

SABBATICAL REPORT - TERM 3 2010

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Acknowledgement

I wish to express my appreciation to the Board of Trustees of Tauranga Primary School for supporting my sabbatical application and to the NZEI for their role in securing this provision in principal's conditions of service. Such a well worthwhile professional development opportunity should be available for all principals after a defined length of service. Thanks also go to my staff who ensured everything at school moved forward during my absence.

Introduction

My sabbatical study involved exploration of the ways I could extend my knowledge of and Leadership practice regarding formative assessment, in order to extend staff's teaching practice in this area, effectively increasing the amount of student input into their own learning.

I was unable to attend any conferences/workshops due to the timing of my sabbatical but I was able to interview and meet with several professionals, classroom teachers, principals, academics and educational consultants who are working to bring about pedagogical change in schools.

As the roll out of National Standards in New Zealand was in place between my application for a sabbatical and prior to my actual time out I was interested in comparing school systems where students have to complete SATs (Standard assessment tests) at specific grade levels to see whether formative assessment practices were compromised at all.

Tauranga Primary School charter's major focus is on enabling our students to become "powerful learners". We want our students to become increasingly responsible for their own learning. We want them to use higher level thinking skills, to be good self-managers, good communicators, good team players and to persevere to achieve. We want them to be able to reflect on their learning and set goals for themselves.

During our 2009 ERO visit we set "student voice, use of feedback/feed forward in enhancing student achievement particularly in literacy" as a focus for the review.

Several good areas of teaching practice were identified in current classroom practice. Recommendations set during the review tied in extremely well with my sabbatical proposal.

I took the opportunity to visit schools in New Zealand and also met with educators overseas where excellent formative assessment practices were already in place. It was valuable to reflect on teaching practice in New Zealand while discussing formative assessment practices with educators in other countries.

How lucky we have been to have educational leaders and decision makers, who have, to this point, developed the use of Formative assessment and leadership practice here. I interviewed professionals whose belief in formative assessment as a way of enhancing student learning is being constrained because of the requirements of SATs (standard assessment tests). During my sabbatical I was continually reminded of the restrictions that were placed on teachers and students in both Canada and the United States where controls on students learning (and teaching practice) were in place through state/national testing and reporting.

New Zealand teachers have been able to genuinely design a curriculum to best suit the needs of the children they teach. Students are encouraged to discuss their personal learning with peers, teachers and parents. They can help set their own learning goals and identify their next learning steps.

As long as we can keep the focus in this country on extending developments in formative assessment practice we will see continued involvement by students in their own learning, leading to improved learning outcomes. We must not get bogged down as educators in other countries have become when the focus turns to high stakes national testing and comparisons of schools.

While investigating Formative assessment practices I visited local schools, schools in Hawke's Bay, the Waikato and the Central North Island. I revisited the city of Peterborough, Ontario, Canada where I had taught on exchange in 2005. I had discussions with a range of principals and educators in these schools regarding formative assessment practices. These discussions were very timely given the imposition of national standards that was forced upon New Zealand schools between my application for sabbatical leave and being awarded same.

Ontario has a high stakes standardised testing regime (Grades 3 and 6) that determines the programme in both these grades annually. The programme is totally focused on producing the best test results in literacy and numeracy for the school. Results are, of course published and comparison with other schools occurs through these published result tables. While these individualised school results are analysed and areas for improvement are identified, each student's results are not analysed in any depth to assist the students to improve in areas of need specific to them. Formative assessment is not a term in common usage and students when spoken with are not able to identify the next steps required in their learning beyond the class rubric currently in use.

Teachers I spoke to in Canada stated their belief in the power of student voice in their learning but felt they were constrained by the requirements of State testing. They stated that mostly their teaching was focused on ensuring their students could sit the tests rather than on what was necessarily best for their students' learning. This was especially so for teachers of grade 3 and 6, the year levels that tests are administered at.

I interviewed a "Tutor" teacher (a recently created initiative) whose role was to work with teachers in identified schools to lift student achievement by improving teacher practice. The selected schools had been chosen because of their SAT results and the identified teachers again had been selected as a result of the low SAT scores of their students. Often the selected teachers were resentful of their inclusion in this programme, making the job of the tutor teacher rather difficult – can pedagogical change be made when the need for change is denied?

In discussion with this vibrant tutor teacher it was obvious that student ownership of their learning was a real focus of this change and that this was a difficult concept for teachers who were very autocratic in their approach to classroom management and in their teaching style to grasp.

