Principal Sabbatical Report

Term 3 2010

An investigation into the potential role students can have in the development of our school as a 'positive learning culture which will produce students who are enthusiastic, contributing members of society.'
Student engagement.
(From Carterton School Charter, Strategic Goal 1)

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Acknowledgements

Executive summary

When beginning my sabbatical I was focused on investigating the concept of 'student voice' as a way of enhancing student learning. However I soon became very aware that student voice is only one small part of 'student engagement' and to expand my study I reviewed current engagement literature, visited a school which has developed proactive methods of engaging their students, and reflected on how the learning I had experienced could be related to my school situation.

For students to access the learning opportunities a school offers there must be a match between their needs and wants and the learning experiences they are offered. The concept of 'student engagement' is key to this. If a student is disaffected or disengaged from their school environment they will be unable to take advantage of learning opportunities.

My report summarises key points from literature and studies on student engagement, reports on my visit to Red Beach School and links what I have learned to possible next steps for Carterton School.

Purpose of sabbatical

Personal
To provide time for professional learning, reflection and rejuvenation.

Having started each of the last 25 school years as a classroom teacher, senior manager or principal I welcomed the opportunity to take time to reflect on my contribution to education in the past and future. I needed for a break to refresh myself. I have continuously maintained my professional learning through study, attendance at courses and conferences and by involvement in professional learning groups. To have the time to focus on an area which fascinates me without the day to day pressures of leadership and management in my school was wonderful.

School
To improve my knowledge, skills and practice through engagement in professional learning and a school visit, and so enhance the learning experience of students and teachers at Carterton School.

During my sabbatical I read about student engagement, especially searching for information on how students can have input into decision making about the design of their curriculum and learning experiences.

Through reflecting on my practice within the context of this study I believe I have improved my ability to lead a change that will create an environment where effective, meaningful and committed teaching and learning is the norm for every student and teacher, and where all participants in the school will be able to make a real contribution to its development.

I investigated the ways Red Beach School has engaged students in their learning, and reflected on what we are doing and what we can do to encourage similar engagement at Carterton School.

As a full primary school we are constantly aware of the need for our year seven and eight students to be provided with appropriate leadership opportunities. This project provided some suggestions and ideas we may adopt.

An action plan was developed to work towards the most 'positive learning culture' possible for the students of Carterton School.

The end of the sabbatical period brought about a new beginning for our school as we look more deeply into how our students can be more meaningfully engaged in their learning.

Cluster / wider community
To contribute to the professional learning culture of the Wairarapa.
I plan to share my experience and learning with the cluster of principals I work alongside in the Wairarapa. My participation in a Principals Learning Group across the Wairarapa and Manawatu will also provide an audience for my plans. As a result of my sabbatical I will work with colleagues in my school to investigate our current practice and lead discussion reflecting on possible ways of enhancing student engagement with extending their student voice.

Background and rationale

There is a range of information available about the impact student voice can have on students engagement with their learning. I had found limited examples of work in primary schools. Current research and commentary on 'Student engagement' is rich and varied. The sabbatical provided the opportunity for me to critique the information available and make it pertinent to our school.

For several years the professional development I have undertaken (attending conferences, cluster meetings and readings) has often included a component called 'engagement'. What this actually means is not always made clear for our context as a decile 4 school in a provincial town. Being able to 'personalise' the information has been of benefit to us at Carterton School.

The NZCER conference "Engaging young people in learning: Why does it matter and what can we do?" held in Wellington on 9 September 2009 was a key catalyst for my study and investigation.

Methodology

Reflection on a recent comprehensive literature review for the Ministry of Education 'Students Engagement in the Middle Years of Schooling (Years 7 – 10): A Literature Review' (Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010) provided a powerful information to base possible actions plans for our school.

A visit to Red Beach School and Lesley Tait (principal) provided a wonderful 'sounding board' for my thinking and many practical prompts for Carterton School.

Attendance at the NZCER conference 'Engaging Young People in Learning: Why does it matter and what can we do?' (Wellington 2009) encouraged further questioning and prompted more focus on what teachers do as well as looking at what students do.

