

Principal's Sabbatical Report

Term 2 2020

In-school Truancy: Causes and Strategies

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Purpose

Initially I wished to investigate how to sustain and improve school culture, in a rapidly changing environment, through engagement with community. However, the Covid-19 pandemic altered my intentions to some degree. Along with the Board of Trustees and Senior Leadership Team, I made the decision to continue with taking my sabbatical leave in Term 2, knowing that the school was in excellent hands during this time. The various acting positions had been put in place early in the year, before the full effect of the pandemic was known. Covid-19 restricted the travel plans I had considered and it was not possible for me to fulfil my intention of completing a short course “School Turnaround Leaders Program” at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Nor was it possible to visit schools in person in the early part of my leave. Instead I completed an online course through the Harvard Graduate School of Education, “Leaders of Learning” and Zoom meetings were organised to gather information from schools.

Background

This report has a narrower focus than the original statement of purpose as above, in that it deals with one particular aspect of behaviour that has rapidly changed and has a direct impact on a positive school culture, namely that of in-school truancy ie students arriving at school and choosing to not attend some classes, while remaining onsite.

In mid-2017, we noticed a rising number of in-school truants or, as we termed them, “roamers”. Roamers would run away from any member of staff trying to engage them in a conversation about where they should be. At times, these students would knock on a classroom’s window to attract the attention of a friend in the class, or to be annoying to the class and teacher. Some students have occasionally tried to enter a classroom, not their own, without invitation to attempt to speak to a friend in the class. This disrupts the teaching and affects the learning of other students.

These roaming students were mostly from Years 9 and 10 and a higher proportion were Māori. Keeping these students in class and engaged in their learning will have the benefit of enhancing their achievements and academic outcomes, and enable others to achieve in a focused learning environment.

Summary of activities

- Consideration of student voice from the students who are/have been roamers. Focus groups with students and with whanau was unable to occur as planned because of Covid-19 restrictions, but previously collected student voice was used.
- Analysis of roll data, achievement data and discipline data of mid-Decile schools in urban areas with a school roll of 1000 or more students and a similar demographic.
- Interviews by Zoom or by school visit with those schools that responded to my enquiries.
- Professional readings.

Student Voice

Common ideas summarised from collected voice of students who were roamers included:

- Don't understand the work
- The work is boring
- Don't feel any engagement with topic
- Don't see why the need to learn that subject/topic
- Find it hard to concentrate in class
- Can't do homework
- "Stuff" is happening at home/at school/with friends

While "Teacher doesn't like me/Teacher picks on me" and "I don't like the teacher" were given as reasons, further probing almost always brought out an underlying reason for the student thinking that there was not a good relationship between the teacher and them.

These statements may arise because of the challenges of:

- understanding about the prior knowledge and learning experiences that a student brings to the class.
- introducing elements of choice within the topic or type of assessment.
- knowing the interests of students in all classes.
- giving relevance to what is to be learnt.
- understanding the background of the students, whether they have time, space, support, technologies required to complete work at home.
- knowing that students are coming to class having had sufficient food, sleep, support.
- helping students to manage their reactions, relationships when issues arise.

I noticed that our Kamar pastoral entries following meetings with students about attendance seemed to fall into two categories:

- Discussion about the student's motivation for not being in class: *Introductory meeting with P. Discussing his recent behaviour and lack of engagement in class and also attending classes. Think he finds the material hard and needs to have the tasks chunked up into small pieces. He has an aspiration of becoming a surgeon. Having a goal is a start we can build on. Explained that If I did not see a turn around then actions will be taken. Very supportive and that we would assist as much as possible but P needs to want to engage which was the focus of the meeting.*
- What the student needs to do to fix the issue: *Frequently late to school - no reason, off task in lessons. Mum, L, HOH all met to discuss. On report: arrive on time; stay focused; never give up; ask for help when stuck. Organisation strategies for home re prep for school etc*

The second type of entry puts the onus on the student to conform to particular behaviours, but does not indicate the teaching or support that will be given to the student to make a change.

