

2018 Sabbatical Report

Collaborative learning environments where students in all year levels are empowered through creative learning opportunities

Jane Lindsay
Paihia School

Term Three 2018

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the Ministry of Education, New Zealand School Trustees Association (NZSTA) and New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) for the provision of sabbatical time and awarding it to me. Thank you.

I would like to acknowledge the Paihia School Board of Trustees for allowing me to take this sabbatical. I am very grateful for your support.

I would also like to acknowledge Chrissy Smith, Paihia School Deputy Principal who stepped up and did an outstanding job of Acting Principal in my absence. Our school was in good hands.

The staff of Paihia School are to be acknowledged for your acceptance and support of my sabbatical. As a result of what I have seen and learnt I am enormously proud of you and the professional work you are doing in our school. You are great to be working with and I am looking forward to continuing to make a difference for our students together.

The principals, staff and students of the schools that I visited are to be acknowledged with gratitude. I was made to feel so welcome despite your busy working day. I thoroughly enjoyed talking to students across the country and seeing the great work being done by leaders and teachers.

Background information

I have been a Principal for ten years and the last four have been at Paihia School which is a Decile 4 school with approximately 200 students, of whom 60% are Maori, 30% are New Zealand European and the rest from all over the world.

We belong to a network of schools who have been working together for many years with an achievement challenge of 'learning together is empowering'. Through this network we have become part of Manaiakalani Outreach who have a cybersmart curriculum and a learn, create, share pedagogy.

Paihia School has been through considerable change. Three years ago we introduced 1:1 digital devices in all classes from Years 4 - 8. Last year we opened up innovative open-learning environments with modern furniture. Students now have more time and choice in what they learn, when, where and with whom. Student voice is clear that they like ownership of their learning. Teachers are enjoying collaborative teaching opportunities.

Our student achievement data is beginning to show signs of improved progress (it certainly needed to!) however it is clear we still have work to do, especially for our boys.

Additionally, in our unrelenting focus over the past few years on reading, writing and maths we had lost sight of creativity and learning through play. I wanted to find out if there was more we could be doing to empower our students in their learning in a creative way, especially for our boys.

Executive Summary

The focus of this report is on what it means to be an empowered learner. It explores collaborative learning environments where students have self directed learning opportunities by doing something creatively or differently.

Purpose

The purpose is to learn more about creative learning or learning through play across all year levels so we can improve the learning opportunities for our students. It is also to reflect on where we are going as a school and examine how we could do things better to accelerate student achievement through allowing more creativity.

Rationale

Our students achievement data measured against the National Standards in reading, writing and maths was between 60% and 65% for the first three years that I had been at Paihia School. This was well below our target and national expectation. At that time, our Maori students (60% of our student population), both boys and girls, were over represented in the below and well below groups. Low achievement was distributed across the school although, in particular, the majority of our senior students were well below expectation. We have felt a great sense of urgency around data (reading, writing and maths) and at the end of last year we began to see some promising results.

We attribute recent improved results to the engagement through digital devices, plus self directed and collaborative learning opportunities. We also attribute it to the collaborative teaching environments and teachers being able to exercise their strengths. Teachers made optimum use of teacher aides for front loading and learning reinforcement.

We are making a difference to student achievement but have become rather one dimensional in our delivery so we need to do something differently to allow our students to reach the potential we believe they have.

Methodology

I undertook a range of activities in order to get a wide perspective. I visited many schools from Northland down to Christchurch and the West Coast. I spoke with Principals, and teachers. I spent time in many classrooms and spoke to lots of students from Year 1 - Year 8.

Additionally I read books like 'Learning in the Fast Lane' by Suzy Pepper Rollins as well as numerous online articles through Ministry of Education, blogs and discussion groups. I watched videos and read online resources available on websites such as Education Central, Enabling E-Learning, and Ed Talks. I revisited work by Michael Fullan, Mark Treadwell and Sir Ken Robinson.

I also spent time thoroughly reading information about the Manaiakalani learn, create, share pedagogy to gain a more thorough and clear understanding.

Furthermore, I spent time reflecting on what we are already doing at Paihia School, together with what I have seen, read and learnt. I have evaluated future implications for Paihia School in order to further improve creative learning opportunities for our students.

Findings

I believe the definition for creativity is to combine existing knowledge with original ideas in different and imaginative ways to create a new outcome. In order for creativity to occur there needs to be opportunity to explore and moments for discovery. It may also need structure and support to reach the desired outcome, potential and possibilities.

It is timely to be reminded how essential it is that creativity be integrated into teaching and learning in all New Zealand schools. Included in the values of the New Zealand Curriculum is the statement, 'Students will be encouraged to value innovation, inquiry, and curiosity, by thinking critically, creatively, and reflectively.' Furthermore, the New Zealand Curriculum vision statement refers to 'young people who will be creative, energetic, and enterprising.' This is the document that education in New Zealand is based on so needs to be acknowledged in its entirety.

