

A Teacher's Work

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ABSTRACT: The government has become very fond of saying that the key factor in student underachievement is teacher expectations of students. It is true that teacher quality is the greatest internal school factor affecting student achievement but it is also true that external socio-economic factors have an even greater impact. Teachers themselves must become more political and just as we must have high expectations for our students we must also have high expectations on the government to deliver 'needs based' funding so that all New Zealand children get a high quality education as a right of citizenship.

Schools in low-income communities hit rock-bottom in the mid 1990s. Rolls dropped, funding decreased, boards and principals struggled and teacher morale plummeted. Across the country as the *Tomorrow's Schools* self-management model was set in place the previous infrastructural support from the Education Department was cut away and schools were left to sink or swim on their own resources.

For utterly predictable reasons schools in low income communities were unable to adapt quickly to these changes. The expertise was simply not there on the newly established Boards of Trustees with their wide range of new responsibilities. As a group these schools struggled and became soft, easy targets for Education Review Office (ERO) attacks. The ERO relished their role of using schools in low income communities to establish a clear low end for the new educational marketplace.

At the same time poverty was biting deep in poorer communities with benefit cuts, loss of quality jobs and market rents for state houses. Social problems faced in schools in these communities were spiralling up as families plunged into poverty.

Many parents lost confidence and many of these schools went into a downward spiral. Under the new regime school funding was based on roll growth so that across the country, schools in high income communities grew rapidly and received massive increases in funding which was at the same time stripped from schools in poorer communities.

Among these schools Tangaroa College in Otara, Auckland was no exception. By the late 1990s the school was picking itself up and was beginning a rebuilding process. This year, 2004, the school has a roll of 1100 – up from a low point of around 400 in 1998.

I came to Tangaroa as HoD Science just as this rebuilding was beginning and my job was to help this process in science. The science teachers were excellent. Despite everything that had happened they were dedicated, very hard

working and a credit to education, the school and the community. However, the school had not had an HoD of science for a number of years – another result of the disastrous 1990s – with the role being shared around several teachers. Teachers tended to work individually and the departmental infrastructure which supports high quality teaching and learning across any department was inadequate.

It goes without saying that quality is the key to public education. Setting high education standards and having high expectations of students is the critical driver in education in terms of the difference a school can make once the students have passed through the school gate. Using this as a starting point decisions about departmental policies and procedures become straightforward.

We took a departmental-wide approach to revamp our junior science units, renewed our textbooks at all levels, and began to make up the deficit in quality science equipment which had developed during the low roll, low funding 1990s.

We tackled all our junior and senior assessments - a huge job taken on by our staff on top of adapting to NCEA at all levels. We also established an across the board science skills assessment which all junior students do as a way of tracking learning in the junior school on a year by year basis.

We also worked hard to build other activities into our departmental work to add more colour and texture to our science education programme. This included an annual inter-class science quiz for each of Forms 3 and 4 and an in-school science fair at Form 4 where students undertake their own science investigation on topics of their choice. The most satisfying aspect of this has been the year by year improvement in the quality of student investigations and reports to the point where the quality would easily match that at any school.

We have also sought to use every possible opportunity to give our students experiences outside school both through class trips and taking part in the various science initiatives at the university or polytechnics etc. Students in low income communities can easily miss wider experiences which middle class communities take for granted.

Developing initiatives in literacy has also been an important aspect of our work in science. Poor literacy levels are a fundamental factor in undermining student learning. This is possibly the single greatest obstacle – aside from the social conditions of poverty which exist in the student world outside school – which hinders student achievement. Literacy has had a school-wide approach but we have developed some specific literacy initiatives in science with support from language experts on the staff.

None of these above are revolutionary developments. They represent good quality policy and processes to give the best learning experiences for students.

At the same time we have worked hard to encourage many more of our students to see university study as their first option beyond school. When our science labs were upgraded 3 years ago we asked Professor Michael Walker from the Biology Department at Auckland University to open them in a ceremonial fashion.

