

Making a Positive Shift for All Learners
Trisch Inder, Principal St Joseph's School, Queenstown
Sabbatical period 4/7/16-25/9/16

Acknowledgements

Thanks to our school Board, our Deputy Principal, Brendon Martyn who took over as Principal in my absence, the teachers and students and school families who all supported me to take this Sabbatical time

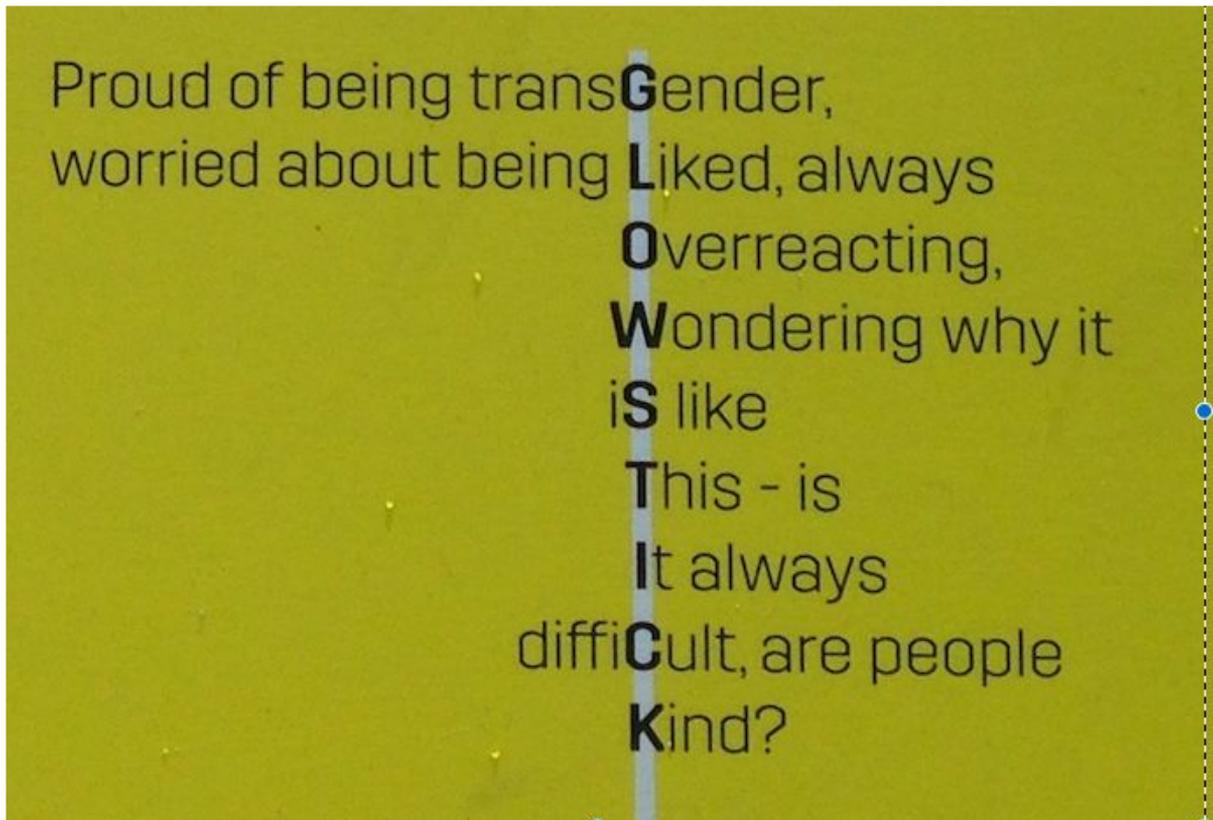
To the Principals, teachers and students at the school I visited for sharing their stories and expertise: In New Zealand - Wanaka Primary School, Hawea Flat Primary School, Goldfields Primary School, Cromwell Primary School, St Mary's School, Gore, St Joseph's School, Takapuna

In Finland - Anneli Rautiainen, Head of unit, Counsellor of education, Basic Education and Early Childhood Education Unit, Finnish National Board of Education, Helsinki, Finland
Kulosaari Primary School, Helsinki; Vuorentausta school and Metsäkylä School, Tampere
Tarja Suhonen, Ylöjärvi School district; Eurajoki School and Preschool Naavatupsut aka Bear moss bobbles, Eurajoki, Vesa-Pekka Leino, Eurajoki School district administration; Rantakylä, Pre-primary - Tippamaki "Tippis" and Tolppila School, Karstula

Executive Summary

I am grateful for this opportunity to take time out of the busyness of being a Principal to explore how we might make a positive difference for learners at our school. Through my sabbatical, I do not have any definitive answers but I do have clear direction of where our school needs to go next .