Further to this, the NZ Ministry of Education has introduced a new Digital Technologies curriculum, aiming to get students beyond just using or consuming digital products. In this new curriculum two strands, called Designing and Developing Digital Outcomes and Computational Thinking, focus on understanding how digital devices and systems work so that students can participate in creating digital products. It provides a focus on students building their skills so they can be innovative creators of digital solutions instead of just being users and consumers of digital technologies. This is applicable to students in all year levels. Rightfully so.

One way I can see this being achieved is through STEAM - Science, Technology, Engineering, Art and Maths. This has been around for a while but has not been something I had considered until now. According to the Ministry of Education, students who participate in STEAM learning:

- think outside the box
- feel safe to express innovative and creative ideas
- feel comfortable doing hands-on learning
- take ownership of their learning
- work collaboratively with others
- understand the ways that science, maths, the arts, and technology work together
- become increasingly curious about the world around them and feel empowered to change it for the better.

Surely, this is a way forward to provide hands on, creative opportunities for students in all year levels, using digital devices in a balanced way.

This all fits perfectly with the well researched learn, create, share pedagogy of Manaiakalani. In Manaiakalani schools all students have 1:1 devices and are creating all the time. I pads for juniors and Chromebooks for seniors - owned by the students. Their belief about creativity is in line with Sir Ken Robinson and totally flips the viewpoint about learning through creativity.

Dorothy Burt states, 'We talk about creativity being an element of the Manaiakalani pedagogy, a component of the learning cycle. And often this is where it sits; Learning activities occur, the learner creates something to demonstrate this learning (process, activity, knowledge building etc) and then shares it with a wider audience... We believe, and our researchers concur, that significant learning and cognitive engagement occurs when our young people 'Create to Learn'. They begin with creativity and the learning emerges from there. Sir Ken Robinson uses the example of his hometown band, the Beatles, and his belief that when they first started out they only knew three chords and their musical knowledge and learning exploded as they were involved in the creative process.' Now, that is thinking creatively about creative learning. This pedagogy is the means for implementing the above.

There was a wide range of teacher practice and learning environments across the schools that I visited. Some schools had embraced open learning environments and collaborative teaching while others remain single cell with teacher directed learning. I believe it is possible for creative opportunities to occur in any sort of learning environment, especially if student numbers are low, however in larger classes it is more easily achieved when there is more than one adult in the room. A balanced programme with deliberate acts of teaching can be taking place while the other teacher can be targeting students who are engaged in meaningful play activities, prompting discussion and questioning that encompasses a wide range of competencies. These interactions lead to motivation for writing, real life reference to numeracy skills as well as other curriculum areas.

Of interest to me was a learning through play environment I saw in one school where a specific range of activities that students could do was deliberately provided, as opposed to just a range of resources on offer. This was replicated in each class where play occurred. These specifically included digital, inquiry (science), tactile, creative, maths, social, of specific student interest, artistic, fine motor skills, etc. This added depth to the creative learning environment in a meaningful way and catered for all students' learning styles.

Playing can provide huge opportunity for creativity at its best. Stephanie Menzies enters a plea to bring play back into the classroom. I agree with her statement, 'We all know that play contributes positively to a child's sense of well-being. It enhances a child's natural capacity for intense and self-motivated learning. It helps build creative and critical thinkers, and lets children test social boundaries. Play produces curiosity, openness, optimism, resilience and concentration. It enhances a child's memory skills, develops their language skills, helps regulate their behaviour, advances their social skills and encourages academic learning to take place.'

I saw a range of students engaged in play activities. What was interesting was that this predominantly occurred in junior classes. I did not see this occurring beyond Year Four. It seems to me that the benefits of playing (therefore creating) are equally applicable to our senior students.

What I did see was senior students using digital devices to create objects and share their learning. I would suggest that in some cases the introduction of digital devices has resulted in creativity being centred around what can be done on or by the device as opposed to considering other means of teaching or learning. How do we cater for all learning styles, especially kinesthetic, if we do not provide students with the resources and chances for learning with materials? I am seeing less outside the classroom learning and less hands-on creative opportunities, for example hands on Science experiments, proper Physical Education lessons being regularly taught, etc. I am totally committed to equipping students for their future but quality education is about achieving a balance. Balance for our senior students to be creative in lots of ways and balance so our juniors have access to digital tools to support learning.

In Lifelong Kindergarten, learning expert Mitchel Resnick argues all levels of school should be more like kindergarten. He believes to thrive in today's fast-changing world, people of all ages must learn to think and act creatively—and the best way to do that is by focusing more on imagining, creating, playing, sharing, and reflecting, just as children do in traditional kindergartens.

I agree, however we may need to consider not only teaching with creativity but also for creativity. As I mentioned in my definition of creativity there may be the need for direction and support in order to allow students to maximise their creative potential. I believe this as I have seen many students who do not have the social and emotional skills to play alongside others. This applies to students of all ages. Support needs to be provided to ensure students know what to do and how to do it, how to deal with skills like sharing, collaborating, taking turns, respect others, winning or losing. This is where positive behaviour for learning strategies could be beneficial. Scaffolding within creative opportunities may be appropriate to support the development of individual student needs.

