

Collaborative Critique based on Evidence of Practice.

The Ariki Project

(*Ko tōna mana i hōkai i runga i te nuinga noa atu o nga hapū.*)¹

Background

Principal professional learning projects have been sponsored by the NZ Ministry of Education for over a decade. They have, in the main, encouraged small groups of principals regularly to spend time debating and examining the way in which they work. This has provided opportunities to problem solve together, to consider emerging ideas from the literature, and to help and assist each other as they engage in a very demanding professional life. That this has been a successful strategy can be attested by the large numbers of groups which continue to function long after their particular contract period has expired. The **Ariki Project** aims to further expand and strengthen this process.

Introduction

It has become customary to cite a predominantly overseas body of research suggesting the genesis of the planned approach to a new development model. This **Ariki Project** which is constructed around a *focus on interactions* while occasionally travelling in tandem with some of the notions which have been reported in the literature, had its beginnings in an essentially New Zealand context and has been developed to meet the idiosyncratic NZ system of school governance and principalship. Nothing, of course in this field can be entirely novel and this brief preamble will cite links, where appropriate, to existing literature as the various elements of the project are discussed. What is thought to be unique is the manner in which these various elements are assembled and operationalised in this particular project. Here the internal and external *Focus on Interactions* can also be used by the participating schools as an alternative to the more traditional Principal Appraisal for a calendar year. By exchanging the obligation to engage in the usual Principal Appraisal procedures for a year schools are able to devote the recovered space and energy to the Ariki project. It doesn't become yet another demand on their time.

Why focus on interactions?

If we were able to lift the roof of a school and watch the activity as it happened, it is likely that we would be struck with the predominance of interactive talk amongst the occupants. Teachers talk with students, with each other, students talk and from time to time visitors talk with various groups. Obviously there are times when students study independently and individually and teachers prepare and mark but the dominant activity

¹ See resource at <http://www.learningmedia.co.nz/nz/online/ngata/e2mdictionary> where the meaning is one of mana extending over many hapu.

is likely to be interactions amongst the people. Thus it makes sense to use these actions and reactions as the raw data for our study and development activity. In so doing we will extend the kinds of interactions considered to include those occurring in the Quality Learning Circles² within each participating school and the QLC activity that takes place within the regular meetings of the principals' reflective groups.

There is support for this kind of reasoning by Elmore (2006) for example:

"We have known explicitly for at least thirty years, and probably implicitly for a good deal longer, that it is not the policy, or the program, that directly produces the effect."... "interaction effects dominate main effects. The effects most worth knowing about ... are interaction effects." (p4);

and by Spillane (2006, p84);

"Interactions, as distinct from actions, are critical."

The Reflective Groups

At the heart of this programme of development is the concept of the reflective group. The particular form that we propose to use is Quality Learning Circles. This is a concept already in wide use around the country and has been employed as an interactive and process guide in a number of New Zealand school research studies. (See for example Lovett 2002, 2003, 2004).

Quality Learning Circles are focussed interactions with colleagues where shared professional narratives are illustrated with evidence of practice. Each circle is a small heterogeneous group whose members take turns to recount their selected interaction. This is supported with shared evidence. They then ask critical reflective questions of each other. Before separation they may confirm the summary that has been kept and make arrangements to visit each other for further learning. Groups may extend their discussion through the introduction of virtual visitors and reference to appropriate literature. This process underlines the search for meaning that characterises professional behaviour. Throughout the year this activity becomes a substantive part of principal appraisal and the each leader's search for correlations between their intentions and their work and what happens in classrooms.³

The pilot studies to date suggest that prime focus needs to be on the individual school before principals join groups to talk about the pedagogical implications of their work. The underlying assumption here is that principals need to understand fully and be able to talk about the correlations of their own interactions with staff, with what their teachers actually do in the classroom before they can integrate new knowledge from research articles or from their peers in meaningful ways. What this project attempts to do is to

² Trace the development of this concept over the last few years through:
Stewart, David, **Tomorrow's Principals Today**, Massey University, Palmerston North, Kanuka Grove Press, 2000, Chapter 3
Stevens, Ken and David Stewart., **Cybercells: Learning in Actual and Virtual Groups**, Melbourne, Thompson/Dunmore Press, 2005, Chapter 7 ; and
EDEX Tutorials (<http://www.edex.net.nz>) 2007/8

³ See tutorial at http://www.edex.net.nz/files/djs_qlc.swf

firstly engage principals in their own schools gathering evidence of their practice to support their descriptions. Only when this is done can the across school reflective groups really get up to speed. To this end, there is a new taxonomy for critical/reflective discussions which seem to facilitate this and principals then use when engaging in follow up classroom visits. The Ariki Project concept proposes that the gathering evidence of practice methodology, the reflective group process, and follow up visits focus can follow the same design for both the internal school practice and the across school principal groups. This gives a level of consistency to the practices and facilitates the possible growth of higher order thinking across all the groups.

