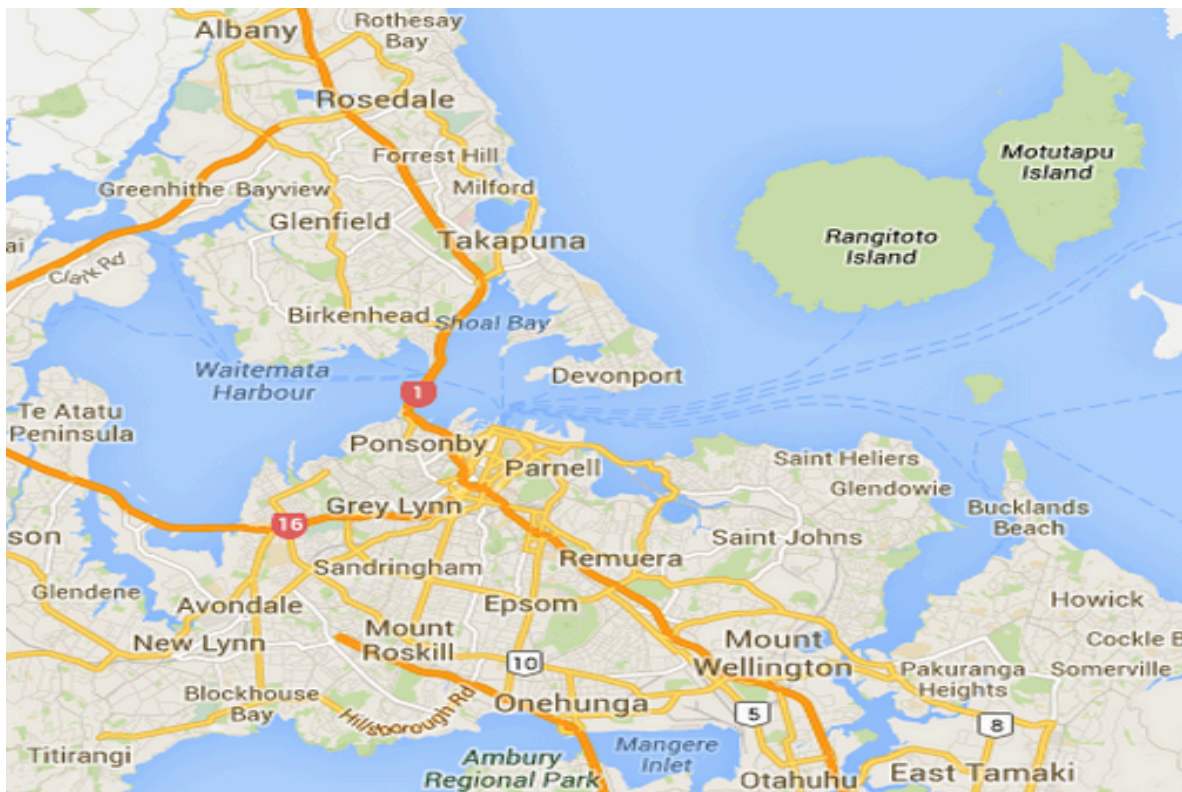


## AUCKLAND INTERMEDIATE SCHOOLS LEARNING AND CHANGE NETWORK

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### INTRODUCTION TO THE AUCKLAND INTERMEDIATE SCHOOLS NETWORK

'Auckland Intermediate Schools' is a network established in 2012 by a group of 19 schools' principals and lead teachers who were keen to ensure the effectiveness and safeguarding of intermediate schools. A core leadership team of three principals, Colin Dale from Murray's Bay Intermediate School, Jill Farquharson from Auckland Normal Intermediate School, and Howard Perry from Waikowhai Intermediate took responsibility for driving the network development. These core leaders brought a complementary set of knowledge, skill and interest to the network leadership.



