

Sabbatical Report

*How we engage our
Senior College students in
our Christian special
character*

Graeme Whitehead

Area School Principal's Sabbatical, Term Two, 2019

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

Introduction

Focus Question

Methodology

Summary

My Findings

References

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Excellere College Board of Trustees for their support of my sabbatical. I would like to acknowledge the Ministry of Education through TeachNZ and NZEI/PPTA for this opportunity. I would like to thank Nicole Grammer, for leading our school in my absence, and those staff that took on extra responsibilities. I would like to thank all the staff, and students, of the schools I visited for their willingness to share, and celebrate, their school culture and stories. The hospitality I received was outstanding and an example of God's Kingdom on earth. Finally, I would like to thank my wife and family for their support as I was a 'house dad' for a term.

Introduction

This report is the outcome of an Area Schools' Principal's sabbatical taken Term Two, 2019. I have been Principal at Excellere College for six years and we have experienced change and growth during this time. As a school we want to develop the foundational character of our students as a priority, and as our fallen world continues to change at a rapid rate we, as educators, must constantly reflect on how we can best guide our students to contribute and lead their own futures. As a Christian school we have the responsibility of providing an excellent education within a Christian environment. The challenge of balancing both expectations has led to this research into how other schools are pursuing this goal.

Focus Question

How we can continue to positively engage our senior students with our Christian special character, alongside their focus on NCEA academic success.

Summary

It became obvious during my visits to schools that in spite of the different contexts it was the Christian culture of the school, and positive, caring relationships, that had the biggest influence on student engagement. Schools had their own specific strategies for engagement, many common across schools. Evaluation of our success in this area was a question that needs to be further examined, as schools varied greatly in their capacity to provide evidence and articulate this success. A common thread through the schools was the place of some form of Christian Living programme from Year 1 to Year 13. This was broader than NCEA Biblical Studies and provided opportunities for robust korero around relevant issues they were facing, or were evident in wider society. The courage to address theological and controversial issues was positive aspect in the senior school.

Across New Zealand our Christian schools are doing a great job at educating our youth for their place in God's Kingdom. Without exception the students I meet and talked to were articulate, confident, polite, and peaceful souls. They loved their school and the safe environment it provided for learning and personal growth. Many displayed a servant heart and this was an aspect of their proposed journey after leaving school, whether at tertiary level, in the workforce, gap years, or the Mission field. The consistent messaging on their journey through the school was an important aspect of their character development.

Methodology

As an initial introduction to this topic I undertook some specific professional reading. I decided to focus on previous Principal sabbatical reports with a focus on student engagement.

Findings from these reports included:

- *Student choice and direction in the learning were seen as keys to student engagement. (Goodall, p6).*
- *Opportunities for service both within the school and the wider community appeared to have a real grab in terms of engagement and purpose. (Goodall, p6).*
- *Growing the opportunities and recognition for service within the College, for the local community and internationally. (Mangan, p5).*
- *Investigating the feasibility of an overseas trip to Samoa to provide service for a community. (Mangan, p6).*
- *Quality teachers who can establish strong and caring learning relationships that allow personalisation of relevant programmes are central to engagement and achievement. (Olsen, p2).*
- *The Aspire Project seeks to engage students, teachers and parents in collaborative evidence-based learning transformation ... It places student voice at the core of transforming learning opportunities... (Fahey, p5).*

A number of recent reports and articles were also sourced. They added the following:

- *... engagement is increased through flexible, individualised teaching in a supportive learning environment... Strong student-teacher relationships create a classroom where students feel safe and engaged. (aitsl, p7)*
- *Strong classroom management and student-teacher relationships have a significant impact on engagement and achievement. (Hattie, 2009).*
- *Learning had to be constructed on their genuine experiences. (Fancourt, p25).*

The *Education matters to me: Engagement (OCC & NZSTA)* report identified six main aspects:

- Get to know me
- Engage with me on my terms
- We don't all learn the same
- My friends are my go-to
- Respect me, treat me as an equal
- Recognise my potential, and give me hope.

A school website search for foundational documents found School Charters, Strategic Plans, Statements of Faith, and other documents which reflected the basis for the school's Christian culture. These provided a platform, and in some cases specific information, for exploring the world through a Christian lens, and worldview.

Ten schools were visited, four in the South Island and six in the North Island. Eight were Year 1-13 Area Schools, whilst two were Year 1-10 schools. A set of questions was sent to each school before the visit to inform the focus for the visit. A day was spent at each school talking to the Principal and staff, attending Senior leadership meetings, talking with senior students in small groups and informally at breaks. I was also able to observe some Christian Living senior classes where available. Notes were taken around each of the questions, and later analysed to generate commonalities, specific strategies and points of interest.

Findings

This section lists the specific responses to the questions provided to each school. Where responses were similar the initial reply has been used.

What foundational understandings/documents underpin your expectations?

