

Principal's Sabbatical Report 2010

Purpose:

To investigate the unique opportunities and issues inherent in sole charge and remote schools with common features such as size and location. To investigate what these schools have in common and how principals in these schools exercise leadership in managing these.

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- Convenors and attendees at the Sole Charge Principal's Conference in Palmerston North
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Introduction:

This investigation will extend my learning and enable me to develop ways of leading and managing change. The intent is to ameliorate the difficulties and maximize the opportunities presented by our particular set of circumstances. The opportunity to share these findings with others may assist other sole charge principals in managing the issues inherent in schools of small size and in remote location.

Background

With 20 years experience as a sole charge teaching principal, 17 of them here in the stunning environment of Aoraki Mount Cook National Park, I am continually seeking to refine and polish my practice and pass on some experience and guidance for others in a similar situation.

The implementation of NZC provides opportunities for positive change in teaching practice. Of particular note for sole charge and remote schools in unique settings, are the place-based opportunities generated by being an integral part of a small community. These place-based learning situations promote rich learning around the future focus themes of sustainability, enterprise, globalisation and citizenship. They provide authentic contexts to develop core skills, values and key competencies. They enable personalized learning programmes contributing to young people who are confident, connected, actively involved lifelong learners.

However, the same set of circumstances that provide such opportunities is also responsible for the issues which were identified by the schools visited; high costs associated with PD, ICT back-up and staffing, the difficulties of matching suitable

personnel to the opportunities identified and the time required to be both a competent and well prepared teacher and an effective principal. These difficulties can limit effective use of our place-based opportunities.

A key task for a Principal is to identify these opportunities and issues and, in partnership with the Board of Trustees, document them into a unique, visionary strategic plan. By sharing what others in similar situations are doing, we increase our chances of providing programmes that meet our students' needs and improve learning outcomes.

Findings have come from 2 main sources:
A survey and visits to 8 schools including our own.
Attendance at Sole Charge Principals Conference

For school visits, I identified 8 schools, (including our own) in 3 regions that have a set of factors in common, namely (a) size: all have a small roll and (b) location: all are remote and close to or part of a National Park or Reserve. There are many more schools in New Zealand with these factors in common and my findings will be widely shared. However, there are two other factors more specific to us than many other remote, rural schools and that is that we are on a tourist route or in locations where the tourism industry is of importance to our community. We are well positioned within our communities to make the most of the Place-Based Education Outside the Classroom opportunities provided by our unique locations.

I wanted to find out what factors influenced each school's ability to develop and implement a curriculum unique to their location. I developed a questionnaire based on 6 areas of interest and made contact with a specific set of principals, many of whom I had met previously at a sole-charge principal's seminar in Christchurch in 2009. The six areas of interest are:

- Curriculum
- Students
- Staff
- Community
- Resourcing & Property
- The Big Picture – Reaching Out

The questionnaire was designed to prompt thinking for an interview when I visited. Bearing in mind that ultimately, I want to share ideas on opportunities and issues, I indicated that I expected principals to consider which of the questions had particular resonance with them and to expand on those in particular during my visit. Some of the views expressed here are from the seven principals visited.

As not all questions were intended to be answered by all principals, I have not included the specific questions here. As a result this data is qualitative rather than quantitative and I have used the terms 'all, most, many, several and some' rather than percentages to describe principal's responses.

Also, as a result of interactions with principals at the Sole Charge Principals Conference in Palmerston North, many more views were able to be added. Although many of the 50 schools represented at the conference did not fit the parameters of being in or near to National Parks and Reserves, information provided was valuable to the study overall

and has been included where relevant. As a result, this is an overview of ‘what’s on top’ for the principal’s views included in this report.

As well as producing this report, I have compiled a set of resources and examples of how other sole charge and remote schools are managing their situation. This is in CD form and will be distributed to the schools included in the study and to others on request. Many thanks again to the schools that have contributed material for this resource.

