

## Shaping the vision

### How the relationship between research and practice informs and enriches school-based curriculum development

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#### Introduction

Early in 2007, the principal of Southbridge School in Canterbury overheard a remark from a colleague that the new entrant children of 2007 will be in their final year of secondary school in 2020. This chance remark was the genesis of *2020VISION*, a programme of school-based curriculum development aimed at transforming the educational experiences of children at Southbridge School to equip them for the opportunities and challenges of life as young adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*2020VISION* is Southbridge School's response to the New Zealand Curriculum, particularly to the invitation in that document for schools to substantially redefine their relationships with their communities.

The New Zealand Curriculum sets the direction for teaching and learning in English-medium New Zealand schools. But it is a framework rather than a detailed plan. This means that while every school curriculum must be clearly aligned with the intent of this document, schools have considerable flexibility when determining the detail. (Ministry of Education, 2008: 37.)

Freedom to design a local curriculum is both an opportunity and a threat. It invites educators to de-privatise their practice, both among themselves and with their school communities; but this requires them to confront deep-seated issues of power, autonomy and professional confidence.

How do we – teachers – successfully confront and deconstruct those aspects of the current model of schooling, many of which are personal to the extent of being subliminal, that stand in the way of change? How do we enable multiple voices – students, parents, other professionals and the wider community – to form meaningful partnerships that expand and enrich children's education?

As we began our journey towards *2020VISION* we discovered that, while there exists a large body of research into school leadership and school improvement, there is very little research into school-based curriculum development that explores the relationship between school and community. The few New Zealand studies that have been conducted in this area of school development offer insights on how to improve the relationship between school and home (Ramsay et al., 1993; Bolstad, 2004) or how to address deficits between school and home that affect student achievement (Bishop et al., 2003), but offer only scant guidance on how to sustain and deepen the change process beyond the early innovation phase, or beyond addressing a particular problem or deficit. Resources to support the implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum are also limited, tending to be either digital ‘snapshots’ of innovative practice, or conversations among groups of school leaders groping towards enlightenment. One thing was clear: *2020VISION* would need more support than this if it was to succeed.

The principal also realised that there could be value in recording the story of *2020VISION* as a longitudinal case study of transformational change in response to the New Zealand Curriculum. How does a school manage the multiple challenges and opportunities of the new curriculum, while continuing to perform the day-to-day functions of a busy organisation? What actions must a school take to realise the potential of the New Zealand Curriculum? How can long-term transformational change be sustained amid the competing demands of the many stakeholders in a school?

In July 2007, the principal discussed the project with Dr Susan Lovett and Associate Professor Alison Gilmore at Canterbury University. By this time the *2020VISION* project had been launched at Southbridge School with a strategic planning day involving all staff, the board of trustees and a group of parents. At this event, the school’s recent development was reviewed, the New Zealand Curriculum was introduced, vision and values were reaffirmed and ten broad areas for development were identified.

This work formed the basis of discussions with Dr Lovett and Professor Gilmore, from which the idea emerged to engage them in *2020VISION* through a research project. This began with two broad aims: to provide a model for other schools of how to conduct community consultation towards the outcome of designing and implementing a local curriculum; and to provide information for the Ministry of

Education and other stakeholders on the challenges and opportunities encountered by schools implementing the New Zealand Curriculum.

The research team intended that the project, like *2020VISION* itself, would be a long-term commitment. The initial phase of the research sought to address two questions:

1. How does a school and its community design and implement a local curriculum in response to the expectations of the revised New Zealand Curriculum?
2. What effect, if any, does a locally developed curriculum have upon student engagement with learning?

A third question to be addressed in future phases of the research project was:

3. How effective is ongoing consultation in transforming the relationship between a school and its community?

A successful application for funding was made to Cognition Education Research Trust (CERT). The research project began in October 2007 with funding for one year. Further funding from CERT was secured in December 2008 to continue the project through 2009.

### **Exploring the research partnership**

From the outset, the research project was designed as a reflexive-action model, with researchers acting as collaborators in the *2020VISION* project, and research findings progressively informing subsequent actions. This approach to research of school-based curriculum development had proven successful in an earlier, much larger-scale New Zealand project (Ramsay et al., 1993). In that project, conducted under the management of the then Department of Education at the outset of Tomorrow's Schools, 28 schools throughout New Zealand worked with both developers and researchers to implement community consultation. Developers, mainly Ministry of Education field officers, worked as coaches in schools, initiating and trialling strategies for curriculum reform. The research team, under the guidance of the University of Waikato, provided ongoing evaluation on the change process while also

monitoring, evaluating and giving feedback on the work of the developers (Ramsay et al., 1993: 4).

More recently, the Ministry of Education's Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) promotes partnerships between researchers and teachers. A review of 55 TLRI projects by Garvey Berger & Baker (2008) acknowledges the real issue of connecting research with practice in an educational context:

...in most cases we have not been able to figure out how to make the tight connections between policy, practice, and research that will help put the research into practice.