While teachers in North America were clear about the importance of formative assessment as a tool to improve students learning it was not promoted strongly within their schools as an aid to work with individual students. Rubrics were seen as the basis by which students could determine if their learning was on track.

In several cases these rubrics were generic for the whole class, were often commercially designed and used across classes as part of a school wide programme. Amongst the teachers I spoke with there were many excellent educators who had adapted the use of these rubrics and were using them with their own students as success criteria and breaking down the larger learning steps for those students with special needs. They also implemented opportunities for self and peer feedback/feed forward into their programmes.

Ironically, the best formative assessment practice I became aware of in North America was that developed for students with special needs. Dr Kate Marcovchick, Maine, USA has developed a concept she refers to as “Celebratory Learning”. Celebratory Learning caters for individual needs and learning styles and is improving the learning of many students who sit outside the state-testing regime. Decisions can be made about their learning based on their previous knowledge. The use of formative assessment (feedback/feed forward) aspects closely identifies the next learning steps required for each student as an individual and teachers are using this knowledge to improve outcomes for these students.

In “ Differentiating Instruction Through Celebratory Learning” – written by Dr Markovchick and Corda Ladd Kinzie, there are many references to engaging students to take more responsibility for their own learning – Connections to previous learning is highlighted. “If our brains are to make any new learning our own then the new learning must be linked to previous knowledge.”

Need-based learning – “as learners we benefit most from learning opportunities that meet our needs both in content and in process.”

Celebration – “celebrating the individual in the learning process actively promotes understanding, acceptance and affirmation of the individual and their perspective.”

They suggest many ways in which teachers can encourage their students to develop skills in analysing their learning and ways in which they can set goals for improvement.

In Maine I also met with the principal of Union Charter School (Maine) whose students sit outside the mainstream testing requirements. The opportunities within the Charter School regime empowered teachers to implement programmes aimed at the needs of their students rather than the demands of the state system.

Students could discuss their goals, their next learning steps and at the middle school/high school level could plan their own programmes with a mentor adult assigned to them. These students were often students who had dropped out of mainstream schooling and/or had been identified as slow/reluctant learners. Some of the projects they had planned and carried out successfully were inspirational, the results often reflecting an expert in-depth understanding of specialist knowledge. The ability to control their own learning without the constraints of a regular classroom (and the high stakes testing involved) was acknowledged as being a high success factor in this school's programme.

While on sabbatical I also read several articles and books on Formative Assessment as a powerful tool for improving learning in primary school students (particularly in literacy) with a particular focus on the work of Ann Davies and Shirley Clarke. I also read other principals' sabbatical reports relating to the whole area of assessment.

There is an agreed definition of assessment types as follows:

Assessment of Learning is information collected by teachers about the students' learning for the purpose of sharing e.g. with Parents, School Boards, for school reporting and for official requests.

Assessment for Learning is the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by students and their teachers to decide the current level of learning, what they need to do to improve and the best way they can do that. The most important focus of this approach is what the student thinks about and does with assessment results.

It is important that parents and the wider community understand the real difference i.e. that Assessment for Learning:

- ___ Engages students;
- ___ Focuses on "what" and "how" students learn;
- ___ Involves students, parents and teachers working collaboratively;
- ___ Is an ongoing systematic process;
- ___ Is part of effective teaching and learning;
- ___ Supports and reflects curricular outcomes;
- ___ Recognises all educational achievement;
- ___ Respects the dignity and the development needs of learning;
- ___ Is equitable and fair;

- ___ Is a key professional skill

“Directions for Assessment in New Zealand” – *Developing students assessment capabilities* states:

2.6. School-level assessment

In schools, assessment is typically seen to have three functions:

- obtaining feedback that is used for informing teaching and learning through what can be called pedagogical, teacher, or formative assessment;
- compiling accounts of student achievement to provide a basis for individual, summative reports;
- obtaining data that will be used to analyse and report the achievement of groups of students, particularly in relation to regulatory requirements for target-setting.

There is an increasing amount of information being published regarding the benefits of formative assessment and teachers are becoming familiar with its intent. They are to be observed trialing and moderating ways of further engaging students in their learning.

Shirley Clarke, Helen Timperley and John Hattie, In the New Zealand edition of “Unlocking Formative Assessment identify several key factors in engaging students, amongst them;

- Sharing learning intentions with students
- Establishing success criteria (not too many)
- Feedback – more powerful when it is delivered throughout the learning phase not just at the end of a project
- Assessment to inform next learning steps

Learning intentions and success criteria should be included wherever the activity is planned as it then becomes a significant point of reference for every lesson. They are more likely going to create the focus for “what we are going to learn” rather than “what we are going to do”.

