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Investigating responses to diversity in a secondary environment

Linwood College is an urban, lower decile school with a student population that is diverse in many ways in terms of: culture and race, academic ability, attitude to schooling, home socioeconomic status, personality and personal interests, and ability to cope with instructional English.

The school became a partner in this research project because it has a commitment to embrace and celebrate aspects of diversity within its strategic vision, its policy statements, and curriculum implementation. At the same time, staff wrestle with what are often considered to be oppositional pressures of curriculum delivery, assessment requirements, and the fostering of meaningful learning for diverse learners. The school wanted to examine what it currently does in terms of responding to diversity and wanted to investigate ways to narrow the gap between policy and practice. This project represents a beginning to a much longer process.

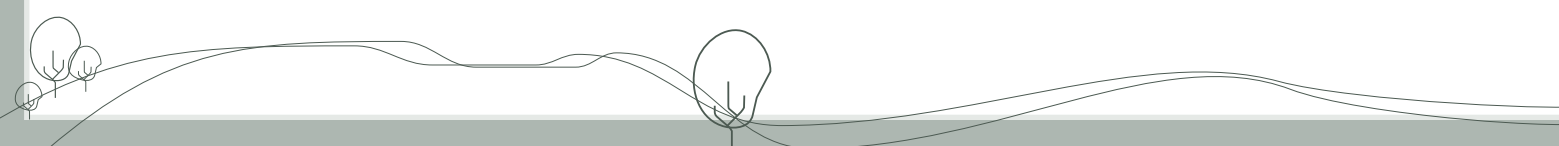
Aims and objectives

The aims of the project were twofold:

- to investigate how the school was responding to the diversity of its students
- to build capacity and capability within the school for staff to research their own practice, and thus build a research platform for change.

The objectives were to:

- examine school-wide systems and policies
- examine departmental strategies
- examine teaching practices
- sample student voices concerning a wide range of outcomes
- develop the skills of teachers as researchers.





Research methodology

Linwood College's school-wide policies were analysed for content related specifically to addressing diversity, and heads of departments (HODs) were interviewed for their interpretations of these policies and the focus of their department. This analysis did not present evidence of the implementation of strategies to address diversity. For this, HODs provided information via email about what they thought diversity was and what they thought were the relevant diversities that should be addressed in their departments. Then, as part of the analysis, the mismatches between policy statement and practice were identified.

Two departments in the college (science and physical education) systematically examined the relationships between the teachers' planning, what resources they developed or needed to develop, and how the students were responding to these. This was considered in the framework of how they currently address diversity in terms of guidance for teachers in their schemes and how teaching materials might support the diverse needs of students. Another area of the college (Integrated Studies Syndicate) also looked at these three components (planning/resources/how students respond). They reorganised their scheme to place greater emphasis on using their integrated schemes of social studies, English, the new key competencies, and some elements from the New Zealand primary schools social skills programmes to focus on personal relationships within the classroom.

In order to investigate examples of ways that teachers respond to diversity in their own teaching, small groups of teachers chose to investigate a particular aspect related to their own experiences in classrooms as action research. Small research projects were developed in the light of existing literature, and the strategies conceived by the teachers as being appropriate for addressing their particular concern were followed. They derived research questions and strategies that they would trial with their students to implement their plans. They wrote up their findings as case studies. For example, two staff from two departments (social studies and English) considered the role of the teacher in managing the composition of groups during co-operative learning tasks aimed at addressing diversity within a class identified as GATE (gifted and talented education).

