

SELWYN PRIMARY SCHOOL

Te Puna o Nga Tumanako (The Spring of Hope)



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Principal Sabbatical Inquiry: Term 3 2018

Investigate best practice play-based learning initiatives. Develop an action plan to improve the evaluative capability of the school to lift student achievement of all learners and meet the developmental needs of the students.

My appreciation goes to:

- The Selwyn School Board of Trustees, for supporting my sabbatical application and the resourcing it provided.
- The Ministry of Education for granting me this opportunity.
- The Selwyn School Deputy Principals, for so willingly and capably stepping in the role of role of Acting Principal and embracing the professional growth opportunities.
- Other staff at Selwyn school who stepped up.
- The Principals, Deputy Principals and associated professionals that hosted me in their schools in Northern Ireland, England and Wales.
- My own family for their support, encouragement, faith and confidence.

NB: this inquiry is based solely within the unique context of teaching and learning at Selwyn School

“A leader takes people where they want to go, a great leader takes people where they initially don’t want to go, but ought to be.”

Rosalynn Carter, Former First Lady of the United States.

PART 1: SETTING THE SCENE

PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

The **aim** of this inquiry is to investigate Play Based Learning (Learning Through Play - LTP) and to develop and understanding of best practice, inclusive of evaluative capability.

This study focus is grounded in the context of Selwyn School which is a decile 2e, dual medium school located in urban Rotorua. 83% of students identify as Maori and the community is now highly transient in nature.

Historical analysis of School Entry Assessment, National Standards and Nga Whanaketanga Rumaki Maori data showed that in their first year of school, our 5 year old students were not doing as well academically or socially as we would like. 2016 saw LTP introduced in the English medium New Entrant area. This resulted in students social/relational skills advancing satisfactorily but the same could not be said about progress or achievement in the core curriculum areas.

What also became clear was the need to strengthen evaluative processes around not only LTP, but also in core curriculum areas. As time has gone on its has become understandable as to why the Education Review Office questioned our approach during their visit in August of 2017.

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS:

- This inquiry is based within the context of Selwyn and its uniqueness
- Data supports the need for shifts

NEW ZEALAND PRIMARY SCHOOL SECTOR - TURBULENT TIMES

At the time of undertaking this inquiry, the primary sector has been facing its most turbulent time in many years:

- Teachers on strike in pursuit of better pay and conditions.
- Record numbers leaving the profession.
- An aging teacher population.
- Low rates of entry to teacher training programmes.
- Desperate teacher shortage.
- High numbers of students entering school with high levels of learning and/or behavioural needs, creating stress for teachers and principals.

NEW ZEALAND EDUCATION, LTP AND THE 'PLANNING PARADOX'

Following the abolition of National Standards/Nga Whanaketanga Benchmarks post the 2017 election, it is suggested that the broader scope and potential of the NZ Curriculum would now be fully harnessed. However, the expectation that 85% of students achieve NCEA 2 Level as a minimum upon leaving school, is still being heard from the powers that be. This filters through and is evidenced by the focus on core curriculum achievement evident in ERO school based reports. Not only do the Ministry of Education and its various branches focus on these as measures of success, but so does society as a whole. Understandable to a degree, as what is the purpose of a school?

At Selwyn School, the whanau want their tamariki to be happy and settled in school and to be achieving. Many students levels of achievement in core curriculum are at low levels on entry. The game of catch up is being played from the get go.

It is accepted and understood that play can facilitate learning so there is a desire to incorporate play like freedom into more formal school based learning, even for older pupils. However, such a strategy transfers control over what is learned from the teacher to the student. This is unsatisfactory if the teacher has an agenda in which certain specific knowledge should be assimilated (Ainley et al 2006: 3). That 'agenda' is the impact of the high stakes testing kaupapa and is what is referred to as the planning paradox in this context.

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS:

- *Societal expectation exists that students will achieve in the core curriculum areas*
- *A conflict exists between the notion of play and core curriculum outcomes for students entering school with low levels of achievement – the planning paradox*

THE PLANNING PARADOX AND HIGH STAKES TESTING IN THE UK

Time spent in low decile schools in Northern Ireland, England and Wales showed that all schools except one had, until as recently as 2015, engaged in LTP as we have at Selwyn School - responding to the urges of our students. All had made changes due to the unsatisfactory levels of student achievement in core curriculum areas during that time. OFSTEAD and Estyn, organisations tasked with a similar brief to that of ERO, had made reference in a number of school review reports about the play provision and the impact it had on student achievement in the core curriculum areas.

