

# Sabbatical Report

**Stephen Blair, Tokoroa North School, Term One 2017**

## **Professional Learning Activity:**

Educational equity, social justice and schooling in New Zealand. What do school leaders believe about equity and social justice? What are the innovative school systems and practices aimed at reducing the effects of economic deprivation on learning outcomes?

## **Purpose of the Sabbatical:**

To explore ways in which effective schools are successfully utilising and implementing strategies designed to improve learning outcomes for underprivileged students, especially priority groups of special needs learners and Maori students.

To engage school leaders on the nature of their understanding and approaches to equity and social justice.

To reflect on my personal philosophy and my school's approach to equitable outcomes and how this supports social justice outcomes.

This sabbatical will look at the following areas:

School philosophies and belief systems

The attitudes and beliefs of school leadership, particularly Principals

Special programmes

Use of particular personnel

Use of and access to technology

## **Programme Outline:**

My sabbatical programme was based around school visits. I included a range of schools from low socio-economic to those in affluent areas. This would likely give me the opportunity to identify and compare attitude variations between principals.

I visited and spent time in eight schools. Five of the schools were in Christchurch. I considered it possible that out of adversity may come innovation. An unexpected bonus arising out of the Christchurch area was the predominance and development of the "Modern Learning Environment" phenomenon, which has arisen out of the massive property redevelopments and school reorganisations following the earthquakes.

I am grateful to the time afforded me by the school principals and other members of their staff who were so generous and open when talking with me.

## **Summary of school visits**

### **Findings from my leadership enquiry questions:**

1. How do you, as a principal make sense of, or define, 'equity' and 'social justice'?

**General understanding:** It was interesting that nearly all principals interviewed expressed how difficult a question this was.

Five principals spontaneously used the following picture to illustrate their understanding of equity and two had it on their office walls.



All those interviewed had a very good understanding of the difference between equality and equity. The word “opportunity” was often referred to. It was clear that those in less advantaged schools associated equity with having a strong desire to ensure their children had access to programmes and experiences that enhanced their learning. This often included active searches for the funding and support required to pay for extra or enhanced programmes.

**The moral imperative:** It was clear from several principals that they saw the pursuit of equitable outcomes and social justice as a “moral imperative”. One principal described it as “doing the right thing”. It was clear that all regarded a strong vision as being very important. This vision centred on the success of the students in their school. Enhancing positive life outcomes for their students was seen as an important part of their role. One Principal was strongly influenced by the book: “Classroom to Prison Cell” by Alison Sutherland.

**Celebrating alternative / other knowledge:** Several principals saw it as crucial that their schools were able to define success and celebrate it outside the “National Standards straight jacket”. For instance, this included strong reporting in other areas that their children excelled at such as movement, art and dance. These alternative indicators of success were often culturally based. The celebration of “what you can do rather than focussing on what your deficits are” was crucial. This was seen as important for student self-belief and engagement. These leaders saw that narrow definitions of success were putting some learners at risk through the “self-fulfilling prophecy” effect. The ways in which we set goals for students and identify what can be improved on was seen as very important. “How can we define success for each of our students in a meaningful way?”

**Understanding their school community and learners:** This was identified as an important part of understanding equitable needs and how these can be addressed. Programmes which reached out to parents and actively listened to their needs were seen as an important part of the development of successful equity addressing programmes.

“What are your needs and are we addressing them in the best way?”

Another way of putting this was to use the box analogy in the picture above. “Is this box the one you need or is there another box we can provide to better support you?”

**Access to resources:** It was interesting to note that principals in the higher socio economic schools saw “equal access” to resources as important. This was illustrated through what some regard as an uneven ability for students with identified special needs to access resources.

**Finding your own solutions:** This was seen as very important by some Principals. It was seen as their job to develop the solutions to their issues rather than wait for MOE funded PLD or “someone else” to find the solution.

2. To what extent was equity and social justice a motivating factor in you becoming a principal / principal of this school?

Most principals saw themselves as always having a strong desire to promote equitable outcomes for all students and this had been a determining factor in their career choice. For some it also influenced where and what type of jobs they applied for in terms of school socio economic status.

