

# **REDUCING THE EFFECTS OF ISOLATION ON STUDENT LEARNING**

## **A STUDY CONDUCTED DURING A PRINCIPAL'S SABBATICAL**

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### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the following for making my sabbatical possible:

- The South Westland Area School Board of Trustees for giving me leave and supporting my application
- The staff of South Westland Area School especially those senior members who took on extra responsibilities in my absence. It would have been very difficult to take leave without having the confidence that they would perform their extra tasks with a high level of skill and very successfully
- The Ministry of Education for providing sabbaticals for principals
- The area schools I have visited – Broadwood Area School, Te Kura Taumata o Panguru Area School, Taipa Area School, Tuatapere Community College and Catlins Area School. Also the Top of the South Area School Cluster.
- Misato Junior College in Tagasaki, Japan
- Reap Aotearoa Conference in the Far North
- Area School Conference in Invercargill

### **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Living in small rural communities can be a real challenge. This is more so when people (including senior students) may at some stage need the professional help of a guidance counsellor. Providing guidance for students at these rural schools can be a real challenge.

Progress has been made in Area Schools through the inclusion of a guidance allocation by the Ministry of Education GMFS. Guidance counsellors have traditionally been trained and registered teachers who have additional specialist qualifications in counselling. Finding these people to work in rural schools for a small teaching allocation eg .2 is nearly impossible.

Youth Affairs Minister Nanaia Mahutaa at the New Zealand Guidance Counsellors Conference in Hamilton said

“For some young people, guidance counsellors are one of the only positive links to the world,”

“Without them, our young people would have no other source of guidance and encouragement to make the all important choices regarding their future.”

## **2. PURPOSE**

The primary purpose of this research as originally intended was to investigate how rural area schools in New Zealand deal with Guidance for their students. The special focus was to be on:

- Where Guidance fits in to an Area School
- How students access guidance services
- What other schools do with their Base Guidance Teaching allocation
- How could ICT (video-conferencing) play a role in Guidance

## **3. BACKGROUND**

The guidance counsellor role is very complex, because a counsellor needs to build and maintain professional relationships with a wide range of people. They work with a number of key stake holders

- 1 Students – they give them an opportunity to explore difficulties and concerns and empower them to make informed decisions.
- 2 Working with the Principal
- 3 Working with Staff – sharing expertise to support all staff and generate support from staff for students
- 4 Working with families/whanau/caregivers
- 5 Working with outside agencies and community groups

While the above support is the ideal this does not happen in small schools at the time of need, because of lack of access to a counsellor. With only a few pupils on their roll they do not generate enough GMFS to warrant a full time counsellor in their school. What happens then when students need on-going help?

#### **4. ACTIVITIES UNDERTAKEN**

The main part of the research was to visit three area schools in the Far North and two area schools in Southland. I have also discussed this with the Top of the South Area School community of which I am a member. All of these schools are rural and mostly small ie below 200 students.

Most of my research was in New Zealand Area Schools. All were in rural areas with no more than 28 Full time staff. Access to counselling on an on-going basis was limited and urgent help all took time to organize.

My time at these schools was very informative and there were lots of other spin offs from visiting schools similar to my own.

The five NZ schools I visited were:

1. Broadwood Area School – A decile 1 school in the Far north. About ¾ hour drive from Kaitaia. Their roll is approximately 105. No qualified guidance teacher. Guidance is dealt with within the school and the Principal takes a lead role in this.
2. Panguru Area School – A decile 2 school in the Far North. Their roll is approximately 65. About 2 hrs drive from Kaitaia. No qualified guidance teacher. A guidance person is employed (a role model in the community) and takes a lead role advocating for the student and liaising with the parents/community
3. Taipa Area School – A decile 3 school in the Far North. Their roll is approximately 450. Half an hour's drive from Kaitaia. A qualified guidance person employed 2 days per week. On site there is an adolescent Health Centre (Nurse and Dr visits), RTLB, and an Alternative Education Centre
4. Tuatapere Community College – A decile school in Western Southland. Their roll is approximately 200. About an hour's drive from Invercargill. A qualified Guidance teacher is employed 1 day per week. Prior to this appointment there was an 18 month gap in finding one.
5. Catlins Area School – A decile 6 school in Eastern Southland. Their roll is approximately 160. About 1 ½ hour's drive from Dunedin. A qualified teacher is employed for 3 periods per week.

