

Beginning the journey into educational research

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Introduction

This chapter identifies both the background and impetus for the study I am currently engaged in. In this doctoral research I intend to explore the reasons for a disparity of achievement across the eight schools within the Wainuiomata cluster, with a particular focus on leadership, school culture and professional learning communities in these schools. This doctoral study is my first step in a journey into educational research. While still in the very early stages of my study, I have been able to begin the process of identifying the issue, posing the research question and exploring the scholarly literature. This research is planned to be completed by December 2012.

My own teaching experience of 26 years has been in state integrated Catholic schools. New Zealand Catholic schools have been integrated with the state since 1975. All funding for staff and operations comes from the state, and all property is funded and maintained by the Catholic Diocese in which the school is located. My teaching experience has for the most part been in Catholic schools in low socioeconomic areas with high percentages of Pacific Island students. I was appointed as principal to St Patrick's School Wainuiomata in January 2002. In 2004, a decision was made to merge two existing Catholic Schools, St Matthew's and St Patrick's, into St Claudine Thévenet School, a new full primary school (Years 1-8) opening in January 2005, and it is at this new school that I now hold the position of principal. This role holds for me much responsibility and much passion. I try to work in ways which, I believe, best enhance academic outcomes for all students. The driver for undertaking research is gaining a better understanding of how this can be done.

In 2002, I was fortunate to participate in the pilot programme 'First Time Principals', funded by the Ministry of Education and provided by the University of Auckland. This programme was designed to enable new principals to undertake intensive professional development in leadership and learning. The programme was undertaken in each school holiday period for the first year of principalship. At the time, I found this programme both daunting and rewarding. I realise now that it created a very solid platform for my ongoing professional learning and development.

In my second year of principalship we took part in an Education Review Office (ERO) visit. ERO is charged by the Ministry of Education with undertaking reviews within all New Zealand schools, to identify good practice and areas for improvement in both instructional programmes and compliance. The visit involves four ERO team members spending three days in the school, with a report day on the fourth day. The review process is viewed by many as a threat and intrusion. However, I see it an opportunity to review current practice and to gain feedback and advice on ways to ensure that we, as a school, are providing the best possible opportunity for student success over a range of academic, social and cultural areas. This collaborative approach was acknowledged by the ERO team members in their report:

The new principal, who began at the beginning of 2002, provides strong professional leadership and sound advice and guidance to the board. She has introduced a culture of shared decision making and is well supported by her deputy and assistant principals. Considerable work has been undertaken to strengthen management systems and documentation to better guide curriculum delivery across the school. Teachers are encouraged to reflect on their practice, through whole-staff discussion and professional development in order to improve outcomes for students. (ERO Report, 2003: 2)

This report was the first indicator for me that particular systems, behaviours and practices could have a more positive impact than others on student outcomes and achievement. From 2003 we, as a school, began to identify areas for improvement. This focus for improvement was enhanced by the opportunity to work with other schools in the Wainuiomata area.

The report also identified areas for improvement which enabled the staff to have a clearer picture of current student achievement and next steps. It needs to be noted that on my entry into St Patrick's School, there was a large amount of assessment data available. However, none of the data available was benchmarked, normed or analysed. This was a major concern, as teachers believed they were doing a great job, yet could not articulate their justifications for their belief. My first steps were to:

- Initiate a new school wide assessment plan, which enabled us to collect and analyse assessment information in literacy and numeracy to establish baseline data about levels of students' achievement

- Identify specific areas for improvement
- Plan actions to be taken to lift performance.

This first ERO visit in 2003 was a real driver for my professional learning and practice. It began in my own school and merged well into the local Wainuiomata context.

Forming a cluster of schools in Wainuiomata

Wainuiomata was designed to accommodate families on low incomes, and much of the housing in this area was planned and built by the State in the 1950s. In the 1950s and 1960s, Wainuiomata grew very rapidly. Many schools were built to accommodate this new growth. Over recent years, the number of young people in Wainuiomata has been declining. In 1991, according to census data, there were 3,636 students in Wainuiomata schools. The 2001 census reported 3,127 students. At that time, it was estimated that in 20 years' time there would be approximately 2,000 students in school.