Staff in schools visited subscribed to the following as key drivers of their practice:

- Students need to be achieving in the core curriculum (as well as other areas).
- LTP is planned for, assessed, evaluated, and resourced.
- The role of the teacher and teacher aides needs to be defined – questioning to extend thinking and developing oral language capability
- That longer periods of time were not needed for core curriculum teaching and learning, Instead pedagogical and practice focus and clarity were essential.
- High expectations of students, particularly in the area of self-management were crucial for learning,

- Classroom environments need to be ordered and free of clutter, mess, unnecessary items, including toys that weren't part of LTP.

HIGH STAKES TESTING AND THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

What hasn't changed in New Zealand

- The focus on 85% of students achieving NCEA Level 2.
- Benchmarks for achievement and at specific year levels within the New Zealand Curriculum.
- Students are expected to be progressing and achieving in their first year at school.

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS:

- Selwyn School is not based in the UK.
- We will not adopt and replicate exactly what is being done in the schools visited in the UK or the direction of The Curriculum of England and Wales.
- We have the 'high stakes testing' kaupapa in common.
- We can work smarter by bringing play into, or altering what play looks involves in core curriculum learning sessions.

PART 2: TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

LTP PRINCIPLES

Briggs and Hansen (2012) proposed key principles to extend learning in children and centres around the child as an autonomous learner:

- Learning is related to choice.
- Through choice comes responsibility if coupled with structure.
- To make choices, students need a number of skills including, but not limited to: co-operative, reflective and oral/verbal.

Bennett (1997:121) concluded that:

- Play experiences do not automatically develop skills in children.
- Play allows children to develop skills if the context has been provided by the teacher.
- Time, space, stimulating resources and initial questions are required to begin the learning process.

These findings and thoughts are, to a degree, in conflict with the 'Longworth model' and the views of the likes of Nathan Wallis. However what needs to be considered is:

- The prevalence of the high stakes testing model.
- Students entering school with low levels of achievement in core curriculum areas.

- Students making unsatisfactory progress in core curriculum in their first year at school when in a LTP environment.

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS:

- *Learning is enhanced by choice.*
- *Learning is enhanced by teacher action and structure.*
- *A degree of conflict exists between the opposing LTP theories and approaches.*

PLAY AS WE KNOW IT AT SELWYN SCHOOL

The approach to play at Selwyn School has been consistent with that of Longworth Education:

- When engaged in authentic play, children are more likely to develop higher order cognitive and socio-emotional skills than if exposed to direct teaching and adult-structured learning opportunities.
- Curiosity motivates children to seek new knowledge, playfulness allows them to practice new skills and use them creatively through meaningful conversation.
- To be able to do this, children require the freedom to engage in authentic play.
- Self-chosen and self-directed.
- Process rather than product driven.
- Contains structures or rules established by the players themselves (Gray, 2013; Brewer, 2007).
- Imaginative, non-literal and removed from reality (Gray, 2013; Brewer, 2007).
- Occurs between those who are active, alert and non-stressed (Gray, 2013; Brewer, 2007).

As students spent periods of time engaged in play as described and given the low achievement levels and the high stakes testing environment, this poses three **serious** questions:

- What does that mean for the students achievement in core curriculum?
- Can our students afford the time away from core curriculum learning?
- Would Selwyn School be brave or stupid to ignore the planning paradox and what the data is telling us with the hope that around the age of 7 years achievement accelerates even if this is in direct contrast to the New Zealand Curriculum?

KEY UNDERSTANDING:

- ***Can the obvious benefits of LTP be balanced with the need for accelerated achievement in the core curriculum for Selwyn School students?***

PART 3: BEST PRACTICE – DRAWING A LINE IN THE SAND

QUALITY TEACHING

LTP will not raise achievement on its own – quality teaching practices are essential. Quality teaching is defined as 'pedagogical practices that facilitate for heterogeneous groups of students their access to information, and ability to engage in classroom activities and tasks in ways that facilitate learning related to curriculum goals' (Alton-Lee p1 2003).

