

Principal Sabbatical Report: Term 1 2006
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FOCUS:

The original focus was on data analysis and how to use data effectively in leading a learning school. *Constructing the Future and Challenging the Past: Excellence in Learning and Teaching* was the theme of the international conference and school visits in Chicago.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support of those who have worked towards establishing the Principal's Sabbatical scheme and the board and senior staff of Queen Elizabeth College for supporting my application.

A Executive Summary

The opportunity to participate in a principal sabbatical has allowed me to stand back and reflect on my practice and the college's current position with respect to data analysis, classroom instruction for improved outcomes for students without the day-to day pressures of leading a school. I have also been able to travel, attend an international conference, visit schools in Chicago and spend time with my family.

B Purpose

There were two main purposes for my sabbatical:

1. To investigate ways to analyse data to inform teaching and learning for improved student outcomes.
2. To attend the ASCD annual conference in Chicago

During the period of the sabbatical I continued in my role as a mentor of First Time Principals, worked with able students in the local primary school and spent time on the family farm.

C Background

Since my appointment as principal I have been a member of the Association for Curriculum Supervision and Development (ASCD) and wished to attend an international conference.

The focus on analysing data effectively was determined by me (and the college) to be a key to improving student outcomes, however there is a wealth of data that is collected in our schools and often it is difficult to ascertain what is useful data and is not. There is a need to identify what data is collected, why, and how it is used to improve teaching and learning.

It is timely to take the time and reflect on the college's performance and plan for improvements.

D/E Activities undertaken and Findings

Appendix 1 shows the activities I undertook during my sabbatical compared to what was intended. The actual activities varied from the intended and this was probably due to the fact that there was a need to refresh and vitalise.

Outlined below is a detailed report on the pre-conference institute and ASCD conference that I attended. While my professional reading highlights that conferences and one-off courses are not the most effective professional development, in this case it has been beneficial in that these two events are seen as a way to challenge my practice and a means to inform my future practice.

Pre-Conference Institute Report

During the initial weeks of the sabbatical I had decided that the focus would be around data and the analysis of data in schools for student achievement and school improvement.

I had selected to attend a pre-conference institute on data analysis because of the focus, however, confirmation of registration at the ASCD Conference indicated that I had been allocated my second choice pre-conference institute *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies That Work for Every Teacher*. Contact with Faye Hauwai (CEO, Learning Network NZ) attempted to change this back to the original request but was unsuccessful.

Having attended the ASCD conference, listening to discussions around school improvement and looking at the multitude of software programmes for data analysis available in the USA I believe that the pre-conference institute on data would be of little use to me in a NZ setting (sometimes we forget this in our search)

The reason for stating this is that much of what is required in the USA appears to be prescribed from outside the school, for example the superintendent whereas NZ schools have autonomy and set their own targets as part of the planning and reporting process.

The majority of the software packages were used to analyse state testing data as this was a major focus.

Classroom Instruction that Works: Research-Based Strategies That Work for Every Teacher

This pre-conference institute was led by Bea McGarvey, who works for the Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning (McREL) group as an independent consultant.

The institute was based on the book *Classroom instruction that Works: Research-based Strategies for Raising Student Achievement* by Robert Marzano, Debra Pickering and Jane Pollock and was two days in duration.

Bea set the scene for the two days by making the following comments:

“Be prepared to learn.

We know what works in the classroom but do we have the will to do it.

Motivation of students lies with the teachers.

The danger is to lower our vision!

You can say yesbut if you identify what is getting in the way of the vision and address this.

School leaders are responsible for **not** putting students into a poor teacher's class.

We do not exist to give people a job”

The underlying principle of the institute was that **as educators we need to be experts about learning**. There is a difference between teaching it and learning it!

