

Reflections on Raising Achievement of the Very Able Learner in Low Decile Schools

“The welfare of children should be at the heart of all our thinking.”

Barry Teare: “Effective Provision for Able and Talented Children.”

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Acknowledgements:

- 1. Truro High School, Truro, Cornwall**
- 2. Treviglas Community College, Newquay, Cornwall**
- 3. Newquay Tretherras School, Newquay, Cornwall**
- 4. McAuley Catholic High School, Auckland, New Zealand**
- 5. Sisters of Mercy.**
- 6. New Zealand Catholic Principals’ Association.**
- 7. The New Zealand Catholic Education Office**
- 8. The New Zealand Ministry of Education.**
- 9. The many inspiring teachers I was privileged to speak to and observe.**

Purpose, Rationale and Background Information.

McAuley High School has consistently raised achievement of all its students. At Level 2 NCEA, we are achieving at an equivalent level to Decile 8-10 schools, whilst at Level 1, NCEA, our students achieve well above the national average with pass rates well above 70% and, with over 90%, achieving the Literacy and Numeracy prerequisites. At Level 3 NCEA, our students are achieving a pass rate over 55%. It has become increasingly clear that our challenge is how to cater for students who were or could be identified as Gifted or Talented. Our policy regarding Gifted and Talented students needed to be reviewed in the light of the “new” New Zealand Curriculum as well as our procedures for identifying, monitoring and catering for these students. The purpose of the sabbatical was to investigate and gather information from diverse schools in England as to how they met the needs of their students. I deliberately chose very different schools catering for students from many different socio economic backgrounds.

The first school visited was Truro High School for Girls. This school is a public school, associated with the Anglican Church and the fees per term range from £3,500.00 per term (day scholars) to \$12,000.00 per term (boarders.) The roll is approximately 400 and the age ranges from students aged 3 years (pre school, Nursery) to 18 years. The roll for years 7-13 is approximately 250. These students were extremely privileged with class sizes ranging from 1 to 24. A wide range of subjects is taught with the emphasis on providing for the individual needs of each student. The quality of teaching is exceptional with the teachers focussing on the development of thinking and problem solving skills. The music department was phenomenal with students being provided with amazing opportunities for performance, additional qualifications and individual tuition. There was a wonderful relationship between students and staff with the result that the teaching staff could focus on facilitating the learning.

The second school visited was Treviglas Community College. This was a Business and Enterprise Specialist College. The gender of pupils was mixed and the age range from 11-19. The school had a roll of 1100 students. It catered for a diverse range of students: with a fairly large proportion from low socio economic areas. It had recently been awarded the title of “High Performance Specialist School” (similar to our lead schools in the new Zealand EHSAS project.) It was a truly comprehensive school. It had recently been visited by Ofsted and received an excellent report. This school catered for the needs of all its students and identified the top 5% of students as gifted and 10% of students were identified as talented. A register was kept of these students and a report sent to the government three times a year. Their Gifted and Talented Advisor met with teachers with a similar role in other schools on a regular basis. The classes were streamed and those identified as academically able were provided with every opportunity to excel. The school had an inclusive policy and of particular interest was also the care given to

those with learning difficulties. Reflective Practice was very evident and strongly promoted were deep learning skills (thinking skills) and student ownership of their learning.

Newquay Tretherras School was the final school visited. This was a school of 1600, mixed gender, aged 11 - 19 and a truly comprehensive school. It catered for students from diverse socio economic backgrounds. It had appointed a specialist teacher to run the Gifted and Talented Programme. (This role is very similar to that of the New Zealand SCT.) Over 400 students were on the school register identified as either gifted or talented. (25%.) It was the role of the specialist teacher to identify, and monitor the progress of the students. In addition, each department had one teacher responsible for identified gifted and talented students within their department. The school catered for all the needs of its students including those with learning difficulties and behavioural needs. High quality teaching and the introduction of the “Tretherras Way” made this an uplifting school to visit. In addition to the Gifted and Talented coordinator there was a specialist teacher for classroom practice – the “Assessment for Learning” coordinator. Outstanding work is being done on the promotion of individualised learning programmes and students managing their own learning.

All three schools were most warm in their welcome and the opportunity exists for closer liaison with McAuley High School. New Zealand teachers are highly regarded and there were already links with New Zealand. I am grateful to these schools for their welcome, expertise and assistance. It was uplifting to witness inspired teaching and converse with teachers and head teachers who were enthusiastic about their subjects and totally committed to providing for all the needs of their students. The students were welcoming and friendly and very willing to share what they saw as the strengths of their schools.

