

Modern learning environments allow pedagogical shifts

When Peter Verstappen accepted the principal role at Wakefield Primary he arrived with a conviction and vision of learning and teaching done differently.

Peter explains it this way: "The school was primed to introduce modern learning environments (MLE) but I knew from experience that creating a modern learning space does not, by itself, create modern learning.

"The real business of MLEs is to shift teaching and learning to a model that truly enables students to become confident, connected, lifelong learners, and for us, that has happened by exploring 'democratic education'. It's a brilliant model for 21st century learning, because it places the student front and centre within the process of curriculum design, delivery and evaluation.

"We've tended to think of democratic education as 'alternative', but we're finding people who have been applying it in mainstream settings for some time; people like Chris Brough of Waikato University, whose work on shaping inquiry topics along democratic lines is stunning. Another great source of ideas is NZCER's work on the key competencies, especially its recent studies on how to apply the key competencies in holistic ways that enable students to lead their own learning."

MLEs are the perfect fit for four of the key principles of democratic education: student-centred learning programmes; students developing goals around what they want to learn about; starting with the strengths of the student, and finding opportunities to contribute to the community. As Chris Brough outlined in her Set 2, 2013 article, student-centred approaches to curriculum implementation often include teacher-student co-construction of learning and learning goals. The students have a greater say in what, when and how they are learning.

"The democratic approach to curriculum integration involves teachers and students collaboratively co-constructing curriculum, using themes that are of importance to the children in their particular contexts. The partnership arrangement values student voice and the cultural currency children bring."

So how does this type of pedagogy come to life for teachers used to directing the enquiry process? Julie McIntosh and Bek Gabites grabbed the opportunity to work in Wakefield's first MLE learning space. They take up the story:

"We were looking forward to working with a colleague in a totally collaborative way and to the challenge of enabling the children to lead their own learning. On the other hand we were apprehensive about the logistics of managing a student-led programme. But after the first few months we knew we'd never go back to a single-cell classroom, and a teacher-directed programme.

"We started by introducing democratic ways of learning into the inquiry curriculum, and quickly



Wakefield Primary students involved in outdoor learning

discovered that when we genuinely allowed the children to make choices and have ownership about how they learnt and what they learnt, they stepped up and took responsibility. They took the whole thing very seriously; we were really impressed with their careful thinking and without fail, they made sensible decisions that we felt comfortable with as teachers.

"We then decided that to be true to our purpose we also had to apply the same approach with reading, writing and maths. We took things slowly, but our results in terms of student engagement and progress have given us the confidence to continue along this path. We thought that with a completely new group of learners in 2015 we'd have to go right back to the beginning, but because teachers are using the same approach right across the school, the children we have now are already on the way. These children have come to us ready to participate in a student-led programme which will enable us to further develop the democratic approach to learning in our classroom."

Brough's research also started slowly with teachers deciding to start by:

- resisting the temptation to answer questions
- modelling an inquiring mind and problem solving
- conducting agenda-free discussions
- sharing responsibilities and decision-making
- genuinely listening to and acting on student's contributions.

With a new pedagogy, making community engagement an aspect of learning, it was natural to design increased whānau and community involvement. At Wakefield School this happens through the 'Big Picture', an unfolding process of drawing together school and home to create a student-centred curriculum, through parent focus groups, strategic planning days and learning talks with experts like Mark Osborne from CORE

Education and Dr Brian Annan of the University of Auckland.

"It's hard to convince parents that their opinion counts in curriculum design, or even that they can form an opinion about something that is not traditionally their role in school life," says Peter. "It only really starts to work when parents see teachers showing that we too are learners and showing that we too are learners and are prepared to get our hands dirty to figure out a new way to work."

Two years after first altering their approach, the staff at Wakefield School are very excited that the International Democratic Education Conference – IDEC – is coming to Nelson in April 2015.

"IDEC lets us get close to the heart of democratic education," says Peter, "and we're never going to get a better chance. Like any conference, it's about ideas and networks, but this is a genuinely international gathering so the ideas and networks are on a grand scale. IDEC will lift our eyes to a broader horizon." ■

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Brough article: <http://bit.ly/1F70FH8>

International Democratic Education Conference: <http://bit.ly/1Eb766r>

Key competencies: www.nzcer.org.nz/nzcerpress/key-competencies-future



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