competencies from the NZC. Most talked of the difficulty of balancing engagement with assessment and achievement, though in places this was working well the assessments were far less intrusive and more a natural part of the learning process. I very much doubt if the children knew in some instances that they were being assessed.

Integration across curriculum areas in order for children to see the interconnected nature of learning was clear to see and of paramount importance. This combined with a less is more mantra and going deep into a concept, or revisiting the same concept in a variety of contexts, really allowed the children to see and build on these natural links. Curriculum design and implementation overviews that were well understood and regularly discussed by staff were vital to this being a reality.

All schools talked of the importance of ICT in engaging children though were quick to point out that it was just another tool. Some schools were quite prescriptive in what ICT tools and apps were taught and used and some were more organic. Teacher expertise and confidence was still at times a barrier to full integration of ICT. The most successful

schools had provided teachers with personal devices for exploration and PD to go with this.

Student choice and direction in the learning were seen as keys to student engagement. The more students were able to choose aspects of their learning, either in terms of content or sequence of activities within a set time frame, the more they engaged. There was still a strong element of teacher direction in most schools though still plenty of choice within a defined framework.

Resilience and growth mindsets were explicitly taught and celebrated in many schools. Children were aware that not all learning was easy and that challenge was a path to growth. By openly discussing this and recognizing the times when these traits were practiced to attain success children were less likely to opt out of the learning or become disengaged.

All schools gathered student voice around a variety of things and in a variety of ways. Some were more formal and had surveys for children to complete and representative school council groups, whilst other were done in a less formal more conversational manner. Student voice was sought on learning, teachers, culture and safety. Children were asked about what they liked, what excited them and what they needed more help with in terms of learning.

This data on engagement and learning was fed back to teachers and/or syndicates to inform decisions moving forward. Some schools collated this further to present at a Board of Trustees level.

Some schools had quite high levels of student ownership in the decision making processes where they were encouraged to identify, explore and problem solve real issues that impacted on their school day. Opportunities for service both within the school and the wider community appeared to have a real grab in terms of engagement and purpose.

Time, assessment expectations and varying teacher capability and adaptability were the greatest barriers to student engagement. The schools that I visited had tried to eliminate these by ensuring there was deliberate connectedness in the learning and between the learning areas. Themes or concepts taught were teased out to see how they might fit together across curriculum areas, which assisted with both time pressures and engagement of children.

When teachers consciously looked to put children and their engagement at the heart of the learning and not systems and structures which children needed to work around there appeared to be greater engagement. The same can be said for assessment and the authenticity of assessment tasks. When these naturally fitted with the learning and were not seen as an add-on the engagement was higher.

Reflections on Think Tank

On the 2 day NZC curriculum think tank we spent time looking at the intent of the NZC and how we can reinvigorate its core vision of Young people who are confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners?

The key reflections I took from this were:

- Greater emphasis needs to be placed on curriculum design to achieve the purpose of the NZC at a principal and school leadership level, with a very clear focus on the child at the centre
- Collaboration at a school-wide and system wide level was an area that requires further unpacking. There needed to be an emphasis on the dispositions required for this to work effectively.
- Teacher development needs to be driven through the Teaching as Inquiry cycle with an emphasis given to growth mindsets
- Curriculum design needs to be localized, rich, real and relevant to the community it serves
- The interconnected nature of learning coupled with the dispositions required to be an effective learner need to be what underpins curriculum.
- We need a national conversation about the importance of a broad, rich and creative curriculum which is not measured, or given value, based on the current metrics

Implications for my school

As a school I feel that we are doing lots of things really well and I found having the time to step back and reflect on this quite heartening. However it also highlighted some areas that we may need to revisit. Also as I expected I have finished this sabbatical with more questions than answers so moving forward we need to ask ourselves the following:

- Are we at times more driven by assessment regimes than by student engagement and how do we look to address this?
- How do we place a greater emphasis on the dispositions needed to be a great learner and a great citizen and less on subject matter?
- What emphasis do we give to excitement, fun and allowing children to work to and through their strengths and passions?
- In what ways can we encourage teachers to teach through their passions to greater engage children and to improve their level of personal fulfillment as teachers?
- How do we look to encourage resilience in our children?
- How can we ensure that learning for our children continues to have authenticity and that they are able to easily see the interconnected nature of their learning?
- In what ways can we gather greater student voice about their learning?
- What do we stand for as a school and what behaviours do we exhibit every minute of our day to support this vision?
- Why can't school be more like Disneyland?

Conclusion:

None of these are short term or fast fixes, but more lenses to reflect through as we continue to grow as a school and ensure our children remain at the heart of what we do. Using the above questions as a driver I would like to spend time talking directly to students about their learning and teachers about their teaching.

I would like to encourage teachers to use greater student voice to guide their own inquiries into teaching practise. I would also like to gather student and teacher voice around the systems and structures they feel both enhance and conversely impede learning in our school and look at ways to either promote or diminish the impact of these accordingly.