

Making a Difference for Senior Primary Students



Best Practice in Years 7/8 Education in Full Primary Schools

**A Sabbatical Leave Report
by Barrie Clark**

2010

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Section 1: Background

1a. Background and Purpose:

I am the principal of St Peter's School, a decile 9, Catholic and state-integrated, full primary school in the Christchurch suburb of Beckenham. During the first term of 2010 I took sabbatical leave, granted by the Ministry of Education and supported by the chairperson of the school's Board of Trustees. The focus of the study undertaken during the period of leave was "best practice in Years 7/8 education in full primary schools" in order to "better inform St Peter's School's efforts to provide quality learning experiences for its senior students".

St Peter's School was restored to full primary school status at the beginning of the 2009 school year, after many years as a contributing school since decapitation to serve Diocesan needs in 1974. A key strategic goal of the school's Board of Trustees is to establish the senior school as a strong and viable element within the whole school's structure. For this to be the case, the school is striving to provide the quality of learning experiences which will act as a stimulus for junior and middle school parents to choose the retention of their children in the school for their senior years as their preferred option.

The intention of the study was to visit a range of full primary schools and talk with principals, teachers, students and parents at the Years 7/8 level. Where appropriate, classroom observations would also occur. As a principal, my particular focus was to interview principal colleagues about the key decisions, planning, strategies and practices which they implemented and which, in their view, contributed strongly to the success of the senior education in their school. Thus, the study relates to the leadership and management of full primary schools, and 'big picture' and strategic issues, and was not an attempt to identify good classroom teaching ideas in the various curriculum areas – a possible focus for a teacher's sabbatical report.

Although the sabbatical leave was granted for ten weeks, just less than nine full school weeks were available for school visits as it was a short term. Also, the study took place during the first term of the school year and therefore, understandably, the first two weeks were not convenient for school visits. Related professional reading occupied the time not spent in schools.

1b. School Visits:

I visited a good many schools during the term of the leave extended to me. I am grateful to the principals and Years 7/8 teachers of the full primary schools in which I spent a good deal of time:

Our Lady, Star of the Sea School (Sumner)
St Patrick's School (Bryndwr)
New Brighton Catholic School
Sacred Heart School (Addington)
St Anne's School (Woolston)
St Mary's School (Blenheim)
St Joseph's School (Papanui)
Our Lady of the Rosary School (Wellington)
North Loburn School (North Canterbury)
Freeville School (Ch-Ch)
Mairehau School (Ch-Ch)
Riverlands School (Blenheim)
Fairhall School (Blenheim)
Beckenham School (Ch-Ch)

1c. Interviews and Conversations:

Professional dialogue is a great medium for encouraging self-reflection and personal professional growth. I was fortunate enough to spend time, in this capacity, with a good number of individuals:

Sue Brown	Opawa School teacher
Deb Daines	New Brighton Catholic School principal
Peter Callanan	St Anne's School principal
Trish Sleeman	Sacred Heart School principal
Frank McManus	Sacred Heart School teacher
Aaron Richards	St Patrick's School (Bryndwr) principal
Denise Healey	Fairhall School teacher, deputy principal
Mary-Angela Tombs	St Mary's School (Blenheim) teacher, deputy principal
Chris Brell	Riverlands School teacher, deputy principal
Dave Parsons	Riverlands School principal
John Bangma	Mairehau School principal
Janet Cummings	Sacred Heart School teacher, deputy principal
Simon Green	North Loburn School principal
Lois Pettigrew	North Loburn School teacher
Mark Gregory	St Joseph's School principal
Marietjie Benjamin	St Joseph's School deputy principal
Kathleen Daly	Our Lady of the Rosary School principal
Bernita Bennett	Our Lady of the Rosary School teacher
Margaret Coleman	Star of the Sea School principal
John Leonard	Freeville School principal
Paul Wilkinson	Freeville School teacher, deputy principal
Bernice Swain	Freeville School teacher
Nick Major	Beckenham School principal

I also carried out in-depth interviews with Maureen Kerr (leadership adviser, Catholic Education Office, formerly principal at St Patrick's School, Kaiapoi) and Cushla O'Connor (religious education adviser, Catholic Education Office, formerly Years 7/8 teacher at Our Lady of Victories School, Burnside).

I thank all of the above for sharing the benefit of their professional experience, judgment and wisdom.

I spoke with many parents of senior school students but interviewed a small number at quite some length, namely Lyn van Velzen (Tuamarina School - Blenheim), Tania Temesvari (Freeville School) and Belinda Barrett-Walker (St Anne's School, Woolston). I thank them for sharing their thoughts, and experience, in having a child as a senior student in a full primary school, with me.

Section 2: Findings

2a. Findings – Introductory Note:

This was a relatively narrowly-focused study, and not as open-ended as some might be, because of the nature of the topic. It also became immediately obvious that many full primary schools were experiencing the same difficulties and issues, dealing with these in similar ways and identifying a similar range of exciting opportunities for 'adding value' and 'personalising learning' for Years 7/8 students. I found myself having very similar conversations in most of the schools I visited. For this reason the findings I have identified are not especially numerous but are both credible and reliable because they are supported by the experiences of many more than just one or two schools.