In relation to creating reflective questions most of the studies perused presumed that these questions would be posed by the group facilitator, the academic leading the study or the teacher of a student group. There is little evidence in the literature search which has been conducted to date to parallel the direction taken by many of the principal groups who have worked in the various Ministry contracts so far. Our intention has been to provide a simple taxonomy with some examples from which groups can generate their own questions which best fit the local context. Furthermore we have endeavoured to provide a template which was soundly based around group activity as different from personal study or direct supervision. The latest version of this categorisation uses just four sets; questions about meaning, questions about lateral links, questions about existing data, and questions about validation. These notions are detailed in an Edex tutorial <http://www.edex.net.nz/files/Asking%20Reflective%20Questions.swf> and in a separate resource entitled 'The Reflective Group Process' <http://www.edex.net.nz/files/The%20Reflective%20Group%20Process.pdf>

Another of the areas where the reflective group dynamic differs from other critiquing methodologies, such as peer coaching for example, is in group audience behaviour. As one group member presents their narrative and engages with the others in discussion there is always at least one other person just listening. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this listener often engages in internal debate comparing and contrasting what is being presented with their own practice. We believe this often results in the listener altering their own subsequent behaviour. Perhaps as the Ariki Project gets underway we will be able to collect some more data around this issue.

A further specific difference from much of the reflective discussions reported in the literature is that prime facts for discussion come from selected interactions that participants have identified in their own work as being important (See also Spillane 2006, p4).⁴ As groups critique these interactions, which form the bulk of what they do, they are seeking to determine whether these behaviours are *worthwhile*⁵ and whether they

⁴ Spillane's definition of distributive leadership as "the collective interactions amongst leaders"

⁵ **worthwhile**: *sufficiently important, rewarding, or valuable to justify time or effort spent.* Collins English Dictionary. 1984

worthwhile also implies the notion of being 'transformed' by what you know. - not just knowledgeable. See R.S.Peters. 'What is an educational process' in *The concept of education* Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd London, 1967.

are achieving the goals they have set for themselves and their students. Indeed, a central element becomes the search for correlations between what they do, what they planned to do, and classroom and student consequences.

A Process Instrument

Having selected a *focus on interactions* as the major dimension of the project it becomes vital to then provide a means of thinking about the range of possible options. To this end the writer has developed a **concept map** which performs a number of functions. Firstly, it provides an overview of the possible range and shape of the interactions that may become the focus of study and critique. Secondly, it arranges these possibilities in a construct which attempts to mimic the manner in which a practising educator might approach them. Thirdly, these templates are then presented in an interactive web based design which facilitates simple recording and diary entries. Over time these diary entries come to constitute a personal portfolio. It is examples of these diary entries which are taken to the quality learning circle discussions and used as evidence of practice. (See also Doig. Accessed 2007)

Classroom Interactions ? 🖨️ Print

2. Classroom teaching interactions

Concept

Facilitate new learning from examining existing practice.