Professor John Hattie's research suggests that the teacher has a significant impact on learning outcomes – 30%. Second only to the students themselves at 49%.

When examining Hattie's effect sizes, there are a number of teacher related actions, that when actioned effectively that impact positively on student achievement.

- Feedback, including remediation
- Quality instruction – direct
- Class environment
- Challenge of goals

Professor Pam Sammons research presented in 2016 highlighted a number of characteristics of exemplary practice, consistent with that of Hattie:

- Relationships: learning centred - *students achieved best in classrooms where the teacher related well to them as individuals and valued their cultural identity* (Bishop – Te Kotahitanga).
- High expectations: high but realistic expectations conveyed for all their students (Bishop – Te Kohtahitanga)
 - *Teachers believed that what they did made a difference.*
 - *Practice bereft of deficit thinking such as lack of achievement attributed to students' background or constraints imposed by "the school system."*
- Pedagogy and practice: a dynamic relationship between their assessment of students' learning and the planning and implementation of the learning steps.
 - variety of assessment techniques
 - feedback and feed forward
 - student agency
 - dynamic instruction
 - reflection and inquiry
 - sense of urgency

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS:

Drivers of student learning include, but are not limited to:

- Quality teaching - pedagogy and practice
- High expectations – actions and belief
- Learning Centred Relationships – student and teacher (not excluding student/student and teacher/whanau)
- Sense of urgency

LTP DEFINITIONS

Term	Action	Benefits (some)
Free time	*students choose *teachers rove and manage	*student freedom *teachers can see and respond to student urges
Continuous Play 'Play Zones'	*teachers plan, assess, evaluate and review/reflect *teachers provide play choices wtlanent learning zones *zone remains but choices within the zone change *students choose from play choices that relate to the core/supporting curriculum, localised curriculum/graduate learner profiles *teachers rove, question and discuss *can be closed as an option during core curriculum time *teachers respond to the urges of students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● by observing the nature of play within the zones ● adjusting/planning play opportunities within the zone to reflect the urges of the students 	*emphasises the need for students to self-manage *students have an element of choice *every moment is valued as a planned and deliberate learning opportunity *eliminates the notion of 'finish quickly so I can play with the blocks' mindset in students
Curriculum Play	*teachers plan, assess, evaluate and review/reflect *teachers provide play choices within the class in addition to the permanent zones *teachers rove, question and discuss if/when not in the instructional phase *choices relate to the current core curriculum foci *can be closed/.unavailable during Continuous Play *teachers respond to the urges of students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● by observing the nature of play within the zones ● adjusting/planning play opportunities within the zone to reflect the urges of the students 	

EVALUATIVE CAPABILITY

Internal evaluation is undertaken to assess what is and is not working, and for whom, and then to determine what changes are needed (ERO 2016:3)

Internal evaluation requires those involved to engage in deliberate, systematic processes and reasoning, with improved outcomes for all learners as the ultimate aim. Those involved collaborate to:

- Investigate and scrutinise practice.
- Analyse data and use it to identify priorities for improvement.
- Monitor implementation of improvement actions and evaluate their impact.
- Generate timely information about progress towards goals and the impact of actions taken.

This encompasses:

- First Year At School Strategy: initiative approach evaluation – big picture.
- Teacher Planning: Core Curriculum, Supporting Curriculum, LTP.
- Assessment: Core Curriculum, Supporting Curriculum, LTP: individual student.
- Data: collation, analysis/inquiry:
 - Cohort tracking
 - Programme reflection/conclusions/shifts

The LTP 'big picture' evaluation will be undertaken based on the framework as published in **Internal Evaluation: Good Practice** (ERO November 2015)

<p>1) Noticings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What is happening here? ● Is this what we expected? ● Should we be concerned? ● Do we need to take a closer look? ● What is the problem or issue here? 	<p>2) Investigating and collaborative sense making</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What does good practice look like? ● What do we already know about this? ● What do we need to find out? ● How might we do this? ● What is our data telling us? ● What insights does the data provide? Is this good enough? ● What might we need to explore further?
<p>3) Prioritising to take action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● What do we need to do and why? ● What could we do that would help us to improve outcomes for all learners? ● What support do we need to do this? ● What resources do we need? ● How big is the change we are planning? ● How do we approach it in a way that is manageable for leaders and teachers? ● What are our next steps? ● What strengths do we have to draw on? 	<p>4) Monitoring and evaluating impact</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● How are we doing? ● What evidence do we have of improvement/progress? Is this good enough? ● Do we need to adjust what we are doing? ● What are we learning here? ● Can we use this learning in other places? ● What is happening as a result of our improvement actions?