The seven schools in the TOSI Network (Rai, Murchison, Collingwood, Tapawera, Karamea, Reefton and South Westland are all very similar – no qualified on-site counsellor – one has access to paying for a counsellor to come in on a needs basis. The schools deal with issues within the school – most schools have a trained teacher who the students can work with. Outside agencies are used when a crisis occurs however the time lag is of concern.

Most of the schools use in-school programmes eg:

Peer Counselling

Restorative Justice Schools

Form/Whanau groups

Health classes

All of the schools use a number of outside agencies eg

Public Health Nurse

CYFS

Educational Psychologist

Group Special Education

Social Services for teenagers

Kimi Ora – Youth Mental Health

Camhs – Community Mental Health

Smashed and Stoned - 8 weeks programme

Homebuilders

Medical Centres

Chaplain

Family works

Rata te Awhina

## **5. FINDINGS**

My Information was found by visiting the schools and talking with their Principals and also meeting with the TOSI group at their Term 1 meeting in Nelson.

- 1. The smaller the Area School in student numbers, the less likely to have a trained Guidance Teacher on Staff.**

Staffing does not allow the luxury of employing a full time counsellor within the school staffing structure in small schools (U3 and below). Consequently the schools use a range of people to help the students and families, along with outside agencies. This can be satisfactory but issues arise when this person moves on and a replacement is needed.

**2. The further from the main centre (5000 people or more), the harder it is to find trained teachers with guidance qualifications**

Trained Guidance teachers do not seem to be available in isolated areas for part time work. If they are available, they are only in the schools one day a week. This makes it hard when issues arise when the Guidance is not at school. It is also a hard position to find a replacement when the Guidance counsellor moves on.

**3. The further from a main centre (5000 people or more), the harder it is to access agencies at short notice in times of crisis.**

Agencies are like most constrained within a budget and not always available immediately or available on the occasions when the school may need them in times of crisis or for regular on-going support

## **6. Recommendations**

**a. The Importance of Guidance being available for all students**

There are many issues for small remote schools and one of these is not being able to get professional help in times of crisis or with on-going issues for our students. We need to look further into having an on-line environment which would include professional development for these key people in our schools

**b. Professional Learning for all Teachers and especially guidance personnel**

There is an important need for our ‘guidance personnel’ (trained or untrained) to have adequate support and supervision of their work. They need to have professional development on issues facing our young students to be both able to help them and also recognize signs of serious issues. A group of guidance teachers could meet regularly to form a professional learning group.

### **c. Supervision**

Regular professional supervision with a supervisor is essential. This should be regular and on-going.

**d. Area School Association** to look into employing a guidance counsellor to be available on line through say the video conference delivery. This would be available for students, staff and parents on a needs basis. This could also cover the Professional Learning and Supervision as mentioned above.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

All of the Area schools that I have visited or talked to have all made a wonderful effort to help support their students within their schools. By forming small professional learning support groups (using VC gear or by some other mechanism) we can support these teachers to discuss issues, have available a supervision structure and also to arrange for other “Professionals” to have sessions in their area of expertise. If an on-line counsellor was available then this would ease the pressure on small rural schools. Teachers would benefit greatly from networking opportunities and to share professional practice. Our students today are facing all sorts of issues in their life and we need to be well-prepared in helping them through this stage in their lives irrespective of where they live and go to school in New Zealand. There also needs to be an organization like Reap (if available) who would be able to have an up-dated directory of outside agencies which a school would be able to access within their own districts.

Other events undertaken on my Sabbatical

Two days in a Japanese School – Yr 7 - 10

A session with Mike Sabbin – Methcon – Protecting People and Profits through Education

Pa Henare Tate – A journey (hikoi)

Sue Clark – adult literacy

Dr Michael Irwin – Boys issues

AGM CETA

Visiting Barbara Tane – James Hargest HS

Visiting William Tailby - Kaitaia College