CURRICULUM

Discussions in this area were based on NZ Curriculum, Local Curriculum including Place-based opportunities and EOTC, Schools own Curriculum Programmes of work, Curriculum Delivery, Classroom Organisation & Management, Assessment

NZ Curriculum and Local Curriculum

Most schools had made a start on developing a unique local curriculum based on The New Zealand Curriculum. Community consultation was evident in this process and principals in several of these schools are happy to share their journey with others. However, the value of sharing our individual journeys was neatly summed up in this quote from one principal:

We can share good practice examples with others but the reason why they work for us is because we’ve created them to suit ourselves and our communities. What we’ve designed that works in our own schools may not necessarily work for others.

Place-based Programmes and EOTC

All principals visited made some use of Place-based learning opportunities utilising the immediate local environment, local personnel and local expertise. However, there was a larger degree of variance in use than I expected. An inquiry into why that may be so could be the subject of another entire research project.

All principals visited recognised that their unique location provided a range of EOTC opportunities and these were an important part of most schools curriculum.

Experiences and opportunities as part of the regular programme mentioned or observed include:

- Native Bush studies either within school grounds or close by x 4 schools
- Night Sky studies using local observatory and / or personnel x 3 schools
- Skiing on local fields x 7 schools
- Ice-skating at local rink x 2 schools
- Use of local swimming pools x 5 schools
- Enviroschools Programme x 4 schools
- Conservation studies with DOC x 4 schools
- Local rock climbing opportunities x 2 schools
- Use of local Visitor’s Centre x 3 schools
- Use of local Museum x 1 school
- Use of local Alpine Environment x 4 schools
- Use of local Beach and Seaside Environment x 3 schools
- Use of Air-based opportunities x 2 schools

- Use of local hotel personnel for careers programme including cooking x 1 school

Local Curriculum programmes and procedures for these place-based opportunities were documented as part of schools' overall curricula or as part of EOTC policy and procedures rather than as stand-alone documents. Informal dialogue about the perceived success of place-based programmes resulted in widespread agreement that measurement of the success or otherwise of these programmes was difficult. The benefits and flow into other curriculum areas was often competency based and therefore hard to pinpoint specifically. Another comment was:

All learning is contextual and often it's hard to tell at the time if the intended learning has occurred. It's the nature of kids to take the great stuff they do for granted as they know no better. However at a later date – sometimes years later, someone mentions something that happened and they all go 'Oh yeah and.....' and it's only then that the impact of the original learning becomes evident

Examples for sharing are included on the CD.

Programmes of Work

Amongst the schools in this study, schools own Programmes of Work in Curriculum Areas were documented to some degree. Literacy and Numeracy received most attention but there was also evidence of specific programmes of work in Health and Phys-Ed as this is an area where numbers and environment impact on possibilities. EOTC options were well utilised by all schools in the study and many of the schools emphasised a swimming programme and all had adventure playgrounds. Other unique sports opportunities for students included a school with an emphasis on unicycles and other wheeled options, a school with a BMX track and others with bouldering wall options.

Examples for sharing are included on the CD.

Curriculum Delivery and Classroom Management

Curriculum delivery and classroom management for sole charge and remote schools were areas that principals had generally given a lot of thought and attention to. The complexities of multi level teaching with limited personnel was second only to teacher / principal balance when it came to "what is most difficult about our job". There were as many different ways of timetabling and scheduling the days as there were schools visited and principals talked to all had to work around the needs of children, availability of staff and physical work spaces available.

Although most schools had a part time teacher's aide or second teacher on a regular basis, all principals generally spent the majority of their time on school-wide curriculum delivery, and described the difficulties of having to have a good grasp on all curriculum areas at all levels. The introduction of National Standards was cited as adding significantly to the workload of this group of principals as we are required to learn and remember the specifics of each standard requirement at each level across all literacy and numeracy strands.

Effective delivery of our place-based programmes, relies on staff having skills specific to the programme and also strong pedagogy surrounding values, competencies and core skills to be developed through these programmes. The strength of these programmes is the potential flow on effect through all other curriculum areas but for this to occur, learning outcomes must be explicit, known and accepted by all participants and assessable in some way.

Examples for sharing are included on the CD.

Assessment

Schools used a variety of assessment tools including AsTTle, PATs, Probe, STAR, NumPa, Exemplars and Running records. There was general agreement that it was virtually impossible to report accurately to the Board regarding student progress without identifying individuals as the cohorts were so small. However, principals expected Boards to treat this information with discretion and no issues seemed to have arisen recently.