Findings from schools' experiences

All schools promoted culturally responsive relational pedagogy and restorative practices and, in some schools, PB4L (Positive Behaviour for Learning).

Most schools acknowledged having experienced in-school truancy to some extent.

Schools that did not have in-school truancy had one of the following:

- No bells and a strong emphasis on self-management of students.
- Support staff employed to work with and escort students to get them into class.
- Flexible learning spaces with high visibility throughout the school.
- Noticed a decrease in period absence, but a slight increase in full day absence, possibly as a result of proactively escorting students to class.

Strategies that assisted schools in keeping students in class:

- Professional learning opportunities to embed CRRP as expected practice. Teachers establishing positive learning relationships with their students, finding out about their interests and prior learning.
- Differentiated learning to cater for differing levels of learning, and professional learning opportunities to upskill in this.
- Engaging with whanau and students in a positive collaborative manner as soon as in-school truancy is noticed. Develop strategies for the student, the school and whanau to employ in getting the student re-engaged with their learning.
- Keeping full records of meetings with students and whanau, something which can be lost when dealing with many students in a day.
- Follow up meetings in two to three days to provide feedback and encouragement to students, again something that can get moved aside in busy times. Follow up feedback to whanau, so that they can reinforce the desired behaviours at home.
- Using language that invites a conversation eg “tell me about... “ rather than “why did you...”
- While deans were the ones to deal with repeated truants, subject and tutor group/form teachers also need to play a role in following up a student who is absent from class but does not have a justified absence for the day. Tutor group/form teachers can be the ones to first notice a pattern of in-school truancy and can also be those to provide the feedback and encouragement following a whanau meeting.
- Accurate period by period attendance recording. It is difficult to have parents and caregivers engage with the school if the roll is marked incorrectly. Using the text notification system twice a day, at interval and after school, ensuring that teachers have time to complete their rolls, can reduce the incorrect reporting of period by period absence. Accurate roll keeping ensures that parents and caregivers trust the information they receive and can address this with their students.
- Extracting attendance data from the student management system in a manner that makes it easy to track students' attendance, and to take action if attendance drops to a predetermined threshold.

Engagement of students in their learning and futures

Having students engaged in their learning reduces truancy and in-school truancy considerably.

In their publication “Motivation, Engagement and Student Voice”¹, Toshalis and Nakkula observe that:

- *To capitalize on individual motivations and meet individual needs, customized pedagogical approaches that differentiate instruction for each student tend to work far better than uniform “catch-all” techniques.*
- *Research shows that both intelligence and motivation are malleable. Helping students understand that they can acquire new skills and improve existing skills through effort, regardless of past achievement, increases their motivation to try.*
- *Tracking students based on perceived intelligence or motivation can be harmful. Separating “less intelligent” or “unmotivated” youth from their higher-achieving peers will likely exacerbate existing motivational dispositions and intellectual capacities.*
- *Providing opportunities for choice, control, and collaboration are potent strategies for increasing academic achievement. Young people are likely to be more motivated and engaged in an activity when they feel they have a voice in how it is conducted and can affect how it concludes.*
- *Many students have difficulty engaging in school, even when they feel motivated. For these students, it may be necessary to teach self-regulation skills to help them stay on task, set goals, monitor their learning, and change strategies as needed.*
- *Despite the benefits of technology, today’s myriad digital distractions can threaten productivity and cognitive complexity in learning. It is essential to teach adolescents when to unplug and how to focus on one activity at a time.*

The strategies listed above aim to keep students in class but these are externally imposed, by the school, on students. Self-management, as emphasised in one of the schools, takes into account the observations noted by Toshalis and Nakkula.

¹ Toshalis, E. and Nakkula, M. (2012) *Motivation, Engagement and Student Voice*. Students at the Center series, www.studentsatthecenter.org

Courses taken

Without the possibility of international travel, I took the opportunity to explore online courses, knowing that our students were all experiencing online learning at that time. I used the website: www.edx.org (edX | Free Online Courses by Harvard, MIT, & more | edX) and enrolled in the course [Leaders of Learning](#) from HarvardX instructed by Richard Elmore, The Gregory R. Anrig Research Professor of Educational Leadership at Harvard University.

