



Promoting Positive Learning Engagement and Raising Achievement Levels Among Priority Learners from Low Socio-Economic Communities

Through a Healthy School Approach

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AND

Action Research/Learning Study 2014

This Learning Study pre-supposed a Healthy School approach was built around:
Nutrition/Physical Activity/Student Wellbeing/Relationship Building/Values
Education/Cultural Diversity and Community Inclusion.

'Under Achievement' relates to Maori/Pacific/low income families who are not
achieving at, or above National Standards.



Defining a “Healthy School Approach”

For the purpose of this study report, a “Healthy School Approach” is a provision of school based learning initiatives which foster beneficial health related understandings, attitudes, applications and school community relationships, in order to enhance the Hauora, wellness and development of attitude towards better life choices and sustainability.

Purpose

The purpose of my sabbatical/study was to gain a greater understanding of evidence based and successful school practices, which engage students in learning, particularly those who are underachieving and/or who have yet to develop a positive attitude towards learning.

For the purpose of this study, I have examined and read a range of articles on related topics. In addition, action research involving Education Study visits to local and overseas Primary Schools; interviews and discussions with School Principals/Education Health Agencies; and participation in community forums – committees – workshops seminars, have been undertaken.

It is from this study, that I will look towards more effective leadership and guidance in supporting a stronger connection to learning among students/family/school and further build learning relationships which harness student’s wellbeing and provide increased opportunities for them to experience learning success.



Related Study

Context/Foundations for Sabbatical

'Achievement in school is dependent on a number of factors, from the quality of teaching and the school environment, to the intellectual capacity of the child and their opportunity to learn'. Students health and wellbeing can either contribute to or undermine this 'opportunity to learn' and therefore their ability to achieve.

Although there is no clear evidence that improving physical activity and nutrition will directly result in improved academic achievement, it has been suggested that an indirect link between physical activity, nutrition and academic achievement exists due to improvements in physiological, behavioural, psychological and social health and wellbeing leading children to state where they have 'the opportunity to learn'.

J. Clinton, A. Rensford & E. Willing (2007).

A literature review of the relationship between Physical Activity, Nutrition and Academic Achievement.

Commissioned by CMDHB Lets Beat Diabetes Schools Accord. Auckland University Services.



Healthy Children & Young People are Better Equipped to Learn

The health and wellbeing of Children and Young People is affected by many factors. **The relationship between activity, nutrition and academic achievement has been distilled from literature in consultation with the Health and Education sectors in New Zealand, this is outlined below.**

Improved Physical Health & Wellbeing

- Increasing physical activity improves health and wellbeing.
- Increasing physical activity improves thinking.
- Increasing physical activity can improve socialisation.

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Improved Nutritional Wellbeing

- Improved nutrition improves health and wellbeing.
- Children and young people who eat breakfast regularly are more likely to make better food choices throughout the day.
- Improving nutrition can lead to children becoming more socially involved and interested in their environment.

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Improved Behaviour and Academic Performance

- Increased physical activity improves children and young people's classroom behaviour, including attitudes, creativity and discipline.
- Positive behaviour, emotional wellbeing and academic achievement are more prevalent in healthy and active children and young people.

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Improved School Attendance

- Physical activity and nutrition can help develop a healthy immune system and therefore may reduce health related absenteeism from school.
- Child and young person obesity is also linked to poor school attendance. Increased physical activity and better nutrition may contribute to reducing health related absenteeism.
- School-based breakfast programmes may also improve attendance.

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Improved Social Wellbeing

- Improved social wellbeing can influence a student’s “opportunity to learn” and their ability to achieve in the classroom.
- Lack of physical activity, poor nutrition affect the overall social wellbeing of a child and therefore adversely affects their ability to learn.
- Participation in physical activity and sport fosters the development of relationships with peers.
- Improved nutrition can assist children and young people to become more socially involved, interested in their environment, active and capable of effective communication.