(Garvey Berger & Baker, 2008:1)

The *2020VISION* project consciously addresses the deficit between research and practice both in its desired outcomes and in the nature of the partnership between Southbridge School and the researchers. Garvey Berger and Baker identified two archetypes of practitioner/researcher partnerships emerging from the TLRI: 'practitioner as research assistant' and 'researcher and practitioner as associates' (2008: 4). *2020VISION* in its early phase demonstrates strong elements of the latter, with the rare distinction of being a research project initiated by the practitioner.

From the outset, the role of the research team (Gilmore, Lovett and Michelle Clarke) was to gather data through interviews, observations and a student engagement survey; to share the data with the principal, staff and others through verbal and written reports; and to report to CERT and the project's policymaking partners (the Ministry of Education and the New Zealand Educational Institute) through milestone reports. However, it was also understood that the research team would perform some of the functions of the developers in the project reported by Ramsay et al. This understanding grew out of a previous successful research project undertaken by the principal and Dr Lovett which explored teacher development through quality learning circles (Lovett & Verstappen, 2004). Dr Lovett participated in that project as both researcher and coach.

The research team began its work by spending time at Southbridge School, familiarising itself with the people and the place. Researchers attended meetings of the school community, a school picnic and staff professional learning meetings. Researchers recorded their reflections from these events. Throughout 2008 they

conducted a range of interviews with the principal, teachers and support staff, and with children, parents and members of the wider community. A student engagement survey was also conducted with all children.

The research team has formed a close relationship with the principal, who holds a dual role as both a co-director of the project and a research participant. In his role as co-director, the principal's tasks have included drafting the research proposal to CERT, identifying the project's aims and research questions, liaising with funding and policy-making partners, and contributing to decisions about data-gathering, budgeting and future directions. As a participant in the research, the principal is not directly involved in drawing conclusions from data or writing milestone reports.

Team meetings to discuss the management of the research project inevitably include discussions about the nature and meaning of data and, in turn, have become a source of additional data and of the future focus for both the research project and the wider application of *2020VISION* at Southbridge School. An indicator of the strength of the partnership is the confidence of the researchers to contribute to *2020VISION* outcomes with ideas drawn from their own research and experiences, or by directing the principal and staff towards other relevant research.

By attending professional learning meetings, the researchers also established their credibility among the staff and contributed further towards the process of change. By the time a second strategic planning day was held in October 2008, the research team was widely accepted as having a stake in *2020VISION*. They offered ideas in discussions about the future of the school and its curriculum, and shared their findings from the research data and their perspectives as 'critical friends' of the project. At all times, the researchers have shown delicacy in balancing the roles of collaborator and data-gatherer. For example, at staff development meetings researcher participation tends more towards asking questions to promote reflection among staff, and offering suggestions about relevant resources and ideas to inform next steps, rather than offering advice or challenging teacher perceptions.

### **How the research partnership supports *2020VISION***

In the Teacher Professional Learning and Development Best Evidence Synthesis Iteration, Timperley et al. discovered that 'engagement of external expertise, often researchers, was a feature of nearly all core studies' – that is, those studies that were

shown to be effective in promoting professional learning (Timperley et al, 2008: xxix). They continue:

the need for external expertise is understandable ... because the substantive new learning involved in most core studies required teachers to learn new content and skills and to think about their existing practice in new ways. It is unlikely that any group of professionals would be able to manage this level of new learning without support and challenge from someone with expertise in the area. (Timperley et al, 2008: xxix.)

These statements throw light on the role of the research team at Southbridge School. *2020VISION* is not a professional development project as this is commonly defined. It does not aim to address a specific dimension of teacher learning, such as curriculum or pedagogy. *2020VISION* is a broad strategic process that nevertheless embraces specific disciplines and highly focussed activities. Other professional development programmes happen within, and through, *2020VISION*.

For example, since the beginning of 2008 the principal and teaching staff have been engaged in the Literacy Professional Development Project (LPDP), which is facilitated by a literacy expert working in the school. The LPDP more closely matches the model of external expertise described above than the work of the *2020VISION* research team, whose role is to inform and explain rather than to facilitate the *2020VISION* project.

The researchers do not claim, nor are they expected to offer, expertise in the many facets of school life that are touched upon in the project. Neither are the researchers engaged to support the staff of the school to conduct research. As noted above, this project does not fit neatly into either the paradigm of ‘practitioner as research assistant’ or ‘researcher and practitioner as associates’. While it may be desirable for staff to be more active in the research project (Sharp et al., 2006), their current involvement is as participants in interviews and in their consideration and application of research findings. The exception, as already noted, is the principal whose role, to date, has been pivotal in shaping the *2020VISION* and in linking the vision with the research project.

So what benefit does the research partnership bring, remembering that the research was initiated by the principal and is funded by CERT as a partnership

project? How does it support the school to realise its vision of a 21<sup>st</sup> century curriculum? What are the benefits to the research community and to its policymaking partners, the MOE and NZEI?

### **Benefits to the school**

Despite this research project being somewhat outside Timperley et al.'s definitions of purposeful engagement of external expertise, there are several ways in which the research contributes to the success of *2020VISION*.