2b. Findings – Managing Perceptions:

One of the comments most frequently made to me by principals and senior school teachers was to the effect that "ensuring a quality reputation for your senior school, and a high degree of confidence in its ability to add value to student learning experiences, is all about managing the perceptions of parents and the wider school community". This comment reflected:

- the concern sometimes felt in regard to the marketing procedures of other schools (eg. some intermediate schools) at whose information nights high profile activities such as rock band concerts, business enterprise competitions, school musicals, the school radio station etc were presented in such a way that parents perceived that almost every child would be involved in these events when the reality was such that auditions and trials generally eliminated most students from involvement
- the way in which some schools listed or described facilities which they believed set them apart from most other schools and added considerable value to students' learning when, in fact, these claims were open to question eg. a computer suite (access to which, in fact, was rostered by class and generally resulted in each individual student having perhaps an hour per week on a computer) or a science laboratory (often the science teacher's home room but

not necessarily leading to any more hands-on experiments or ‘white coat’ science) – “we go to the science lab but we mainly just take notes, or write down information from the whiteboard, after we watch things like DVDs or something on YouTube” stated one student in Yr 8 at a Yrs 7-13 school

Having made a decision to send their child to a particular primary school at the New Entrant level, relatively few parents revisit this decision, other than in exceptional circumstances or, obviously, due to a change in the location of their home. However, most become aware of the greater variety of placement possibilities at the Year 7 level as their child approaches this schooling level. As a result, all of the full primary schools I visited have felt under some pressure from neighbouring schools, either a neighbouring intermediate or Yrs 7-13 school, as this ‘competition’ manifests itself. Two schools identified no less than five other schools to which their students had been drawn at the Years 7/8 level during previous years. All of the remaining schools identified at least two other schools which were located relatively close by and which catered for generally larger numbers of Yrs 7/8 students.

Common ‘best practice’ outcomes of this perception of competition have been:

- Regular (ie. at least annual) and deliberate reflection on the quality of the senior school programme being provided. This process involves a good number of stakeholders ie. professional staff, Board of Trustees members, parents and, often, students. It is also extensive in nature ie. classroom programme, extra-curricula activities, allocation of funding and staffing etc.
- Annual ‘parent information evenings’ designed to provide quality information to parents about the nature of the school’s senior school programme and the extra opportunities it might provide – even schools which are successful in retaining most, if not all, of their Yr 6 students into Yr 7 continue to provide this assurance to parents of the ‘added value’ being delivered to senior students in the school. It is worth noting that the ‘parent information evenings’ seen to be most successful were those at which the school’s current senior students had considerable input and profile – as one parent noted “hearing about all the good stuff from the kids themselves had the most effect for me”.

In relation to the two points made above, several schools stated that “complacency can readily develop and become the enemy” (a quote from one principal) unless these quality assurance practices become embedded in the school’s culture and procedures.

One school used the Education Review Office’s national report “Best Practice in Yrs 7/8 Education”, a 2002 publication, as the basis of a self-review exercise in which the school’s stakeholders identified the ways in which the school’s own practices met, and often exceeded, each of the Yrs 7/8 ‘quality teaching and learning indicators’ highlighted in the report. The resulting document was made available to any parents questioning whether or not the school was able to provide for its senior students as well as a neighbouring, probably larger, school may have been able to do. However, while it can still be found on many staffroom shelves, it is worth noting that the national report referred to is no longer listed on the ERO website as being available. This is an indication that the report may no longer be seen by ERO as being a robust descriptor of best practice at this level of the school, a constantly evolving setting. Nevertheless, the concept behind this school’s self-review process is commendable.

Such processes, providing assurance to families against externally-referenced criteria, are to be encouraged.

Further outcomes of this sense of being in ‘competition’ with neighbouring schools have been that:

- Schools have strengthened their marketing and promotion practices eg. many of the schools visited have printed a glossy brochure, on display and available at the school office, specifically devoted to describing Yrs 7/8 programmes, activities, events and successes – quite separate from whatever other general promotional material the school produced and made available to families.
- The office foyers of full primary schools particularly feature well-presented displays of work completed by senior students, in art for example, and/or photographic displays of senior students involved in activities such as outdoor education – these were very prominent in a number of schools visited and achieved the twin purposes of reinforcing the school community’s strong awareness that this was a full primary school and also that Yrs 7/8 students were being particularly well catered for.
- In the Catholic schools visited, the displays described above were also very apparent in the entrance foyers of the parish church and/or hall; in these schools the parish constitutes an important part of the wider community and is a potential source of students, thereby becoming a major focus of the school’s promotional efforts, particularly in regard to Yrs 7/8
- The principal’s regular school newsletters prominently feature news from, and coverage of events in, the senior school; many of the principals with whom I spoke commented along the lines that they ensure that “whatever else goes in each newsletter, I make sure I promote what has been happening with our Yrs 7/8”, in the words of one, and that “I keep trying to hammer home the message that great things are happening with our Yrs 7/8 students”, as another stated. A number of schools regularly included items of ‘senior school news’, written by the students themselves, in their newsletters – these items had been noted as having particular impact (as well, of course, as providing an authentic purpose for written language)

2c. Findings – Key Features – Leadership and Pastoral Care:

Full primary schools have identified **two major points of difference** between themselves and other schools, these being the areas on which they now focus to **add value** or **personalise learning** for their students in Years 7/8. Principals and senior school teaching staff in every one of the schools visited were able to describe, at some length, a raft of activities in which their students could become engaged in each of these two areas. The two areas are:

- **Student Leadership**
- **Pastoral care** of younger students

The staff of full primary schools, and the parents of senior students in those schools, repeatedly pointed out that the size of the student body in intermediate schools meant that leadership opportunities were available to only a small proportion of the school’s

population or were spread so thinly that few students received any real responsibility through which to grow their leadership capacity. Likewise, the absence of younger students in intermediate schools, or the equivalent departments of Yrs 7-13 schools, meant that there were no opportunities to participate in nurturing the personal growth of younger children, seen as an important aspect of the emotional and social growth of students in the pre-teenage years, particularly of the boys.