FIRST YEAR AT SCHOOL STRATEGY

Preamble: Rather than limiting and therefore narrowing this kaupapa to LTP, it is in fact a strategy or approach to learning in the first year at school - *First Year At School Strategy*

Positioning

- We are operating in a culture of high stakes testing.
- Core curriculum outcomes are important (along with other areas as set out in our Marau, Strategic and Annual Plan).
- Quality teaching is a key element of student achievement.
- We remain committed to our localised curriculum and achieving balance between core and supporting curriculum.

PART 4: ACTION PLAN

NB: initiatives as a result of the TAI undertaken by myself as part of my sabbatical will need to be considerate of the Te Koru Tahī/First Year at School Strategy internal evaluation and self review

Staff welfare <i>NB: difficult current 'political'</i>	Support staff Staff shown they are valued	BoT Principal DP/AP/leaders	Schoolwide strategy	Ongoing
Staff NE/Y1	Staffing - teachers	Principal (consult/consensus where possible)	Placement of staff	ASAP
	Staffing - TAs	Principal/BoT	Resource TAs	ASAP
Quality Teaching	PLD - formal	Principal, DP/AP, leaders, teachers *consult/decisions by consensus where possible **Principal to approve	Ongoing	Ongoing
	PLD - self directed			
	TAI			
	Leadership support/guidance			
Creating time/space				
LTP definitions as prescribed	Staff understanding & implications clear	DP/AP, leaders, teachers, TAs	Open forum: opportunity for staff to gain clarity	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
Free time definition as prescribed *2019 PRINCIPAL INQUIRY	Elimination of free time from the programme as a 'regular go to'	All staff associated with NE-Y2	Open forum: opportunity for staff to gain clarity *2019 PRINCIPAL INQUIRY	Term 4 2018 and into 2019

Continuous Play	Develop an understand of the kaupapa – what where, when, how, why	All staff associated with NE-Y2	Share Inquiry Share resources Think tank & PLD	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
Curriculum Play	Develop an understand of the kaupapa – what where, when, how, why	All staff associated with NE-Y2	Share Inquiry Share resources Think tank & PLD	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
Timetable	Review and adjust NE and possibly Y1/2 if needed	Principal, DP/AP, LTPLG Teachers **consult/decisions by consensus where possible **Principal to approve	Discuss and plan	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
Classroom Environments	Refocus on policy with particular focus on decluttering and tidiness	All staff associated with NE-Y2	Discuss and decide – ‘how can we make this happen?’	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
	Managing the environment – student self-managing /staff role		Discuss and decide on expectations/strategies	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
	Classrooms to be free of all toys not associated with PC/EC		Open forum: opportunity for staff to gain clarity	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
Role of the teacher (and TA)	Define	All staff associated with NE-Y2	What do we know already from our LTP experiences?	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
	PLD	TBC	Attend	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
Planning	Rationalise T3 schoolwide review	Principal, DP/AP, LTPLG Teachers **consult/decisions by consensus where possible **Principal to approve	Discuss and plan	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
	Adjust expectations			
	Adjust formats			
Assessment	Review Data Strategy and adjust (Core Cm)	Principal, DP/AP, LTPLG Teachers **consult/decisions by consensus where possible **Principal to approve	Alter SWAF	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
	Establish LTP processes	**consult/decisions by consensus where possible **Principal to approve	Include in SWAF	Term 4 2018 and into 2019
Reporting	Review and refine student reporting if needed			Term 4 2018 and into 2019
ECEs	Further enhance relationship with ECEs / increase profile	TBC		T1 2019
Information/ promotion	Review school brochure and refine if needed	Principal, DP, PLGLT		T1 2019
	Develop NE Brochure	Principal, DP, PLGLT, teachers		T1 2019 (T4 2018 POSSIBLE)
	Develop NE info pack	Principal, DP, PLGLT, teachers		T1 2019 (T4 2018 POSSIBLE)
	Develop NE Whanau Info Board	Principal, DP, PLGLT, teachers		T1 2019 (T4 2018 POSSIBLE)