Background and rationale



This poem is from an installation of Poetry written by young people around the theme of “Light” which I came across in Edinburgh during my travels. It spoke to me of our young people who stand out because they are different for whatever reason. Being different can be celebrated or can be a challenge. Our responsibility as educators is to ensure that all our students are cared for and celebrated “as culturally located human beings by providing a safe, nurturing environment. This will include developing and sustaining the language, culture and identity of every student to ensure that they have the best opportunity to learn and experience educational success”. (ERO School Evaluation Indicators) 3 To do this, we need to know our learners, understand how they learn and how we can scaffold them to continue to make necessary progress.

There are times when I have thought about students at our school and wondered, have we really done enough for them to progress in their learning? Have we made their learning more difficult through our lack of knowing enough? As a result of these concerns, we embarked on a professional learning journey to raise achievement and ensure progress of all students through developing our understanding of quality teaching and learning.

We had the opportunity to join the Ministry of Education contract “Accelerating Literacy Learning”. Under guidance and support of Ministry appointed specialists in reading and writing, teachers gathered baseline data and put an intervention in place that they believed would lift the achievement of the students involved. These interventions were guided but

based on what we knew to be good quality teaching practice, using Effective Literacy Practice, 2006 and ideas shared by the specialists.

Two of our teachers completed the Incredible Years training and we learnt from this the value of building strong positive connections with children and their families. This was further reinforced in the Accelerating Literacy Learning contract, where we focussed on the “language, culture and identity” of each of the students and their families. The current ERO School Evaluation Guidelines also reinforce the importance of relationships.

Under the Leadership and Assessment contract, working with Gary Tenbeth, we further explored what teachers needed to do to support and empower learners to be able to manage and take charge of their learning based on the work of Absolum, and Gray (2006 reprinted 2011).¹

All teachers now use “Teaching as Inquiry” as a means of closely identifying aspects of their teaching practice or programmes that might shift the progress of targeted students who are just below the National Standard. Through these interventions, we are expecting students to make accelerated progress, bringing them up to and being able to stay at the National Standard for their year group.

This year, teachers have strengthened their use of research to inform their inquiries and this has also strengthened their impact. We know that, “the biggest effects on pupils achievement occur when teachers become learners about their own teaching and when pupils become their own teachers”.² (Visible Learning, John Hattie) We have been working on developing students’ ability and opportunities to have increasing control of their learning.

Further to this, we have been mindful of the importance of students having good transitions at each stage of their learning as this is a time when children’s learning progress is more vulnerable or compromised. For this reason, we developed our Welcome Wednesday afternoon as a transition to school so that students came to school at least 10 afternoons prior to starting school; they could come more if this was considered necessary. Over the time we have had this going, it has undergone various changes and has now morphed into a play based programme in the New Entrant class. This was done due to children still struggling with being able to leave their parents in the morning and the stress this has caused. Since play based learning was introduced this has changed. The other benefits of having play based learning were soon evident and this has continued to develop.

Through all these developments and changes made, though many of our students did make expected shifts, there continues to be a group of students who do not make the necessary progress and as they get older and the learning more challenging they get further behind

their peers. We believe, every child has the right to success so my question is still - are we doing enough for these children?

Purpose

The purpose of my sabbatical then was to further develop my own understanding and skills in relation to developing learning opportunities for children with specific learning challenges. I wanted us to be able to set up systems and strategies to identify and then meet the learning needs of these children so that they have a better chance of being successful learners at and beyond their time at our school.

Methodology

During my Sabbatical, I met with professionals including teachers and principals in a number of New Zealand schools and various schools in Finland, Ministry officials working for the Education Department and municipalities in Finland and Jenny Tebbutt, educational consultant with expertise in working with children with dyslexia, dyspraxia, children on the spectrum, those with auditory and visual processing disorders as well as ADHD, read material from ERO, reviewed course notes from workshops we had done already, including with Jenny Tebbutt and read relevant information from various sources. I wanted to gain an understanding of what was happening in other schools in relation to identification and differentiated learning opportunities to ensure success for all our students, including those at risk students.