This sabbatical report deals in some depth with the practices of, and recommendations made by, full primary schools in each of these two areas, which they all prioritise.

2c (i) Findings – Student Leadership:

The exercise of student leadership achieves two major purposes:

- Assists the work of the whole school by enabling a much larger number of events and activities to be undertaken than would be the case if the organisation of these events was solely managed by staff and parents

and, more importantly,

- Provides many opportunities for the personal growth of students as they plan and organise activities, gaining in confidence and a sense of responsibility, and in both collaborative and self-management skills, as they do so.

Students become more resourceful, learn to communicate in a wide variety of ways and develop a sense of shared ownership in the life of the school, leading in turn to greater motivation and purpose in their daily engagement with staff and fellow students, as they identify how they might contribute, as citizens, to the greater good of the community. Thus, they become better prepared for their later lives in a wider society. In relation to motivation, some parents of senior students commented that they found it much easier to get their children to school once they had a school-wide responsibility and a sense of connection with the life of the school.

All full primary schools reserve key leadership roles for their Yrs 7/8 students. In the bigger schools, they are reserved for Yr 8 students, while Yr 7 students take on important, but lesser, roles. In reserving these roles for senior students, schools deliberately encourage a sense of anticipation on the part of Yrs 5/6 students (and their parents!) of one day being able to fill these roles. Several of the students I interviewed commented that “I wanted to stay here for Yrs 7/8 because I thought it would be great to be a sports captain” (others made similar comments in relation to being an assembly leader, computer tutor, head librarian etc). Several of these students further commented that they felt there would be little chance of being selected to fill one of these roles in a much larger intermediate school.

The provision of leadership roles to students is carefully managed by the class teacher, and the wider staff of the school, so that all senior students have such opportunities for personal growth. From the point of view of integrity, and having promoted leadership roles as a key feature of the opportunities to be offered to senior students, schools clearly feel that these should be extended to all students and not just a select few. In order that there are a sufficient number of such roles available for all

students, staff members in schools have had to 'brainstorm', sometimes with students, the areas of school life which offer potential for a greater degree of involvement of, and leadership by, senior students. This has caused schools to re-think aspects of management and organisation and they have been surprised with the changes which follow and the resulting enhancement of school life. An example of this is the school which, in trying to find a role for each senior student, identified 'the school gate greeter' as a potential responsibility. A roster was drawn up to include all interested students with the result that each had approximately one day per fortnight 'on duty'. This student is stationed at the school gate each morning from 8.40a.m. and welcomes each arriving family with a smile and some friendly words. It has become quite a popular role for students and has received favourable comment from many parents; school life has been enhanced as the size of the leadership, or responsibility, 'pie' has been enlarged.

Some of the schools I visited were Catholic schools. They have found that the many aspects of their Special Catholic Character lend themselves to student leadership. As these schools identify areas of school life which are open or available to students to play a stronger role, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, they have found that daily class prayer in each room, regular paraliturgies and service activities, such as Mission Days and visiting rest homes, provide many extra leadership opportunities than might be the case in a state full primary. Thus, it could be argued that the many benefits of any school's full primary status are even more apparent, and can be especially emphasised, in Catholic integrated schools.

All of these leadership roles are generally recognised with publicly-presented badges (or tee shirts etc), worn both to provide status and to promote the concept of future leadership among the school's younger students. "I'd like to wear some of those badges when I'm one of the bigger kids" I was told very enthusiastically by a younger student in one of the schools visited. School newsletters and foyer displays also draw further attention to leadership roles and to those selected to exercise them.

The actual leadership roles in which Yrs 7/8 students are involved are many and varied. They are limited only by the perception and imagination of the school staff and by the constraints of the size of the school, the school timetable, funding etc. This list is certainly not exhaustive but does capture the flavour and extent of such roles and responsibilities:

- Physical activity leaders (PALs), trained by Sport Canterbury to lead playground activity for younger students
- House captains and deputy captains
- Membership of the school/student council
- Sports monitors and captains
- Cultural leaders (eg. organising school art exhibition)
- Computer tutors
- Assembly leadership team
- School office receptionists (as required)
- School gate greeters
- Peer mediators
- Road Patrol monitors
- Librarians

- Environmental leaders (eg. Arbor Day planting, recycling coordinators)
- Staffroom hosts when there are visitors

and, in Catholic integrated schools:

- Young Vinnies leaders
- Mission Day organisers
- Liturgy leaders
- Prayer leaders in other classrooms

All schools regard training for leadership as being a very important part of their programme. It is not just enough to provide leadership opportunities for students but essential that the Yrs 7/8 students are trained for leadership. In most cases, students are expected to apply for the most important of such roles, often using supplied job descriptions to assist them in doing so. When selected, they are encouraged to set recorded goals and are counseled through regular self-reflection activities. Those elected or appointed to student councils receive opportunities to observe the conduct of, for example, P.T.A. and Board of Trustees meetings so that these can become exemplars of good practice.

