

PRIMARY PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL REPORT

Peter Ahern

Term 3 2015

Title and focus of the sabbatical:

To develop, grow and support student agency at St Joseph's School in Upper Hutt.

About the author:

I first started as school principal here at St Joseph's in 2011. My prior principal experience includes Totara Park for 10 years and of Sherwood School in Hawkes Bay for 4 years. I have experience at all levels of senior management within primary schools as well as many years in front of classrooms.

St Joseph's School is a decile 7 catholic integrated full-primary school of about 380 students situated in central Upper Hutt. Along with most other schools in the Upper Hutt area it enjoys a positive reputation. St Joseph's has a diverse ethnic community including 48% European NZ, 15% Maori, 16% Pasifika, 7% African and 14% Asian.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to acknowledge first and foremost the St Joseph's School Board of Trustees for supporting my application for sabbatical leave associated with the study.

I also acknowledge my experienced deputy principal Andrew Herrick and assistant principal Ailsa Buckley for the great job they did in keeping the "ship on course" in my absence. 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 my fellow Upper Hutt principals who are walking a similar pathway to mine, who are open minded, forward thinking and act as sounding board for many shared emerging concepts and ideas. Thanks also to the schools I visited and to the many principals and teachers for giving a large amount of their time in a generous and open manner, sharing what their schools were doing with passion and pride.

Pre Amble

I have to state at the outset when I first selected 'student agency' as a sabbatical topic 12 months ago it was well before the phrase became as freely used as it is today. That said, I strongly believe this to be an extremely powerful and enlivening principle that will transform education in New Zealand classrooms, as we know it. Our students will benefit immensely as their class programmes will be more engaging, their curriculum enriched, they will feel in control of the pace of their learning and be motivated and inspired by their own successes and of those around them.

Executive Summary

Jo Public make a lot of assumptions about education today based on their own experiences in their classrooms as they grew up and on their limited knowledge of modern schooling today. Lessons in their mind should last for about an hour, the teachers control what is learnt, how it is learnt, even where and when it is learnt. Lessons should be about one subject at a time. Mobile phones should be taken off students or be switched off during school. Students should learn inside classrooms and students come to school to learn, and teachers come to school to teach. The challenge for us leaders in education is to alter the way things are done in the classroom so our teachers get to know our students, allowing them to fully engage and inspire our young people to be creative, to develop and refine their interpersonal and self management skills that they will require if they are to be successful in the world they will emerge into as young adults.

Purpose

To develop, grow and support student agency at St Joseph's School in Upper Hutt firstly by improving my personal understanding of agentic learning and secondly by identifying a number of next steps for our school to take to ensure this style of learning becomes "the way we do things around here."

Activities Undertaken

Along with my forward thinking principals from Upper Hutt I visited a number local Upper Hutt schools as well as schools in Christchurch and Auckland who have been introducing changes to their schools, leading to greater student agency to their learners over a number of years. These changes have had to be sequential, strategic and timely so that teachers, students and parents were able to see the relevance and understand the need for the innovations.

I also attended the CORE Education Ulearn conference in Auckland along with a number of my staff. This was an opportunity for me as well as key change agents within my school to hear stories of successful innovation from educators from throughout the country.

Findings

All of the schools I visited in Christchurch, Tauranga, Auckland and in Upper Hutt build student agency by implementing systems that foster a greater sense of ownership and self-efficacy by their students in their learning, inviting students to have a voice in that learning, and even to take greater control over the way outcomes from the learning are expressed.

Student-led projects and inquiries were used to build agency, as learners often controlled not only the challenge or question that was explored, but also the method of investigation, the tools that were used, the actions taken as a result of the inquiry and the means of demonstrating evidence of learning.

The schools I visited now recognise that the work places our students will emerge into are going to be very different from today. As a result our students are now being exposed to a lot more project-based learning, involving collaboration, co-operation and being contract driven, resulting in a lot more self managed and self directed learning that can take place in class and/or at home.

One challenge with this way of learning is scaffolding all learners towards success, particularly when all of them have very different levels of experience and expertise when it comes to any inquiry process and self-management. Without some core knowledge and skills in questioning, researching, investigating or analysing information, it's going to be difficult for them to maximise their position as learners.

A huge benefit to our students through increased student agency is the refinement of their key competencies, such as self-management, prioritising, time management and teamwork. It's probably these skills and competencies that will benefit our students best in the future because it's the 'soft' skills that are transferrable to any collaborative assignment or workplace.

Placing the learner at the centre not only makes them the focus of attention in terms of policy and planning, but also impacts greatly on the speed with which innovative changes can be implemented successfully.

Having established the fundamental premise of placing the learner at the centre of our thinking, there are a number of keys to unlocking the transformation potential in our schools.

Implications for my school

Essential to the cause is Transformational Leadership where leaders create an environment where they inspire staff, motivating and encouraging them to make the changes required to enable the shared vision to become a reality.

Through my leadership team and my teachers I must empower our learners by providing them with opportunities to make choices and to have the ability to act on those choices. This is the key of agency where learners have the 'power to act'.

