

Principal Sabbatical Report

Danny Nicholls – St Patrick’s Catholic School Taupo

Term Three 2016

Inquiry focus:

“What are the conditions present in higher decile schools that encourage cultural responsiveness to occur?”

Preamble

My three main sabbatical objectives were to:

1. Engage and reflect with professional readings and leadership materials.
2. Undertake an inquiry into cultural responsiveness models in schools of similar demographics.
3. Recharge, reflect and reenergise.

Section 1 - Reengage with professional readings and leadership materials.

During 2012-2016 I completed two formal qualifications – a Masters in Educational Leadership and a Diploma in Religious Studies. Both study paths required a high commitment of personal time and energy attending papers face-to-face in term breaks and completing assignments and tasks during term time evenings. In order to balance the time required with the demands of leading a school and my own personal commitments with a young family, I found that many of the readings, discussions and concepts that I came across I could only engage with on a surface level rather than critically engage and reflect on.

Over the last two years I have also redeveloped my own professional learning networks (PLN), both on line and face-to-face. Online connections such as twitter, Facebook groups and blogging circles have allowed me to connect with educators and other thought leaders “any time, any place”. It has also strengthened my knowledge base in leading other staff to develop their own PLN’s, and the introduction of #stpatstaupo channel on twitter has had a good initial takeup and is a valuable learning space for our teachers.



A staffroom display providing teachers with food for thought and ideas

The combination of completing this demanding study and growing PLN venture has changed my thinking and vision for Professional Learning in my school. I am interested in developing collaborative opportunities for shared learning on a wider and also more personalised scale than I have previously. This can and will mean new ways of thinking about how professional learning occurs and what opportunities should be prioritized for teachers and leaders.

Section 2 - Undertake an inquiry into cultural responsiveness

During my seven years at St Patrick's I have seen changes to our schools ethnic makeup and a growing awareness that we need to consider our beliefs and practices around effective cultural responsiveness. We have had a strong Filipino community for some time and in recent years have seen increasing numbers of Maōri families choose our school.

As a staff we have undertaken a number of initiatives to strengthen our practices:

- Majority of staff and leadership team undertook a ten week evening Te Reo course to improve our basic knowledge
- As a staff we have reviewed Tataiako and Ka Hikitea documents and adapted some practices in light of these (although more is still to be done in this area)
- We have re-initiated meetings with specific cultural groups in our community
- The leadership team has engaged with ERO's "Effective School Evaluation" draft document and considered change and refinement in light of that document.

I feel pleased that these initiatives demonstrate that the school is actively seeking to improve, however I know there is much more we can be doing. It is a matter of discovering what that "much more" looks like!

Because we are a high decile school with a small proportion of “high priority learners” (not my label but a Ministry of Education one), we are not a priority school for additional support in many areas such as per child funding, professional development contract opportunities and in-school initiatives such as books in schools and fruits in schools. While we have many families and students in need, the system is not geared towards these smaller sub-groups within schools. It is focused on whole school data profiles. Recent changes to targeted student profile funding may assist schools such as ours although such mechanisms may have unintended consequences which educators are right to be wary of.

I intended to visit other schools of similar profiles and glean practices, procedures and programmes that schools felt can help to offset these issues and can improve cultural responsiveness in their communities. I approached approximately twenty schools and ended up visiting or interviewing five schools to inform my thinking below. Interestingly the most common response I had from schools was “we don’t have anything that we are doing, but we are also struggling in this area, can you pass on your findings?” This small anecdote may speak to a great need for support or resources in schools not deemed critical by Ministry statistics.

Prior to my sabbatical I was fortunate enough to attend the NZPF conference and hear Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert speak. I connected with their message strongly and blogged my response at the link below:

<http://stpatstaupoprincipal.blogspot.co.nz/2016/06/trans-tasman-conference-day-3-keynote-1.html>

Through the whole conference they were the speakers who had the most impact on my thinking. As a result I decided to create an inquiry focus for my sabbatical utilizing the Spirals of Inquiry model (Kaser, Halbert).



Halbert and Kaser's Spirals of Inquiry Model

Applying the model - What's going on for our learners?

Focussing

Our learners achieve well in all main categories – whether the comparison is by decile, ethnicity, regional or school profile, our overall data is strong. However

when we focus on specific sub-groups within our own context, we can see that Maōri boys are comparatively underachieving, and through reviewing data, the overall attendance of Maōri students is less regular than non-Maōri.