They also state that; “...A *good* short term plan will look messy by Friday” because the teacher will annotate it with “*assessment information to inform planning*”

The impact of sharing learning intentions with children includes:

- Children are more focused
- They soon realize how important the learning intention is to the task

- They are more likely to express their own learning needs
- A learning culture grows within the school as the language of learning intentions is used in place of the language of activities
- The quality of the work improves

I find it refreshing that many New Zealand academics have consolidated their ideas “Directions for Assessment in New Zealand – *Developing students’ assessment capabilities*” but at the same time ironic that some of these same academics are applauding the “National Standards” .

It is stated in the Overview of this paper that “*The central premise of this paper is that all young people should be educated in ways that develop their capacity to assess their own learning. Students who have well developed assessment capabilities are able and motivated to access, interpret, and use information from quality assessment in ways that affirm or further their learning*”. Let’s hope that having a single attainment point for every student to reach by the timeframes stated in the National Standards allows students to still retain their enthusiasm for learning.

In “ Focus on Effectiveness- Researched-Based Strategies” The emphasis on the importance of feedback is stated. As this is an area for development across the school it was of particular interest.

The article states.....Providing Feedback

Providing the right kind of feedback to students can make a significant difference in their achievement. There are two key considerations. First, feedback that improves learning is responsive to specific aspects of student work, such as test or homework answers, and provides specific and related suggestions. There needs to be a strong link between the teacher comment and the student's answer, and it must be instructive. This kind of feedback extends the opportunity to teach by alleviating misunderstanding and reinforcing learning. Second, the feedback must be timely. If students receive feedback no more than a day after a test or homework assignment has been turned in, it will increase the window of opportunity for learning. Feedback is a research-based strategy that teachers, and students, can practice to improve their success.

Key Research Findings

* When feedback is corrective in nature—that is, it explains where and why students have made errors--significant increases in student learning occur (Lysakowski & Walberg, 1981, 1982; Walberg, 1999; Tennenbaum & Goldring, 1989).

* Feedback has been shown to be one of the most significant activities a teacher can engage in to improve student achievement (Hattie, 1992).

* Asking students to continue working on a task until it is completed and accurate (until the standard is met) enhances student achievement (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001).

* Effective feedback is timely. Delay in providing students feedback diminishes its value for learning (Banger-Drowns, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991).

* Administer tests to optimize learning. Giving tests a day after a learning experience is better than testing immediately after a learning experience (Bangert-Downs, Kulik, Kulik, & Morgan, 1991).

* Rubrics provide students with helpful criteria for success, making desired learning outcomes clearer to them. Criterion-referenced feedback provides the right kind of guidance for improving student understanding (Crooks, 1988; Wilburn & Felps, 1983).

* Effective learning results from students providing their own feedback, monitoring their work against established criteria (Trammel, Schloss, & Alper, 1994; Wiggins, 1993).

Implementation

Fine-tune how you provide feedback by focusing on the details of what you say, as well as when you say it. Research suggests best practices for providing feedback:

1. Increase the value of tests and homework. Providing only a grade or number on a test or homework assignment leaves out critical information for students. Take time to write comments, point out omissions, and explain your thinking when reviewing student work.

2. Make feedback count. Feedback is best when it is corrective in nature. Help students see their errors and learn how to correct them by providing explicit and informative feedback when returning student work. Make feedback another part of the learning process.

3. Don't delay feedback. The longer students have to wait for feedback, the weaker the connection to their effort becomes, and the less likely they are to benefit.

4. Help students get it right. If students know you want to see them succeed, and you're willing to help explain how, their learning improves. Give students opportunities to improve, try again, and get it right.

5. Ask students to provide feedback. Students can monitor and provide feedback to other students, as well as compare their work to criteria. Engage students in review of their own work and others.

6. Give students time to absorb new ideas. Tests are more effective as opportunities for learning if a day has gone by between learning experiences and the test.

7. Use rubrics. Rubrics provide criteria against which students can compare their learning. Involve students in developing rubrics. Rubrics help students focus their effort.

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I also read widely on topics ranging from Student Voice and Formative Assessment through to articles and books about the place of the arts in establishing well rounded children, revisiting Elwyn Richardson's "In the Early World" and viewing yet again the TED Talk by Ken Robinson on how school is killing creativity. We should never lose sight of the need for students to enjoy their schooling. Those students with talents in areas other than literacy and numeracy should be given opportunities to develop – Ken Robinson states that "creativity should have the same status as literacy. The education system at present aims to have everyone as university professors, we now need an MA to carry out a job that previously was well done by someone with a BA." He states that"schools have mined our minds the way we have strip-mined the earth."