Findings and discussion

The school-wide policy analysis identified a commitment to several diversities within the college, primarily those of culture, race, socioeconomic background, and educational needs, but also those of social diversity, home background, and parental/guardian relations. This did not include diversities such as age range (which are more evident in year levels), or specific pastoral and

subject areas. Some aspects of diversity were perceived by HODs as relevant within departmental practices, but were not identified specifically in policy statements. These were individual needs, prior experience, subject specialism, and subspecialism interest. It is interesting that HODs indicated aspects of diversity that were important to their departments and that these are included in many of the schools' policies. However, we know that research that investigates school systems and policies and the contribution they make to effective schooling has not produced clear and unequivocal messages to educators and policy makers about the implementation of these policies (Banks, 1992). Due to this mismatch between perception of what was relevant and what was written in the policies, it was proposed that a periodic audit of the practices which address diversities should be carried out to identify the current relevance of a range of diversities and realign policy statements accordingly.

The research also showed that there was a need to question the use of generic language for policy statements and explore concepts such as "fairness" rather than "equality".

The science department focused on how its system of unit planning in spreadsheet columns could be used to record and communicate strategies that are responsive to addressing diversity, from literacy and numeracy requirements, strategies for GATE through to cultural and vocational interests. Through this, the science department identified "dimensions of diversity" in lesson activities and resources. For example, a student who appears "able" in science, but may have a disproportionately low reading age, may require an activity to be adapted to meet their needs. Other examples include where staff shared their planning documents in terms of how to set up co-operative activities and how to develop co-operative skills amongst the students.

The physical education (PE) department looked at its own practice for developing its Year 9 programmes of study, schemes, and student workbook. It began with the PE staff identifying their current concepts of diversity. With the help of student feedback to the course, they began to develop approaches to addressing diversity through concepts of olympism. While still recognising practical skill development as a major part of their programme, they have begun to incorporate practical as well as learning skills more holistically. For example, the staff are considering how they can incorporate the use of reflection in the Year 9 workbook to enhance the ways students take on more responsibility for their own learning. "Developing socially responsible students who have a broad appreciation of difference within a class has become a focus for the Year 9 programme" (Head of Department, PE).

Processes and strategies adopted by both the science and PE departments provide examples for other departments in the school to follow. They also provide examples of how teachers can collaborate and share their ideas to enhance the effective teaching strategic objective outlined in the Ministry of Education's (2005a) Making a Bigger Difference for All Students summary document.

The Integrated Studies Syndicate (ISS) examined their whole philosophy of teaching in light of the extremely diverse needs of the students they cater for. They identified that, for many, a barrier to learning was in part a consequence of other social barriers, which in turn was attributed to difficulty, for many reasons, in the transition from primary and middle schools to secondary school. It was noted that "students in the primary sector tend to just do this [work collaboratively], with minimal training or direction from teachers. However, students often need to develop or be retaught these skills within the secondary environment." The staff in the ISS realised early in the year that individual students had multiple diversities and that teachers needed to find ways to cater for and include all students. The nature of the range of needs among the students participating in Integrated Studies meant that they were ill-equipped to cope with the normal school day, they found it difficult to cope with issues that arose, and needed support to relate well (positively) to one another. To address and accommodate the range of diversities, the ISS teachers aimed to provide a consistent environment or "unity" of behavioural models and expectations. The staff identified that there was an ongoing need to refocus on teaching and reinforcing positive behavioural and social skills with these students. Teachers modelled acceptable behaviours and teaching social skills to create a tolerant and safe environment. They rewrote their schemes to reflect this focus and also realigned their activities with the recommended new key competencies which supported their objectives (Ministry of Education, 2005b).

A social studies teacher and an English teacher investigated how five students who had been identified as able and as GATE responded to different teaching approaches. Both teachers used a case-study approach with the same group of students. They asked the students questions about various ways of setting up group work and co-operative activities. The students were also asked to keep learning journals. Both teachers were surprised at what the students told them in terms of their preferences for working together in small groups. As a result of carrying out the projects, these teachers will no longer make assumptions about the students they teach and will consider how they set up co-operative learning situations in more structured frameworks in future.