2c (ii) Findings – Pastoral Care:

Student leadership often merges with the pastoral care of younger students. An example of this is when whanau groups were formed in one school. All students were divided into ‘families’ in which all age groups were represented, these groups meeting on a regular basis, under the leadership and guidance of a Yr 8 leader and a Yr 7 deputy. A good many of the school’s activities were organised within this structure and it not only provided the senior students with an opportunity to organise events and implement ideas but also to get to know and nurture younger students.

Buddy classes are often set up in full primary schools. This involves senior classes being paired with junior classes and coming together for a shared book time, to carry out computer skills tutoring, to teach physical education skills (eg. bowling and catching) etc. One school found that this worked best if Yr 7 students were buddied with New Entrant or Yr 1 students so that, both students still being in the school the following year, this relationship could further develop as the same buddies worked together again in Yr 8 and Yr 2. A particularly positive example of this interaction was a senior student completing a digital record of a New Entrant’s first day and/or first week at school, including captioned photos, video and sound recordings eg. an interview. This was then presented at the school’s next assembly as the senior student introduced and welcomed the junior student to the school, an assembly to which the New Entrant’s parents were invited.

Buddying senior classes with junior classes also leads naturally into taking some responsibility for wet day supervision (organising and leading classroom games, reading stories etc) which very often becomes a popular role. Another delightful example of the pastoral links which become established through these activities was observed in the school in which each senior student was assigned a junior student on whose birthday a handcrafted birthday card was delivered to the room and presented, along with a “\$2 shop” gift. These small events, over the passage of time, enhance

the social and emotional welfare of each student and, naturally, the whole school community. They take advantage of opportunities which can best be capitalised upon in full primary schools.

One school has formalised pastoral care into what has become entitled the Junior Tutor Programme (J.T.P.). On three mornings each week, and during their own class' literacy time, a senior student worked with a junior student on reading, written language or basic mathematics facts tasks for thirty minutes each session. They worked with the same student each time in order to build a relationship with them. Although involvement by the senior students was optional, it has become a popular part of the school programme and staff observed that the self-esteem of both students was enhanced. The senior student was also asked to maintain a brief written, and reflective, learning log or record of each session:

- Date?
- Who did I work with?
- What did we do?
- How did I help?
- What could I do next time? ie. could I change my approach?
- What have I learned?
- What skill/attitude/value did I use or demonstrate?

Section 3: Observations

3a. Classroom Observations:

Some time during the sabbatical visits was spent observing in Yrs 7/8 classrooms. This was not the major focus of the sabbatical project as I had made the decision that it would be relatively unproductive to identify good teaching strategies in other schools and then attempt to 'download' these onto an already competent teacher in my own school. Nevertheless, familiarity with good practice in other schools does provide the background for a school leader to engage in professional conversation with one's own senior school staff, assists in setting goals for the development of the senior area of the school and provides a benchmark against which to measure school progress and, for this reason, my sabbatical visits to schools did include making observations in some classrooms.

Good Yrs 7/8 classrooms tend to look and sound unlike those at other levels of the primary school. This reflects a number of factors:

- The nature of the relationship between teacher and students
- The nature of the relationships among the students
- The nature of the programme
- The nature of both the learning backgrounds and the learning needs of the students

Some brief comments in relation to each of these:

3a (i) Teacher-student Relationships:

Previous researchers into this age group have reported on surveys carried out to identify the qualities of a good teacher as perceived by the students themselves. The results showed that what we might describe as pedagogical (teaching and learning or curriculum) knowledge was barely mentioned by the students. Instead, the students believed that a good teacher was one who, in summary, “likes the kids, is fair to everyone, listens when you want to tell them something, believes you, isn’t too serious, enjoys their job, provides encouragement, is patient, takes the time to explain things” etc. In other words, personal qualities are the key to success with this age group and the nature of the student/teacher relationship is critical. The adage that “Children don’t care what you know until they know that you care” is at no level more apt than it is at Yrs 7/8 level. This fact signals, for school leaders and managers, the real importance of appropriate teacher selection. Teachers selected for positions at this level of the school should be those who have chosen to teach this age group. It is not an area of the school which provides a ‘safe placement’ for an average teacher. Passion for learning, confidence and, especially, high motivation and energy are desirable attributes for all teachers but are critical at this level of the schooling system. The good classrooms I observed were similar – they featured a relaxed, conversational, informal, good-humoured atmosphere but one in which clear expectations about being busy and productive were quietly but firmly conveyed. Perhaps surprisingly, students appear to want a teacher who is firm. “Good teachers are teachers who are quite strict” stated one student, while her peers nodded assent. Reflecting also this age group’s concern for apparent fairness, or justice, another added “Strict teachers are the good teachers because they make sure that everybody plays by the rules”. This is not the same thing as lacking warmth. It reflects the fact that students in this age group respond well to someone they respect – there is an understanding that a teacher does not have to be ‘popular’ to be able to help students to learn effectively. More than one teacher told me that students in this age group “had learned enough about school to know that they could be as more or less engaged as the teacher required.” One teacher expressed this as “they actually like being lazy but are quite prepared to work hard if they know that’s what you expect”.