Developing a hunch

Focussing on attendance and engagement seems the best place to start when considering how to improve student achievement. Therefore the following initiatives may help in this area:

- Track closely individual student attendance of our priority learners, and engage with families more closely when there is a clear link between attendance and achievement.
- Maōri and Pasifika community engagement – in term four, two teacher leaders are coordinating an engagement and consultation meeting with these parents, and this may be a good opportunity to strengthen home/school learning relationships, as well as share examples of resources and strategies that families can use.

Learning

During the “learning” phase I took time to visit and speak with other schools as well as engage with three key resources

- Ka Hikitea – Accelerating Success 2013-2017
- Ka Ora Kainga Rua – Tuwharetoa Matauranga and Education Strategy
- Tataiako

My intention from these resources is to use aspects of each to inform professional learning for teachers in 2017, and to use them as reference points to inform the board’s strategic planning and annual targets from 2017 onwards.

My time spent in other schools and with other Principals confirmed many good practices already occurring in my own school while also providing scope for me to reflect more deeply on other matters, and to see different approaches to leadership and engagement. Key insights included:

- High expectations are a crucial precursor to high achievement.
- Deficiency mindsets or institutional acceptance of underachievement must be challenged and questioned regularly – continue to ask the hard questions of board, teachers, families, students. Most critically as school leaders, we must ask them of ourselves!
- Teachers must be supported to develop cultural responsiveness – it should not be assumed that because a class is “settled” or “on task”, that all children are learning, or that these are the best conditions for learning for all students.
- Authentic community engagement is not a one-off consultation or survey, but a relationship that requires cultivation, discussion and honest dialogue over time.

Taking Action

This will be the work that begins as I return from sabbatical! This thinking and new learning can inform the contribution I bring to the board's annual and strategic planning. I can then construct a plan based on developing understandings and co-constructed vision for St Patrick's school that can be shared and owned by the whole community.

Section 3 – Recharge, Reflect and Reenergise.

The intent of a sabbatical is to provide some downtime from the daily demands that Principalship brings and I was grateful to have that opportunity. I was able to use the time to achieve some personal goals. I improved my personal fitness, spent time with family and friends, shared experiences with my children and was able to generally feel more relaxed than I have in many years. I did not travel as much as I had initially intended to but found myself happy to enjoy a slower pace of life here in Taupo. Living close to the school and hearing the bells ringing and children playing at lunchtime, but not being a part of it, was an unusual feeling. It was a privileged time and I know that it has had a strong impact on my personal wellbeing. I return from my sabbatical with clear strategies to assist me to continue focussing on my fitness and a healthier work/ life balance, which in turn allows me to be more effective and energetic in my work.

The break also allowed me the opportunity to reflect on the changing nature of Principalship. The job has changed significantly since 2005 when I took up my first position. Initiatives such as Communities of Learning, Special Education restructuring, targeted funding priorities, Health and Safety requirements, social media and increased accountabilities of boards have meant that it is harder and harder for the Principal to focus on being a genuine "leader of learning". With increasing demands comes less availability and presence in curriculum developments and classroom programmes. The demands and expectations of the role are changing rapidly and perhaps unsustainably in the long term, with expectation and pressure that more can continually be achieved with less and less resourcing in real terms.

I have always valued and promoted empowering teachers and leaders as a possible solution to these issue of workload pressures and diverse expectations.

It seems to me that just as CoL's and MLE's are stimulating different thinking about how teachers might operate and collaborate most effectively, the same could occur for the role of a Principal. Shared leadership roles, increased workflow flexibility, rethinking accountability and responsibility delegations and more collaborative structures may allow a more "fit for purpose" 21st Century leadership model. Additionally I feel a sabbatical should be a provision within the collective agreement that Principals can access as of right every five years, rather than being something that must be applied for to both the Ministry and Board and then "won".

All food for thought and possibly a focus of future research in the years ahead!

In closing I would like to thank my Board for supporting this opportunity, my deputy Principal Ange Edhouse for taking on the Acting role in my absence, other key staff for their additional inputs and the Ministry of Education for funding this sabbatical initiative.

Danny Nicholls
November 2016.