The network leaders' interest under the umbrella of high quality intermediate schooling was to improve their students' achievement in writing, a focus reflecting the intermediate school network leaders' observations of clear discrepancies between reading and writing scores of students in their schools. Of particular interest was the writing of priority learners, those students who were achieving below national standards. Across all schools, students performed in writing at a level below that of other subjects. Of the 19 schools initially indicated interest in the project, 12 of these made the decision to remain working together. The map below shows the network area, which spans from Murray's Bay in the north to Otahuhu in the south, and from Pasadena in the West to Buckland's Beach in the East.

The network members welcomed the opportunity to learn together, to share resources and the inherent challenges that professional dialogue would bring. As a group, they believed they could collaborate and consider practice in relation to middle school ideology, learn with one another and create sustainable change. This network strategy was not viewed as a quick fix. The network leaders wanted any changes brought about through their new learning connections to be embedded in their school systems.

At this point, network development continues to be an evolving process of creating activity to ensure deep analysis. Core network leaders report that participants are experiencing the activity of the network as an "interesting, energising journey" that they share with like-minded colleagues. The connections made through the network provide valuable opportunities for feedback and reflection, with no events or discoveries being considered either right or wrong. Connections are extending beyond the network as network leaders contribute to Regional Meetings and students share their experiences of learning with network leaders from other networks.

Table 1. The 12 schools of the Auckland Intermediate Schools Learning and Change Network and the network leaders from each school.

|  | <b>Principal</b>      | <b>Enthusiastic Leader</b> | <b>Practitioner Evaluator</b> |
|--|-----------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| <b>Auckland Normal Intermediate School</b> | Jill Farquharson      | Jonathan Hughes            | Alex Tiley                    |
| <b>Belmont Intermediate School</b>         | Justine Someville     | Lucy Naylor                | Lucy Naylor                   |
| <b>Birkdale Intermediate School</b>        | Richard Coote         | Yalanda Choromanski        |                               |
| <b>Bucklands Beach Intermediate School</b> | Diane Parkinson       | Lenva Shearing             | Ian Dickinson                 |
| <b>Glenfield Intermediate School</b>       | Raewyn Matthys-Morris | Angela Clouston            |                               |
| <b>Kowhai Intermediate School</b>          | Paul Douglas          | Tanya Stanisich            |                               |
| <b>Murrays Bay Intermediate School</b>     | Colin Dale            | Laura Fleming              | Sue Ruxton                    |
| <b>Otahuhu Intermediate School</b>         | Brent Woods           | Jenny Bickerton            | Kamrul Jalil                  |
| <b>Pasadena Intermediate School</b>        | Tony Walsh            | Danielle Lauchlan          | Danielle Lauchlan             |
| <b>Ponsonby Intermediate School</b>        | Wim Boxen             | Katie Muller               | Rebecca Sullivan              |
| <b>Remuera Intermediate School</b>         | Janet Exon            | Tom Beckett                | Rebecca Collins               |
| <b>Waikowhai Intermediate School</b>       | Howard Perry          | Leanne Smith               | Leanne Smith                  |

Facilitator: Brian Annan, University of Auckland

Lead Development Advisor: Rose Carpenter

National Manager: Jackie Talbot

### *Demographic Information*

The schools participating the Auckland Intermediate Schools Learning and Change Network have decile rankings ranging from 2 to 10. On July, 2012, the Auckland Intermediate Schools Network had 7408 students enrolled. The distribution (in percentages) of ethnicities at that time are shown in the graph below (figure 1)