3a (ii) Student-student Relationships:

Students in this age group are particularly peer-oriented. For many younger students, their teacher’s approval rates highly and compliance is therefore often a feature of their classrooms and their behaviours. Although not necessarily desirable from a learning point of view, junior classrooms can be quite teacher-focused and yet the students can be happy in such an environment. With older students, the approval of their peers is extremely important to their social well-being and, in turn, to their happiness and consequent learning success at school. Compliance is less important to them so long as they don’t “lose face” with their classmates. Yrs 7/8 students are therefore seldom comfortable in a teacher-focused classroom. One principal and former Yrs 7/8 teacher, very highly regarded by teachers and students alike, suggests to all her senior school staff that, in managing behaviour, “absolutely the most important thing is that you should never back them into a corner in front of their peers”. She believes that, in acknowledging the high importance of peer approval,

teachers should find “quiet, subtle, low profile, individualised” ways of managing students. “If you make an enemy of one you can very easily make an enemy of them all” she counsels teachers new to Yrs 7/8 teaching.

3a (iii) Programme requirements:

In regard to the nature of the programme, there are new curriculum requirements which appear at the Yrs 7/8 level. These include the need to provide opportunities to learn another language, in addition to English and te reo. French, German and Spanish are the languages most frequently taught to meet this curriculum requirement. Regular Technology instruction – fabrics, foods, plastics and metals, wood - becomes a part of the programme at this level and this generally requires a weekly visit to another school’s technology centre. Careers education, another requirement, is implemented in a variety of ways but often includes visits to worksites, invitations to individuals to visit the school and make presentations to, and field questions from, the students and this component of the curriculum often produces a student-mounted careers expo, to which parents are invited, as its concluding activity. As these requirements are met, the Yrs 7/8 programme takes on a different shape to that apparent in other classrooms in the same school.

3a (iv) Learning Backgrounds and Needs:

Most students in Yrs 7/8 have developed quite sophisticated learning skills and are able to participate productively in a programme which fully illustrates many of the dimensions which teachers with younger students have just begin to explore. Students at the senior level are also preparing for the demands of their secondary education, something which their parents are particularly well aware of, a point made to me very frequently by the parents with whom I spoke during my sabbatical visits to schools. These two factors, once again, change the nature and appearance of Yrs 7/8 learning programmes, especially in schools which cater well for this age group.

Most Yrs 7/8 students have learned to read – they are readers. The instructional reading programme no longer exists as a separate component of the classroom day and now becomes embedded in the topic studies programme. The ‘learning to read’ process is overtaken by the more relevant context of ‘reading to learn’. The students have the skills to enable a true integrated curriculum to be pursued, one rather less compartmentalised by subject and more reflective of the world of learning beyond the school gate. Students are also more able to engage in inquiry learning without the degree of dependence on the teacher which, despite worthy goals, tends to occur with younger students. Information and communication technologies play an integral part in learning at this level of the school as students have become more adept with multi-media. Yrs 7/8 students have more experience in the setting of learning goals and a greater ability to self-reflect and assess the quality of their own performance and the most appropriate next learning steps. These factors potentially enable the competent teacher to engage collaboratively with his/her students to personalise the learning programme. Again, this changes the nature of classroom life.

3b. Preparation for secondary school:

Under the heading 'Learning background and needs' I have commented on the fact that parents of Yrs 7/8 students appear particularly anxious about the fact that their children need to be well-prepared for life at secondary school. Much of the feedback which they provide to schools and teachers in relation to their child's learning programme in a full primary school centres on this awareness. In turn, principals and teachers, in catering for their students and promoting the relevance and benefits of their school's learning programme, have identified strategies and approaches which they believe will assist in ensuring these students will be ready for the challenges of secondary school life.

These include:

- Planned, regular, timetabled interchanges between classrooms eg. for numeracy, literacy etc so that students get used to having teachers other than a homeroom teacher with whom to interact, complete homework for etc – students also physically move to another classroom during the course of these
- Some specialist teaching eg. in art, music, physical education, science etc – there are teachers in all schools with specialist skills who can be utilised for some time each week to work with Yrs 7/8 students while their class is taught by the regular senior school teacher
- Daily or weekly written goal-setting using collaboratively-developed templates
- The use of personal learning journals encouraging self-reflection and, again, goal-setting or identification of 'next steps' in learning
- Students organising personal timetables for the following week, completed on a Friday afternoon and identifying non-optional curriculum activities, whole school events, optional cultural group activities (eg. choir), sports practices, student council meetings, interchanges, assemblies etc
- Students have their own 'homework and communications' book in which they, not the teacher, record the messages which need to be conveyed to parents about the school calendar of events, required items etc
- An individual learning or education plan (I.L.P. or I.E.P.) for each student, developed after negotiation between student, teacher and parents, and recording key learning goals and the timelines and strategies to achieve these; this forms the basis of student-led interviews/conferences held twice each year
- A range of "choices" built into the class programme (or the day or the week), designed to encourage students to take greater ownership of their learning; these may be as simple as exercising choice as to the order in which tasks will be completed or may consist of adding a certain number of "can do" activities to the "must do" list determined by the teacher



The strategies listed above are designed to encourage the growth of students as reflective, organised and independent learners who take responsibility for much of their own learning and who manage their own time and manage it well, these attributes being seen as key to the achievement of success in a secondary school environment. They also assist to foster the perception on the part of parents of Yrs 7/8 students that their children are getting “an intermediate school programme”. They help to provide what one principal described as “the obvious differentiation which parents are looking for”.