In 2002 there were 10 primary schools (Years 1–6 and 1–8), two intermediate schools (Years 7–8), and two secondary schools (Years 9–13) servicing 3,127 students. The prediction of a decline in numbers led the Ministry of Education to undertake a review of the provision of schooling within the area. It could be argued that this review reflected a concern about the cost of maintaining half full schools. The review, based on the predictions after the 2001 census, indicated the need to reduce the number of schools within the Wainuiomata Valley. The option of closing schools was not supported by the local community, so a decision was made to merge schools within the area, reducing the total number of schools from 14 to eight.

Merging schools was a new initiative in New Zealand, and guidelines for merging developed as the process unfolded. Essentially, students from each of the merged schools would begin in a new school environment with a new school name. This process was intended to allow for a smoother transition and recreation of cultures. The purpose for this was to ensure that students from one school were not swallowed up by another in the process of change. Merging created a new school culture and a new beginning.

As part of the merger process, funding was made available for schools to develop property and create opportunities for enhanced educational outcomes within the Valley

(Greening, 2008). This funding, named The Joint School Initiative Funding (JSIF), is based on a per head formula. It is to ‘allow the co-operative development of projects for community wide multi-school initiatives for the improvement of education achievement within the community’ (Greening, 2008: 5).

All eight Wainuiomata schools formed into a cluster to undertake the process of designing a project intended to enhance educational outcomes for all students within the Valley. The forming of this cluster was a significant movement in how schools worked together. There had always been collegiality amongst principals. However, this collegiality did not extend past the local management issues of the local schools. Wainuiomata was one of the first areas within Wellington to work in this new way. A ‘cluster’ was clearly defined by the principals’ group as a group of schools willing to learn and work together for the enhancement of all students within the Valley. The decision to form a cluster had implications for:

- Assessment, data analysis and sharing – common tools and trends
- Professional learning groups – principals, literacy leaders, cross-school year group teachers
- Valley-wide (cluster) expectations
- Teacher assessment and cross school observations

Student achievement

Initial data indicated that every year group was achieving below the National Mean in reading. This indicated a need to begin with a focus on literacy across the Valley. The Wainuiomata Educational Literacy Development (WELD) project began in 2005. It aimed to show evidence of improvement in four main areas: student achievement, teacher content knowledge, transfer of literacy pedagogy into practice, and the development, support and implementation of professional learning communities.

The project identified specific objectives in the area of improved student achievement. These are set out in Table 1.

Table 1: Achievement objectives for WELD 2004

Target group	Achievement Expectation	Timeframe
Students starting school	95% will have attended a recognised preschool education environment	By end 2007
Year 1-4	90% will be reading, comprehending and writing at their chronological age	By end 2007
School leavers	80% will have achieved 8 credits in literacy and numeracy (NCEA)	By end 2007

Teacher content knowledge

The focus for this aim was to assess the current level of content knowledge teachers had in the area of literacy. This assessment was undertaken through the use of a scenario, developed using a fictional classroom reading lesson. Teachers were asked to identify the level of effectiveness of the practices in this situation. Based on the responses of teachers, levels of content knowledge were assessed and gaps targeted to ensure improvement in the content knowledge of the teaching of literacy.

Transfer of literacy pedagogy into practice

Once a clear picture of their content knowledge levels was obtained, teachers were observed in order to assess their practice in the teaching of literacy. It was thought that there might be discrepancies between what teachers knew and what teachers did in the teaching of literacy.

Standardised observations were undertaken by independent observers, and data from these were collated and shared within and across schools.

Developing and supporting the implementation of professional learning communities