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Improved Health and Lifestyles

- Reducing childhood obesity will assist in improving over health.
- Reducing childhood obesity will assist improving thinking.
- Reducing childhood obesity will improve childhood behaviour. Emotional balance and academic achievement are more prevalent in well-fed and active children.

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J. Clinton, A. Rensford & E. Willing (2007)

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Research Findings

Does New Zealand have a long tail of School Under Achievement?

On the basis of the PISA data the evidence supports the claim that New Zealand has a wider distribution and more low performing students than countries with similar average scores.

More alarming, may be the realisation that the number of low performing students is actually greater, as it is highly possible that participants undertaking assessment were more likely to be high performing students who chose to participate, while low performing students may not have eg. through absences/withdrawal from test situations/were stood down – suspended/non parental permission.

Factors beyond school, have a profound effect in determining school achievement eg. economic distribution of social goods. Until these issues are addressed, then very little will be done to eliminate the social causes of school under achievement, which include family poverty, poor child health, lack of family resources which support child learning, hunger and school attendance.

Current solutions seem to be misplaced for they focus on the within school factors, without little regard to those beyond school. It is hard to see how National Standards, Charter Schools, Reading Recovery, Pasifika Plan and Kahikitea promoted by successive Ministers of Education and MOE officials, will have much impact on arresting the decline in school achievement as measured by international testing.

Until such time as the full force of the state is brought to bear on tackling the wider social, political and economic conditions which reinforce structural inequality then there is little reason to think that things educational will improve on the national scene, or as measured by future PISA results.

In the meantime children will continue to suffer and be seriously disadvantaged.



Promoting Health and Wellbeing through Relationship Education

Evidence shows that the cultural difference between the non-Maori and the Maori approach to health requires consideration from educators. Health Promoting Schools supports the holistic view of health and wellbeing, which includes spirituality.

While the whole framework is put in place for all children to access, there is a definite cultural lean to one side and some might question why there appears a move to support the health needs of Maori children and young people.

The fact is – in practical terms – health inequities between Maori children and non-Maori children in New Zealand remain significant and persistent eg. infectious diseases; injury.

“With regards to school aged children, Maori children are three times more likely than non-Maori to be hospitalised with respiratory and skin infections, have higher rates of rheumatic fever and bronchitis and are at increased risk for accidental/non-accidental injury.” Dr. Matire Harwood – Auckland University Health Research Unit.

The question is then asked “Is it the responsibility of the school to monitor the health of their students, in particular Maori/Pasifika pupils, who face bigger challenges when it comes to achieving wellbeing?”

Essentially the response is “yes”. Teachers and school are critical to improving the health and wellbeing of their Maori Students and such support could range from working with other agencies to just simply training teachers about cultural safety.

While health and wellbeing inequality between Maori and non-Maori children is still very evident throughout New Zealand, understanding the issues is the first step towards rectifying this disparity, as well as remaining aware of cultural differences that need to be consciously acknowledged.

It is then up to schools and teachers to realise they hold incredible opportunities to make these positive changes for their Maori (and Pasifika) students through a variety of ways.

Partnerships are vital in schools’ support of student wellbeing. Partnerships with students, their parents, whanau, hapu, iwi and wider community, including professional support agencies, have the potential to find solutions to actively improve the wellbeing of all students.



Wellbeing For Success

ERO identified five principles as common themes in the evidence and research on effective programmes and initiatives that promote and respond to student wellbeing. The principles strengthen the practice and processes for student wellbeing and are strongly tied to a holistic approach to student wellbeing; and acknowledge student wellbeing as multi-dimensional.

The principles are as follows:

Positive and trusting **relationships** are at the centre of effective efforts to promote student wellbeing, creating a sense of connection and belonging within the school community.

The **strengths** of students and their whanau are valued and used as the basis for promoting and responding to student wellbeing.

Cohesion across policies, practices, intervention and initiatives contributes to an integrated, joined up, well 'glued' and seamless approach to promoting student wellbeing.

Inquiry is dynamic, considers the school context, utilises a wide range of information sources and acts upon findings to improved student wellbeing, driving improvements in both learning and teaching contexts.