In one school, the Yrs 7/8 students host a family barbecue towards the end of both the first and fourth terms, during and after which they take time to demonstrate to their parents their classroom learning achievements and share the evidence that they have met, or are closer to meeting, their personal learning goals.

Section 4: Classroom Pedagogical Strategies

Some interesting classroom approaches which were observed included:

- Students as ePals, using their laptops to send daily emails to peers in other countries or geographical situations
- Classroom reading programmes utilising a greater variety of “instructional readers”, such as N.Z Geographic magazine, the newspaper, items printed from internet sites, sets of novels, Air N.Z. inflight magazines etc
- A ‘mystery day trip’ once per term, taking the students to a surprise, high-interest event, activity or location – designed to generate language, broaden horizons, stimulate goal-setting etc
- An ‘education is everywhere’ programme, one afternoon per week, utilising parent and community interests and strengths – these are ‘workshops’ in which students participate in music, drama, crafts, hobbies and interests with external tutors
- An annual speech competition, judged by an outside ‘personality’, presented in front of a Yrs 5/6 audience
- The use of a community swimming pool, and often its specialist instructors, to provide high quality swimming and water safety tuition on a regular basis throughout the year eg. travelling by bus (or shuttle van) for daily swimming for a three-week period in each of the four terms of the school year



- Involvement in a wide range of outside events organised and hosted by various community businesses, institutions and organisations such as:
 - CantaMath competition
 - Science Awards
 - Mathematics Challenges
 - Current Events Quiz
 - Spelling Quiz
 - Science Fair
 - City Council Environmental Award Scheme

- The use of the Burnham military training and confidence course or the police training and confidence course to develop skills and self-esteem

Section 5: Home Learning, Leadership and Citizenship

The many practices which I identified, discussed with principals and teachers, and have collated under this heading, certainly provided the most worthwhile and exciting observations during my sabbatical visits to schools.

These practices:

- linked classroom teacher practice with school-wide activities and priorities
- provided authentic contexts for student learning both within and beyond the school
- provided opportunities for, and evidence of, the development of the New Zealand Curriculum's key competencies
- provided individualised learning pathways for students and recognised the unique set of interests and abilities of each
- promoted growing student independence and ownership of learning
- encouraged leadership and a growing sense of citizenship
- recognised that the school environment is not the only one in which worthwhile learning occurs and
- displaced the traditional, and now very much outdated, approach to homework



A “Summit Challenge” debrief at North Loburn School



The specific way in which these elements are integrated into the school’s programme varies quite substantially from one school to the next. The several examples and ideas provided here do not include every nuance of observed practice but do provide something of a practical framework against which any school might focus its reflection and decision-making.

Very few full primary schools set their Yrs 7/8 students daily or weekly homework in the traditional sense. The subject of traditional homework activities has become a vexed issue during the 2010 school year anyway, with the departure of some schools from this practice even receiving attention in the national media during the first term. Most teachers have long recognised that few of the learning needs of children are met by traditional homework but those who teach the senior classes in full primary schools particularly recognise the inadequacy of this approach. They have looked to change the vocabulary of ‘homework’ to that of ‘home learning’ and to better link the daily work of the classroom with the real lives of their students, seeking to identify authentic and often practical contexts in which Yrs 7/8 students can both practise and reflect their increasingly sophisticated learning skills.

Most utilise the approach of identifying sets of challenges, established either for the current term (often the case at the Yr 7 level) or the entire school year (often at Yr 8 level). Many of these challenges have been identified through collaboration with students, and parents, and recognised the fact that many students were involved in really worthwhile activities beyond the school without these being ‘set’ by their teachers. Yrs 7/8 students, far more so than younger students, are beginning to have quite active lives beyond the school gate. Good schools recognise that learning does not stop when students leave at the end of the day and seek to dovetail the school and home lives of students and integrate their learning.

Typically these challenges were grouped into sets or dimensions which provided coverage of a number of key areas, such as:

- Academic (or learning)
- Cultural
- Sporting (or physical)
- Leadership
- Citizenship and/or Community Service (linked to Catholic Character, in an integrated school)

In most cases there were approximately ten challenges under each of these headings. Students had to achieve, or complete, approximately six challenges under each heading during the course of the school year, in whatever order they chose. It was each student's responsibility to keep a portfolio, or appropriate written or visual record, of the challenges they had completed. Usually this involved each challenge being "signed off" by the appropriate class or subject teacher, or adult (eg. librarian, school secretary, parent netball coach, caretaker). The signatures of other responsible adults who had been informed about the programme were also accepted as evidence of achievement eg. scout leader, surf club captain, Parish youth worker, dance or guitar tutor, club sports coach. Students frequently reported back to their peers in the classroom, or shared the evidence of their achievement (eg. PowerPoint presentation, digital portfolio, trophy or certificate, badge, etc), so that even those challenges completed entirely outside of school hours came under the 'umbrella' of the school.

In a number of schools, an activity related to careers education, which is a distinctive element of the Yrs 7/8 curriculum and is approached in a wide variety of ways, is integrated into the challenges programme as a compulsory task. This means that activities such as:

- preparing, carrying out and reporting on an interview with someone in a particular occupational role (eg. a veterinarian) or
- completing a project alongside or under the supervision of, for example, an engineer or
- researching, using the internet, the work of Red Cross reconstruction staff

could become relevant and appropriate home/school learning opportunities.

