Sabbatical Study 2019

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Research and explore possible engagement strategies for parents of Māori and transient students in our school context

Background

We are a Decile 7 school in the heart of the Central Southland Farming community. Our roll is largely influenced by the fluctuations in local dairy industry. Over the past eight years there has been a notable increase in the student make up at our school with transient students making up between 25 and 60 % of the student body on any given year. (For the purpose of school reporting and this study transient has been defined as being in at least two different schools on arrival to Drummond). Of this transient group, approx. 20% identify as Māori, a further 40% are migrants.). Some students have cumulative school changes through the year.
We have also seen an increase in the number of families arriving to our school at various times through out the year as opposed to the majority starting our school on 1st June –which used to be the trend. (1st June is also known as gypsy day when dairy contracts for the upcoming 12 months begin). Similar trends could be found in approximately 75% of the ten other Southland schools that participated in the survey and interviews.

Research reflects similar patterns of transience we find in our school are similar Research supported our findings
Education Counts Reading
" Students have better outcomes if they do not move regularly- school movement has an even stronger effect on educational success than residential movement". The article from recent census also states that Maori have highest rates of transience nationally with 12: 1000 children moving at least 6 times in their primary schooling, followed by Pacifica with 7.0:1000. The Southland province has the second highest rate of transient children in the South island followed by the West Coast. This article also concludes by noting that the " overall transience rate is dropping in NZ, the cumulative movements for those in this cohort is in fact on a rapid increase"

Because some transient students began Drummond school and left again within the six-month assessment and reporting time frame we were finding that we had very little, useful data, if any, to determine progress that these students had made during their time at our school. From 2016, this lead us to separating overall student achievement data into transient student cohorts and 'fixed cohorts' – children who began school at Drummond and as noted above, we found a vast, albeit unsurprising variation in results. We began setting separate targets for each cohort. The MOE April 2018 noted that "targets are well designed to take into consideration the changes within the annual roll" .
While most of our students achieve at or above expected level, we noted that children from transient or Māori cohorts tend not to make the progress we felt they could.

After some review and considerable refining of systems, we then began a priority learner register and the careful tracking of progress for these students during the time they were at Drummond as opposed to overall achievement. Not surprising was the fact that the longer the students stayed, the better the gains.
Alongside this we spent time devising, implementing and reviewing support programmes to help improve student progress. One such programme was Our 'Around the World' – an English Language learning class and our Young Fliers programme. Our efforts were noted by ERO in our 2017 report citing that " irrespective of how long a child is at the school, there is a determined effort to lift achievement and sound systems to identify, track and monitor individual and groups of children's progress and achievement over time" **and that " School systems and practices are effective in equity and excellent for most children"**

Despite our efforts there provoked a feeling of what else could be done to improve the rates of progress and consequently, overall achievement, in our school and community context for both transient and Māori students.

Self review showed that while our school has high levels of engagement from long standing families, parents of some of our transient students appear more divided with their time and less likely to engaged in school activities or learning.

There was/is scope to grow and foster richer parental engagement and involvement of Māori and transient student cohorts in particular and in doing so – creating a greater sense of wellbeing and belonging and consequently – student rates of progress and overall academic gains.

While engagement with whānau became the focal point for my sabbatical, it also became evident as I progressed, that other threads needed to be explored, namely the role of social needs in improving rates of progress. I began by researching Masglow's Hierarchy of needs and the role it could play in supporting these groups of students

Purpose

ERO partners in learning Partners in Practise Report shows that effective partnerships between schools and parents,whānau and communities can result in better outcomes for students. The better the relationship, the more positive the impact on students learning.

The overarching purpose was to:

*Investigate successful strategies for engagement of parents of transient and Maori cohorts in children's learning and to review and refine current practices.

* Build a shared understanding of effective practice and in turn increase engagement of parents, strengthen links to the school and sense of belonging and subsequent rates of progress.

