



Motueka High School Storied Experience: Teaching and learning strategies

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ABSTRACT

In 2005 Motueka High School became involved in the Ministry of Education's Enhancing Effective Practice in Special Education (EePiSE) project. The following is the story of how we integrated this action research project into our existing Enhanced Programme Funding (EPF). The project was supported by researcher Don Brown and led by our head of department (HoD), Learners' Support, Jan Trafford. A range of teachers across the school, including the literacy coordinator, Tracey Ellery, were involved in the project. Both initiatives aimed at upskilling all teachers, enhancing literacy across the school and were based around students with moderate special teaching needs. We collated quantitative and qualitative data mainly in the area of literacy but also in numeracy and behaviour. These two programmes have made an impact on the school's efforts to increase learning outcomes.

Practice Paper

Keywords

Action research, effective practices, learning strategies, literacy programmes, professional development, teacher development, teaching strategies.

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning ... our principal Rex Smith was noticing that our (then) school certificate results were below average. After investigating possible reasons for this, he found that Motueka High School programmes were up-to-date, relevant, and he believed that the teachers were hard working. This led to two thoughts: what were the students' abilities and skills at the time of the Year 9 intake, and were the teachers adequately equipped to meet the needs of the incoming students?

The primary assessment used at Motueka High School for Year 9 students is the Supplementary Test of Achievement in Reading (STAR). In 2003, 26% of Year 9 students arrived at high school with a stanine 1 or 2 on their STAR, and in the 2004 intake there were 35.5%. We concluded that students with high literacy learning needs were enrolling at our school and we needed to do something to address the problem.

The low STAR results along with Progress and Achievement Test (PAT) scores led to the school applying for the Ministry of Education EPF programme. Our learning programme was to focus on students with moderate literacy needs and began in 2004.

A Year 9 literacy class was set up. The target students for this class were a group of students who we hoped would achieve the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) level 1 if they were given some extra literacy support. Approximately 16 students were selected for the initial class and most had achieved stanine 1 or 2. The targeted students received the same curriculum programme and assessments as their Year 9 peers, however, they were supported in class through lesson adaptation and delivery by two teachers, one of them specialising in literacy. The supported students were expected to write less, to talk and discuss their ideas and learning more, and there was a focus on individual reading. To encourage successful learning, subject-specific vocabulary and the relevance of the lesson to the students' life experiences were stressed. A close liaison was maintained with the parents and caregivers of these students.

A second part of the programme focused on professional development for all staff in literacy strategies. Experiences from using these strategies were shared and discussed at regular professional development meetings. Surveys regarding this professional development found over 90% of the staff were using the literacy strategies in their classrooms and over 75% believed these strategies had helped their students.

One of the key outcomes is student success at level 1 of NCEA. Thus, when our school was accepted for the EePiSE project, we were able to explore in more depth the needs of our targeted students, and the methods we used to sustain and enhance their ongoing learning. At the same time as we started this project, we received feedback from many parents that their children were able to read well but that their spelling was very poor. This was something we needed to consider as well.

ACTION PHASE

Cooperative learning was a strong focus of our action research. Brown and Thompson (2000), state that cooperative learning has the goal of 'improving the academic skill of all team members enabling them to face the world with more confidence and with improved levels of skill' (p.13).

With this in mind, and in consideration of parent feedback, we were encouraged by our researcher Don Brown to implement a spelling programme across all Year 9 English classes, in effect increasing our target population to all Year 9 students. The following is a brief outline of the programme we implemented in Term 3, 2005.

Year 9 spelling programme

1. All students are pre-tested on level 1 words.
2. Students are paired with a partner they work with each spelling session.
3. Partners test each other on unknown words from the pre-test, using groups of 10 words at a time.
4. Students then complete a variety of spelling activities on unknown words.
5. Students are retested by their partners and then go through the same process with the next set of words.
6. Once the students have learnt all the level 1 words, a post-test of 50 words is given.
7. Students will then move on to level 2.

Teachers were asked to support the spelling programme in other curriculum areas by introducing curriculum key words for each lesson and using flash cards. The flash card programme developed by Don Brown reinforced new curriculum vocabulary and concepts. The programme was supported by staff-wide professional development and was left up to individual teachers. There were varying degrees of programme utilisation by staff but the comments were positive from those who did implement the strategies.

What grew from this?