Collaboration enables the inclusion and involvement of students, teachers, leaders, parents, whanau and community in promoting student wellbeing.



School Attendance

In my action research study based on interviews/discussions with a number of School Principals/Leaders of low decile (1-4) Primary Schools in Manurewa and Papatoetoe, there was unanimous acknowledgement by all that poor student attendance and punctuality remains a continuing challenge to raising student achievement levels, let alone support success at or above National Standards.

“You can’t teach someone who’s not there”

“Learning opportunities are lost with non-attendance and/or lateness and cannot be recovered”.

- Principal comments

Research also indicates that poor attendance can lead to a range of other factors that indirectly can have an impact on the achievement of students. Studies have established that a lack of commitment to school and truancy are risk factors for substance abuse, teen pregnancy, delinquent behaviour and school drop outs.

While parents are primarily responsible for getting children to school every day, schools and their communities have a role to play in recognising and addressing the barriers and challenges that affect attendance by individuals and groups of school students. It requires a successful partnership between the school and its families to address these wider issues.

In the case of the Manurewa community, the local Manurewa Community Board, together with the Police, are providing strong and effective support/resources to encourage families to attend school regularly. Local school agencies eg. Attendance Officers/Social Workers, plus in-school initiatives eg. daily home contact, are also realising the importance of ‘acceptable attendance’.



An Action Research

Summary of School based initiatives bring about improvement in:

Student Achievement among priority learners

School Attendance/punctuality and attributes towards better learning

(Based on Schools visited: Singapore; Hong Kong; Manurewa Principals Assn. Schools)

- Establishment of in-school Skate Board bowl.
- Students able to make lunch appointments to meet with Principal.
- School policy “Zero tolerance to bullying”.
- Term by Term morning tea with Principal for full attendance students.
- Organised and regular sports/cultural/dance activities/karaoke
- Celebration and display of cultural diversity.
- Opportunities for ‘ a Student Voice’ to be part of school culture.
- Student goal setting and reporting initiatives (formative assessment).
- Adoption of school role models – sports/actors/music personalities.
- School wide focus on ‘Celebrating Success.
- Parent support groups; regular social and curricula workshops.
- Wide variety of Display Boards located around school.
- Fruit in schools/Milk in schools/Kiwi Can.
- 1x Education Assistant (T.Aide) per class
- School Social Worker
- Designated ‘Teacher Confidante’.
- Student Leaders/Ambassadors/Health Leaders
- Boys Club – kinaesthetic based activities eg. dismantling car engine.
- Cultural disciplines eg. Tamatoa/Arts/Food growing.
- Creation of colourful, values based school environment.



Findings

It is every schools fundamental and professional purpose, to implement and deliver a curriculum to its students with learning success and achievement being the outcome (to then build on and support further learning!).

Within this report to date, there has been some indicators of the challenges schools with priority learners are experiencing, along with some progressive measures to both deal with these and to support a wider “community of learning, a learning community”.

I believe the present New Zealand Curriculum has provided an excellent opportunity for our students to interpret not only the core parameters of this curriculum, but to interpret it with both the school community and its student’s needs, in mind.

From a healthy school perspective, we need to encourage our young people through the school and its community, to be healthy by giving them skills to address the factors around them, that might discourage healthy behaviour.

Health promoting initiatives eg. Fruit in Schools/Milk in Schools/Healthy Lunches, create a healthy school culture, which in turns lends itself to promoting student led health projects. Eg. Sports Programmes/Dance Performances/Food preparation.

In other words, where schools can support the provision of projects, which empower students; help them to understand and value healthy behaviour; make responsible choices; improve their engagement with school; and develop their life skills and competencies, then their future is better enabled to meet the challenges of today with new learning (and success) to take into their tomorrow.



Findings

Whilst this is an ideal, I am confident it will have its place in supporting under achieving priority learners to better participate in school and experience progressive success. In addition, it is just as essential that teachers make a “mind shift” in giving power to students and to work to support students to ensure their success.