Research :
Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is a motivational theory in psychology comprising a seven -tier model of human needs, often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid. It is based on the theory that needs lower down in the hierarchy must be satisfied before individuals can attend to needs higher up. From the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, the needs are: physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem and self-actualization. Physchological needs include the basics of water, shelter and clothing. Security included financial, physical health and wellness. Masglow descrived love and belonging as friendships, being part of social groups and forming attachment to these. Esteem was defined as having a very important role in motivating behaviour. Self esteem and personal worth create a sense of value and can and should be encouraged through participating in sports, arts, or particular groups. These four needs are defined as deprevation needs and without them , it is difficult to have self actualization – the ability to realize full potential and desire to become everything one is capable of.

Life experiences can cause fluctuations within the hierarchy levels, therefore not everybody moves in a unified manner through the levels. In summary the basic needs need met before progression to higher levels within the pyramid can be obtained.

This theory highlighted the fact that at our school we could be better at 'gain a more in depth understanding of the needs of the whole child on arrival to our school which included more detailed understanding of the possible or 'deficiency' needs of students. Given that some students arrive to our school,having already been to three or more schools, it is not surprising that progress and achievement levels are generally low. However, many of these students struggle are often lacking in what Maslow describes as 'physiological' needs, yet we tend to immediately default to entering children into support programmes aimed solely at improving cognitive needs. On reflection, some support programmes also take children from classes, further creating a sense of indifference, or prevented them from doing 'rest of the class' activities where they had the opportunity to network and connect with their peers and to build a sense of belonging in our school. Of course, children incidentally improve friendships and connection etc over time and through activities such as team sports, house groups, buddy programmes – all of which we do have operating, however more could be done to purposely build these deficiency needs.

Masglows hierarchy of needs did lead itself to widening the sabbatical – to not only finding strategies to engage whanau but to also see what specific actions schools were taking that we could use to build the 'physiological needs' of our students, particularly 'love and belonging' and 'esteem'.

Research clears tells us that wellbeing has a clear influence on student learning. "Young people who feel safe, supported are more engaged and ready to learn"
Iona Halstead Sec or Ed NZ 201

Professional Activity and Findings

1. Survey and meetings with school leaders

To determine which other Southland schools had high or increasing numbers of transient students, I created a survey to determine
a)which schools had similar trends in their rolls with hope of meeting with school leaders
b) Proven successful strategies to 'socially' develop new students (to help build physiological needs of students – Maslow's hierarchy of needs)
c) Proven successful strategies used by these schools to engage and communicate with parents of transient and Māori cohorts.

Findings
a) The survey was sent to 13 Southland schools. 10 identified, (using the definition above) as having an increasing transient roll since in the past three years. While reasons for the increase largely due the dairy industry, other reasons included the affordability of housing and changes in local industry – fishing.
All schools used in the study had between 10% and 60% of their school roll identified as transient at the time of the interview/survey. * Mid 2018)
6 of the 11 had an increasing turnover of students while two had retained a similar percentage in the past three years.
From here, I was able to determine which school leaders to talk to directly the leaders of these six schools to further discuss and determine what specific strategies they were taking in the hope of adding to what we were currently doing.

I was very fortunate to be able to meet with leaders of these schools.
It was very apparent from these discussions that strategies being used could be broken into several different components. Some had commonalities between the schools and with actions our school currently takes.
However there were others that we could integrate immediately to improve what we are currently doing:

b) Strategies to help build the psychological needs of 'love and belonging' and 'esteem' (Maslow's hierarchy of needs) These have come about from the school interviews as well as the Māori Engagement- Successful Findings ERO report 2010 reading.