Findings

Student engagement in school decreases in students between the ages of 12 and 14. As a result academic achievement decreases. It has been this age group where many studies on engagement have focused. However the findings of research can be equally applied to younger and older students.

I   What is 'engagement'?

Far from being a simple to describe behaviour or disposition, engagement involves many aspects of a student and their environment. A range of features combine. In the recent past being confident, enjoying and participating in school life could have been described as engagement. But these behaviours alone are not engagement. Motivation is deeply linked to engagement, but is not enough on its own; the ability to concentrate for periods of time, while being important, is not the only feature of someone who is engaged.

Gibbs and Poskitt 2010, in their thorough literature review "Student Engagement in the Middle Years of Schooling Part A" (pg 2), identified seven key features of engagement which are reported across literature on engagement. They are:

1. connectedness/sense of belonging to school (Bishop et al., 2007; Libbey, 2004);

2. sense of agency (Joselowsky, 2007);

3. involvement, effort, commitment, and concentration (Shernoff & Schmidt, 2008; Tsai, Kunter, Ludtke, Trautwein, & Ryan, 2008);

4. motivation and interest in learning (Deci & Ryan, 1994; Tsai et al., 2008);

5. sense of self efficacy (Anderson, Hattie, & Hamilton, 2005; Bandura, 1997; Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004)

6. orientation to achievement and performance (Bong, 2004);

7. self-regulatory processes and skills (Cleary & Zimmerman, 2004; Dembo & Eaton, 2000; Dinsmore, Alexander, & Loughlin, 2008).

While Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) focused on studies of students 12-14 years of age disengagement from learning does not happen only in this two year period. Finn and Kasza at the NZCER conference 'Engaging young people in learning' September 2009 identified stages as early as pre-school age where disengagement could begin. If this is so it is our responsibility to be aware of the factors which could lead to disengagement and to support each member of the school community in developing methods to meet the needs of our students.

A definition offered by Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) summarises the complexity of the term 'engagement'.

> "Engagement is a multi-faceted construct that encompasses students' sense of belonging and connectedness to their school, teachers and peers; their sense of agency, self efficacy and orientation to achieve within their classrooms and in their broader extra-curricular endeavours; their involvement, effort, levels of concentration and interest in subjects and learning in general; and the extent to which learning is enjoyed for its own sake, or seen as something that must be endured to receive a reward or avoid sanction. Further, engagement is a variable state of being that is

influenced by a range of internal and external factors including the perceived value or relevance of the learning and the presence of opportunities for students to experience appropriately-pitched challenge and success in their learning. *As such engagement is malleable by the actions of teachers.*" Gibbs & Poskitt 2009, p2 (my italics)

The comment "*engagement is malleable by the actions of teachers*" plays a central role. As principal of a school I can allow, encourage and support my teachers and staff to develop effective engagement in students, and we can aim to create a 'positive learning culture' (school strategic goal 1).

Cathy Wylie at the NZCER conference (2009) commented that engagement is a largely active term. It involves the learner and the teacher in action. The action of the teacher is of crucial importance, as well as that of the student. It no longer enough to 'know what year 5s need to know' and 'fill' them with that information. We now focus on getting to know the individual students in our classes as well as possible in order to meet their needs and provide an appropriate level of challenge in their learning. This is exactly what we need to do when thinking of how we can encourage increased engagement in our lessons and in life in school in general.

Three factors are commonly considered to work together to facilitate 'engagement'.

* Behavioural factors
* Affective / emotional factors
* Cognitive factors

It is often believed that behavioural and emotional factors need to be present before cognitive factors can be fully engaged. The behavioural and affective areas are more complex – they cannot be easily tested and are not always easy to observe. They tend to be more internalized. Many of the seven key features of engagement noted above are related to the behaviour and affective factors.

While these three internal features combine to affect engagement, the external contexts of learning, some of which we may have more control over in a school, must also be considered.

* The teaching environment and content of the curriculum (including rules, expectations, physical organisation)
* The home situation
* The students place within their peer group

If we believe engagement in learning is important then we need to take all of these factors into account when organising the systems in our schools, and when deciding what our curriculum should consist of.

II   What hinders engagement?

If the factors above encourage engagement then the absence of them would suggest engagement is hindered.