It was interesting to talk to one principal who after spending the majority of his career in high socio-economic schools explaining that he didn’t fully understand equity until he became principal of a low socio-economic school. He believed that until you have had the experience and understanding of what many children and parents face in terms of poverty and the daily struggle it was unlikely that you would have a real understanding of equity. This was a strong motivator for him to become a Principal coupled with a strong desire to implement his own ideas.

3. What do you believe to be the important actions that you take as a leader concerned for equitable outcomes and social justice?

**Model and “walk the talk”:** Several Principals saw their ability to influence staff, board and parent beliefs in this area as crucial. They needed to be able to articulate their vision of equity and be strong advocates for children. This was then reflected in their actions and leadership behaviour. They needed to model strong equitable principles and ensure that sometimes the hard decisions were made in the interests of children.

It was important that every staff member could articulate what the school was trying to achieve and how this was going to be done. New ideas and actions in the school were seen through the “equity filter”. This was used as a touch stone which supported morally strong decision making.

One principal used the equity fence picture above to work with staff and to discuss what this meant for them as teachers and how they taught. The staff of this school also used the illustration with students when goal setting with them, thus providing important student voice in the solution finding process.

**Monitor and track:** It was seen as important to know your children and what is happening for them. School knowledge of children’s circumstances and needs needed to be accurate and timely. This required the school management to ensure school wide systems were in place for the identification and monitoring of children’s needs.

4. What factors help and hinder your commitment and work for equity and social justice in your school leadership activities?

**Community understanding:** Several Principals stated that community understanding of equity was sometimes not well understood. The belief that everyone should “get the same” was strong with some parents. Interesting that this seemed to be a concern in the higher socio-economic schools. One Principal described it as having to “work to overcome the redneck factor”.

**Board of Trustee understanding:** Overall Principals found boards supportive of actions which addressed equity outcomes. This was seen as crucial for the support of budgeting decisions and programme approval. One Principal mentioned that sometimes the insistence of Boards on “hard data” to justify programmes was difficult and not all programmes easily lent themselves to measureable assessment.

**Staff attitude:** Developing the shared vision was important. Principals found that staff who were unable to support the principle of equity usually moved on or needed to be moved on.

**Resourcing:** Everyone spoken to mentioned this. All Principals said they could do more with more resourcing and often the hardest part of their job was to prioritise need against the multiple calls made on school funding.

**Access to specialist help:** This was seen as part of the uneven provision of special education help and resourcing throughout the country. Geographic location often determined what access to specialist help was available and what highly specialised programmes such as Conductive Education were available. Schools in higher socio-economic areas often saw themselves as poorly resourced to address equity needs and that support agencies often overlooked them in favour of poorer schools.

**Obsession with standards based assessment:** This was seen as a problem and the feeling that programmes had to be justified with hard data usually linked to National Standard goals. It was felt that other forms of assessment needed to be developed and valued. An example of this was the Arts which schools were trying to encourage as part of the wider recognition of what constitutes “success” for students.

**Parent capability:** Principals mentioned that many of their parents lacked the capability or knowledge to support equitable outcomes for their children. Some displayed a mind-set of inevitability about the eventual education outcomes for their children. Others talked about the general stress households were under economically and socially which often made parent support difficult.

**Findings from my programme inquiry questions:**

I have summarised the programmes and approaches I observed on my visits which were of particular interest. These programmes were being implemented by schools with the intent of addressing equity issues. I grouped these into what I regarded as general approaches / programmes which were part of school wide life and those which were being implemented to target a specific need or group of learners.

(Programmes such as Reading Recovery, Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) etc. were observed but are well known so I have not included these)

## **General Programmes**

### **Strategic Planning**

One of the schools had a comprehensive Well Being Strategic Plan. This comprehensive plan included vision and values, school approach to well being, actions to be taken, behaviour expectations, links to resourcing, links to outside support agencies and programmes. It was excellent to see such a comprehensive approach to addressing equity issues sitting alongside and given equal status to other strategic planning documents.

### **ICT Provision and Integration- Digital Learning Initiative**

One school saw equitable provision of ICT access as crucial to enhancing the learning outcomes of the students. It had gone to extraordinary lengths to ensure every student had access to a device. This involved securing privately sourced funding. A well-developed ICT integration philosophy and staff development supported the implementation of this.

### **Sunshine Circles**

A programme led by teachers which uses playful, cooperative and nurturing activities to lead to enhanced social, emotional and cognitive development. The improvement of group dynamics and cooperative learning is an outcome. The belief enhanced student self-esteem will contribute to better engagement with learning underpins this programme.

