

School B [an urban girls' school with a role of around a thousand students]

A year 9 and 10 programme

Focussing inquiry

The impending implementation of the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) provided some of the catalyst for this school to review its junior programme at the end of 2008. The other catalyst arose from a review of their teaching and assessment practices. Entry data and PATs over recent years showed an increasing number of students at year 9 with low literacy levels. The tail was getting longer. Although the school had a number of ESOL students, it was mostly first language speakers who comprised this group. The courses provided were very assessment driven with lots of common assessment tasks. It was a 'teach, test and move on' approach. Teachers believed that the fragmented, compartmentalised nature of this approach was not suiting an increasing number of students.

The school was using an N. A. M. E. approach based on NCEA for summative assessment and reporting purposes. It was apparent that lower achieving students were demoralised and demotivated by this approach. Some students were always getting Ns even though they were progressing.

Teaching inquiry

The decision was made to shift to a theme based approach across years 9 and 10. It was envisaged that this approach would enable both teachers and students to make connections and to bring knowledge from one theme to the next and across texts. Using themes as 'umbrellas' would allow for some commonalities across the department, but still allow flexibility, as teachers could select texts and tasks appropriate for their students. They decided on four themes at each level, and each theme covered a term's work. Teachers could choose where in the year's programme they offered each theme.

These were, for year 9:

- facing challenges
- celebrating diversity
- making a difference
- deception.

For year 10:

- aiming high
- injustice
- keeping it green
- identity and individuality.

The decision was also made to make significant changes to assessment practices. The number and type of assessments were set [e.g. one speaking assessment]. However, teachers could decide where they positioned these within their programme. There was also a range of assessment tasks to choose from.

School B: using Inquiry to plan secondary English programmes

This enabled teachers to select the timing, context and tasks to suit their students -the N,A,M and E system of assessment of reporting.

Evaluating inquiry

The NZC was the original catalyst for change. The teachers believed that the theme approach had enabled them to implement the document according to its intent. It had allowed them to integrate values, key competencies and achievement objectives. Programmes were more learner-centred and students were encouraged to achieve personal excellence. It was apparent from class discussions, written work and student reflections that they were making connections. They were seeing the links. They were engaging with texts at a thematic level, in many cases without teacher prompts.

Teachers were 'teaching more creatively'. Using a theme such as 'keeping it green' had required teachers to 'think outside the box'. There was a much wider range of texts used and connections made to current happenings in students' lives.

The shift to assessing and reporting against curriculum levels has enabled teachers to track shifts in student achievement more effectively. "We can see them moving. Students seem motivated to succeed. Most of them are striving to achieve the next level - even if it's just one tick for one aspect they reach at that level. The great thing about assessing against the levels is that there is continuity between years 9 and 10 because they are working on the same scale. Before they could go from an Achieved at year 9 to a Not Achieved at Year 10, now the way we do it means that they are still Level 4 - and this seems to make sense to the girls."