The next stage of our action research project involved our resource teacher of learning and behaviour (RTLB) working with the Year 10 literacy class. This class had been supported in 2005 as the Year 9 literacy class. Under the guidance of Don Brown the RTLB introduced a paired writing programme to the class to make spelling relevant, to increase confidence in using words, and to improve cooperative work skills. The programme involved the RTLB working with four pairs of students. He taught them how to praise one another, how to expand on ideas and encourage writing, and how to correct their peers in a non-threatening manner. A consequence of this particular programme was a small paired maths project. This involved some Year 13 students working with some identified Year 11 students who were requiring help to enable them to achieve NCEA level 1. This programme only ran for four one-hour sessions but all four Year 11 students went on to achieve in their Term 1 assessments.

Both of these programmes, while small, were successful in that all the students involved in them enjoyed the experience. The main comment was that students found it easier to ask a fellow student for help than their teacher. The tutors also gained from the experience. They recognised that in order to teach a skill they had to synthesise that skill first themselves. The Year 10 students in particular experienced a high degree of increased confidence. These were students, who despite some intensive literacy input throughout their schooling, (reading recovery, RTLB intervention, teacher aide support) were still at stanine 1 and 2 on STAR, and reading at a 5-7-year-old level. For most of them it was the first time they were in a position of skill and knowledge at school.

OTHER OUTCOMES

Both the spelling programme and the literacy professional development have had some very positive outcomes in other curriculum areas. Many teachers have adopted a whiteboard format that includes topic-specific key words and lesson aims. An initially reluctant teacher has now realised that with the introduction of NCEA, subject-specific language and literacy has become very important to his subject, and has spent considerable time creating process charts with key words and definitions for display in classrooms. Similar things have occurred with other teachers. There has also been a great deal of sharing of resources and ideas from department to department and we are beginning to see a change in junior school curriculum delivery.

The second part of cooperative learning was to improve the way in which students engaged with each other while completing tasks. An important aspect of this was group or class identity: 'We do best as individuals when we have learned within a supportive group' (Brown & Thompson, 2000 p.16).

For our literacy class this was something that happened quite quickly over the course of the year. The students saw themselves as a cohesive and supportive group as the following quotes testify:

... because you are not shy and you are confident and you can stand up in front of them and say a speech or something.

... because then you know the people in your class and you can work with them better.

... there is no bullying.

Many parents have said that this is the first time their child has enjoyed school:

... he grew in confidence and as he was in a class with other students with learning needs he was free to be himself (parent of a child in our literacy class).

REFLECTION

The questions we asked ourselves at the end of our project were these: What has been challenging? What have we learnt? What would we do differently next time?

The challenging parts were starting and finding the time to coordinate and carry out the research. It took time to select a topic that was relevant, purposeful and fitted into what we were already involved in. Then, part-way through the project we had major staff changes which impacted on the continuity of the research. Working with already busy teachers was also difficult at times. A lot of different teachers were involved in the research and they all had to find time to do the extra work. When we ask what have we learnt, it is important to point out that our action research is really still at the beginning stage. The action research model is a cyclical one and for us at the moment our research is posing more questions than it is answering. We are now ready to move into the next cycle.

What we can report to date, is that there has been a move from technocratic teaching to a manner more encompassing of the teacher as a professional, a teacher who while guided by documentation, works reflectively and makes curriculum judgements according to individual class and student needs.

Education is a powerful tool and curriculum is a key component. At school, we have in our hands the ability to not only reproduce life as it exists outside of school, but to produce life chances for our students. School should not be a mirror of society at large; it should be an agent of change. EEPiSE has enabled us to enhance our journey of change and for us that has been one of the most positive aspects of this project. We are opening the eyes of our teachers to new teaching methods, and opening the doors of success for our students.

And next time? Firstly, we hope there will be a next time. Secondly, we have learnt that we need to have very clear objectives and outcomes at the start of our project. Although we realise that this doesn't mean the initial objectives will remain the same, it does give us purpose and direction at the start. Such is the nature of action research.

REFERENCES

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AUTHOR PROFILE

Tracey Ellery has a background in special education teaching and is currently the literacy coordinator at Motueka High School where she has worked for the past seven years. She has two young children one of whom who started school this year, an event that enabled her to see education as both parent and teacher. She is studying for her Master of Teaching and Learning focusing on students with high literacy needs.

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