Agency isn't about abandoning our role as teachers and leaving everything to the learner, but rather it recognises the learner as an empowered and active participant. It requires us as teachers and leaders to re-think how we engage with learners and the role we take, and it requires a change to the traditional classroom routines and daily timetable.

The process of learning through increased student agency is far more transparent for all students. They are self-managing learners involved in setting and monitoring goals, reflecting, self and peer assessing, choosing appropriate strategies, and naming their next learning steps. They can articulate the what, how and why of learning. They understand themselves as learners and know how they learn best.

Students also have to learn and understand what is all about - their responsibilities and rights in personalising their own learning. The key to it all - just as for staff, students also have to be taken through a process where they understand and contribute (and eventually lead) to their own learning programme. Beginning with an exploration of the 'ecology of learning' and leading to the outcome centred around 'enduring understandings' students learn, and are lead and guided through the knowledge and skills they need if they are to become life long learners.

We must acknowledge that learning is not confined to the four walls of a classroom, nor finishes at the school gate, but it can and does occur anywhere, at any time and at any pace. That learning may also be presented in many differing forms yet still meet the requirements of the assigned task.

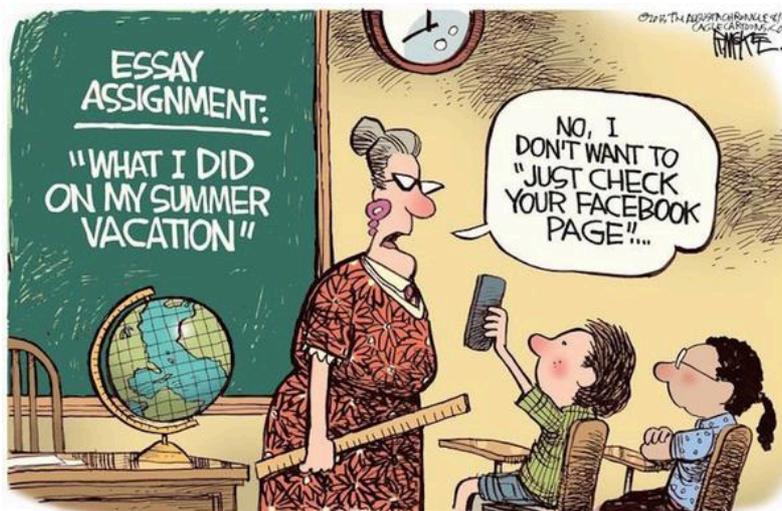
Teachers need to be open to change. An essential ingredient of agentic learning is the culture of collaboration and inquiry at teacher level so that changes that take place are reflected on and improved upon so that the best systems are what

eventually become the way things are done. Quality teaching remains the most effective key to student achievement, which is the non-negotiable driver of all we do as a school.

The increasing availability and use of digital technologies is enabling this to occur more easily, for example, learners are able to access what they are learning and doing at school from home or elsewhere, and they are able to access programmes of learning from other places, not depending purely on what is provided in their local school context. Our teachers have to plan for this and be equipped with the skills and capabilities that will allow students great autonomy and independence on their learning journey. Flipping lessons, setting up workshops and allowing the more motivated learners to work independently of their teacher[s] either in groups or by themselves on pre-assigned tasks.

We also have to embrace the idea that learning involves the process of knowledge building, and that this is no longer regarded as an individual endeavour, but occurs as individuals interact with each other, contributing, shaping and refining ideas so that the new knowledge is created. The implications this has for how classrooms are managed is huge.

The idea that 'no learner is an island', and that the connections between and among learners is fundamental to learning in the 21st century linked to the increased availability and use of digital technologies means that there is now no limit to how and where these connections are made. This is particularly significant in an increasingly globalised world.



Conclusion

Leadership is the major change agent for transforming school pedagogy. Therefore it is up to the leadership teams within schools, in particular that of the principal, to provide the environment where it is 'safe' for teachers to innovate and to give these things a try.

There will always be the critics who may well refer to the changes being advocated around increased student agency as being yet another fad. However there has never before been the tools available to our students that provide our students with the opportunities to have such ownership and independence in their learning.

The time is right to make the change. There are plenty of successful models out there for schools to learn from. Our NZ Curriculum offers opportunities for schools to create

their own curriculum and even the gatekeepers ERO advocate alternative ways of delivering the curriculum to empower, engage and motivate ALL our learners.

Small steps are essential so that sub-groups within a principal's influence are not scared away by massive, random changes that undermine established practices and that challenge shared values.

Professional readings are ideal for developing momentum. Focussed staff meetings and visits by teaching teams to local schools where there may be pockets of good practice or even pockets of bad practice that others can learn from are powerful for creating shared understandings and for creating the collaborative team of professionals who are receptive to change.

The power and permission for change lies with the principal. If schools don't start to make plans for the changes required I believe they are doing their teachers, students and wider community a disservice.

The challenge for leaders in education is to alter the way things are done in the classroom so teachers get to know their students, allowing them to fully engage and inspire our young people to be creative, to develop and refine the interpersonal and self management skills they will require to be successful in the world they will emerge into as young adults.