Teachers carefully monitored their students' efforts. A comprehensive record was kept of each student's involvement and success. A good example of this was seen at Christchurch's Freeville School. The school's mission and its expectations of students are promoted under its "Freeville Flyers" banner and, in keeping with this, each senior student has a 'passport'. As for a real passport, in which progress around the world is recorded by a local stamp as evidence of the journey to and from a destination, each occasion on which a Freeville Yrs 7/8 student successfully completes a challenge is recognised with another stamp in the passport, in this school's case using a specially designed "Fit to Fly" aircraft stamp. This culminates in being awarded Gold Wings (60 stamps), Silver Wings (45 stamps) or Bronze Wings (30 stamps) professionally-produced certificates at the end of the year. North Canterbury's North Loburn School provided another model of this approach. This school, geographically located close to Mt. Grey, uses a series of what are described as 'Summit' challenges. These are not

restricted to the senior school only. Students at the Yr 8 level work on an “Everest Challenge”, those at Yr 7 focus on achieving targets set out in their “Aoraki/Cook Challenge”, those in Yr 6 work on home and/or school activities in their “Tasman Challenge” etc. Once again, there are sets of activities in each challenge (eg. cultural, sporting, community, leadership). The activities have a degree of similarity from one school level to the next, so that the process and concept become familiar over time, but obviously vary in difficulty or complexity depending on the age of the students.

A number of Catholic full primary schools have integrated their Special Character into this approach. One of the dimensions of their sets of challenges covers what was described in a couple of these schools as Discipleship. Thus, responsibilities such as contributing to the work of the school’s Young Vinnies, carrying out the role of an altar server, organising a Mission Day activity, playing an instrument at a school or parish liturgy etc were given credit, more so if considerable ‘out of school’ time had been devoted to organisation and/or preparation.

Typically, schools attach a different number of points or credits to various tasks, activities or challenges. For example, working as a school librarian for an entire year carries more points or credits than doing so for a term and introducing a guest speaker at a whole-school assembly carries more points or credits than doing so at the class level. The credits recognise the difficulty of the challenge, the student’s persistence over a period of time or the relative degree of importance of the role eg. sports leadership compared to deputy leadership. Credits are accumulated, with a maximum number allowable under any one dimension of the multi-faceted learning challenges programme, and thresholds are set for the attainment of various levels of the final awards eg. gold/silver/bronze or credit/merit/distinction.

The work of students in this ‘home and school learning’ programme provides many opportunities to foster the achievement of students in relation to the New Zealand Curriculum’s Key Competencies:

- Developing and Using Thinking Skills
- Using Languages, Symbols and Texts
- Managing Self
- Participating and Contributing
- Relating to Others

Many schools quite carefully cross-reference these key competencies with the tasks or activities in each year level’s booklet of possible challenges, and the range of options available to students for reporting back on, or sharing, their learning. Thus, the written record of the successful completion of a learning task also provides the evidence of a student’s practice of one or more of the key competencies.

Clearly, there is a great deal of flexibility within this general approach and schools are readily able to personalise their own programme. However, all schools reported high student motivation and strong parental interest and support for programmes which link home learning, community involvement, leadership, citizenship and, in integrated schools, elements of Catholic Special Character.

Section 6: School Organisational Strategies

Schools use a variety of approaches to maximize their potential as a full primary. No one approach, no one answer, suits every school. In fact, the decisions made by some schools almost contradict those made by some others. What did become clear, however, as I visited schools was that the most successful of them had not left things to chance or just allowed systems to evolve. They had been involved in deliberate and constructive action designed to create a successful learning environment at the Yrs 7/8 level.

Teacher selection, as already mentioned, was a key issue. One principal described the ideal Yrs 7/8 teacher as “a strong teacher who is empathetic with the age group and who communicates well with, and relates well to, parents”. Three or four schools had deliberately appointed a teacher with recent experience in an intermediate school. The principals in each of these schools conceded that the particular teacher was no better than others who could have been appointed but commented that the perception of parents (already identified as being highly important) was that this teacher “would know all about the age group and the programme”. They saw this teacher as a specialist intermediate school teacher rather than as a ‘promoted’ primary school teacher. One principal stated that “I don’t think that teacher is any better than the one we used to have in that senior room but the negative feedback we used to get from some parents disappeared overnight when we appointed a former intermediate school teacher, so at least it’s one less issue I have to worry about!”

On a more constructive note, a good number of principals commented that they really try to “look after” their senior class teacher. “Don’t just appoint the right person and leave it at that” said one experienced school leader. “Look after your Yr 7/8 teacher, support them, encourage them, provide them with the best resources and celebrate their successes. Urge them to have an active out-of-school life as teaching at this level is demanding and they need to be refreshed often” he added. The pastoral care of staff members is a key ingredient in the quality leadership of all schools but, clearly, many principals feel that this is especially so of senior school teachers.