Key Activities	Expected Consequences	Evidence
Conversations about teaching & evidence of student learning Room 6 Language - 16th Dec 07 07:03pm	Teachers will be critically reflective about their practice. They will seek to adapt what they do to best empower student learning.	See Chapter 3 Tomorrow's Principals Today
Discussions around evidence trends and the meaning of student activities	Within these discussions evidence trends are	<div style="border: 1px solid gray; padding: 5px; font-size: x-small;"> <p>Web Diary 🖨️ 🔍</p> <p>Room 6 Language</p> <p>16-12-07</p> <p>Title</p> <p>Room 6 Language</p> <p>Main Theme</p> <p>Classroom Teaching Interactions</p> <p>Evidence Discussed</p> <p>Classroom Data</p> <p>Summary of Interactive Activity</p> <p>This conversation arose after I spoke to one of the teachers following his recent language survey results. He had asked these data in a recent QLC meeting and others in the group had questioned the validity of learning methodology as he often uses whole class approaches, and had offered to learn teach with him if he was interested. This conversation led to his perception about his teaching effectiveness and he wanted to explore how any new teaching would be organised.</p> <p>Reflection</p> <p>I need to spend some staff development time relating and exploring the art of asking reflective questions. Perhaps we need to schedule a number of sessions where QLC groups actively practice this notion. This interaction had stimulated my thinking about how best to link into the various QLC groups that operate in the school. What do I really want to know and when do I need to be involved with the groups about the practice that flow out of these sessions? For the next round of principal group meetings I will suggest that we share how we approach the QLC concepts in our own schools.</p> </div>
Discussions of teaching technique.	Through and/or they will see	
Discussions around shared activity.	An analysis of teaching conducted with others will be made and compared to effectiveness of individual work.	

Why appraisal?

Having assembled a suitable process we need an application to enable the model to be operationalised. The assumption here is that these reflective and critiquing concepts need to become part of routine professional behaviour if they are to have an impact on professional practice. In a real sense choosing to apply this *focus on interactions* through an appraisal application answers one of the serious questions that Elmore posed to the OECD Conference:

"What the present conception of accountability lacks is a *practice* of school improvement to go with the *policy* of accountability." (2006, p7).

The Ariki Project offers contiguously, a practice of accountability and a network for school development and improvement. New applications desirably, should replace some existing work in schools, should offer multiple means of application, and place choice in the hands of the participants. This project does that and enables principals and teachers to use examples from their daily work in regular scheduled discussions where these data are validated and critiqued, and perhaps modified or changed where necessary. This particular application of principal appraisal will replace more traditional models for each school opting into the project for one year. The pilot studies would suggest that such an exchange moves the thinking around these concepts from perceiving them as predominately a function of control to acknowledging that the processes enhance meaning and promote higher level practice. Accountability or responsibility is still a central notion.

Six assumptions lie behind the thinking from which this project is created:

- Current Principal Appraisal processes have a bias towards compliance and have limited ability to focus on the principal's influence on learning and teaching.
- Effective schools encourage reflective thinking and critique at every level.
- We should be looking for correlations between what teachers do and leadership interactions.
- Teachers should be expected to critique their practice on a regular basis and principals should be guiding this critique.
- Summaries from these teacher reflective sessions should provide evidence of the school's strategy in action.
- Pedagogical leadership can be ascertained to be present when principals are able to assemble evidence of their own practice which can be shown to have a positive effect on what happens in classrooms.

This proposal also acknowledges that many educational professionals appreciate a group focus to their work. Furthermore, the initiative for deciding what is important is in the hands of the participants rather than being directed by some external authority. It should be an attractive proposition for schools as it is not something additional to do but rather substituting reflective group activity based on evidence of current practice, for a number of currently mandated but often time intensive procedures which often divert energy from the ongoing teaching and learning focus.

Metaphor

"metaphors not only make our thoughts more vivid and interesting but they actually structure our perceptions and understandings" and ... "We live our lives on the basis of inferences we derive via metaphor."(Larkoff et al 1980, p273)

The predominate metaphors in this field have been variations of *organisation* – learning organisation for example – which conjures up a kind of coat hanger diagram emphasising responsibilities or *community* concepts usually implying a flattened hierarchy based around relationships. Both of these notions are about the structure of the school. In this project where *function* has priority, we need other ways of constructing our thinking. If the function of schooling is to grow and develop human citizens for example then we might facilitate thinking and discussion by introducing a metaphor based around an *incubator*. The writer has developed this idea elsewhere (Stewart 2008:4-6) but by focusing thinking around a metaphor which values interactions not only can stated goals be pursued but the educative process is open to the extraordinary power of unexpected outcomes.

Outline of The Ariki Project

Objective

To trial the concept of emphasising a focus on interactions as an alternative to the more traditional notion of principal appraisal.

Process

The principal will construct a personal portfolio based broadly around the concept map on KnowledgeNet.

Teachers will use the same concept map – through individually pass-worded copies – to prepare and record the data about their interactions which form the base material for the Quality Learning Circle discussions.