- School Charter: Strategic Plans/priorities – servanthood, deepen Christian expression, culture of service, Christ-centred culture, Christian Biblical learning, Biblically-responsive Practice, Christ-centred pedagogy.
- Statement of Faith, Biblical principles.
- School vision/mission/values.
- Curriculum Statements (including Christian emphasis).
- Teaching documentation (including Christian components for planning)
- Proprietor's vision statements.
- Staff expectations/Code of Conduct.

How are your special character expectations communicated with students and parents?

- Enrolment process (documentation, interviews).
- Newsletters, digital communication.
- Initial evening, picnic, BBQ events.
- School signage (culture/learning/values visuals).
- Social media (Facebook).
- Staff communications with parents.
- Student diaries.
- Surveys.
- Parenting evenings (behavioural programme).
- Assemblies.
- Local issues interactions used to model values.
- Principal available in foyer once a week for coffee and korero.
- NE meeting (including Start-up Kit for home).

How are parents involved in special character?

- Enrolment process.
- Shared events (picnic, hangi, BBQ, performances, evening courses).
- Assembly invite.
- Homework.
- IEP meetings.
- Volunteering

How do you evaluate success in this aspect of school life?

- Principal Reports to BOT.
- Student voice (Y5-10) 3-yearly SC Review.
- Staff meeting participation, outcomes.
- Three-year SC Report.
- Past students' feedback, alumni.

- Anecdotal feedback (students, parents).
- Year 11 feedback after 6 months.
- Staff feedback from internal SC programmes.
- Seniors serving others in school.
- Track when leave (1-5 years), email database.
- Gather baseline data on KC, aspirations, current service.
- Survey form (Key C/Christian values) – self-assessment termly.
- Missions feedback.
- Social media feedback.
- Character self-assessment.
- Returning students.
- Willingness to serve.
- Sports participation/feedback from others.
- Use a visual to show progress over time (a pool of water, place yourself in relation to: in on, toe dip, behind fence?).

What specific special character programmes do you have?

- NCEA Biblical Studies (optional, Y11/12 compulsory).
- Christian Living programme (Y9-13 compulsory, Y11-13 optional (not many take), Y7-13 compulsory/twice weekly Y9-11/once Y12/13, Y10-13 compulsory twice weekly).
- Morning devotions/life skills programmes.
- Foundation Studies once per week.
- World view studies (perceptions, decisions, opinions).
- Missions.
- Termly themes.
- Christian leadership (evidence gathered for end-of-year award).
- Options (production).
- External providers (Attitude,
- Christian Focus Day (external experts in).
- Deliberate staff PLD around Christian pedagogy.

What school events highlight your special character?

- Assemblies, World Vision 40 hr Famine, Run4Bibles, Senior Ball, fundraising, Productions, powhiri, Devotions, worship band, House events (Paper planes, chalk day, walk on hands), service days, art exhibition, Stations of the Cross, Prayer Day, Activity Day (termly), Talent Quest.

How is special character integrated into senior learning experiences/ sessions?

- Contexts (worldview, Creation, ethical issues, debates, what does Scripture say? Proverbs in entrepreneurship).
- Resources.
- Informal korero.
- Planning expectations.
- Deliberate acts of teaching.
- Infused into all aspects of interactions.

- Tangents during teaching.
- Prayer at start of sessions.
- Scriptural use/connections.
- Transformational staff PLD (induction, readings).
- Productions weekly service activity.
- Leadership activities.

What opportunities do senior students have to grow their servant heart?

- Leadership opportunities, sports/cultural coaching, mentoring (Y12 to Y9).
- Connections with outside organisations (Elderly care, environmental issues,
- PBL has a service component.
- World Studies sessions.
- Production.
- Jobs around school.
- Litter collection outside school.
- Missions (MotiVate).
- 40hr Famine.
- School monitors.
- Volunteers in school.
- Service Day (Y8 up).
- Y13's helping Y11's during Study time.
- Y13 service once a week.
- Primary school devotions/PE help.
- Peer support Y12 to Y9.
- Clubs organisation.
- Duke of Edinburgh
- Duty in Junior College
- Councils (Sports, Arts, Christian Faith, Community Service, Peer Support)
- Y13 Service (1 period a week self-directed: murals, Primary reading, Maths Y9, Primary PE)
- 8 Friend Support Team (staff selected).
- 1st Aide helpers (duty).
- Sports Co-ordinator mentor student coaches on SC aspects of role.

What special character leadership opportunities are there for senior students?

- Head Boy/Girl, Prefects, Council (2 per Year group), House leader,
- Peer Support (Y12 – Y7).
- Ambassadors (Culture, Service, Sports).
- Y13 placements in Primary rooms during Study.
- Sports coaching in Primary (NCEA PE credits?).
- Friends' Support (Y 12/13 allocated to Year group: apply, training at start, attend devotions, available at breaks).
- Interact Club – Rotary link.
- World Vision (40hr Famine).
- Worship band.
- Whanau group devotions (vertical home class).
- Y9 camp leader.

- SLT connection.
- Termly event for Junior school (Wheels Day).
- Leadership handover event (camp, day).
- Lunchtime groups/clubs.
- Leaders reading with juniors.
- Bus monitor missions.
- Kapa Haka.
- Local Youth Council.
- Two-day leadership course.
- Leading in local schools.
- World Vision Conference.
- Production.
- Helping at school events (Cross country, Athletics, Gala, triathlon).