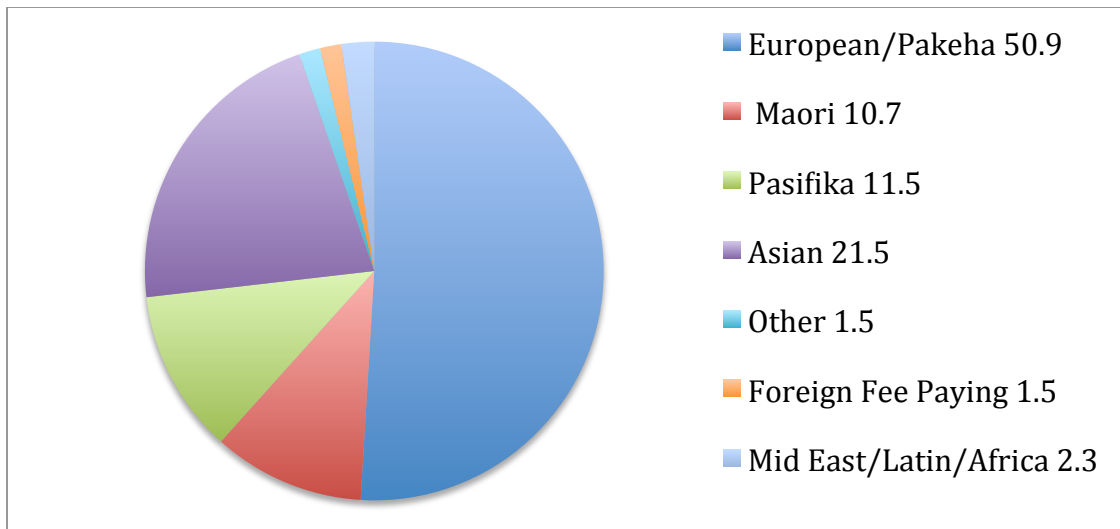


Figure 1. Ethnicity of schools in the Auckland Intermediate Schools Learning and Change Network.

#### A. NEGOTIATING NETWORK START UP

The core network leaders, Colin Dale (principal, Murray's Bay Intermediate School), Jill Farquarson (principal, Auckland Normal Intermediate School) and Howard Perry (principal, Waikowhai Intermediate School), met with the Ministry of Education's National Manager for Learning and Change Networks, Jackie Talbot early in 2012 to discuss interest among intermediate schools across Auckland to form a network focused on improving student writing and lifting the image of intermediate schooling in New Zealand. The proposed membership comprised 19 schools.

This proposal gained the approval of the Ministry of Education. The challenge for the Network leaders now was to progress the network, to develop some processes that would involve effective and meaningful activity. While at this early stage an overall process was not yet established, the group had some ideas about the types of activity that may support their aim. For example, they saw the network as providing

a useful context for sharing knowledge gained from professional activity and published literature.

It was at this point that the network leaders agreed to engage UniServices-The University of Auckland facilitator, Brian Annan, to support them in establishing their network with effective learning and change processes that would help the group of schools achieve its aims. Participant school principals and some lead teachers attended a series of start-up meetings in which the facilitator recommended the group of schools structure their network along the lines of communities-of-practice. This recommendation was made based on the notion that a) network participants, including the students, learn best if they can take responsibility for growing knowledge and for changing their practices and b) the network had come together voluntarily, attracted by a shared interest in a particular body of knowledge and practice (See Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, Snyder & McDermott, 2002). The facilitator also promoted a task-focused and appreciative development process. This process would be a scaffolded rather than prescriptive process encouraging active and considered choice and evidence-based decision-making.

The network leaders found the initial theory-laden meetings challenging but maintained their enthusiasm to move into practical network activity. Before agreeing to commence with a set of network activities proposed to learn what to change, the network leaders wanted to understand more about the flexible framework. Some asked, "How do we know what we don't know if we don't have an expert sharing information?" They were reassured by the discovery that the network could draw from expertise outside of their network and share as well as build on the extensive expertise present, and at times hidden, in their network. As it happened, once discovering more about the expertise existing within their network and integrating that with new knowledge from other sources, the network valued the opportunity it had to make decisions about the nature of expertise that would inform their plan for change.