Data Recording for Project

Pre-project questionnaire (Supplied)

Student data (Perhaps whole of school aggregated graph as at Term1)

Principal portfolio entries

Volunteer sample web diary entries from a range of staff

Agreed sample summaries from QLC meetings (Template with example supplied)

Description of training, use of resources, problem solving etc

Term 4 student aggregated graph

Post-project questionnaire/interviews (Supplied)

Expectations

The principal will complete an entry on most pages of the concept map but will concentrate predominately on page 2 ‘Classroom Interactions’.

Similarly teachers will concentrate on page 2 ‘Classroom Interactions’ and all will complete at least one entry prior to each QLC meeting. (6 entries over three terms.)

The project will seek to find correlations between the principal’s interactions and classroom teaching and learning.

Confidentiality

The material from this study may be used for publication and for further research but the identity of all persons and school will remain confidential to the researcher. All staff will have access to the final draft of any publication prior to its release.

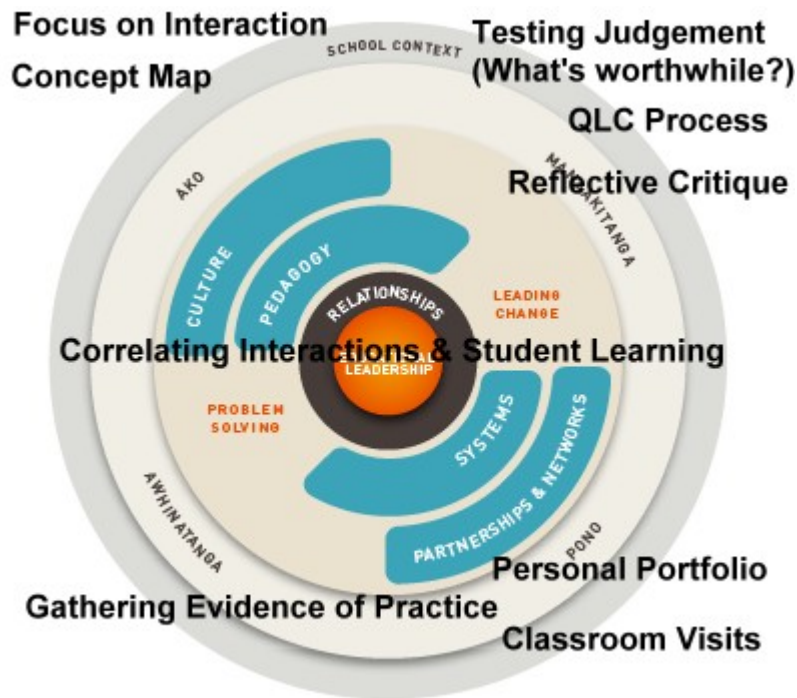
Report to Board of Trustees

The group (or a named facilitator) will present a written report to the Board describing the process and broad conclusions. This will include some analysis of the Principal’s Portfolio and the relationship of this work to the draft principal standards.

Comment

This outline is based on a trial project conducted through 2008 in the Wellington region

Links to Kiwi Leadership for Principals



When the major elements from the **Ariki Project** are superimposed on the Kiwi Leadership for Principals Diagram (2008, p12) the links are self evident. There is a strong challenge recognition and problem solving dimension within the Ariki Project and this is also cited in Key Principal Leadership Activities section of the KLP(2008:17). In a real sense this project provides 'way of working' for those principals committed to putting the notions of the KLP into practice.

Strong links can also be traced to the new Draft Professional Standards for Primary Principals. In particular many of the standards in the Pedagogy section are expressed in similar terms throughout the Ariki Project outline.

In Conclusion

The **Ariki Project** is an unashamedly New Zealand grown development. The *Reflective Principal* courses which led originally to this particular group dynamic amongst school leaders and were revived again under Liz Millar's recent direction of the NZ Principal and Leadership Centre, contribute a necessary stage of thinking and renewal for many. Behind this programme are many years of partnership with NZ principals and a strong desire by all the participants to improve the quality of teaching and learning in NZ schools. As this overview has demonstrated, elements of the notion are strongly supported in the contemporary literature but it is local experience and the uniqueness of the context that has resulted in the particular mix presented here. By building on experience to date and adapting current processes as our knowledge widened we have reached a very exciting place. Now we need to walk on and throughout 2009 the New Zealand Principals' Federation will be conducting a Ministry sponsored Ariki programme with 40 schools. The self funded pilot studies are also continuing and more information is available at <http://www.edex.net.nz>

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