This opportunity has left me personally rejuvenated and confident in the directions and initiatives that we are taking at McAuley High School.

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Reflections on Raising Achievement of the Very Able Student in Low Decile Schools

“The danger chiefly lies in acting well; no crimes so great as daring to excel.”

Charles Churchill: “Epistle to William Hogarth” 1763

All teachers and those involved in Education know that, although socio economic factors can impede the development of identified gifts and talents, it would be very dangerous to assume that students in a low decile school do not possess special gifts or talents. The disadvantages some of these students face, of not being provided with or exposed to a wide range of activities as a pre schooler or at home, result in students not being able to have exposure to a wide range of interests and activities which could develop into long term interests. These students need to be provided with opportunities to increase their motivation and self esteem and also to discover their particular strength or talent. An inclusive approach to the background culture of the student results in the lives of all the students being enriched.

It is suggested that the first thing a school has to do is to develop a definition of Gifted and Talented Students. For some teachers this term makes them feel uneasy. However, the main issue for teachers is the need to offer challenging learning experiences so that each student can reach their full potential. One school used the term, “Very Able Student.” This term easily transfers across all subject areas and interests and can be seen as applying to students who need more depth and breadth of work than a teacher normally prepares for a class. It also implies that a dormant potential may be awakened by the correct stimulus or educational experience in a class. In another school “gifted” was loosely identified as those who were very able in academic subjects and “talented” as those who excelled in the fields of Arts or Sports.

Researchers and educationalists have contributed to an understanding of what are considered to be essential ingredients that with various possible combinations contribute to high achievement. They are:

1. **Intelligences:** (Bodily-Kinaesthetic, Linguistic, Logical-Mathematical, Spatial, Musical, Spiritual, Personal, Interpersonal.)
2. **Knowledge:** (Knowing that... Knowing how to... Knowing when to... Thinking skills, Problem-solving strategies.)
3. **Zeal:** (Interests, Ego-strength, Motivation, Self Esteem, Sensitivity, Maturity.)
4. **Creativity:** (Imagination, Lateral thinking, Independence, Divergence, Originality, Flexibility.)

I would like to add the importance of acknowledging **the rich cultural and religious heritages** of our students. They bring a wealth of experiences that are perhaps not always fully understood or acknowledged by those from different backgrounds.

All of the above ingredients translate directly to the New Zealand key competencies: “Thinking,” “Using Language Symbols and Texts,” “Managing Self,” “Relating to Others,” “Participating and Contributing.” When you combine these with the values of excellence, innovation, inquiry, and curiosity, diversity, equity, community and participation, ecological sustainability, integrity and respect, our New Zealand curriculum offers amazing opportunities for those students identified as gifted or talented.

An important factor does need to be considered. To what extent can our schools compensate or allow for the lack of stimulus at home or the lack of support at home? This brings us back to the importance of that essential triangle of support needed for our students to develop to their full potential: parental support and understanding; student support and the support of teachers. Without all three working together our young people cannot develop and nurture their gifts or talents. Teachers contribute generously to extra curricular activities that can enhance the lives of students and their generosity with their time plays an important role in developing gifts and talents. However, parental support is essential and providing parents with information as to how they could contribute is crucial for the development of a young person.

Within the schools visited, the following processes and procedures worked well. They can easily be adapted or transferred to any school.

1. The development of a school wide Learning and Teaching Policy. This policy will cater for all students and also for those identified as very able, gifted or talented. The policy objective would be to move Teaching and Learning to outstanding enabling all students to reach or exceed expectations, fulfilling their early promise and latent potential. Personalised Learning and Learning Skills would be indentified and all work prepared, planned would provide a highly structured and responsive approach to each student enabling all students to progress, achieve and participate. Links between subjects, events and activities, cultural backgrounds need to be made. All staff need a clear definition of “Gifted and Talented” or “Very Able.”

2. A register needs to be kept of those students who have been identified. It is suggested that the school appoint a teacher to manage the programme for gifted and talented students. This teacher would then appoint delegates from each department in the school, meet regularly with them and monitor the needs of students. In addition, the person would liaise with parents on a regular basis.

3. All lessons need a Learning Skills objective. These skills to come from those identified from the New Zealand Curriculum. The following Learning Skills would become familiar to students.