I used my sabbatical time to make contact, set up visits, arrange travel and then visit schools both in New Zealand and in Finland. Finland was an obvious choice as it has had such a good reputation for its success in the PISA results and I knew they were about to introduce a revised curriculum which I understood was based on the work of Michael Fullan, *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning*. As we had been reviewing the possibility of adopting *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning* as our Wakatipu Community of Learning, this seemed to be a logical connection. I also had a personal connection that allowed me to connect with various different schools in different places in Finland, and these schools varied from pre-primary, elementary and secondary, small and large, innovative learning environments and traditional classrooms so I felt this to be a good cross-section of schools and experiences. I had also managed to make contact and set up a meeting with a Counsellor of Education at the Department of Education in Helsinki.

Findings

In New Zealand schools, what I found was that each school was committed to doing what they could to ensure the progress of each of their students. All the schools used a version of Teaching as Inquiry as a way of inquiring into the impact of their teaching. 7

Schools had staff with different levels of experience and training to support them with both identification of learning needs and then programmes that they used to support their students. Of course, this varied as a result of the differences in training and experience. Some schools were able to put in a lot of additional resources but sometimes, at quite an expense to them.

Each school used a range of data to inform their decisions about the learning needs of their students including the following:

- Conversations with parents eg When they started talking? Crawling? Other milestones? Ability to follow instructions? Any family history of learning challenges?
- Conversations with Early Childhood Centre teachers about any concerns
- Observation and testing by the New Entrant teacher of:
 - Memory spaces and if limited (need 5 memory space to read)
 - Not hearing sounds
 - Not recognising rhyme (even though “bright”)
 - Not retaining sight words
- Use of formal tests to check phonics knowledge including:
 - Gough Kastler, Gail Gillon, Sounds Alive, STEPS
- By 7 years old, if suspected students were not making expected progress and convinced have different learning need eg dyslexia, encourage parents to get assessment done
- Wellness Survey, NZCER - belonging, achievement and resilience
- Attendance
- Junior Assessment of Mathematics
- Observational Survey (6yr net)
- Lexia Core 5 computer programme
- Finding out from the students about how they liked to learn also gave valuable information.

Interventions they used included:

- [Alpha to Omega spelling programme](#)
- [Skoolbo](#) - excellent engaging free program literacy and numeracy - includes emails to update teachers and presents work to children without teachers having to monitor as do with Mathletics
- [STEPS](#) web based spelling prog for children with dyslexia and auditory processing - own list of words can be added onto programme
- Sounds Alive to Yr 2 and once long vowels known, move to Alpha to Omega for older students
- Spelling Under Scrutiny, Joy Allcock
- Kasey Caterpillar for letter formation
- Strong phonics programme taught one on one prior to going onto Reading Recovery programme

- Toe by Toe phonics programme for children (Yr 4 and 5) with dyslexia
- Ron Davis, The Gift of Dyslexia eg of clay figures to represent words - make word out of clay - say it forwards and say it backwards - backwards before forwards - followed by learning words with picture and meaning - draw picture of what word represents for them eg the
- Braingym
- Lexia Core 5 computer programme - work through programme, use at home as well - report identifies needs and highlights for teachers what need to teach
- Symphony maths - on trial
- Early Words , Yolanda Soryl- heavy phonics yolandasoryl.com
- Fernstein Theory - dyslexia
- "Talk to Learn" programme - oral language - group 4 with teacher aid
- Accelerating Learning In Mathematics and Maths Specialist teacher
- Skybridge - Transition to School Programme - eg using scissors, pencil grip, Sounds Alive, number recognition, counting, craft, book bag, one to one matching,
- Perceptual Motor Programme
- Sunshine on line - Rdg and maths
- Apps on Ipads eg Pocket phonics
- Growth mindset focus - celebrate mistakes - work on this with parents as well, certificates for struggle being in learning pit - when put in work here - celebrate progress and determination
- Front loading learning so build confidence and giving double dose of learning (Jenny Tebbutt talks about most learners needing to practice something 7 times to consolidate learning but children with learning challenges need to practice 49 times).
- Teaching strategies for what to do when brain freezes

Schools varied with regards personnel who worked with individual students or small groups of students including:

- Special Education Needs Coordinator (SENCO)
- Leadership team
- Specialist teacher in literacy
- Teacher aide with specialist training in working with students with specific learning needs
- Resource Teachers in Learning and Behaviour and Resource Teachers in Literacy for screening and programmes
- In classroom with teacher

Students also learnt from each other in sharing what "tricks" they used for learning.

All the schools recognised the importance of engaging parents in the identification but also in developing strategies for students.