**Accountability:** Participants in *2020VISION*, particularly the principal, are motivated to maintain their commitment to the project by knowing that from time to time they will be interviewed by the research team, and will be expected to give an account of what they have done and the outcomes of their actions. As the date for the implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum draws close, this additional motivation to address its expectations has proven worthwhile. Through the *2020VISION* project and its associated research, Southbridge School is well placed to give effect to both the form and the intent of the New Zealand Curriculum.

**Access to ideas:** The research project contributes to the construction of a strong theoretical base among the staff by providing access to research and ideas relevant to the project, and through researcher participation in staff professional learning activities. For example, researchers guided the principal to important research into home-school partnerships conducted by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research (Bull et al., 2008). This work includes international case studies that link effective home-school practices to student learning, affirming the consultation already happening at Southbridge School and, more importantly, offering ideas for future activities that will promote improved student achievement.

The contributions of researchers to staff professional learning meetings and the resources they provide to staff through the principal enable a sense of greater efficacy among staff. It is rare in education that school staff are able to study aspects of their own organisation in partnership with academic researchers. The knowledge that they are constructing their own curriculum, one that is nevertheless well grounded in theory, fosters ownership, commitment and esprit de corps.

**Critical reflection:** A willingness and ability to reflect on their performance and upon wider issues of school management and educational theory are common among successful school leaders (Notman & Henry, 2009: 41). In this project, the principal's conversations with the research team and the findings from the milestone reports stimulate reflection on the progress of *2020VISION*. To some degree the research team acts as mentor to the principal. The principal is encouraged to describe, explain and justify actions, to consider alternatives, to engage with the unexpected or the less successful actions and to seek improvements. It is a rich and rewarding discourse.

A direct outcome of this relationship is apparent in the principal's actions to distribute leadership within the school. The 2008 milestone report highlighted the extent to which *2020VISION* was directed by the principal:

There is an urgent need for more ownership and understanding of the vision to come from the teachers, parents and students. Leadership will need to include the work of the more experienced staff and the new deputy principal.

(Gilmore, Lovett & Clarke, 2008: 22)

Conversations among the principal and researchers helped the principal to construct a model of how *2020VISION* was shaping after the first year and a half. The model was beginning to appear dangerously top-heavy. This was partly a reflection of the principal's natural leadership style and also a consequence of other factors, including a high turnover of staff in the previous twelve months. Armed with this insight, the principal, senior staff and board of trustees undertook a major review of school management. Six months later the model looks different: the DP and AP have assumed responsibility for enacting many of the *2020VISION* programmes and initiatives, enabling the principal to continue steering the long-term strategic plan and supporting teachers to get to grips with the new curriculum. At the same time greater efforts have been made to include more parents in the project. The DP now facilitates a parent focus group with the specific purpose of developing and implementing ideas to support parents as teachers.

**Status:** The research gives *2020VISION* status within the school and its community:

Researcher presence at the school and regular reports of our activities to the school's parents in the weekly newsletters have ... raised the profile and given the project an added status because of university staff showing support, interest and a willingness to be involved... (Gilmore, Lovett, Verstappen & Clarke, 2008: 3).

The research team enjoys a high profile among a group of parents, particularly board members and parents who are involved in consultative focus groups, many of whom have been interviewed for the research project. Their contacts with the researchers are the impetus for these parents to take a greater interest in *2020VISION*. The link with CERT, although less widely understood among the community, is also valued. There is recognition and a sense of pride within the school that on their own initiative, they have been able to secure the interest of CERT and the expertise of the University of Canterbury. Usually schools, if they are engaged in research at all, do so only as the subject of somebody else's project. Ownership has made it easier for the principal to 'sell' the project to the staff and community as being worth the resources of time, energy and money committed to it.

### **Benefits to research and policy**

The *2020VISION* project seeks to contribute to our understanding of how school-based curriculum development can happen within a framework of devolved educational management. Compared with most other jurisdictions, New Zealand schools operate in an environment where central government takes an almost recklessly hands-off approach. The New Zealand Curriculum reasserts this paradigm, expecting each school to construct the curriculum in a way that is unique to itself and its community. Many school leaders and boards of trustees view this more as a challenge than an opportunity. Many remain uncertain about how to implement the New Zealand Curriculum, or what the Ministry of Education's expectations are about how the curriculum-in-action will look.

From our conversations with principals and participation in curriculum development meetings, it is clear that most schools are approaching the new curriculum either through the key competencies or by reviewing their vision, values and principles, but few are doing this in meaningful consultation with their

communities. Nor do they know how to go about talking to their communities in ways that break out of traditional relationships of power and information-sharing.

Our wish is that the *2020VISION* research will contribute ideas about how a school can engage with its community, and how it can reconstruct some fundamental relationships of learning among children, parents and teachers, with the result of improving student engagement. Furthermore, we believe the *2020VISION* research project contributes to our understanding of how to bridge gaps between research and practice in educational settings. The project is small and resourced to a level where it is able to capture only parts of the process. The research team's vision is to strengthen the partnerships between Southbridge School, the University of Canterbury and Cognition to build other research activity around the core project and, over time, construct a highly detailed mosaic of how school-based curriculum development can transform teaching and learning in a primary school.

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