1. Formally checking in on the welfare of students prior to beginning and one month after beginning school to find strengths, talents – enabling them to make connections through sports/music/kapahaka. One school did this formally between Principal and student's pre visit and then ascertained thoughts again one month after being at the school. The interview was based on social needs of the student, friendships, thoughts and feelings towards school, actions school could take to help the student feel 'at home' and strengths the students could or would like to offer the school. The results were also used to channel new students into groups they were interested in – sports, drama, music, etc. The two school leaders who did this felt that formally linking students to groups they had an interest in created a greater sense of self, belonging and confidence. Another school funded support or staffing for students who had a particular interest or ability in something that was not already offered by a school 'group'. For example- one school funded a music teacher to work with two students for singing once a week. With a very high transient rate, can see the benefit in formally linking kids to a group of interest and is something we could do better. Often our school teams comprise of the 'most able' or the 'most supported'. Further ways need to be explored to break down the barriers which often prevent some students from participation e.g., cost, self esteem, travel etc. We could also look wider than sporting groups – to cultural, technology, leadership groups. Formally checking in with students a month after beginning our school would also ascertain progress, or lack of.

2. Teina/Tuakana relationships
These included but were not limited to student councils, buddy programmes between senior and junior students, students being placed in house groups, house challenges. While we already have these programmes in place there is room to immediately 'grow' them using simple yet useful strategies such as eating lunch together as a house group, lunch time tug of war, touch games, informal buddy challenges. In one school the buddy programmes stretched to including a child from each class to become a 'tri or a quad buddy', giving all students, particularly transient students a platform to develop stronger relationships and bonds and a 'go to' group for support/questions/ and in some cases friendship. Formal Buddy time was set aside once a week for half an hour, where groups participated in various activities, usually organised by the eldest buddy. Their role was also to foster and encouraged friendships and positive relationships within their buddies. Taonga were presented to buddy groups who had done this particularly well over the course of each week. These Taonga were highly sought after and buddy groups strived to achieve the taonga in school assemblies.

Strategies for engagement of whānau

1. Welcome strategies
A number of schools, particularly those with smaller numbers of transient students carried out informal meet and greet activities such as welcome certificates at assemblies, mihi whakatau, welcome on social media and in newsletters, personal welcomes from Principal. Some held welcome morning teas while others welcomed families at assemblies, using PTA or such like groups to offer baking/small welcome gifts which were presented to families – generally at a school assembly. One school operated the cake bake project where new families were greeted with a cake, baked from a member of the school PTA, Home and School group.

One school principal phoned all new families, welcoming them and would often phone if there were school events that may need further explanation, particularly migrant families. However, they did acknowledge that simpler or less time consuming strategies could be employed. This included extending the buddy system to a family level and new families to the school were able to use their 'buddy' families as ports of call if needed. Buddy families made contact with new families encouraging and inviting them to school events, to PTA meetings, information evenings or such like. In some cases they were able to clarify newsletter information or answer questions about the school.

2. Informal school events
Often informal social events were organised to create a sense of 'togetherness' and belonging for not only whanau but students as well. These included but were not limited to pot luck dinners, start of year fish and chip evenings, barbeques, house challenge events involving families, around the world pot luck dinner where families came together and shared dishes from their own culture. Sometimes these informal events linked to learning such as matariki celebrations, Pet Day or school learning celebrations but most were informal opportunities to come together and meet and chat with one another. These events were strongly supported by considerable research including ERO, Engagement with Schools, 2003, which noted that "Other effective means of encouraging engagement included organising social events at which parents and teachers could mingle and get to know each other, and parents could meet each other. The refugee group found this particularly helpful to them. In some school communities, parent groups met to support each other and to increase their involvement so they could better meet the specific needs of their children. Some parents said that it helped when the school held meetings at community venues, as they were more likely to attend."