Previously I had worked with Michael when I was a science teacher at Western Springs College. There we had worked to pilot a program to bring young Maori students from the university to Western Springs College for one

afternoon per week to work with our students and encourage them to see academic success as worthwhile and achievable.

Michael was initiating a wider programme with the same goals but involving schools from low income communities. We were keen and shortly afterwards we had two Pacific Island students from the university coming into the school for one day per week to work with our students. We put them into classrooms to work alongside classes of students to help demystify university and encourage students to see this option as realistic for themselves. This year will be the 4th year that this programme has been running.

The students come into the school not to mentor individual students but rather to mentor a whole cohort. We believe this is a much more successful approach. Monitoring individual students effectively separates them from their strongest support – their peer group. An individual has difficulty maintaining a dream to attend university when to their peers this is outside the group experience. However if the whole group is mentored and encouraged to make university their first choice then this becomes a natural choice for anyone within that peer group to make.

To support this 'university first' initiative we have also undertaken other initiatives such as:

- At the end of each year we take 150 or so of our Year 9 and 10 students to visit different faculties at the university – again the emphasis is to demystify the university and normalise student choices to enrol.
- Having university lecturers speak to our annual achievers' assemblies for junior and senior students.
- Holding a university information evening for parents and students in the middle of last year. 200 parents turned out on a cold winter evening to hear university staff talk about career and course options for their children.
- The principal and teachers giving a clear consistent message to students about our expectations and the setting of high standards.

The success of this approach is becoming apparent. The university tells us that from 1987 to 2001 we had just 3 students enter the university to do science- based degrees. However more than 10 students are now enrolled in science degree courses at New Zealand universities and we expect a big increase from the end of this year and in each year into the future.

Is this emphasis on university study appropriate for a school in a low income community? Absolutely, yes! Our Minister of Education and the head of the Tertiary Education Commission have both recently downplayed university study in favour of trades training courses and there is certainly a need for people in these roles. However the working class in New Zealand is grossly underrepresented in the professions. We need many more doctors, health workers, lawyers, dentists, accountants, scientists etc with Maori and Pacific Island working class backgrounds. The Minister would do better to target his comments to private schools and schools in high income communities. These are the groups overrepresented in the professions. Certainly it is not a message to give students from working class backgrounds.

It was immensely satisfying over the July school holidays to take a group of our students who are contemplating health-based degree courses to the Auckland University Medical School and having them shown around the buildings by three of our students who have recently entered university to study for medicine, pharmacy and health science degrees. Our job now is to colonise every department within the University with Maori and Pacific students from working class backgrounds.

Having said this it is clear that not every student has the academic ability or the desire to do a degree course at university and I recently took a class of students who are studying electronics at Level 2 (Form 6) to visit the electrical engineering section at our local polytech – the Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT). We spent a very positive afternoon there and saw many lessons in progress and many high quality opportunities for our students. It was a sobering experience however because during the afternoon we did not see a single Maori or Pacific Island student in the classes we were observing despite MIT being in the very heart of the Maori and Pacific community which is Otarā.

Our school is embarking on a specific programme to put this high quality public education provider on the radar screens of our students with a series of student visits and the building of relationships between the professionals at MIT and the teachers at our school.

Teaching is a bottomless pit. There is always a great deal more to be done but it was deeply dismaying to find that within the last month the Minister of Education has said that he has no evidence whatever that the money spent through TFEA (Targeted Funding for Educational Achievement) is making a difference for students in our community. TFEA funding is there to help overcome some of the barriers to learning which working class students face when they reach school because of factors beyond the school gate.

On the same side of the fence the National Party's education spokesperson Don Brash last year claimed that schools in low income communities were "awash with cash". TFEA funding is now under threat. It seems that while schools and teachers move forward the lobbying power of schools in high income communities is undermining our efforts at giving the best for our students. A teacher's work must be not just providing quality educational opportunities but must be actively political as well to counter the cynical expediency of politicians.



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