The agenda for the two days included the following:

- Context (big picture)
- Knowledge and learning
- Motivation-reinforcing effort providing recognition
- Learning goals
- Non-linguistic representations
- Summarising and note-taking
- Providing feedback
- Homework
- Practice
- Similarities and differences
- Cues, questions, advance organisers
- Generating and testing hypotheses

While there a number of different strategies that can be used to improve student learning be aware that every individual teacher will have there own leverage point and will depend on the resources of money, time and energy. One needs to be aware which strategy would be the most beneficial for a particular learning outcome.

With regard to motivation of students it is important to acknowledge that we set up our rooms to motivate ourselves and therefore they could well not motivate anyone else. Teachers should be given the opportunity to understand and become expert on motivational theory and pedagogy. We need to remember that students learn in **different time frames**. We also need to acknowledge that the adolescent brain is developing in a different way to the way ours did (Prensky, 2001).

Teachers also need to work at making the shifts and school leaders need to work at supporting teachers to make them. It is necessary for teachers to be explicit about what the learning outcomes are and the skills required achieving the learning.

Feedback must be accurate and specific if it is going to improve learning. The question to ask is *How can I move to the next level?*

These are just some of the thoughts that have remained with me from the institute. I believe that there are many lessons that we can learn from this work and I also believe that we know a lot of the work. What we need to do as leaders is find ways to support our staff in delivering *classroom instruction that works*. The way the institute was delivered would allow a school to work on specific areas over a period of time or take one area to work on to address an identified barrier that currently exists.

ASCD Conference Report

The annual conference for the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development was held in Chicago from April 1-3 2006 under the theme of “*Constructing the Future, Challenging the Past: Excellence in Learning and Teaching and Leadership*”

What an experience! There were 15 000 attendees at this conference at a conference centre that spanned the freeway (by sky bridge) and included 2.2 million square feet of floor space. If you intend to attend something like this on your sabbatical make sure you get in the day before (at least). The pre-conference institute gave me time to find my way around the venue but more importantly to make connections with other participants. The people from our pre-conference institute table looked out for each other and socialised together.

Having missed out on the data analysis institute I rethought my priorities for attending the conference and decided to focus on developing further the theme of *Classroom instruction that Works*. I attended a number of plenary sessions and workshops that all had varying lengths of time (note: planning your day was critical and required time to consider what was on offer). The sessions I attended included:

- ***Integrating differentiated instruction and understanding design by Carol-Ann Tomlinson and Jay McTigue.*** Key messages in this were: differentiation is a teacher trying to respond to learner needs; it needs to be planned for carefully, assessment is needed to inform instruction. Designing the instruction requires the teacher to work backward: what are the important ideas I want students to understand, what will be acceptable evidence and what learning activities will I use?
- ***General session by Mel Levine.*** Key messages were: How can paediatricians and educators work together so that students do not need to rely on medication for schooling, stop labelling students (which implies they have no strengths) rather be able to describe them well, make connections for students.
- ***Make it happen- leadership for student achievement by Denise Hexom and Bonnie Plummer*** (California). This session looked at the five steps needed to improve achievement: identifying the key components to support student achievement, self-assessment, action plan, classroom assessment and on-going monitoring. The first step key components was broken down to the following: instructional programme (including interventions), instructional time (uninterrupted time), school principals' leadership training, credentialed teachers and professional development (there are some schools in the state of California which do not have qualified teachers), student achievement monitoring system, on-going instructional assistance and support for teachers, monthly collaboration by grade level or programme for teachers facilitated by the principal, lesson pacing schedule (check curriculum progress) and fiscal support.
- ***Building Academic background knowledge. An idea whose time has come by Rob Marzano*** reiterated that no one programme fits all

situations and all students and that leaders need to choose the programme that suits their school. For students to succeed academic vocabulary needs to be taught (this was also touched on in the pre-conference institute). For change to occur in a school there needs to be support and resources. Do not be put off if things appear to be worse at first because you are shaking the branches with new ideas however do be explicit about the beliefs and goals, base changes on research and theory and define success.