The course explored the theories of learning, leadership in different learning environments, how the organisation, systems and structure reflect theories of learning and how physical design shapes learning. It also touched on how neuroscience will affect the future of learning.

The four modes of learning considered were:

- Hierarchical Individual
- Hierarchical Collective
- Distributed Individual
- Distributed Collective

For each mode of learning, the mode of leadership, the mode of organisation and the mode of design that supported that mode of learning were explored and defined.

The Hierarchical Individual mode can still be seen in many classrooms with the teacher providing what must be learnt and success being defined by measurements of students' learning. Students and teachers are in single cell classrooms, with desks often organised in rows. The leader ensures compliance with the requirements of the external governing institution.

The Hierarchical Collective mode defines success based on the organisation's communal values and goals. Learning is collaborative with adults and other students and occurs in specific places that are not confined to just classrooms, but include outdoors and community locations. The leader complies with the requirements of an external authority, while reinforcing the values and goals of the communal environment.

The Distributed Individual mode is characterised by individuals pursuing their own interests to the extent that they wish. Thus they identify what success looks like for them. The leader articulates a vision that appeals to individual learners and responds to their individual learning needs. Learning can happen within defined spaces, both physical or digital or it can occur in other spaces that meet the needs of the learning for the individual.

In the Distributed Collective mode, learning happens through a network of learners exploring shared interests. Learners support the common values and goals of the network and leaders share ownership of the vision. A leader in this environment identifies what members bring to the network and encourages sharing, as well as resourcing from outside the network, ensuring consistency with the values and goals. The location of learning is decided by the network to best meet their needs.

I also took three courses, on the edX platform, from Victoria University of Wellington on the New Zealand Landscape as Culture. The courses explored the relationships of Māori and Pākehā with [Motu \(Islands\)](#), [Maunga \(Mountains\)](#) and [Wai \(Water\)](#). The British colonisation brought Pākehā who had very different and competing views about the landscape in which they lived and continue to live. One example is maunga as part of whakapapa and a mountain is there to be conquered.

The lecturers are Dr Maria Bargh (Te Arawa and Ngāti Awa) who teaches politics in Te Kawa a Māui, the School of Māori Studies, and Professor Lydia Wevers, who is a specialist in New Zealand literature and history. This series deepened my understanding of the Māori world view and increased my awareness of the potential impact of two differing perspectives on the use of landscape resources in the future.

Acknowledgements

I thank the Ministry of Education, through TeachNZ, for providing the opportunity to take this sabbatical leave after being the Principal of Rosehill College for six years. This would not have been possible without the support of my Board of Trustees and the leadership teams and staff of the College. During my absence, the Associate Principal ably led the school as Acting Principal under the challenging circumstances of conducting online learning and the return to onsite schooling. As one of our Deputy Principals moved to another school at the start of Term 2, two Heads of Faculty stepped up to positions of Acting Deputy Principals for the term, providing strong connections to the faculties during this time of change and the other two Senior Leaders shared their wealth of experience. When a Principal is on leave, many people step in to provide their knowledge and expertise to ensure the continued successful running of the school. My sincere thanks go to all.

I also thank the Principals, senior leaders and staff who spoke at length with me about the systems they used around in-school truancy. Some meetings were online and some were kanohi ki te kanohi. During this time of change as a result of Covid-19, I am very grateful that they gave freely of their time and our discussions often roamed beyond the narrow limits of the topic. It is always a pleasure to discuss those things about which we are passionate, in this case the education of our tamariki. The schools which contributed to my research are:

- Aotea College
- Waitakere College
- Freyberg High School
- Te Awamutu College
- Pukekohe High School
- Papakura High School
- Taupo-a-nui-Tia College

Resources

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