The facilitator also outlined all four phases of the strategy to ensure the network leaders understood where they were heading. The four phases were explained as infrastructure (sign-up to the strategy), understanding (profiling the current learning environment to prioritise what to change), implementation (making the changes) and sustainability (deciding what to retain, what to eradicate and next steps). The network leaders were then ready to complete the three tasks to profile the current learning environment;

- Identifying the priority achievement challenge
- Mapping the current situation
- Analysing current practices

The school leaders agreed that they needed at least two leaders to complete those analytic tasks. As most participant schools were large, it was agreed as a rule-of-thumb that the principal would provide strategic resourcing support and an enthusiastic leader (an AP, DP or Senior Teacher) would drive tasks with the students, teachers, leaders and families. Most schools made a decision to appoint two enthusiastic leaders to enable collegial support in leading the activities.

Network members understood that once the circumstances of students' writing were understood, they would agree on goals and specific plans for improving the learning environment around writing. They also understood that their plans would include strategies to increase the lateral learning of all participants (students, teachers, leaders and families) across the network.

## **B. TASKS UNDERTAKEN TO UNDERSTAND WHAT TO CHANGE**

### **1. THE ACHIEVEMENT CHALLENGE - WRITING**

The enthusiastic leaders were clear about the achievement challenge, students' writing. In particular, the activity of the network was to focus on those students who were achieving below national standards in this academic area. The challenge for intermediate schools to support those students to attain satisfactory levels of writing had been clearly demonstrated. The schools had recently taken part in recent professional development programmes and, as a result, had managed to support students to achieve positive gains in reading scores. Despite success in this area of literacy, improvement in students' writing remained a goal for the network.

#### *Learning about the achievement challenge*

At the first network meeting focused on the achievement challenge, the principals and enthusiastic leaders moved into groups of three to discuss what they considered the writing challenge was among priority learners, that is, learners who are Maori or Pasifika or students with special education needs who are achieving below national standards. In their groups of three, they discussed what they considered the students might say. Those hunches about what the students were finding hard in their learning were recorded on a whiteboard alongside the comments reflecting the leaders' own views about the students' writing. While there were some differences, these were not great.

The facilitator then encouraged the principals and enthusiastic leaders to go back to their schools and ask the students what they thought was hard for them about learning to write. They were also charged with asking the teachers and families what they thought were challenging the students in writing. After those in-school discussions, the leaders' of the groups of three schools were to arrange a series of across-school visits to see if there were any common trends and patterns in the discussions. Although some leaders questioned the value of visiting schools that

they considered were too dissimilar to theirs, most participants agreed to try the task anyway. They planned to meet as a collective again a month later.

Within and between-school activity in this network was almost entirely face-to-face. Leaders put no pressure on participants to complete the tasks via digital technologies. The network was about students and adults talking together about the students' learning challenges in writing. Figure 2 below shows how the face-to-face networking flowed from collective leader learning meetings into sub-networks of four schools and back to the collective learning meetings. It represents a flow from a central hub of leaders out to the individual schools and communities then into small collectives and back to a central hub again. That arrangement became a regular pattern for the network as participants learned and planned what to change and then started making the changes.

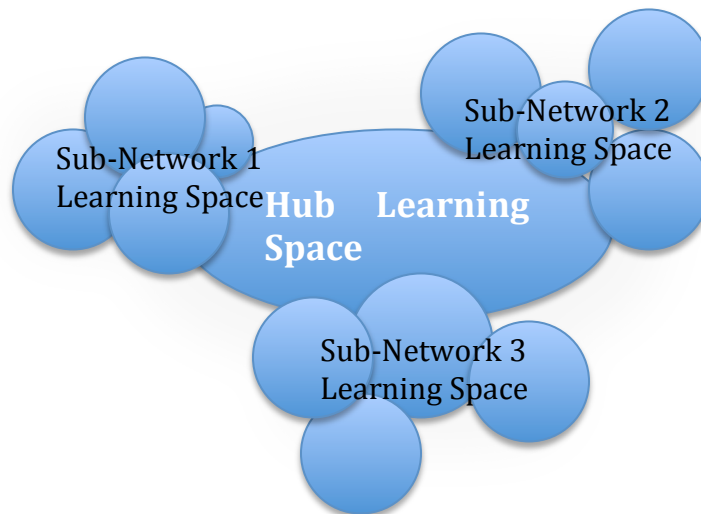


Figure 2. Face-to-face networking relationships among sub-networks of schools and the entire network.