This certainly does not mean a hands off role for teachers. In fact their role can be more complex as they act as a facilitator and resource person. Discussions with some school Principals, suggest some teachers found they needed to assist students to prioritise tasks that would be manageable, so that students were able to see their plans through and therefore experience success.

At some schools eg. Glenealy School, Hong Kong – student teams met during lunch time with the Principal or School Staff. If this initiative took teachers out of the classroom, or occurred in teaching time, it could be difficult for them to sustain.

When reviewing our school curriculum last year, the following reflection questions were proposed as a starting point for our teaching staff to review current views and practices relating to student involvement in decision making and action:

- Is it possible for all school activities to have some form of student input? Is there any aspect of school life that students could not contribute to?
- At our school, how do we find out about what students really need, want or enjoy in relation to their health and wellbeing? Are there new ways we can find out about students needs and interests?
- What do we currently do well about encouraging students to take action to improve their and other’s, health and wellbeing? Are there new ways we could involve students in school actions and decisions?



Summary

There is no doubt social, political and economic conditions reinforce structural inequality in education achievement opportunities within New Zealand schools.

I am heartened by the professional psyché and dedicated commitment of so many New Zealand Educators/Teachers/Principals who refuse to accept that “we can only work with what we’ve got” and/or “within the constraints of what little we can do”.

Rather I see a “Can Do”; “Lets make it work”; “Our children deserve better”; “I’m going to do the very best I can”, mentality hard at work in our schools. It is very much this professional approach and determination that has gained us such high international acclaim as a progressive and successful education focussed nation.

Yet despite this, we still have “an under achieving tail” that in many ways is synonymous with socio-economic status, disadvantaged communities and within New Zealand, high percentages of Maori and Pasifika populations.

Getting our kids to school is the key, where upon Principals and Teachers can focus on building supportive relationships with families. Trust, cooperation, understanding, cultural inclusiveness, listening, integrating them into “us”, encouraging a student voice, and having a school as a good place to be, rather than relate to it as being a place where I as a parent hated, should be where, and how, we could start.



Summary

I have sought to focus on a Healthy School approach as the vehicle I believe can deliver “the goods” in Promoting Positive Learning Engagement and Raising Achievement Levels Among Priority learners from Low Socio-Economic Communities.

I strongly believe our focus in schools should not be to measure learning achievement success against National Standards, but rather progressing student’s learning from their starting point to another progressive stage along their learning continuum.

It is this progress, success and achievement from their learning applications which should be measured/emphasised, not by whether an “outside indicator” eg. National Standards, has been met or exceeded.

All too often in schools, we see evidence of many priority learners, who have made huge gains within their learning continuum, but who ironically are made to feel a failure, because a standardised benchmark (National Standards) has not been attained.

Surely feeling good about oneself, coming to school regularly, experiencing and enjoying success in learning, celebrating achievement and developing a hunger for more, are the ingredients of:

**PROMOTING POSITIVE LEARNING ENGAGEMENT AND
RAISING ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS AMONG PRIORITY
LEARNERS FROM LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES.**



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In addition, I acknowledge my Manurewa Principals Association colleagues for their sharing of data and assisting my research inquiry.

The opportunity to visit schools in:

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|--------------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------|
| • Junyuan Primary School | Singapore | (Mdm. Li Mei Law, Principal) |
| • Nanuang Junior College | Singapore | (Mr. Kwek Hoik Chuang, Principal) |
| • Discovery Bay International School | Hong Kong | (Mr. Grant Ramsay, Principal) |
| • Bradbury School | Hong Kong | (Ms. Sandra Webster, Principal) |
| • Glenealy School | Hong Kong | (Ms. Brenda Cook, Principal) |
| • Peak School | Hong Kong | (Mr. Bill Garnett, Principal) |

Allowed me to explore different school cultures and strategic pathways used to promote positive learning engagement and to raise student achievement levels.

Finally, I wish to thank Auckland Primary Principals Association for granting me this study funding which has enabled a time of refreshment and renewed focus for my direction as a Principal and to enhance learning opportunities for our New Zealand students.