- **General session by Bonnie St John** was a motivational speaker looking at her life from the view of being a Para Olympian. Bonnie is an amputee, who attributes her success her mother's support over the years and her physiotherapist. The physiotherapist was the one who kept on pushing her to bear weight on her stump not because she was mean but because she cared! As she said "no responsible adult told me I was a failure" and "People fall down; winners get up!"
- **Building blocks and habits of continuous improvement by Alison Zmuda and Kathleen Fitzpatrick** This session looked at teaching as a distributed property. Schools and school leaders need to know who/what they are, where they want to be and how they are going to get there based on data and it is together that student achievement/success is raised. This requires taking people out of the isolated classroom and getting them to look at and talk about practice.
- **Teach me. I dare you! By Judy Brough, Sherrel Bergmann and Larry Holt** focussed on the critical components for success, which are a caring and supportive environment, tasks that are interesting and relevant and academic success in a challenging environment.
- **The missing link: Using action research for assessing instruction by Richard Sagor** A key message here for me as a principal was the acknowledgement that we are good at assessing **but not** good at using the data for learning. Action research defined as an investigation conducted by and for the people taking the action, on their own practice to inform their future actions. Therefore clarify your vision/targets, articulate your theory, implement your theory and reflect on your results.
- **Differentiation of instruction at the High School Level by Cindy Strickland** dealt with how to deal with the challenges when trying to implement a change in a school.
- **Unifying leadership for school improvement and accountability: What schools need from system leaders by Michael Palmisano and Sharon Steindam** distinguished between meeting accountability requirements and school improvement. What leadership strategies are needed and how can an improvement be sustained?

School Visits

The final part of my visit to Chicago consisted of two school visits. The first was to Jones Preparatory College in downtown Chicago and the second to Chrispus Atticus Elementary School just out of downtown Chicago.

Jones Preparatory College

Jones Preparatory College is a multi-cultural college established in 1998 from a Girls Business College, with 720 students aged 13-17 olds. Entry to the college is through a selective entry process.

It was impressive to see all students greeted as they entered the school in the morning. This was included as part of the security procedures as every 4th student was asked to go through airport like security. ID cards had to be worn at all times.

Chrispus Atticus

Chrispus Atticus is an elementary school, predominantly black American, for students aged 3-13. The elementary school has developed out of 3 schools, 2 of which were closed and students moved to this site. Of the 420 students at this school 209 are considered homeless (as a result of apartments around the school being demolished and a re-housing project, which saw those whose name was on the tenancy re-housed).

The principal has worked hard at this school to meld together 3 different school cultures not just with students but also with staff. She refers to the students as “stars”, teachers as “star polishers” and herself as the “star keeper”

It was evident, in this school, that literacy and numeracy are school foci and we saw numerous examples of this reflected as we walked around the site and spoke to students.

Issues for the principal include: getting people to come in and have a look at the good things that are happening, keeping the students as the focus by protecting them (and the staff) from outside influences/external pressures and changes that are not focussed on their priorities (literacy and numeracy), threat of school closure on this site and removal to another site.

F Implications

The pre-conference institute provided me with some time to reflect on where we are at as a school in terms of student engagement. It reaffirmed for me that as a leader one of my roles is to challenge staff with “*everyone has to get better*”. Areas for us to work on specifically:

- Is ensuring that the learning goal is stated clearly for students
- Using research to help teachers understand learning
- Ensuring that the conversation with students takes place identifying what ‘the how you are going to get there’
- To improve student motivation will require professional development around motivational theory and pedagogy
- Also professional development is needed around providing constructive feedback to students.

G Conclusions

The challenge now is for me to process these ideas identifying areas of current strengths and areas of weakness, hence identifying areas for improvement and incorporating these into current school systems, challenging where required current practice while at the same time providing support for staff in the process.

J. J. Wood
1 July 2006

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