One other interesting issue in regard to staffing was the differing view, on the part of principals, as to whether or not the Yrs 7/8 teacher should have other responsibilities in the school. One principal commented that parents can become disgruntled when their child’s class teacher is out of the classroom on a regular basis because of administrative demands eg. deputy principal, teacher responsible for sport or, in a Catholic integrated school, Director of Religious Studies etc. The view of parents seems to be that this would be less likely to happen in an intermediate school. This principal, therefore, has assigned to the Yrs 7/8 class a teacher whose week with the students will not be interrupted by other professional distractions. However, in other schools the principal commented that a teacher such as the deputy principal had been deliberately placed in the senior classroom because the parents would be more likely to regard that individual as an experienced and competent teacher. There is no ‘silver bullet’ here but it is clear that schools have given this issue quite some degree of thought. It illustrates, yet again, the efforts which schools believe are necessary to manage the perceptions of the community at a level of the school at which there is such competition for students.

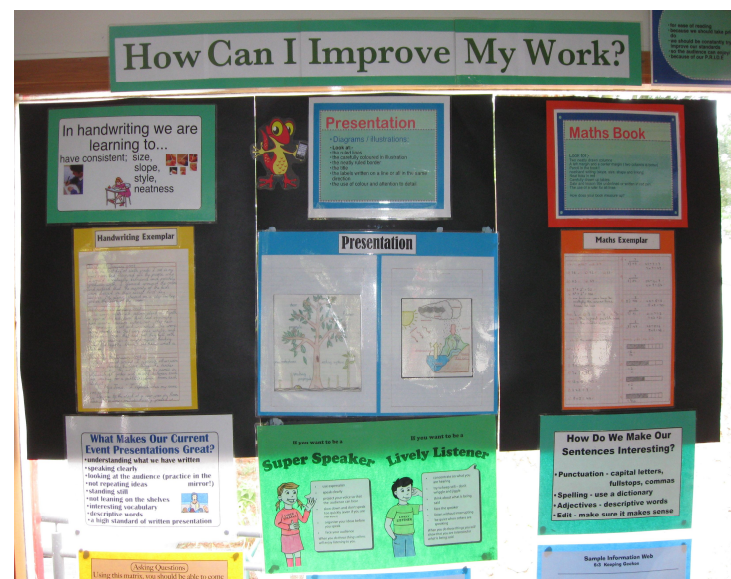
A number of full primary schools describe their Yrs 7/8 class(es), in newsletters and all promotional material, as “our senior school” or as “our intermediate school” or “our intermediate class”. These terms are chosen quite deliberately to reinforce the notion that the programme at this level is significantly different from that provided at the other levels of the same school and that it is has much more in common with the programme which would be offered to the students at an intermediate or in the Yrs 7/8 classes of a Yrs 7-13 school. It assists the wider perception of ‘added value’ or a ‘differentiated curriculum’.

Allied to this, a number of schools are organised to ensure that their Yrs 7/8 teacher(s) does not usually participate in curriculum planning or implementation with the Yrs 4-6 class teachers. They have found from experience that, inevitably, shared events or activities otherwise result from this collaboration and that this creates the potential for the programme to be viewed as “the same sort of work that the juniors do but just a little bit harder”, as one parent described it, or as “not really what they would do at an intermediate” in the words of another.

Some schools have formed a strategic alliance with a neighbouring secondary school. This has allowed them access, for example, to such facilities as a science laboratory, music room and instruments, computer suite, sports field and technology room. The secondary school’s senior students are involved, as part of their community leadership programme, in activities such as sports coaching and computer tuition in the full primary school. The benefits are obvious for the primary school but are present also for the secondary school, which achieves a positive community profile and is often able to take the opportunity to promote its facilities to prospective students and their parents so that it becomes a natural choice when it comes time to enrol for secondary schooling.



A focus on quality in a Yrs 7/8 classroom at North Loburn School



Some schools implement provisions which create a distinction for senior students that is obvious to younger students, in some cases because these, though often superficial, distinctions cause those younger students to aspire to eventually be a senior in their school. These include:

- Uniform modifications eg. wearing caps (or bucket hats) rather than legionnaire-style sunhats, the use of badges, winter or summer shorts with a zip, trousers with a zip, sports tracksuits, a different polar fleece or jacket, white rather than coloured polo shirt etc
 - A separate lunch area, sometimes with landscaping and seating
 - A 'common room', if there is space available
 - A staggered lunch hour so that seniors get some access to such areas as the playing field and adventure playground on their own
- eg. 12.20 – 1.20p.m. Yrs 1-6
 12.35 – 1.35p.m. Yrs 7-8

Section 7: The Future

During the period in which this report was being written, the leadership team of Westburn School initiated contact between themselves and the senior staff of other full primary schools in their part of the city. This initial meeting has led to an invitation being extended to the principals of all full primary schools in the greater Christchurch area to meet (in October 2010) and consider issues of common interest. It is hoped that, in the future, regular such meetings might occur and become a forum for the sharing of best practice in full primaries, for the benefit of all schools in this sector of primary education.

Certainly, the challenges faced by those responsible for the governance, management and leadership of full primary schools are many, varied and distinctive. These schools do provide a learning environment which offers wonderful opportunities for students and which are different both from those in contributing primary schools and those in intermediate schools. Clearly identifying, and strongly promoting, these differences are key leadership issues in such schools. I have gained considerably from the chance to visit other full primary schools and have become convinced that reciprocal visits and working collaboratively, sharing both information and experiences, will offer the leadership teams of these schools the tools needed to secure their future. This study may, hopefully, contribute to that process.

Barrie Clark

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