### **Modern Learning Environments**

These featured strongly in those schools where property development had dictated a new approach to teaching. The idea that spaces and teachers could be used to target groups and individuals with specific learning needs featured strongly. I would sum tis up as being able to use “flexible differentiation” to achieve equitable outcomes. The success or otherwise of these spaces requires a high degree of cooperative behaviour from teachers as well as other systems which track and monitor students by the teaching team.

### **Feuerstein Method**

The Feuerstein Method teaches students the process behind thinking and learning and develops cognitive skills in an organized, structured way. This programme was being applied school wide. In terms of addressing equity issues the school believed that the thinking / learning skills taught to at risk learners would address their learning needs.

### **Student Management Systems**

The development of a student / parent / school shared learning system was seen as important for parent engagement and involvement in their children’s learning. It also enabled an enhanced ownership of learning goals by students. Parents were able to provide feedback to their children via a digital internet based programme. In two schools the “Linc-ed” programme was being used or developed for this purpose. It was completely replacing written reports and traditional interviews. In one school comprehensive parent education seminars were being run as part of the implementation of the system. I believe this would be critical to the success of the approach. These systems were generally being considered in high socio-economic schools where access to the internet by parents was not regarded as an issue.

### **Pastoral Care Committees**

Two schools had specific committees for the purpose of identifying, implementing and tracking students who were at risk of poor educational outcomes for economic, social and or emotional reasons. The committees met regularly to review interventions and evaluate need.

## **Targeted Programmes**

### **Counselling**

Several schools were employing counsellors from their own resourcing to support students with social and emotional learning needs. These needs were seen as likely impediments to the educational success of the students and thus specifically addressing equity issues. Reasons for referral to the

resource were varied. The resource was described by all Principals as being “oversubscribed” and thus requiring prioritisation.

### **Parent support community members**

This was an interesting, innovative initiative. The school has a trust set up and employs a small number of selected community members to support parents who are under pressure from personal or educational issues. It was described as “a bit like the old visiting teacher model”. The goal is to empower parents to solve their own problems. The visiting parents were engaged through direct parental contact or through a school referral.

### **Agility with Sound**

Agility with Sound is a programme designed to develop confident, capable readers. It has been designed for classroom teachers and literacy support staff.

The “integrated suite” is designed to tackle the various obstacles to reading comprehension by restoring confidence to struggling readers and giving them the tools they need to become competent, happy readers.

### **Quick 60**

Quick60 is a commercial programme which teaches the vital early literacy skills in a scaffolded systematic way. It is designed for those students starting school with few literacy skills and limited vocabularies.

### **Rainbow Reading**

Rainbow Reading is a commercial, audio-facilitated remedial reading programme with multiple series aimed at varying age groups, levelled for a student’s current reading ability. This programme was used in a number of schools and lent itself to facilitation by a support staff member.

### **Talk to Learn**

‘Talk to Learn’ is a practical oral language programme for use in junior classes. It was developed to provide teachers with an innovative tool to meet the needs of students beginning school with delayed oral language skills. It is closely linked with the New Zealand Primary Curriculum. Designed to be used with 5-8-year-old students with identified language delays, the programme was observed in several schools. The activities can be used in a small group situation of approximately five students with one teacher or support person.

## **Summary:**

Achieving equity and excellence of education outcomes for all New Zealand’s children is a major challenge for our education system and a priority for the government, MOE and ERO.

This sabbatical has enabled me to:

- Evaluate self-review practices within my own school.
- Evaluate present school approaches to ensuring priority learning groups are having their needs met in the best possible way.
- Identify possible new areas for school development and programme implementation.
- Given me the opportunity to provide leadership and guidance to my senior management team to improve the professional learning in our school.
- Enhanced my ability as a senior Principal to advise and help new colleagues and those who contact me for support.

The time on sabbatical has given me the opportunity to recharge my batteries, reflect on my practice and visit leading educational institutions.

I would like to thank:

1. My Board of Trustees for approving this opportunity
2. My staff who have willingly and successfully acted in higher positions in my absence.
3. The Principals and school staff who have so willingly accommodated my visits and given freely of their time and knowledge.

Stephen Blair, April 2017