School network leaders conducted in-school discussions then principals, enthusiastic teachers and students made visits to other schools where the teams were able to share in critiquing the discussions held about the achievement challenge. The network leaders came back to their next meeting amazed with what



they had found through this exercise. Through within and across-school observations and engaging in dialogue with one another, the network participants were able to gain new insights and valuable feedback on their thinking. Pasadena Intermediate School leaders articulated a common pattern of understanding that the leaders' original hunches about the achievement challenge stood in sharp contrast to the way students experience writing. In this case, the leaders had thought the challenge was related to spelling. When asked, the students were aware of the adult concern about their spelling capabilities, but they were more concerned about their lack of interest in the content of their school writing activities. They wanted attention paid to their interests when setting writing activities and to have audiences for their written work that spanned beyond the teacher. The leaders had not been previously aware of the nature and extent of this mismatch between the teaching professionals' concerns about student writing and the students' concerns.

This new democratic approach to uncovering adult and student thinking behind student writing included a preparedness to take an appreciative view of others' thinking and to be prepared to accept criticism. As one principal said, "You need to be open to it."

One network member talked of his newfound appreciation of the extensive expertise that became obvious during visits. The network discovered that within it there was in-depth knowledge and skill in several fields, some of which had not been visible or previously known to other network participants. The network leaders valued the time taken to talk with another and said that their appreciation of the milieu of expertise in which they were working had motivated them to get on and do things, some returning to their schools and making immediate changes in their practice and learning environments.

A key feature of the network's process was that leaders were not impatient, they took their time to ensure that students' writing was explored in depth. Some schools explored their hunch by changing the environment and observing the associated

changes in writing. For example, Waikowhai Intermediate School took their target group to see motor racing and were told that they would be writing about it when they returned. The teachers making a comparison between the students' regular writing and their writing about the motor racing said they observed a substantial improvement in terms of quality.

### *The refined achievement challenge*

Through the dialogical process outlined above, the hunch moved from broad to specific. Although there were differences among schools, when they came together, there was a common theme: Students' motivation to write. The network leaders had discovered that while students struggled with writing, they were extremely capable and interested in developing their writing although the writing environment was not working for them. What became evident was that it was not so much the teaching activities that were of concern, but the feelings evoked by the requirement to write. Some of these feelings were associated with teacher-student relationships and others about the genuineness of the audiences for whom they were asked to write.

## **2. MAPPING THE CURRENT SITUATION AND ANALYSIS OF PRACTICE**

Enthusiastic leaders were invited to attend a training session to become familiar with the next two tasks: Mapping the Current Situation and Analysing Current Practices. This session covered the procedures for conducting the two exercises. As information was collected during these two exercises, the network was encouraged to identify trends and patterns to identify change priorities within and across the schools. This process was not prescriptive or scaffolded; network leaders devised their own methods of bringing key issues for change to the fore. The facilitator did ask the network leaders to constantly refer back to the student achievement challenge and refine it where necessary as they conducted the two tasks. They used the same hub and sub-network learning arrangement as they had used to learning about the achievement challenge.

### *Multiple sources of data*

Information to understand students' writing came from a variety of sources. For example, the networks' understanding was informed by published professional literature about the supports and challenges for learning to write. One of the network leaders, Colin Dale, conducted a review of literature about the nature of anxiety that children can experience about writing and produced a document *Anxiety in Writing (Dale, 2013)*. At this point, the network is still debating the relative contribution of the learner and the learning environment to anxiety in writing. They may find ways to address anxiety through motivation and engagement but may also discover and create adjustments to the learning environment, such as choice of topic or support to get started. The network understands that actions to address writing will need to take into account the particular reasons that each child experiences anxiety.