Another teacher told us that he had learned a lot more about what the students thought about the process of their learning through his research in this project. He found that

his enquiry was offering "a window into the kids' heads". Even though he set out to track one particular aspect of the work he set up with his class, he received comments on a much wider range of concerns and interests about their learning from the students than he had anticipated. He reported that as a result of this he has gained insights into multiple aspects of student motivation and engagement. He believes that these additional insights have enhanced his relationships with the students and hence the way he plans and teaches these students.

One of the major benefits of the project has been that the teachers now realise that engaging with research helps them to improve their practice and that research can be, and in many cases was already, part of what it is to be a professional. They have grown in terms of their sense of ownership for developing their own investigative focus and research project and in terms of recognising what research can include. Half of the funding from the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) enabled the teachers to be released from classes periodically, which allowed them to discuss and to write up their projects.

Limitations

While the project supported the teachers involved to investigate their own practices, the extent to which it built capacity amongst the staff as a whole was limited. This is due to several reasons. The first was that this project was only conducted over a one year period. It took much longer than anticipated to initiate the individual projects reported here. The second reason is that three of the teachers involved in the project have since moved on to other schools through promotion. This is a testament to their reflective practices, but is also a limiting factor in building researcher capacity within this school, since these teachers are no longer there to mentor others through a similar process.

Building capacity and capability

The teachers involved in the pilot project are at present very tentative researchers, full of enthusiasm for the work and its possibilities, but still discovering the meaning of "evidence-based" theorisations and reliant on the researchers as mentors to guide their processes. Nonetheless, they have developed capability as practitioner researchers and have acquired a sound understanding of the processes and principles of action research and reflective practice. Their readings have given them a substantial body of conceptual knowledge. Their confidence in their own standing as practitioner researchers is gaining momentum and they are becoming more able to lead their colleagues in further research projects.



Through this project, the participating teachers have gained research skills that they would not have had the chance to acquire otherwise. As a result of this experience, they have also realised that investigating an issue and finding evidence can indeed highlight areas for change in practice and uncover areas that warrant further research. Some of the teachers who were involved in this project will be leading other teachers to investigate their own practices in 2006. However, time is required for mentoring and to make the research effective.

Dissemination

A description of the project appeared in *The Colleague* (Stanbury, 2005), a quarterly newsletter published by the Christchurch College of Education that is distributed to every school in New Zealand. The project also featured on TV One's *Breakfast* show on 13 December, 2005.

A description of the project and its preliminary findings was presented at the 50th World Assembly of the International Council on Education for Teaching (ICET), which was held at the University of Pretoria, South Africa, on 12–15 July, 2005 (Greenwood & Conner, 2005).

More details of the individual projects were presented at the December 2005 conference of the New Zealand Association for Research in Education (Conner, Greenwood, & Buyers, 2005). Peter Buyers who co-ordinated the project within the school, was a co-presenter at the NZARE conference.

An article is also planned for publication in the *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*.

References

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The full reports of all TLRI projects are published on the TLRI website (www.tlri.org.nz).

Research team



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Lindsey is a principal lecturer at the University of Canterbury College of Education. Her

research interests include investigating all facets of learning, facilitating teachers to use action research to enhance their own teaching, the effectiveness of teaching and learning strategies to address diversity, especially in science contexts and school change processes. She teaches biology and science classes in the Graduate Diploma of Teaching and Learning and several papers in the Masters in Teaching and Learning.



Janinka Greenwood

Janinka is an associate professor in the School of Literacies and Arts at

the University of Canterbury College of Education. Her research interests include teacher education, action research, crosscultural perspectives, theatre and drama process, and arts education. She teaches in the Bachelor of Performing Arts, the Masters in Teaching and Learning and specialist courses on biculturalism.



Peter Buyers

Peter is a physics teacher who has taught in the United Kingdom before moving to Linwood

College in Christchurch. His study interests include the management of sharing classroom practice in secondary school science, predominantly through the use of ICT. He is no longer at Linwood College and has joined the lecturing staff at the University of Canterbury College of Education.