3. Learning partnerships
Face to face learning conversations where children and parents were involved in setting goals for their students were seen as successful strategies. These goal setting meetings deliberately developed two way relationships where goals were set with parents not for parents. Information shared with parents in reports was clear and enabled parents to support students at home. This was evident in schools who had had carried out review or parent surveys following reporting times. Parents valued having a voice at interview times, especially when this was acted on and followed up at another meeting or time. One school noted they had extended interview times to 20 minutes per child as parents valued the opportunity to look over books, and informally chat with the teacher as opposed to short interview times which often ran over time and parents had to 'wait' on. Parents felt that longer interview times that ran on time and were well organised, helped form connections and relational trust. Parents at one school mentioned that they thought teachers were viewed as open to parent voice and particularly liked when teachers acted on this voice. Similarly, IEP meetings were created with parents rather than 'for' parents.

Educationally Powerful Connections – Nov 2015 cites that 'greater connections are made when teachers and parents engage in joint activities and conversation to increase student learning and teachers have a willingness to listen".

4. Consultation

Māori consultation was held regularly in annually in all school. In some schools, this often included student voice through the medium of surveys or informal chat sessions. While all schools consulted with Māori families, it appeared that what worked well, was when the mode of consultation was culturally appropriate. This consultation offered different ways to express and give feedback where families felt their ideas were valued and listened to, e.g., regular Hui. In some schools, this consultation was extended to transient (often immigrant) families who valued the opportunities to come together and meet others families through non-threatening social events. Schools with Māori trustees had them attend hui and felt this helped engage Māori and for Māori perspective to be heard. In some school Hui were also held at various venues.

5. Multi – cultural school wide activities

Māori families in various schools saw the school as raising the profile of Māori and that it provided a clear message to the community of the value placed on Māori when activities were done by the whole school. This included but was not limited to Marae visits, Kapahaka, Matariki and Māori Language events as well as Te Reo lessons in classes. They valued seeing multicultural Language Signs-, which they felt, sent clear messages about the value of multi-centralism at the school. Some staff participated in whole school cultural competency and Te Reo professional development, while others used expertise in their school or wider communities to come into the school and deliver Te Reo/Tikanga programmes. A number of school leaders across the schools felt that staff were sometimes judged for incidentally using Te Reo around the workplace, particularly if the pronunciation was incorrect. Schools need, including ours, continued professional development to increase teacher capability in Te Reo, (and other languages) but also the freedom and scope to build their confidence in its use.

This was supported by Home School Partnerships- ERO report 2003
"*Māori wanted their culture and values acknowledged through the use of Māori protocols, for example mihi and karakia at meetings. They also expected schools to provide programmes in te reo Māori and tikanga that supported their children's learning. Immigrant parents spoke about teachers' valuing and understanding the importance of their languages and their cultural protocols. They suggested that schools could help teachers increase their understanding about working with migrant and refugee families by inviting people to give them training in some of these aspects. Schools needed to be open to their community and view parents as having a lot to offer to the school".* These findings leave us with scope to review and improve our current Te Reo programme in particular.

6. Clarity of information shared with

All schools sent regular newsletters home to whanau some translated this into various languages for ease of understanding. One school principal phoned new and particularly migrant families to clarify understanding of every prominent school event. Another used the family buddy programme, as mentioned above as a means of helping to clarify information.

Conclusion

There were no 'two' strategies that were perceived as being the 'winning' combination and in fact no school felt they had the 'winning formula'. However, it certainly provided scope for our school to build on and strengthen current practices. In particular our next steps would be,

- Facilitate more student/parent voice to gather holistic information about needs of students on arrival to Drummond and one month after they arrive.
- Actively strengthen strategies to improve social skills (including their sense of self, friendships and sense of belonging) of transient students
- At a basic level, tweaking/ improve systems for whānau communication, e.g. translation of newsletters for migrant families, buddy networks, use of technology/apps etc.
- Build on our current practices in Māori and Migrant whānau consultation
- Go back and ensure we have congruence between beliefs and actions across all staff, about what makes effective whānau consultation and engagement
- Continue to build teacher, leadership and Board capacity in multi-culturalism – ensure strategic aims goals and congruent with day-to-day happenings and teaching.

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References:

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