A variety of methods of recording and reporting pupil achievement and progress was evident. Hard copy portfolios, E-portfolios, sample books and copies of children's exercise books were all in use for recording progress and shared regularly with parents. Several schools had 3-way conferences established in conjunction with other forms of reporting such as standardised report forms.

E-portfolios set up in PowerPoint were a popular means of recording and storing student work and progress. If viewed at school, these can have links to school wide work on the Intranet.

Examples for sharing are included on the CD.

E-learning

A broad range of ability in e-learning capabilities amongst principals resulted in a broad range of experiences on offer for students. Many principals had had the benefit of being part of an ICTPD cluster and this had boosted use of e-learning in their school. However, this was offset by ongoing expenses surrounding purchase and maintenance of equipment and, in some cases, community attitudes to computer use!

One school was trialling videoconferencing as a means of ameliorating the effects of remote location and whilst this seems like a good idea, the set-up expense and back-up required is daunting.

Other e-learning and / or ICT use observed or reported included:

- High use of Mathletics and / or Smart Kiddies for web based maths
- Inquiry models incorporating ICT skills and tools with higher order thinking tools
- Claymation
- Movie-Maker
- Marvin
- Powerpoint
- Kidpix
- Spellodrome
- MP3 players for every child to assist with learning Music Festival songs

- Blogs
- Wikis
- Videoconferencing
- Audioconferencing
- Skyping
- Online programmes such as LEARNZ
- E-portfolios
- Software programmes to support literacy and numeracy
- Research

Examples for sharing are included on the CD.

Homework

Most principals had a homework programme in place. Some were contract or grid based, others were worksheet based. General Knowledge quizzes that could be used as family discussion starters, puzzles and games were all mentioned. Most schools sent home a daily reader for junior children and insisted on some home reading for senior children. Many schools expected students to complete some maths homework each work, usually reinforcing class lessons. Some schools were using Mathletics for maths homework.

Examples for sharing are included on the CD.

STUDENTS

Discussions in this area were based on self management and personalised programmes, Year 7 & 8 students, Maori Students and Special Needs Students.

A common theme was how to support students to become as independent as possible as early as possible because of the complexities of multi level.

Self Management and Personalised Programmes

Marking, Assessment and Recording

Many principals encourage children to self and peer assess and mark work where appropriate. This saves teacher time and also encourages awareness and responsibility for one's own progress and next step learning.

A further step some schools are taking is to encourage students to plot their own progress in numeracy and literacy into their portfolios or e-portfolios onto graphs that show achievement against National Standards.

Students are also encouraged to self select pieces for their portfolios and explain why they were chosen.

Peer Tutoring and Buddy Work

Most principals are operating a peer tutoring or buddy work system to engage younger and / or struggling learners, to make the best use of everyone's time and to provide quality learning, teaching and reflection opportunities for all students. This is deemed to be particularly successful for pairing boys with other boys to improve engagement, and to provide slightly less able children with a chance to practice their own skills by tutoring a younger child. Principals also observed improved relationships, engagement

and progress in the tutors or senior children as the very act of training them for this role provided the students with an opportunity to consider themselves 'peers' of the teachers themselves.

Individual Programmes

In many cases by virtue of the size of the school, most children were on individual programmes anyway. Ideas observed or discussed were:

- Individual activity boxes where a student's work for the morning is set up by the teacher under different headings e.g reading, spelling, word study etc and the students work through their tasks in any order at their own pace when not actively involved in teaching.
- Contract system where up to a weeks' worth of work was set and progress checked on daily
- Task Boards
- Individual and or collaborative projects with peers or in ability groups

One school described how senior students initiated, planned for and organised a trip to Australia to enhance their swimming programme!

Year 7 & 8 Students

Careers

A variety of careers programmes were in place. These included:

- Attendance at Careers Expo every two years where trades / universities / banks / armed services / polytechs etc were represented
- Scheduled visits by members of the community engaged in different professions
- Careers workbooks for yrs 7 & 8 students
- Careers website access
- Integrated into classroom programme as part if Topic work.