- Motivation: challenging self, taking risks, being optimistic, being active and engaging with tasks, celebrating success. (KC: Managing self)
- Resilience: accepting challenges, finding solutions, overcoming barriers, resisting distractions, believing in yourself and your abilities. (KC:Managing Self, Thinking.)
- Collaboration/interpersonal skills: getting involved, learning to accept the views of others, building and maintaining relationships, learning to communicate and negotiate, working as part of a team. (KC: Relating to others, Participating and Contributing.)
- Creativity: Using imagination, being adaptable, taking and managing risks, being curious and asking questions, challenging yourself and others. (KC: Managing self and Thinking.)
- Responsibility for your own learning/managing self: showing initiative, setting targets to work towards, getting involved, being adaptable, being a good citizen. (KC: Managing Self and Relating to Others.)
- Self Awareness: identifying your strengths, using your knowledge, being reflective, developing confidence and self esteem, making health choices. (KC: Using Language, Symbols and Texts.)
- Enquiring Mind/Being a Lifelong Learner; generating questions, exploring and researching, trying new strategies, analysing results and making decisions. (KC: Thinking, Using Language, Symbols and Texts and Relating to Others.)

Each lesson should contain one or two focussed learning objectives that are reviewed during the lesson. There should be effective use of teacher questioning, modelling and explaining. Pupil progress during the lesson should be assessed using a range of effective strategies. Effective use of Summative and Affirmative Assessments, including regular self and peer assessment should be used.

3. All students can expect a personalised approach to their learning. Best practice will see students as partners in their own learning. Learning is encouraged through authentic praise to engage and motivate students. Behaviour is managed through effective planning for inclusion and challenge. Students are supported through monitoring, ensuring appropriate intervention strategies are in place.

4. All students are engaged in learning through skilful planning that takes account of influences such as developmental, gender, social, ethical and religious. Equal high expectations of achievement are expected from all students. The student voice is actively sought to inform lesson and curriculum planning.

4. Teachers will share good practice, pedagogy and research. Effective mentoring and coaching of teachers plus modelling and the willingness to take risks to develop practice will further develop good practice.

5. All teachers need the equipment and skills to use the equipment in order to facilitate learning. Most classrooms visited had skilful use of interactive whiteboards, data projectors, and laptops. A wonderful language laboratory was viewed at one school and the interactive opportunities for the students were greatly enriched. Teachers need a pleasant and safe working environment.

6. Cooperative group work is a key to success. This promotes student ownership of their learning. It also promotes and encourages the development of the key competencies especially managing self and relating to others plus participating and contributing.

7. The organisation of the lesson should commence with a starter activity (DO NOW), the aims of the lesson (a discussion with the students about the aim and how they will achieve the goal set in the lesson.) and a conclusion which will obtain input from the students as to how they feel they have progressed towards meeting their goals. This then leads on to any task which might be set for homework. The lesson should have good reflective practice with a clear differentiation of targets.

A personalised curriculum for the very able student should consider various options: acceleration, adding breadth and increasing depth, include suitable levels of challenge, include opportunities for independence learning, develop leadership skills, develop creative and enterprise skills and include strategies that promote higher order thinking and deep learning. Above all there should be the aim for the highest outcomes and successes.

Assessment for Learning

“A rising tide lifts all ships” Renzulli

Raising the standards of learning and achievement of all students through New Zealand school education is an important national priority. Learning is driven by what teachers and students do in the classroom. In the classroom teachers have to manage complicated and demanding situations, channelling all the emotional, social, personal pressures amongst a group of approximately 30 students to assist them to become motivated learners able to manage themselves and aspire to the mastery of the skills identified as key competencies. It is unfair to expect teachers to achieve this by themselves. Teaching and learning has to be interactive. Whilst teachers need to know about the students’ progress and difficulties to be able to modify their programmes to meet their needs, students, however, need to play a far more significant role in assessing themselves to provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes formative assessment. It is valid assessment when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet the identified needs.

According to John West-Burnham, personalised learning is emerging as a dominant theme in the reconceptualisation of the way in which education is provided. At the heart of this debate is recognition of the concept of a service provided to individuals instead of the prevailing ideology of people having to fit into the systems and structures of a bureaucratic system as best they can. The same can be said for education and for providing for our more able learners. We should be able to provide a coherent education that suits each learner individually. We need to pay attention to the social and educational needs of our able students as this has a “rising tide” effect.