### **3. TRENDS AND PATTERNS**

When all of the information was considered simultaneously, clear patterns emerged. Within the achievement challenge there were specific areas that could be further developed.

These included:

- Active and voluntary participation in writing activity
- Valuing of writing as an activity
- Expansion of vocabulary
- Structuring of written accounts and arguments
- Acquisition and growth of children's beliefs in their ability to write or produce quality work.

The network considered that students were deterred by the difficulty they experienced in writing, boys being overrepresented among those who struggled with writing tasks. Students were not convinced of the need to write. Schools

identified some school environment factors that could be adjusted in order to further these aspects of writing. They considered that the students required authentic contexts for writing, that students' particular interests should be taken into account and that teaching practices needed to be consistent and of high quality. They considered the balance between feedback and feed forward, the place of choice in students' writing, the restrictions of fixed matrices to judge writing performance and the need to scaffold the development of students.

The network leaders took note of supports for students' writing. They identified and examined the circumstances in which students were happy to write and envisaged the creation of an environment where students would be motivated to write, believed they could write and understood the value of writing.

### **C. PLANNING TO MEET THE PRIORITY LEARNING CHALLENGE**

#### **First Plans**

Enthusiastic Leaders took part in a training session to support the development of school plans based on the change priorities noted above. They left the training session comfortable with the planning task ahead and their role in the development of within-school systems and program changes. Some Enthusiastic Leaders made contact with the Ministry of Education's lead development advisor, Rose Carpenter, and the facilitator, Brian Annan, to discuss ideas associated with the plans. Plans to support students' writing were developed in each school and were reviewed by the facilitator and two of the network principals, Jill Farquharson and Howard Perry. The feedback from this review was taken back to the network at the next face-to-face network meeting in which network leaders and enthusiastic leaders discussed their plans with one another. One aspect of the plans that would be further developed was the inclusion of explicit procedures to create opportunities for students to engage in lateral learning.

The facilitator encouraged the core leaders to consider an overall network plan to tie the schools plans together. It did not have to be another document, rather an idea that would galvanize interest across the intermediate schools and their communities. The network plan would denote the commonality within the group, the individual school plans representing its diversity.

### **Refining School Plans**

Following discussion about the plans, network members planned to work on refinements to ensure that school plans included the following.

- A clear and specific focus/aim in relation to student achievement in writing
- Student voice, which informed the analysis of the situation, was also evident in the direction of planning
- Deliberate action taken to authentically engage parents and the community.

The group discussed the need to link the plans to the school charter. Some schools noted the additional challenge Intermediate Schools faced in terms of ongoing community engagement.

### **A plan for the network: Student reference groups**

In order to gather the information required to further development of the school plans, the network discussed the potential of student reference groups to promote student agency. To this end, the network created a plan to have each cluster of schools (four schools in each cluster) select 12 students (three from each school) who would meet to discuss writing (see figure 3).