Technology

Most schools incorporate this into the annual class plan but one school visited has dual enrolment with Correspondence Unit for yr 7 & 8 technology. A teacher's aide is employed to administer this programme.

One school has a business partnership in operation whereby senior students work on Food Technology and cooking with a chef from the local hotel.

Leadership Opportunities

Many schools provided special leadership opportunities for the yr 7 & 8 students such as:

- Peer Mediation Programme
- Health Promoting Schools Representatives
- Enviroschools Representatives
- Jump Jam Leadership Days attendance
- Young National Leadership Conference attendance

Seniors Only Camps

Some schools combined with others in the area for senior only camps, some encouraged year 6 to join for seniors camp. Several schools visited join every second year for a camp they call 'Transition'. At this time, they stay together at a camp away from their

own region, visit secondary schools and boarding hostels and also undertake a unit on sexuality education.

Māori Students

Although only one school visited had a high proportion of Māori students, all schools demonstrated evidence of te reo Māori and tikanga in their programmes. Discussion with some principals touched on supporting and reporting Māori achievement, notably the New Zealand research that provides evidence relating to what makes a difference to Māori student achievement i.e the relationships between teachers and Māori students. It was generally agreed that the size and culture of our small schools were favourable in providing Maori students with supportive student / teacher relationships.

Special Needs Students

All principals agreed that the behaviours and demands of special needs students are amplified due to our size. Whilst we have the opportunity to have very beneficial effects on special needs students, it puts a huge strain on already limited resources. This also has the potential to strain relationships with others in the small school community who can feel that there is an inequity in distribution of resources. Regular access to resource personnel such as RTLB, RTLit, Speech Therapists and other health services is difficult as is finding teacher aides to assist and work one-to-one with these students.

STAFF

Staffing

Recruitment and retention of suitable staff presents ongoing difficulties for many sole charge and remote schools.

Principal Release Teacher

Some principals reported difficulty recruiting a principal release teacher and several principals have recently gone for a term or more with no release days. Recruitment is sometimes limited by accommodation possibilities as no rental accommodation is available for a reasonable rate in reasonable proximity to the school. Some principals report their principal release teacher can live as far as 100km away! Some have 'banked' their Principal release entitlement then taken a lump sum for a week or so when a reliever can be found for an extended period of time.

Relievers

Many principals reported difficulty getting relievers when they are sick. There have been cases where schools have had to close for a day or two because a suitable reliever could not be found. Others reported they'd rather struggle along even when ill as the calibre of suitable relievers would be detrimental to the school. When relievers come from some distance away as is often the case, there is an extra financial burden on the school to cover travel costs.

Specialist Teachers and Teacher Aides

Finding specialist teachers and / or teacher aides to assist with special needs children, specific sports programmes, specialised arts teaching and second languages all present difficulties.

Nevertheless, many schools are offering a second language for some or all of their pupils. This is often delivered by the second teacher or a teacher's aide fluent in the language.

Several schools have time set aside annually during which time they employ a specialist teacher to cover aspects of music, performing arts or visual arts. This can present accommodation difficulties and always has a transport and accommodation cost attached, but it provides students at remote schools with rich and varied opportunities.

Secretaries, Clerical Assistants and Office Managers

Whatever we call them, they are another vital cog in the wheel and all principals spoken with iterated how important their services were. The calibre of the secretary and the relationship they had with the principal impacted greatly on the efficiency of the school in general. There was variance in the number of hours worked per week ranging from 3 to 12 hours.

2nd Teacher

Many schools topped up MOE staffing entitlement funding with Board funding to employ a second teacher for more hours a week. Principals commented that although it was often difficult to secure the services of someone able to do this, to do justice to the range of ages, abilities and curriculum requirements and opportunities, they couldn't manage without. Other principals cited safety as being another point in favour of every school having at least two teachers on the premises at all times. Many schools are in very remote locations and help is a long way off should an emergency occur. To expect children to deal with an emergency should something happen to the principal is a very unfair expectation.