One way to support students when being creative and learning through play is having a learning focus on how to manage themselves as opposed to the creative play activity. I saw this in action in one of the schools I visited. Each creative learning station had a specific learning intention displayed. Students were able to tell me what they were focussing on. Two such examples were: 'To listen to others, use kind words and show positive body language' and 'To do my best to be a kind person, help others and do random acts of kindness.' I think there is merit in making the skills and strategies for meaningful play and being creative together explicit to students of all ages.

Not only do we need to provide safe opportunities for creativity, and teach students skills in order to allow them to be engage in creative activities with others, but also how to think creatively. After forty years of research and experience as educators Peter and Ellen Jarratt claim that 'creative thinking leads to deeper student engagement. And when students are more engaged, they take more ownership of their learning. Creative skills help students become better problem solvers, communicators and collaborators. They explore more and experiment more. They tell richer stories and find their own unique voices. They stretch their imaginations and make connections they might not otherwise

make — and they carry these skills through everything they do in school. And beyond.’ Once again, good reason to provide such opportunities across all year levels. This also caused me to reflect on the skills and learning opportunities I had as a student - my story.

I think back to when I was at school. I remember the rote learning and teacher directed teaching without meaningful feedback. However, I also vividly remember lots of class trips, doing pottery, screen printing onto vinyl, dancing, gymnastics, making my own piupiu and weaving a tapestry bodice, etc. These things are certainly all taught today in schools but I believe the curriculum has become crowded and teachers have lost sight of creativity (through no fault of their own) in the pursuit of meeting national expectations in reading, writing and maths. We need to strike a balance - not losing sight of the sorts of things we used to do while embracing the new. Perhaps this is best summed up by Michael Fullan, ‘It is in creating that the individual finds purpose.’ I would suggest that this applies to not only students but teachers and leaders too.

Implications

Play that is focussed on learning, caters for all learning styles and where the teacher interaction with students is deliberate are the best ways to provide opportunity for empowered creativity. This could be occurring in all year levels.

Providing opportunities for creativity may need scaffolding for those students who struggle with managing themselves and consideration needs to be given to teaching for creativity.

Learn, create, share pedagogy is a proven pedagogy where the create aspect is to learn, not the end result of learning.

At Paihia School it would be beneficial to develop a more robust understanding of what it means to learn, create, share in all areas across the school. STEM and play based learning would benefit all students. PB4L needs to be further implemented and embedded in a systematic, school wide manner so students who struggle with managing themselves can develop skills and strategies to engage in their learning with others. Before 2020 we must implement the new Digital Curriculum in terms of the computational thinking and not just being consumers of devices and apps, but developers. These things do not indicate massive change, just some ‘polishing of the taonga’ that our school is and our staff are.

Conclusions

I have learned a lot about my own understanding of what empowered creativity means as well as having a clearer view of teaching and learning with creativity and for creativity. The final word however, must go to Ken Robinson who aptly states, ‘Part of the adventure here is not just developing creativity in kids but thinking about school in a different way.’

More fun times ahead.

References

Burt, D. (2015). *Manaiakalani - Learn, Create, Share*. <http://www.manaiakalani.org/our-story/learn-create-share>

Enabling e-Learning (2018). Retrieved from Te Kete Ipurangi, [http://elearning.tki.org.nz/Digital Technologies and the National Curriculum](http://elearning.tki.org.nz/Digital%20Technologies%20and%20the%20National%20Curriculum)

Hipkins, Hon. C. (2017). New Zealand Government retrieved from [https://www.beehive.govt.nz/New digital technologies for schools and kura](https://www.beehive.govt.nz/New%20digital%20technologies%20for%20schools%20and%20kura)

Menzies, S. (2015) *Education Central*
[Play based learning: producing critical, creative and innovative thinkers](#)

Menzies, S. (2017) *Education Central*
[Feeding the imagination: tapping into inherent creativity](#)

New Pedagogies for Deep Learning (2018) New Pedagogies for Deep learning: A Global Partnership
<http://npdl.global/>

Pepper-Rollins, S. (2014). *Learning in the Fast Lane*, Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.

Petrie, C. (2018). Creative thinking and the new Digital Technologies Curriculum, *Ipu Kererū - New Zealand Association for Research in Education, University of Canterbury, NZ*. <https://nzareblog.wordpress.com/>

Robinson, Sir Ken. (2011). 'Changing the Paradigm', RSA Animate.
<https://vimeo.com/29485820>

STEAM (2014). Te Kete Ipurangi, Ministry of Education.
<http://elearning.tki.org.nz/Teaching/Future-focused-learning/STEAM>

STEAM Education (2015) <https://steamedu.com/developing-steam-education-to-improve-students-innovative-ability/>

Tovey, G. (2016). The HeART of the matter, *NZ International Film Festival*.
[you Tube clip](#)

What is STEAM (2018). [Education Closet](#)
[What is STEAM?](#)

Why Creativity matters. (2018), *Apple Inc*.
<https://www.apple.com/nz/education/everyone-can-create/>