



A "Better than Normal" Learning Journey

Shona Oliver

Shona Oliver was an experienced principal when she took up the leadership reins at Palmerston North's Central Normal School in 2009. In this project report Shona notes that even experienced principals can find starting at a new school a real challenge. Here she describes her journey towards building trusting relationships with her new staff.

I took up the role of principal at Central Normal School at the start of 2009. The school is very complex. In addition to being a normal school it has six bilingual classes and a large roll of students with special needs. I needed time to understand these complexities. This meant that trying to bring new developments into the school from day one was both a challenge and a risk. I knew that being a successful principal in one school did not ensure leadership success in a very different context. I also knew I could not transfer what we did at my previous school straight to Central Normal.

I could sink or swim by the way I went about implementing this change. I took a deep breath and began.

Building relational trust

A principal's ability to establish relational trust contributes to building a collaborative learning culture (Kiwi Leadership for Principals, p.16)

The staff at Central Normal were new to me, so I had to try and develop their trust quickly. I asked them to come on a journey with me and told them I was not sure where we would end up!

I started the journey by discussing with staff my belief that raising student achievement relies on teachers having access to quality time and professional development so that confidence, skills and abilities around teaching and learning can be built.

To further develop knowledge, confidence and teaching skills at the school, we needed to plan a programme of support and teacher learning. A decision was made to use our appraisal system as the way to focus teachers on their practice and review its impact on student achievement.

Teachers identified a target group of children as the means to reflect on their practice. Each teacher selected children in their class who they would monitor using achievement data throughout the year. Literacy was used as our curriculum base. Once teachers had identified the children they met with me individually to discuss the reasons for their choices and what professional development they might need.

These groups formed the basis of our major reporting target to the Ministry of Education for the year. So in 2009 our Ministry target had one overall statement about raising student achievement in reading. This included twenty two targets, one from each teacher.

Once the process was underway, board members asked the staff representative how teachers felt about the whole idea. Very positive comments were fed back, particularly around having some input and ownership of the school targets.

I feel teachers are more involved in the target setting of the school.

(Teacher)

Opening up our classrooms

A significant part of this work involved encouraging teachers to open up their classrooms to peers and to have more focused conversations with each other about their teaching. We used several ideas to ensure this happened.

Early on we developed a buddy system for the teachers which lasted throughout the year. We intentionally buddied teachers up with peers from other teaching teams so that they interacted with and visited classrooms from other teaching levels.

We also spent time in professional development meetings conversing with our buddies about what we had changed in our teaching and what was working well. Later in the year we used one of our after-school professional development slots to give teachers time to visit other classrooms. This provided a way of focusing conversations on the learning that was evident in the rooms.

We grouped teachers into threes and they had up to thirty minutes in each other's rooms. Again teachers were grouped across the teaching teams so that they could gain an appreciation of what teaching and learning was like at different class levels.



Feedback from teachers was very positive and we intend to develop this further.

Spending time after school in small groups talking about learning in each other's class was excellent. We need to do this regularly.

Being able to visit other classes in our school to observe and talk about teaching skills has been wonderful.

I have learnt so much from others in my own neighbourhood school.

Meeting with my buddy throughout the year has been great.

In term four teachers met with me to present their learning journeys. Teachers shared the achievement data from their target group and talked about the growth in their own learning. We were able to celebrate and acknowledge the development in teachers' knowledge and teaching skills. I was thrilled with the level of self-reflective practice teachers had undertaken.

Professional development

Planned and focused professional development continued throughout the year. Our Literacy Leader asked teachers what their needs were and organised outside literacy experts to spend time with individual teachers, teams of teachers and the whole staff. Comments from teachers about this experience were very positive.

Having outside experts in the teaching of literacy sharing teaching strategies has been so useful to me.

This year I have had to reflect on my own practice more and not just use the same old teaching strategies.

This has really made me focus on my own teaching and not blame other things for students with low achievement.

My confidence has been boosted this year through looking at my own teaching.

Alongside the target work I have described, we also undertook a major review of our literacy and numeracy teaching and examined what difference it was making for students. We wanted to know what was happening in classrooms. Parents, teachers and children were all surveyed about teaching and learning in these areas. In term four this data was reported back to staff. This was a rigorous process and has certainly provided ideas for planning our next steps.

My own leadership learning

During 2009 I worked with my own critical friend. This is a professional person the school has employed to ask me questions, challenge my thinking, help me to strategically plan and generally keep me focused! We meet twice a term and email each other in between. I wholeheartedly recommend this idea because being a principal can be an overwhelming role at times.

This year has reinforced for me that you cannot lead a school on your own, nor would you want to. Developing and trusting your leadership team is vital to the success of your own leadership. Expecting and wanting high standards of student achievement is an important role of the principal. Providing quality time and opportunities for teachers to achieve this through reflective practice is an important component of a professional development programme. Alongside this sits the maintenance and nurturing of staff culture and trust on which everything else rests.

I am so proud of my staff and their readiness to begin this journey. Our teachers are a very reflective and dedicated group who want to be the best for our children. In the year ahead our learning and strategic thinking will continue... after all, as a school very involved in pre-service teacher education we need to be "better than normal."