Through various discussions, the following ideas were considered important for ongoing success for these students. Passing on information to the next teacher about necessary scaffolds ensures time is not wasted when the students change their teacher. As with all learners, engagement is key and it is important these students do not miss out on what they are good at and what they love doing when being given extra support. Students with learning challenges often need to work twice as hard, so celebrating success is really key as is recognising that they are not “stupid” for needing to practice something more. For this reason, they should always compete against themselves rather than comparing themselves with others. It is important to consider the way that assessment takes place, that it does not disadvantage these students. Keeping in mind that children may be using up learning space with learning new routines and programmes, we must therefore ensure consistency in approach and programmes used. Often if routines are set up to meet the needs of these learners, it in no way disadvantages others, and they are not seen as being “different”.

From my visit to Finland, I recognised that the direction that Finland was taking in the development of their new curriculum really matched our direction for education in New Zealand. According to Irmeli Halinen who is Head of Curriculum Development in Finnish National Board of Education, “Developing schools as learning communities, and emphasizing the joy of learning and a collaborative atmosphere, as well as promoting student autonomy in studying and in school life – these are some of our key aims in the reform. In order to meet the challenges of the future, there will be much focus on transversal (generic) competences and work across school subjects. School subjects still have an important role to play in teaching and learning”.⁴

In fact, my visit to Finnish schools reinforced for me that the teaching practice at our school was sound. So therefore, what was the difference and what created their success? Two things stood out for me. The first was the importance of adequate and consistent training to be able to identify students’ learning needs when they do have specific learning challenges and to know what might be a way to constructively meet their learning needs. In Finland, this is included in the Masters teacher training degree.

Secondly, in response to having a tail of underachievement, the Education Department’s solution was to provide a specialist team including a social worker, a psychologist and a teacher specialising in teaching children with special learning needs in each of the big schools and as a shared resource across smaller schools. In this way, if teachers had a concern about a student in their class, wrap around specialist support was immediately available. But how could we replicate this in New Zealand?

I was interested also in the pre-primary education to 7 years of age in Finland. This was in keeping with the play based learning that we have set up in our New Entrant room. Possibly this is also part of the picture for Finland’s educational success. According to Nathan Mikaere-Wallace, the development of social and emotional skills in 3-7 year olds is key to

later success. He goes on to talk about the importance of providing opportunities for developing imagination and divergent thinking ie avoiding right and wrong answers too soon; creating the thinker before worrying about the facts. Through play, we encourage the child to follow their own lead and for us as educators it is important to listen to and follow their concept of the world. If it is as he says, biologically impossible due to the lateralization of brain for children to be doing formal learning and we are pushing them to read and write before they are ready, what does this do to their self worth? I believe that play based learning is worth pursuing as a way of supporting all our learners.

Implications

What stands out, is the need to develop the knowledge and skills of our teachers on how to effectively identify and cater for students with different learning needs through targeted professional learning. Through this learning, our hope is that teachers will be more able to accurately identify students earlier. Knowing that these students will need many more opportunities to practice to enable success, we can ensure this happens with targeted interventions that we know are most likely to be successful.

Something else that comes through quite strongly is that there are a lot of different interventions that schools are using though there are some similarities. However, it is important we are not using interventions that have little impact and this reinforces the importance of using a spiral of inquiry with a mindset of curiosity and genuine inquiry about what is happening for learners and what we might need to do differently as educators. It is important that we bring our "Teaching as Inquiry" process to this so we closely review the impact of what we do so as not to waste precious time and resources. In this way, we will ensure success for these students.

Benefits

I have appreciated this opportunity to take time out to consider what we have been doing at our school, recognising good practice and having the opportunity to see what is happening in other schools. Following on from this learning, I have been able to gain a clear direction for where we need to go next in our learning.

Conclusions

In summary, we must not lose sight of what is important for how we might further enhance learning for children who have learning challenges. Areas to develop for our school are as follows:

- Build teachers knowledge and skills to identify specific learning challenges and provide suitable programmes to support learners needs
- Identify clear process for identification of these children including building positive relationships with the child, family and preschool to better understand each individual child and consider what information could be gathered from preschool eg learning stories and family to better inform our practice

- Phonics learning was identified as key so, review a good quality Phonics programme - identify if teachers are confident and competent in teaching this? Ensure consistency.
- Consider ways to measure success of play based learning to develop social skills, oral language, self worth and confidence as a learner, problem solving, creativity and building resilience

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