## Network for Students (NFS)

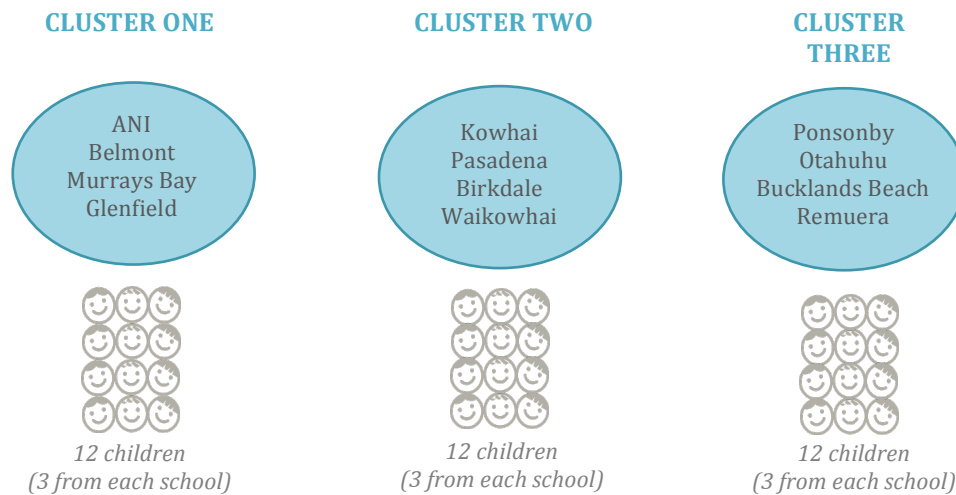


Figure 3. Diagram showing student networks.

The specific ways in which the student networks would operate in each sub-network would be designed within each cluster. The group acknowledged that there would be no release for student visits and that they would need to think creatively about making time, perhaps by adjusting current projects for children with priority needs, bearing in mind the net gains for the students involved.

A point emphasised by the group was the need to ensure students knew about the Learning and Change Network Strategy and were fully informed about their participation. The network, taking developmental factors into account, also considered the need to preserve and foster students' sense of self-worth and standing with their peers and community. Intermediate School students are particularly vulnerable to marginalisation and care would need to be taken to ensure that involvement was a positive social and emotional experience.

### D. IMPLEMENTATION OF PLANS

The overall aim of the network planning was to increase the quality of students' writing. To achieve this aim, the students would need to voluntarily engage in

writing activity, understand the purpose and value of writing, develop and access the tools and skill required for writing and experience excitement in the activity.

Several network leaders remarked that they are simultaneously working between planning and changing things. They commented that the process is not necessarily linear as some aspects can advance while others are being refined. They noted that it was also cyclic, with new information feeding in to inform instituted plans. From discussions with network leaders, it was apparent that the current activity involved a mix of plan implementation and continued data collection in areas that required further understanding. The areas still being pursued included the search for ways to obtain authentic community voice and asking students for their views.

#### *Changes in the Auckland Intermediate Schools Networks*

The network leaders offered interim reports of their progress and current activity at the most recent meeting. A diverse range of approaches planned to achieve the aims of the network and the specific objectives in schools. That is, from an overall network aim of improving students writing knowledge and skill, the individual schools planned actions that reflected their specific environments.

#### *Continuing Inquiry*

The Network has found one of its greatest challenges is connecting with the parent group but this has not deterred it. The network leaders are continuing to explore convenient and meaningful ways to form and establish relationships around students' learning.

One network leader shared with the network her school's experience in engaging parents of intermediate school age students. Connecting with families had been easier where there has been a history of involvement. The school had already developed community relationships through an accelerated learning programme and asked teachers to routinely get to know the parents of each child from the beginning of the year. The school also had a guest speaker, Jannie van Hees, to talk

with families about language. The leader remarked that forming relationships with parents does not necessarily come naturally to teachers. Sometimes coaching and supporting is helpful. A key aspect of this project in the same school was to further relationships with the parents of the participant students. This process is supported by diaries teachers are keeping of their observations and interactions with these students.

### *Visits to Schools*

One sub-network discussed a recent visit to one another's schools. This involved teachers and students. Students talked about writing and the way teachers are supporting their writing. Teachers exchanged information about their hunches in relation to the achievement challenge of writing. Another sub-network had concentrated on setting up systems to support changes. This included some professional development with teachers and meeting with the parents of the participating students.

### *Student Voice*

At the most recent meeting of the Auckland Intermediate Schools Network, students who were participating in the project to improve the quality of their writing attended. They presented their perspectives on writing and participation in the project to the whole group and then discussed more informally their views of writing with groups of network leaders and other students.

