Extending Innovative Leadership to Enable e-Learning for Better Student Outcomes in Primary Schools

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Introduction

A team of school principals and university researchers collaboratively researched effective e-learning leadership strategies employed in one school to make these visible and accessible for other school leaders. The project responded to all principals' need to increase their knowledge, capability and understanding to take advantage of the changes enabled by Ultrafast Broadband in Schools (UFBiS) and the provision of networked services by Network for Learning (N4L).

Aims

The research advanced knowledge about innovative leadership to enable e-learning by:

1. Examining the leadership practices of one principal through the genuine interest of four colleagues, facilitated by participatory research processes sustained over two years.

2. Building leadership capability by supporting principals to adopt, adapt and implement digital technology strategies within their own schools supported by the project team.

Why is this research important?

While increased broadband capacity and improved networked services offer many potential benefits for schools, harnessing technologies to raise achievement and improve learning outcomes requires transformative change enabled by pedagogic and cultural shifts. School leaders and teachers have the greatest influence. It is important to know more about leadership strategies that impact interacting ecologies of the schools and whānau. Strengthening school leadership, effective teaching and assessment to lift student achievement are identified as strategic priorities by the MOE.

Project design

- A two-year (2013-2014) in-depth, collaborative case study of one intermediate school.

- Data collected via observations; interviews; analyses of documents, meeting notes and websites; and complemented by walk-throughs that enabled all of the project team to see the case study school in action on several occasions, plus a visit to all collaborating schools.

- Sustained conversations between participating principals and collaborative analyses during regular face-to-face meetings.

- Complementary follow-on initiatives conducted by all principals during 2014 tested relevant strategies in their own schools.

Findings in brief

The collective analysis of the digital leadership within the lead school identified strategies related to all eight of Schrum and Levin's (2012) dimensions of technology leadership: vision, leadership, school culture, technology planning and support, professional development, curriculum and instructional practices, funding, and partnerships. Broadly, the leadership strategies were:

- developing a school-wide understanding of the role and importance of digital technologies to enable student learning and prepare students for the future aligned with the school vision;

- senior leaders modelling technology adoption while ensuring that teachers experienced new technologies as learners themselves prior to expectation of deployment with their classes;

- encouraging teachers to take risks and innovate with digital technologies in responsible ways to improve student learning; and

- Making the most of available technology, even where that supported an eclectic range of old and new devices. (Mackey, Davis & Stuart et al., 2015)

Leading digital change – a spinning top

Principals were constantly thinking about their own schools in terms of prior experiences, culture, openness to change, resources and other priorities. In the final collective analysis an analogy emerged with a spinning top; leading digital change was like mastering the art of spinning a finely balanced top.

The top is balanced on the spindle of authentic relationships with momentum being provided by the energy of inquiry-based practice. The central core recognises the importance of shared vision and values leading to future focused expectations, while the outer rings of the top illustrates the balance between trust in people and processes, and the balance between freedom to innovate and the collective responsibility for agreed norms.

This leadership model of a spinning top provides a visual response to our research question **"How can school principals effectively lead equitable e-learning in collaboration with their school communities to improve student outcomes?"**

Mackey, J., Davis, N.E., & Stuart, C. et al. (2015). Leading change with digital technologies in education. *SET: Research Information for Teachers*.

Schrum, L., & Levin, B. B. (2012). *Evidence-based strategies for leading 21st century schools*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press

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