



The Learning Partners Programme

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At Papatoetoe Central School principal Marilyn Gwilliam and staff have developed a programme called *Learning Partners* where teachers learn with and from each other in a professional learning community. The programme provides a framework that provides direction for two key dimensions of professional practice: effective pedagogy and growing teacher leaders through educational leadership.

Two years ago, through our self-review processes, we agreed that we needed to improve the way we taught writing. In most cases teaching strategies were appropriate for our students, but when we analysed our assessment data across the school we saw inconsistencies in the way evidence was used to inform teaching and learning programmes. We knew that we needed to get better at using data because current New Zealand research highlights the importance of evidence-based teaching. We decided to structure our teacher professional development programme to focus on this. We also wanted to grow our professional learning community by encouraging teacher leadership, so we implemented a programme called *Learning Partners* to address both of these areas.

The importance of pedagogy

We believe that the pedagogy dimension of school leadership is one of the most important. Intrinsic to this dimension is that teachers work collaboratively, developing their pedagogical content knowledge, and sharing evidence-informed practice with each other.

We wanted our teachers to understand that quality teaching is the key influence in high quality student outcomes and that 50 per cent of variance in a school is attributable to differences between teachers and classes (Alton-Lee, 2003).

We wanted them to promote ongoing inquiry into their practices so that they could assess whether any changes they implemented led to improved student achievement (Timperley, 2007).

We also wanted to develop a culture of *appreciative inquiry* where teachers appreciate that there is mileage in observing and learning from each other when the focus of an observation is an aspect of teaching that they are curious about (Joyce and Showers, 2003). We wanted them to open up their professional practice to each other in a supportive, collegial environment.

Educational leadership: sharing leadership

The second dimension underpinning the programme was educational leadership. *Kiwi Leadership for Principals* focuses particularly on the educational leadership that principals provide, but within this dimension is an expectation that effective principals share their leadership to build capacity so that the leadership of the school is strengthened and sustained. This was

one of the key goals of the programme and research in this area has informed the work of our school for the last four years.

In sharing my leadership, I consider that:

- As leaders, we need to engage in daily professional learning with our staff (Fullan, 2005).
- To improve student achievement, schools as “knowledge intensive enterprises” must have widely distributed leadership (Elmore, 2003).
- I should engage expertise wherever it exists and ensure high internal alignment with our school’s vision and goals (Harris, 2004).

In the programme we hoped that teachers would gain confidence around sharing their professional knowledge, take charge of their own learning and share their learning with each other to improve student achievement across the school.



Selecting Partners

Papatoetoe Central is a U7 school and has teams of four or five classes in each year group. Within these year groups each teacher chose a learning partner. We buddied up new staff to make sure that everyone had their own partner. In the first year of the programme we did not include year one beginning teachers, but in the review at the end of the year it was clear that they would like to have been included. So in the second year of the programme, all teachers took part.

How does the programme work?

Teachers work in pairs and observe each other teaching writing for 20 minutes once each term. There is a specific focus for each observation and they provide each other with feedback and feed-forward after the observations. An example of an observation question is: "How is the teacher using assessment data to plan for the next steps in a student's learning?" They also observe two target students in each class – one who is a very capable writer and one who is working below the expected level.

In the debriefing time, teachers first work with their partner to give feedback and feed-forward, then they combine with another pair of learning partners in a professional learning group within their year group team. They are comfortable working with each other because they plan for learning and evaluate assessment data in their teams on an ongoing basis. Each teacher takes a turn in leading the discussions around what worked, what didn't and what the next focus needs to be for student improvement. They plan the focus for the next observation following this reflective process.

What has happened over time?

The programme has become an integral part of what we do at our school. Teachers are released for all aspects of it and they appreciate that this collaborative practice is an important component of their ongoing professional learning. We can observe growth in teacher leaders in the school and see better use of data to inform teaching. Here are some examples of open and direct feedback comments that indicate deep professional respect and learning:

"As a beginning teacher it has greatly helped me understand the learning goals I should be setting for my students and the resources and tactics I need to utilise to help them achieve their potential. Without assessment I am flying blind."

"As TTe in particular has helped me quickly identify areas of strength and weaknesses and areas where students are needing support. I can group for mini lessons/clinics to target these. I am able to give feedback directly to students. It helps us both to identify potential learning goals for writing."

"I appreciate being able to watch someone else teach – to learn from them. As I am not involved in the teaching, I am able to see what's really going on."

Senior leadership team learning

We have learned that it is very important to keep things very simple – for example we used just one area of focus for each observation. Teachers really appreciate clarity of expectation and the time to do this important collaborative work. We released our teachers to do the feedback and feed-forward sessions and then work in their groups as we wanted the work to be seen as integral to their professional practice, not as an "add on" to be done before or after school.

Team leaders' learning

Our team leaders are responsible for leading the moderation and analysis of assessment data at year group level. Each of them believes that our Learning Partners programme has enhanced this work considerably.

"I feel the Learning Partners programme has been an essential learning opportunity. It has been an opportunity for teachers to improve and refine their practice through observation and open discussion about learning and teaching in their classrooms. I strongly believe that the more open a teacher is to looking beyond what they know, the more they are able to make the most of this opportunity".

"I have found the Learning Partners programme very valuable. It has helped me really focus on my teaching of writing and specific strategies for particular children. It has also helped our moderation and discussions at team level".

Where to next?

An evaluation each year has indicated overwhelming support for the programme from all teachers. They have all found it a valuable process because it is simple and manageable. We will continue to have one focus per observation so that we scaffold teachers' learning and establish the focus of the following term's teaching from the reflective process at the end of each term's observation.

The next step is to video teachers so that they can see themselves in the teaching role and use the evidence for ongoing improvement in their teaching, and ultimately therefore in student achievement.

The programme is a very simple way for school leaders to lead learning in a school, to share leadership and to focus on pedagogy, with the touchstone being the improvement in student achievement.

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