There is evidence that improving formative assessment raises standards. There is also evidence, according to Paul Black and Dylan William, that there is room for improvement and that there is evidence about how to improve formative assessment. Formative assessment assist all learners; those low attainers more than the rest and reduces the spread of assessment and raises assessment overall. They further state that all work that involves ways to enhance feedback requires significant change in classroom practice including assumptions that effective learning requires that students be actively involved. For assessment to function formatively, the results have to be used to adjust teaching and learning. The ways in which assessment can affect the motivation and self esteem of pupils and the benefits of engaging pupils in self assessment need to be carefully examined.

“Feedback to any pupil should be about the particular qualities of his or her work, with advice on what he or she can do to improve, and should avoid comparisons with other pupils.” (Black and William.) One of the barriers to developing self assessment is the fact that students can only assess themselves when they have a sufficiently clear picture of the targets that their learning is meant to attain. Students need to acquire an overview of their learning. When they do acquire this, they become more effective as learners and more committed to their own assessment which in turn becomes an object of discussion and promotes further reflection that is essential to learning. *“Self assessment is an essential component of formative assessment.”* (Black and William.) Students should be trained in self assessment so that they can understand the purpose of their learning and grasp what they need to do to achieve.

It is essential to provide opportunities for pupils to express their understanding of the purpose of the learning as this will initiate interaction whereby formative assessment aids learning. Questioning by the teacher becomes an important tool. Teachers need to allow students enough time to think out and offer an answer. Students can also think in pairs or in groups. Any dialogue should promote thoughtful reflection. Good questioning ensures good quality feedback. Feedback should give all pupils guidance on how to improve and this must be followed by help on how to work at the improvement.

The following summarises the essential characteristics of assessment for learning:

- All staff should share learning objectives with their pupils. The lesson objective will form the basis for questioning and feedback during lesson plenaries.

- Staff should help pupils to know and recognise the standards they are aiming for. Staff would develop, in partnership with students, clear success criteria and relate this to the learning objective. When applicable staff will show and display examples of pupils' work that have met the criteria and provide explanations why and how they achieved this. Staff will model outcomes. Students' work will be displayed in classrooms. Staff will ensure that there are clear expectations of the range of techniques appropriate for the tasks.
- Pupils should be given opportunities to be involved in Peer and Self Assessment. Students would be familiar with the level descriptors of achievement in each subject. Students could be given the opportunity to talk about what they have learned and the learning objectives and success criteria should be the focus of this discussion. Students should be given the opportunity to talk about what they have learnt with a peer, focusing on both the positive aspects and the need to improve. Students will be given time to reflect upon their learning and modify work in response to feedback given. Staff will work with students to identify the next steps in learning and actions to ensure progress.
- Staff should provide oral feedback which will help pupils recognise their achievements and the next steps and how to take them. Staff would plan feedback that relates to learning objectives. Feedback will be given on pupils' contributions related to the objective. Staff will give students guided feedback as they work on a task. Feedback may be in relation to the objective, success criteria, self assessment or learning strategies.
- Staff should provide written feedback which helps pupils recognise their achievements, the next steps and how to take them. The feedback should be constructive as well as positive. Guidance would be given on strengths and how progress should be made. Good effort should be acknowledged. Dialogue between students and staff should be evident in student work. Students should act on teacher's comments.

To summarise, every student should know how they are doing and understand what they need to do to improve and how to get there. This will enable them to be motivated, independent learners. All teachers needs to be equipped to make well founded judgements about a pupil's attainment and understand the concepts and principles of progression, know how to use their assessment judgements to forward plan, particularly for those who are not fulfilling their potential. The school must have in place a structured and systematic assessment system for making useful, manageable and accurate assessments of pupils and for tracking their purpose. Every parent and carer should know how their child is doing and how they can support the students and their teachers.

In conclusion it must be remembered that the teacher is by far the most important resource for all students; the most able and the slower learner. We owe respect to our teachers who are dedicated and committed and who are expected to be enthusiastic, inspirational, humble, purposeful, possess a sense of humour, be knowledgeable, challenging, flexible, imaginative and creative, forward looking, be prepared to be risk takers, facilitators and be responsive and interesting. The Latin proverb further depicts the demand on the teacher: “By learning you will teach, by teaching you will learn.”

We are constantly reminded of the Chinese proverb:

“Do not confine your children to your own learning for they were born in another time.”