School Culture described

* indicates same response from multiple students

Family *

Community *

Safe *

Non-bullying*

Caring *

Relational *

Friendly*

Teachers don't give up on you*

Transformative

Inclusive

Comfortable

Restorative

Welcoming

Inviting

Unity

Supportive

Kindness

Building each other up

High compliance

Non-judgemental

Nurturing

Dedication to each other, students.

Give students a sense of value of their worth

Patience, love

Respectful

Missional

Built over time

Part of a place that wants children to grow in their relationship with God

Explicit expectations around who we are, what we deliver/expect

Community profile high (newspaper, use of facilities, service to others)

High academic expectations
Traditional Faith liturgies
Ethical focus (fashion, Kiva loans, Nike 'Behind the Swoosh')
Teachers being Christian
Small school; Big family
Teachers invest themselves big time (holidays, after school)
Role models

Other observations and ideas:

- SENCo Provided a '10 top tips' sheet for staff on Special Needs students.
- Teachers praying for different students in a syndicate, each morning.
- A Graduation Certificate at year's end (not NCEA linked).
- A Year 7-9 Learning Lab: 2 periods study time per week with staff available.
- Using Kahoot to start a session after a break.
- A Devotions activity: student picks a letter, ID Bible character, describe them/purpose.
- Special Character Professional Learning focus over a number of years.

Conclusions

The engagement of our senior College students is initially influenced by the foundational culture of the school. This is the vision cast by the founders of the school, reinforced over time, and adapted to reflect the changing reality of the world. It reflects the reason parents send their children to the school, and the values that underpin its existence. Setting high expectations for a servant heart, from a junior level, and the visible outworking of these were all evident across the schools visited.

In the senior College, providing specific opportunities for students to explore issues relevant to them, from a Christian perspective, was seen as important. Alongside theological exploration we need to ensure that we equip our students to address the many worldviews they will encounter, as they navigate the fallen world. This was evidenced by the Christian programmes running from Year 1 to 13.

We need to ensure that we celebrate service as of equal value as academic achievement. The building of Godly character is the unique aspect of our Christian schools that parents are seeking and we must continue to lead the education sector in this. This can be done through opportunities within the school to serve others, reaching out to the local community to serve them, or providing Mission experiences in New Zealand or overseas.

It is important to strike the right balance between character and academic focus in developing school culture. This generation Z cohort is searching for truth that is authentic and evidenced, are digital by nature, and have a heart for equity and justice. They face challenging times, however they have the capacity to lead and share Christ's message to the world.

Our students are the kaitiaki (guardians) of the future, and we must equip them to steward our Lord's creation whilst we await Christ's return. I am confident that our Christian schools, throughout New Zealand, are fulfilling their purpose in growing confident young people with Godly character.

Recommendations

Strategies that appeared successful in engaging senior College students included:

- Laying strong special character cultural expectations around character development through serving others, and reflecting the school Student Graduate Profile.
- Some form of Christian study up to Year 13, enabling the exploration of topical worldview issues, Scriptural interpretations, and student-led korero.
- Opportunities for Missions (local, national, international) to provide practical examples of wider world issues and situations.
- Opportunities for service within the school (Monitors, buddy class, assemblies,
- Developing a timetable including SC needs (time to explore SC)
- Leadership opportunities, beyond the formal Prefect/Council/House roles.
- Interactions between senior students and younger students through both tuakana/teina learning situations, and more social/mentoring opportunities.
- A culture of student agency, and appropriate support/funding for student initiatives.

Areas to explore, discussed whilst visiting schools:

- Developing ways of evaluating the success of the Christian environment in growing character, aligned to Christ's role modelling.
- How to upscale a successful small school model to maintain a close sense of Christian community (Whanau, hapu, iwi).

References

- Australian Institute for Teaching and School leadership (aitsl). (2013). *Engagement in Australian schools*, accessed 12 April 2018, from http://www.centralrangeslln.org.au/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/Engagement_in_Australian_Schools-Background_Paper.pdf
- Children's Commissioner (OCC) & NZSTA. (2018). *Education matters to me: Engagement*.
- Fahey, D. (2012). *The best means of developing student self-management at Marcellin College so that students leave the College as independent and self-motivated learners who are capable of building on this beyond school*. TeachNZ sabbatical Report.
- Fancourt, N (2016). *Teaching about Christianity in religious education: a review of research*. University of Oxford.
- Goodall, C. (2016). *Research current literature and visit other primary schools to investigate the direct impact of student engagement on achievement*. TeachNZ sabbatical Report.
- Hattie, J. (2008). *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*. Routledge.
- Mangan, R. (2013). *It's easier to build a boy than repair a man*. TeachNZ sabbatical Report.
- Olsen, P. (2013). *Observations of initiatives aimed at increasing student engagement and reflections on the heritage of the Edmund Rice Charism*. TeachNZ sabbatical Report.