In practical terms, and of use to us at school, the 2008 Ministry of Education "Study of Students' Transition from Primary to Secondary Schooling" (in Gibbs & Poskitt 2010 p4)

identified five main reasons why students reported they felt less engaged in some settings. These were:

- Work was not at an appropriate level
- The content of the work was irrelevant
- The presentation of the work was "dull or boring'
- The environment was not helpful eg too noisy
- Issues with relationships hindered learning (between the student and the teacher or other students)

III   Factors which schools can influence.

Gibbs and Poskitt's 2010 report to the Ministry of Education synthesized a large number of pieces of work on engagement and they highlighted 8 factors which schools can influence – each of which contribute to a students level of engagement.

Table 3: Factor importance	
Strong compelling evidence of the effect of these factors on engagement and learning outcomes and/or achievement	Relationships with teachers and other students
	Motivation and interest in learning
	Goal orientation
	Academic self regulation
	Self efficacy
Moderate evidence of the effect of this factor on engagement and learning outcomes and/or achievement	Relational learning
Some evidence of the effect of these factors on engagement and learning outcomes and/or achievement	Personal agency
	Dispositions

Gibbs & Poskitt 2010

These factors intertwine, and Gibbs and Poskitt acknowledge that some may have appeared less important in their review as fewer studies have been completed in that area. For practical reasons as principal of a school it is useful to reflect on each disposition and how we could encourage its development at our school.
I have reflected on each factor and related it to our school in my action plan.

Factor 1   Relationships with teachers and other students

Positive relationships between teacher / students and students / students in a well organised, safe, challenging environment can support academic success.
This includes the physical environment the learning is taking part in as well as the relationship between the people in that setting.

"a strong sense of relatedness better positions students to take on challenge, set positive goals, and establish high expectations that extend and motivate them." (Martin & Dowson, 2009, in Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010, p6)

In our New Zealand context Te Kotahitanga project has stressed and demonstrated the importance of supportive relationships to underpin engagement in learning in a classroom, especially for Māori students. The Te Kotahitanga 'Effective teacher profile' describes the elements a teacher should bring to their classroom to engage Māori (and all) students. Relationships are key, as described (marked *). The remaining three effective teacher elements are reflected in further factors described below.

Te Kotahitanga Effective Teacher Profile:

The **Effective Teacher Profile** consists of six elements.

1. *Manaakitanga** – teachers care for their students as culturally located human beings above all else.
2. *Mana motuhake** – teachers care for the performance of their students.
3. *Nga whakapiringatanga** – teachers are able to create a secure, well-managed learning environment.
4. *Wananga* – teachers are able to engage in effective teaching interactions with Māori students as Māori.
5. *Ako* – teachers can use strategies that promote effective teaching interactions and relationships with their learners.
6. *Kotahitanga* – teachers promote, monitor and reflect on outcomes that in turn lead to improvements in educational achievement for Māori students.

Factor 6   Relationships with peers affect on learning.

In years 7&8 these relationships can become increasingly complex and difficult for students (and sometimes their teachers!) to manage. Positive or negative relationships with peers can support or hinder a student in their engagement in academic progress and learning. The stronger a students self identity is the more able they are to take advantage of every opportunity offered to them.

Working and learning with peers is a powerful motivation for students. Feelings of self worth are developed if positive relationships can be developed and enhanced. Classroom tasks and activities which build on the development of these relationships can enhance a student's engagement in school and so further their learning.

Factor 8   Dispositions to be a learner

Dispositions develop as a learner is affected by a range of experiences. They are what shape the behaviour of a student when faced with new learning challenges. Dispositions can be influenced by the way a school / teacher structures learning experiences to provide success for a student, much as technical skills can be developed.

Factor 2   Motivation and interest in learning

Often confused with the term 'engagement' motivation is just one aspect which combines with others to encourage engagement. It is a part of engagement which comes from within the student. Motivation can vary widely within and between lessons. It is vital that schools tap into students' intrinsic motivation to facilitate effective learning.

Two types of interest are identified by Hanen, 2006, in Gibbs and Poskitt, 2010 p8, 'Situational interest' and 'personal interest'.

Situational interest = the learning environment, personal interest = the intrinsic interest a students has for an area or aspect of learning.