The students discussed the circumstances and events that supported their writing. They said that they liked working in small groups because they could learn with other students. Other students gave them useful ideas. They found it easier to engage in writing tasks that were enjoyable, such as a 'bring your own device' session. The students' enthusiasm for writing was influenced greatly by the topic, and they preferred to make choices about the content. When they didn't know what to write about they preferred to write about things that related to their experience that "come off me". They also preferred working when other students did not talk



with them, or disturb them. One aspect of writing that deterred the students attending was spelling, their approach to writing being strengthened when they were supported in this area. These students said that they appreciated others looking over their work and would prefer to ask fellow students to first proof read their work before it went to the teacher.

One student who was participating in the programme said that he had already noticed the huge difference in the quality of his work. When he looked at his former writing he was easily able to appreciate this difference. He explained that he had now set new goals. At a surface level, he was looking at punctuation; at a deeper level he was considering the tenses selected in the text.

### **Network Focus and Next Steps**

#### ***Keeping on track***

The network leaders noted that some things were changing although more information continued to shape aspects of the change process. They noted the need to keep reminding teachers of the plans, to continue learning what to change and to prevent reverting back into “running with the old”. They considered the ways in which they were working together and the ways the three sub-networks of schools related to the larger network, noting the need to continue to work strategically.

Each sub-network made plans for the next interval between meetings, each noting the value of face-to-face interaction. These plans included:

- Visits amongst schools in the sub-network
- Continuing to understand community involvement and to set up opportunities for parents to connect with schools about students’ learning
- Reshaping of sub-networks where membership has changed.

## E. A COMMUNITY OF INTEREST

From the first planning stage, the network itself has assumed the facilitation role, the input of the outside facilitator very quickly reducing to café meetings in which network design and implementation matters were discussed. The three core leaders stated a preference for on-going facilitation arrangements to continue with the current facilitator for the duration of the project on an 'as needed' basis. Ownership and direction of the network activity from that point was in the hands of its core and school-based leaders and the participants across the schools.

The Auckland Intermediate Schools Learning and Change network has seen the benefits of connected activity for schools and their students and network leaders were aware that, to achieve this, the project required a degree of structure. As one leader commented, there had to be a purposeful action or goal associated with the connections members made. The structure and operation constructed by the Auckland Intermediate Schools Network extends beyond that of simply a project team to resemble more of what Wenger, McDermott & Snyder (2002) called a community of interest. Members have a direct role in accomplishing a task in relation to an identified goal and there is a measure of clarity around the tasks. This is evidenced by the central position of knowledge exchange and creation and the explicit wish to develop school and individual capabilities in writing. The network has purposely maintained flexible boundaries to allow for such growth by ensuring voluntary participation, capitalising on its balance of commonality and diversity. Three school principals with complementary sets of knowledge and skill have taken lead roles in the project, contributing differentially to a range of tasks. The network connections have been maintained and strengthened by members' enthusiasm for the topic, identification with the group, and appreciation of the individual and collective expertise they have found. The involvement of enthusiastic teachers has allowed the group to learn about and appreciate the 'stunningly talented and knowledgeable' teachers and children in their schools.

The network has been supported by the enthusiastic participation of its members and its reciprocal professional relationships with the Ministry of Education and the Provider Team (Uniservices-University of Auckland and Learning Media). One school principal made reference to the dialogical climate of the group of principals, teachers and outside agencies that had helped establish the project and to carry it through. Open, transparent, honest interaction occurred without a hard-line, set framework and the project was propelled by the willingness of everyone to make it work. The network members were able to engage with the project that, while resourced, was not directed by any organization to engage in specific activity. This balance of structure and autonomy is seen by the network as communicating the Ministry of Education and Provider Team's beliefs in the capability of the educators to make sound decisions and, as one participant said, it provided the opportunity to 'make us think'.

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