Staff Professional Development

Most sole charge schools find professional development difficult on many levels. Understandably, PD tends to occur in larger urban centres so there is a time and cost factor involved in travelling the distance required. Again, as a result of distance, there will often be the need for accommodation and meals as return travel to PD venues is usually impossible in one day. Added to this is the cost of a reliever, if one can be found! Relieving costs often involve the daily rate and travel and more accommodation. Should one have the opportunity to engage in PD, its effectiveness is often minimised due to the fact that upon return to school, the sole charge teaching principal has so much to catch up on, there is little time to reflect on, develop and implement ideas and new knowledge attained.

Appraisal

Several of the principals indicated their schools employed an external advisor for appraisal. Reasons stated were:

- The cost saving if several schools clustered and paid the cost of a professional service. This reduced travel and accommodation costs and the cost of a reliever if they were to undertake peer appraisal with someone from a neighbouring school.
- New ideas from the external appraiser
- Someone to talk to!

Some principals commented that the external appraiser was fulfilling some of the vital role that Rural Advisers used to play only now we have to pay for it!

COMMUNITY

These comments pertain only to the schools visited as they are situated in the heart of the community they serve. In these communities most families are only a short distance from the school. In contrast many of the other rural schools represented at the sole charge conference had many children travelling long distances to school each day by bus.

Community Involvement

Most principals reported a high level of community involvement both in day to day activities and to support sporting, cultural and other place-based events. Many schools have regular parent help and feel well supported on class trips and EOTC activities. Many of the schools visited have ongoing partnership programmes with businesses in the community such as DOC, local hotels, local shops and specialist services such as museums and observatories.

Several principals commented that the Board, parent body, PTA organisations and other long-term residents are often strongly opinionated when it comes to school management and governance and that managing this network of relationships in such a small community is often difficult and fraught with hazard.

Consultation and Communication

All schools visited communicate regularly with their communities, most via a regular newsletter sent out in paper form but also often emailed as well. In most cases, the principal is responsible for the content but may enlist the secretary to produce and distribute it.

Some principals commented on the difficulty of getting responses to surveys and questionnaires for strategic planning or other purposes from their community. It was difficult to find methods of encouraging participation at parent teacher interviews and the health meeting scheduled every two years. The range of enticements included prize draws, food, delegating to students and reminders to 'have your say or keep quiet'.

Examples for sharing are included on the CD.

Demographics

Some principals commented that although there remained a core of stability in the community, the instances of admissions and withdrawals were on the rise with rolls fluctuating more significantly from year to year now than 5-10 years ago.

There was more varied ethnicity at these schools than 10 years ago and more transience as the tourist trade developed.

Several principals commented on instances of 'rogue' families moving into and out of the area and the detrimental effect this can have on a school when unacceptable behaviours are brought into the school community by a dysfunctional family and how magnified this becomes in a small school environment.

RESOURCING AND PROPERTY

Funding

Fundraising

Principals agree that due to the limited size of their school community they are reluctant to ask the same people time and again for money, whether it's in the form of sponsorship, raffles or donations. Therefore alternatives that draw on a wider resource base have been established.

Many principals reported they have someone in their school trained to fill out application forms for grants from a variety of sources. This is an ongoing means of funding. Without it, the schools would be unable to provide the variety of programmes and experiences, employ the range of staff or purchase costly IT and property resources that they do.

Other initiatives include:

- Partnerships with businesses in the community whereby a line of goods is sold on behalf of the school
- Sale of 'on behalf' chocolates in many of the businesses in town
- Marriage celebrant fees donated to school
- School designed and made products e.g cards, calendars, books and green bags sold in outlets in town

Contestable Funding

Several principals described funding for ICPD and EHAS clusters as being a big boost to school finances but agreed that it was often in retrospect. This means that schools had to pay for high cost goods and services from the operational grant and then had to wait for reimbursement. This often put a strain on cashflow.

Resources

Uniforms

Many schools had a school uniform for sports, or hats, often sponsored by a local business.

ICT

The range in accessibility and use of ICT tools and equipment in schools was large. Some schools had an almost one-to-one ratio of modern computers to students. Resources included laptops, desktops, fibre optic broadband, videoconferencing, data projectors, Interactive White Boards, still cameras and camcorders in daily use. In contrast, others were struggling with older computers and unreliable modem dial up. Most principals agreed that even when modern equipment is installed, its ongoing use and efficiency is reliant on a good ICT technician being regularly available and this was not often the case.