Both need to be addressed at school to make the most of the students' preferences in learning.

Factor 7   Personal agency / cognitive autonomy

This factor describes the control a person has over the way their learning is conducted. In the school setting this means involving the students in the development of their learning experience. At different ages / stages this may range from co constructing success criteria to the planning and completion of a wholly independent investigation. It is in this domain that student voice can play a part – allowing the students to analyse and describe what suits them best.

Factor 5   Self efficacy

        "…the individuals conviction of being able to master specific activities, situations or aspects of his or her own psychological and social functioning." (Bacchini & Magliulo, 2003 in Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010 p8)

A student's current state of self efficacy is strongly influenced by past learning experiences – if a student has achieved success in the past s/he is more likely to assume s/he will have success in new learning.

Factor 3   Goal orientation

If students can be involved in setting the agenda / content of learning they will become more engaged. It is suggested (Martin, 2007, in Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010 p9) that there are two types of goals which can combine to enhance engagement. These are 'mastery orientation', developing yourself within a learning area, and 'performance orientation,' when your learning is measured against others.

Some students will respond more positively to one than the other. The matching of a goal to the students is crucial - too high or low, or in the wrong orientation, and the goal can impede rather than support learning.

The setting and achievement of goals requires appropriate and timely feedback in order for them to contribute to ongoing student engagement.

Factor 4   Academic self regulated learning

Students need to be able to think about their own learning and be taught methods of reflecting on their learning. They need to be provided with tools which will help them to do this. They will then be able to take some control over their progress and achievement by using the tool. Development of metacognitive skills will enhance student engagement with learning.

D   Visit to Red Beach School

I decided to visit Red Beach School in Auckland to talk with Lesley Tait the principal, as I had read a report written by Lesley and her previous Deputy Principal, Sarah Martin, on the use of student voice in their school development work: 'The power of student voice'

Their report described the merging of several of the factors and actions described above and so provided a practical example of the enhancement of student engagement in a 'real setting'.

While the report I read was written about an initiative a few years ago (2005-6) the process followed tied in closely with the current stage of development of my own school, and it fitted well with our goal of developing a 'positive learning culture' and enhancing the levels of engagement of our students. In addition – being able to discuss developments since 2006 with Lesley meant I could update the progress and adaptations made by the school.

Red Beach's two main goals over 2005-6 were a) to have student input into the design of the curriculum and b) to have meaningful learning (for students and teachers) occurring. All of the eight factors from the Gibbs and Poskitt (2010) review were reflected in the story shared with me by Lesley.

The Red Beach process began when maths and literacy data had been analysed. The question arose 'What is learning at Red Beach School?' The Red Beach management team interviewed students on paper and video about their learning, their thinking, their learning environments and the teaching they had experienced that supported learning.

The results of the interviews coincided with a review of the school vision. A visual metaphor was looked at and the Red Beach 'lifelong learning' design began to take shape.

After the senior management team investigated the concept of lifelong learning the DP videoed a random sample of 80 students from the 600 student, year 0-6 school. Asking 'What do successful learners do?' their videoed responses were edited into a 1 hour video – the results of which were not what was expected! Most students were not able to articulate what learning was – or how to be a successful learner.

The school decided they needed to develop a common language to describe learning and that all members of the school community needed to develop an understanding of how learning occurs in the classroom.

The discussions around the school changed from being focused on behaviour and work to learning, for example student's certificates all contained the vocabulary of the lifelong learner instead of 'work'.

A year later 60% of the students interviewed were able to articulate what a 'good learner' does.

To support these developments a coaching programme for teachers was instigated which involved regular classroom observations with a focus and feedback to eth teacher and the coach.

When any change is planned at the school the teachers, community and the students are considered and asked for their views (eg surveys). A student survey relating to the BOTs key performance indicators has been completed for three years (the same questions asked each time but in a different focus area)

Red Beach School continues to develop and enhance its processes to engage students in lifelong learning. Student voice is valued and a real catalyst for change.

Implications

From their review of current literature Gibbs and Poskitt identified <u>four ways schools can take positive action to enhance student involvement and engagement.</u>

1. Nurture trusting relationships.
Social acceptance can be more important that academic success to students in the middle years of schooling. Students need to know adults care for them and know them well. Their sense of justice and fairness are strong.