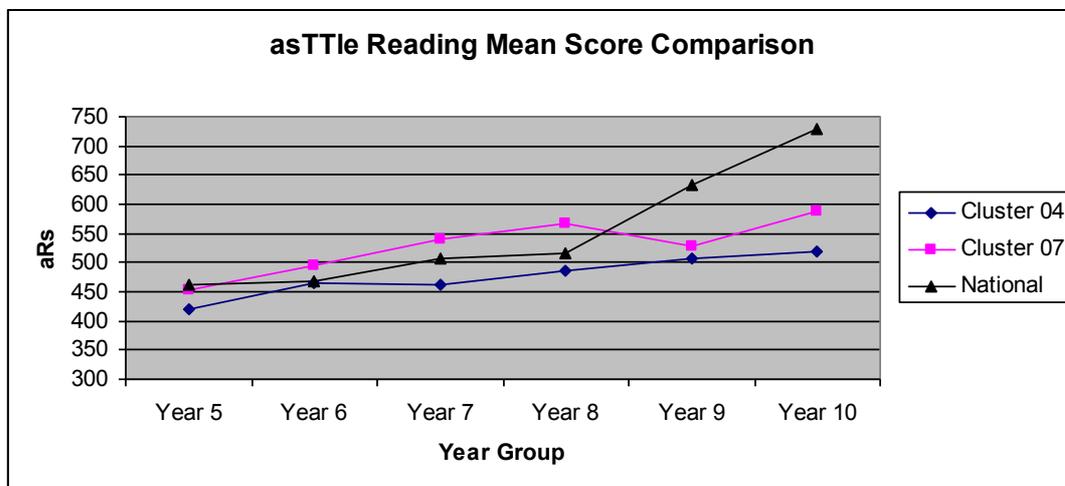
Professional learning communities (PLCs) were set up and facilitated by the Project Co-ordinator. This allowed for all schools to undertake this process with some level of individuality. An essential feature of a professional learning community is the willingness of teachers to ‘deprivatise’ their practice; that is, teachers would be working in collaboration with their colleagues, rather than in isolation in their classrooms (Timperley & Parr, 2004).

As the project developed and grew, questions continued to be asked about what other practices could have a positive impact on achievement. More pointedly, what were the leadership teams within the Valley doing to improve their knowledge and practice?

Variations in achievement

This project lasted for four years. Cumulative cluster data indicated some movement in literacy achievement levels across the Valley, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Wainuiomata and National asTTle Reading Mean Score Comparison, 2004-2007



The results shown in Figure 1 are based on collective data. While the cluster-wide mean levels of achievement had improved, further investigation identified that not all schools within the cluster had achieved the same degree of improvement. The end-of-project data reflected a disparity of achievement across schools within the cluster, after four years of the schooling improvement project.

Despite the eight Wainuiomata schools drawing students from similar socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, and receiving similar levels of professional support through the schooling improvement project, some schools within the cluster had high levels of academic achievement, while others had low levels. This disparity in levels of achievement did not differ greatly from the overall disparities within the national picture. While New Zealand's education system has many strengths, and many students achieve very well compared with students in other countries, performance on international studies consistently shows disparities in achievement across the population that are as large as or greater than the international averages (Marshall et al., 2008).

Research project on understanding and reducing achievement disparities

The important question which arose from the results was this: Why, within a group of schools which are so similar to each other, and which have participated in the same improvement project, should there be a degree of variation in achievement levels similar to that which exists within the whole national achievement picture?

This was the question which formed the basis of the research project on which I began work in January 2009. I intend to extend existing New Zealand research in this area, and develop a deeper understanding of: what impacts on sustained student achievement; how these impacts can best be addressed; and how schooling improvement projects can best enhance academic outcomes for students within and across schools.

The disparities in achievement across the New Zealand population consistently shown in student performance in international studies are often explained as relating largely to socioeconomic disparities. However, similar disparities have been shown among schools of

similar cultural and socioeconomic circumstances within the Wainuiomata cluster. The aim of this research is, first, to seek to understand the problem of disparity of achievement across schools within one community which appear to be similar to each other; and secondly, to contribute some understanding of how we may deal with this problem.

A review of current literature in this area has indicated four major concepts to be explored: learning organisations, school culture, teacher professional development, and leadership. Through this research, it is intended to give those who develop and implement local policy (and potentially, those responsible for national policy) increased understanding and knowledge of how to facilitate instructional improvement in order to promote improved outcomes for all students. A particular aim is to help the Wainuiomata cluster teacher leaders to lead and contribute to enhanced professional practice in their schools, through the systematic collection, analysis and dissemination of evidence related to student achievement and classroom practice.

This research project forms the basis of my doctoral studies, which I am undertaking through the Australian Catholic University in Brisbane. The EdD (Doctorate of Education) is a structured 18-month process, consisting of three modules: Research Problem Exploration in Context; Literature and Theoretical Critique; and Research Paradigms, Methodologies and Methods. Each module requires me to attend the University three times, enabling me to meet with both of my supervisors, develop ideas, and refine my writing. In 2009 I completed the first module and began the second. The third module begins in January 2010. With ethics approval, I plan to begin my data collection in August 2010. I have found the process very challenging and rewarding, and the grant I have received from CERT has been invaluable to my participation in this study.

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