Students voice needs to be heard in the arts as well and the next learning steps for these talented students needs to be provided by teachers with the same deliberation and care that they have been developed for literacy and numeracy.

It was also useful to read and reflect on articles relating to formative leadership. One such article was **The Principal As Chief Learning Officer: The New Work Of Formative Leadership** by Ruth Ash, Dean and Maurice Persall, Director of Graduate Programs Orlean Bullard Beeson School of Education and Professional Studies Samford University Birmingham, Alabama. The following extracts are worth sharing in this report.

“ Formative Leadership”

Formative Leadership Theory, developed by Ash and Persall, is based on the belief that there are numerous leadership possibilities and many leaders within the school. Leadership is not role-specific, reserved only for administrators; rather the job of the school leader is to fashion learning opportunities for the faculty and staff in order that they might develop into productive leaders. This theory of leadership supports our view of the teacher as leader and the principal as the leader of leaders. It is grounded in the belief that educators should enhance not only student learning but also the learning of the adults within the school.

The formative leader must possess a high level of facilitation skills because team inquiry and learning and collaborative problem solving are essential ingredients of this leadership approach. Imagining future possibilities; examining shared beliefs; asking questions; collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data; and engaging the faculty in meaningful conversation about teaching and learning are all formative leadership behaviours. Ten new Formative Leadership principles support a new paradigm for quality leadership.

Formative Leadership Principles

1. Team learning, productive thinking, and collaborative problem solving should replace control mechanisms, top-down decision making, and enforcement of conformity.
2. Teachers should be viewed as leaders and school principals as leaders of leaders. Leaders must be viewed as asking the right kinds of questions rather than knowing all the answers.

3. Trust should drive our working relationships. Leaders must not assume that the faculty, staff, and students will try their best to do their worst. The leader's job is to drive out fear.
4. Leaders should move from demanding conformity and compliance to encouraging and supporting innovation and creativity.
5. Leaders should focus on people and processes, rather than on paper work and administrative minutia. Time should be spent on value-added activities.
6. Leaders should be customer-focused and servant-based. Faculty and staff are the direct customers of the principal, and the most important function of the principal is to serve his or her customers.
7. Leaders should create networks that foster two-way communication rather than channels that direct the flow of information in only one direction.
8. Formative Leadership requires proximity, visibility, and being close to the customer. Leaders should wander about the school and the surrounding community, listening and learning, asking questions, building relationships, and identifying possibilities.
9. Formative Leadership is empowering the people within the school to do the work and then protecting them from unwarranted outside interference.
10. Formative Leadership requires the ability to operate in an environment of uncertainty, constantly learning how to exploit systemic change, rather than maintaining the status quo.

It would appear that in order for student voice to be heard and to be valued in the learning process then teachers' voice must also be heard, many learning leaders can improve outcomes for everyone in a school.

It would be amiss of me to exclude a quote from Black and William in this report. In their book "Assessment and Classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*" they state that effective formative assessment:

- promotes learning
- involves the teacher believing that every student can improve
- promotes conversations between student and teacher
- promotes conversations between students
- provides feedback and feed forward to students that helps them identify what they need to do to improve
- encourages students to set their own learning goals
- allows students to demonstrate what they know and can do
- clearly indicates to the student what is being assessed
- makes the performance criteria obvious to the student
- motivates students to want to learn.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would write that the discussions, observations, readings and reflections I engaged in during my sabbatical allowed me to determine that the “Powerful Learning” framework we have developed and are refining at Tauranga Primary School is based on best practice and is empowering both teachers and students.

They are able to critically reflect on their progress and determine the “where to next” with developing confidence. They are understanding that peer feedback is a powerful tool therefore they share their learning with their colleagues/ fellow students.

Teachers will continue to grow this area and share their new knowledge with our students and our parent body. We want to see the excitement of learning reflected in our students as they come to realise they can be in charge of their own learning and know what they have to do in order to reach the next stage. They are “Learning to go Places.’

To spend time revisiting places and spending time with colleagues in Canada and Maine was an empowering and enriching experience. It allowed me time to reflect on and enhance my knowledge in a relaxed yet thought provoking way.

Lastly, for the relaxation part of my leave, I spent time traveling, in Slovenia and Croatia, experiencing extremely different lifestyles, history and natural beauty.

Readings:

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