2. Fun and challenging learning activities.
If teachers can look at learning from the student's perspective and plan to use a range of teaching strategies students become more engaged.

3. Make learning meaningful.
Connections must be made to a student's interests and life out of school within the curriculum. Moves must be made away from theory into practical learning activities.

4. Students take responsibility for their own learning and know how to learn better.
Lessons need to be ordered and structured to provide scaffolding for new learning. Explicit learning strategies are taught. Feedback against clear success criteria with a discussion about learning occur in a timely manner.

Possible actions for Carterton School

A proposed plan reflecting on using these four ways as basis for a model for what we could do at Carterton School to improve student engagement, and linking this to the visit to Red Beach School, and my other reading and learning.

From research	For school
Development of trusting relationships	
Social acceptance is more important in the middle years than academic achievement.	Strategies to deal with conflict implicitly taught. Positive Behaviour for Learning expression of interest end of 2010.

Opportunities for co operative learning provided. PD for teachers if necessary. |
| Students need to know adults care for them and know them well. | Parent / teacher / student beginning of year discussions & goal setting instead of 'parent / teacher interviews.'

Surveys home at start of year.

Articulate expectations to all. |
| Fairness. | Clear, shared expectations, rewards and consequences. Discipline in private. Ensure consequences to the person who breaks the rules not whole group. Listen. |
| **Fun and challenging learning activities.** | |
| Teacher looks at learning from the students' perspective. | Camps, EOTC, investigative / inquiry approach to study. Focus on links to prior knowledge, learning and experiences.

Ask – Develop techniques for canvassing student views. Student voice group set up. |

	‘Me and My School’ NZCER survey. Circle time. Video interviews on key aspects of school.
Range of teaching strategies used. For exampl, co-operative learning, peer tutoring, reciprocal reading, practical work, use of range of technology.	Work with year 7&8 learning team to develop strengths in a range of teaching techniques. Identify other teachers who have strengths in these areas. Relate this to our ‘Teacher as Inquiry’ learning. Use the Carterton School ‘trees of learning’ to articulate and develop dispositions to foster engagement. Reflect year 7&8 need for competition in and out of the classroom.

Make learning meaningful

Make connections to personal interests and culture within the curriculum. Make learning ‘real life’.	Curriculum planning takes into account needs, interest and background of students. Find out what the students see as being useful.
Make links from theoretical to practical learning.	Clarify and articulate the importance of learning through development of clear learning intentions for all learning. Plan for and share a real life context for learning.

Students take responsibility for their own learning and know how to learn better.

Links between previous and new learning need to be strong.	Focus on teachers finding out as much as possible from last teacher and using previous years assessment information to make learning appropriate from the start of the year.
Metacognitive strategies and explicit learning strategies are taught.	Teachers share current knowledge and understanding of metacognitive skills. Professional development opportunities. Plan development of these skills through school – relate to our ‘trees of learning’.

Feedback against clear success criteria.	Continue focus from past years. Relate to the Carterton school 'teaching as inquiry' cycle. Support each stage of learning with clear success criteria. Co construction of criteria a focus.

Conclusions

'Engagement' is a complex phenomenon, many factors combine to determine an individuals level of engagement in their learning. As teachers and leaders in our schools we must know and understand that we can affect and alter a students level of engagement, and hence their academic success, by how we build their learning environment and the learning experiences we provide.
The student is at the centre of their learning and we must tap into their current interests, dispositions and life experiences.

> 'In the end, the path to student engagement starts where young people are and helps them to chart a course that will take them where they need to go. On the way, the more they can find and use their voices to express who they are and what they want, the greater is the likelihood that they will seek and find what they need. Engagement is a habit of mind and heart. It is what we want young people to cultivate not just to get their diplomas, but as a lifelong way of being. It is what we want our schools and programs to foster with every aspect of their curriculum, organization, and culture. To engage young people requires of us what we ask of them: full commitment, a belief that it is possible, and a vision of a viable and productive future (Joselowsky, 2007, in Gibbs & Poskitt, 2010, p7)

We can make the difference.

References

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