Property

Playgrounds

All schools visited had playground equipment in varying stages of aging! A variety of integrated and stand alone equipment was observed. Principals reported use of playground equipment was determined by weather, age of students and current fads amongst students. Some principals mentioned the disproportionate amount of time and funding put into school playgrounds for the limited use they received.

Examples for sharing are included on the CD.

Swimming pools

Many schools still maintained a swimming pool, some covered and / or heated. Regular swimming programmes were still a feature of the phys-ed programme as principals identified this activity as being an individual pursuit where the small number of children in sole-charge schools is actually an advantage. However, again it was mentioned that a disproportionate amount of time and funding was spent on swimming pool maintenance for the limited use they received.

Libraries

Many schools had a separate library building or area and this was often a community library. One school had an arrangement with the town library to regularly change the selection of books available.

Community use of school facilities

Many principals reported that they encourage the community to use the swimming pool when operational and charge a fee for doing so. Most schools employ (or have as a volunteer) someone responsible for pool water checks and maintenance.

Many schools encourage community use of the library and have set times for doing so. If this is the case, some schools employ (or have as a volunteer) a library manager responsible for issuing books and maintaining the library.

Fox Glacier School has a pre-school facility in the grounds of the school. This facility was provided by the Ministry of Education to support the growing number of pre-school children.

Makarora School has a community library and community centre attached to the school.

Franz Josef School has established a satellite unit for Year 9 and 10 students. This is a joint venture with South Westland Area School. Students receive direct teaching and their independent study is supervised. This initiative provides students with the opportunity to continue their secondary education in their local area. A separate building in the school grounds is set aside for this.

Haast School is used as the base for the local Public Health Nurse

Aoraki Mount Cook School has a mini BMX track and a perimeter running track which are used by community members out of school hours.

Some schools allow community access to sports equipment out of school hours and have arrangements with groups in the community to use sports facilities out of school hours.

THE BIG PICTURE – REACHING OUT

Principals in sole charge and remote schools are well aware of the real and perceived effects of isolation both on themselves, their staff and their students. All principals spoken with described different ways of minimising these effects such as:

- Clustering with other small nearby schools for sports and cultural, music and performing arts activities

- Clustering with other small nearby schools for ICT development using external facilitators
- Videoconferencing and skypeing with other schools and outside agencies
- Audioconferencing with other schools and outside agencies
- Wikis and blogs
- Clustering for PD e.g West Coast Literacy Strategy and ICTPD contracts
- Clustering through L & M groups
- Clustering for Principal Appraisal
- Attendance at relevant conferences and seminars
- Purposeful interaction with others in the community for a range of activities including arts teaching, environmental studies, sports coaching, technology and careers programmes
- Purposeful school camps and school trips

CONCLUSION

The sole-charge and remote-school principals that I visited are hard-working professionals dedicated to providing the best possible education opportunities for their students.

This includes purposeful use of their unique location to provide place-based and EOTC opportunities in their local environment. These diverse experiences - often requiring delicate relationship building within the community and unavailable in other locations - allow principals to develop a truly unique local curriculum.

Having the same students over a period of time and getting to know them and their families well, enables principals at these schools to craft and deliver highly personalised learning programmes that engage and challenge learners. Principals visited remarked that many of their studies intuitively took into account the current students needs, interests and abilities.

Principal's visited, while proud of their achievements and successes, agree that the stress of their position and the workload is phenomenal. Their dedication to their school and community inevitably requires significant sacrifice. Several principals knew their health had suffered as a result of their workload. All agreed that their work / life balance was constantly an issue and that this had impacted on family life and relationships.

Most principals viewed their position as a vocation rather than a career and consider it the hardest work in the education sector they have done. Many felt the ever increasing workload made the prospect of remaining in that position for any length of time untenable. There was strong support from the principals visited and many spoken to at the conference for revisiting the issue of a minimum FTTE of 2 at Government level. Subsequent to that, I have initiated a meeting with members of the NZPF to discuss how the Rural Education Reference Group (REREG) may be able to support our concerns.

In the meantime, the bright eyed, eager faced children enjoying their learning in our spectacular environments is sufficient motivation for this sole-charge principal at least to keep going.

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