Year 12 Academic Mentor Male Aloalii and student Dashmesh Kaur

Developing a programme for enduring academic success

Before becoming a Starpath partner school in 2011, Aorere College in Auckland had been running a series of after school 'achievers' groups and department-based mentoring programmes for their students. Principal Pat Drumm saw the Starpath Project as an opportunity to learn effective practice from partner schools and a way to formalise their commitment to raising student achievement.

As leader of the school's academic counselling programme, Deputy Principal Stuart Kelly, was adamant that any formal programme they introduced wasn't seen by teachers as a quick fix or short term initiative. "We wanted an enduring strategic programme that targeted academic success above anything else" he says.

At the beginning of 2012 Stuart began by introducing a programme with the Year 11 tutor groups, which the school calls Academic Mentoring. Teacher's were required to interview each student in their tutor group about their academic progress using achievement data stored on Kamar, the school's student management system. Tutor groups were kept to 15-20 students to maximize the chances of the programme's success.

"Our Year 11 results last year were the strongest ever," says Stuart. Following this success, Aorere College decided to roll out Academic Mentoring to all student year groups. Almost every registered teacher at the school is now an academic mentor. Junior mentoring groups have 20-30 students where the key focus is on settling into academic life at the school. Year 10 groups focus on preparing for NCEA. From Year 11 onwards, mentoring groups are kept smaller with no more than 20 students to ensure they get regular contact with their mentor. The school also has additional junior and senior

Māori Academic Mentoring groups which are voluntary for students.

Academic mentors meet with each student once a term during academic mentoring time, previously called tutor time. The details of these conversations are then recorded on Kamar. During this time all students, whether they are meeting with the mentor or not, have a year appropriate academic workbook to work through. The workbooks were designed by deans Kelly Paterson and Frances Murphy based on ideas they had seen at other Starpath partner schools.

A weekly, school-wide professional development programme supports the academic mentors. These sessions focus on how to conduct an effective academic mentoring conversation and the use of assessment data, such as e-asTTle, NCEA and PATs. Stuart says: "There has been a significant increase in teachers' use of data to inform discussion."

Mentors meet fortnightly with deans and senior leaders for updates and support. "Staff have been incredibly supportive of rolling out the programme over the whole school this year because they saw how successful it was with the Year 11 students last year," notes Stuart.

For Stuart, the fact that students and teachers have responded so positively is a triumph. "Students now have one person consistently supporting their academic advancement," he says. "Teachers have a coordinated, strategic role in guiding their students successfully through NCEA and realizing their potential. As a result school leaders, teachers, students and parents are seeing the benefits through increased academic attainment."

From the Director
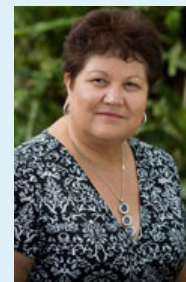
In a recent meeting with the Minister of Education the topic of public metrics was raised.

The Minister is keen to follow the examples of the Health Ministry and Ministry of Social Development in terms of publically reporting on a small number of indicators.

In the case of health there are six indicators reported on for each District Health Board in the country. The idea of determining public indicators for the education sector is an interesting one.

What should we consider? First the indicators need to have meaning and significance to the education sector. In other words, they must be able to connect directly to the classroom and with school realities so that they cannot be dismissed easily. Another consideration needs to be that they can be communicated to parents and to the general public in ways that are understandable.

Some of the indicators have been 'self chosen' through the Better Public Service Targets. These include '98% of children starting school will have participated in quality early childhood education' and '85% of 18 year olds will have achieved NCEA Level 2 or an equivalent qualification'. Other potential indicators are National Standard outcomes and retention statistics. These statistics are readily available now. It is important that the indicators that are chosen are positive and constructive.

The Minister is also looking for what she has termed 'out-of-school' measures, of which one will be focused on parental engagement with their school. It would seem sensible to work with other government agencies, such as the Ministry of Social Development and the Health Ministry, to see if there can be cross-fertilisation with their indicators that pertain to young people and education.

I also would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of the team here at Starpath, to congratulate Distinguished Professor Dame Anne Salmond on being named New Zealander of the Year.

Dame Anne's contribution to Starpath has been significant. She was responsible for the initiation of the project, has been on the Board since its inception, and continues to be one of its most fervent supporters.

Professor Liz McKinley
Director, Starpath Project

Photo of an academic counselling session provided by Manurewa High School

Academic conversations:
The building blocks for success

The academic conversation between a student and a teacher is a key element in Starpath's academic counselling strategy for improving Māori and Pacific student achievement. Academic counselling is an integral element of the Data Utilisation, Academic Counselling and Target Setting Programme (DUACTS) and partner schools have developed different approaches to structuring these conversations with students.

One thing that is consistent for a successful academic discussion across all schools is the teacher's ability to build a positive rapport with the students they are supporting. Earlier this year Starpath conducted a series of workshops with teachers involved in academic counselling. From discussions and feedback we have identified some critical aspects for effective conversations with students, including:

Be Present
The conversation needs to concentrate on the individual being counselled. The teacher should reduce distractions and interruptions as much as possible. If these discussions take place in a classroom the teacher should consider how to separate conversation space from other activities. The position of seating needs some thought. The conversations can take place face to face, side by side or with a desk in between.

Be an active listener
The teacher should be able to demonstrate that they are fully focused on the conversation. Skills such as paraphrasing, reflecting, clarifying and recapping are important. Using wait-time during the conversation is vital to encourage student engagement.

Bring an academic focus
The conversation needs to concentrate on student achievement. This is the priority. Pastoral and behavioural issues can be raised only if they relate to achievement but should not be the focus of conversation. Discipline issues can be discussed at another time or through school referral systems.

Be confident
Research suggests that students expect their teachers to be confident about the matters discussed in an academic counseling conversation. It's important for academic counsellors to keep up to date with NCEA expectations, and it is also helpful to know when to refer the student to another person such as careers counsellor. Being well prepared for the conversation is important. This includes looking back at records to see what was agreed last time.

Build trust
The relationship developed with a student can be particularly strong and this inevitably involves a a high level of trust. It is essential to be mindful of confidentiality and ensure that professional boundaries are respected at all times. Effective counsellors build high levels of trust by doing the things they say they will, when they say they will.

Implementation update

A busy year ahead
Joy Eaton, Deputy Director

Project Director, Professor Liz McKinley, has said on a number of occasions that this will be the busiest year for the Starpath Project and, with all 39 partner schools now fully on board, she is not wrong.

The beginning of 2013 saw the completion of Starpath's introduction sessions with the final group of schools. All Phase Two schools now have a baseline profile written and have been introduced to the key findings from Starpath's research in Phase One. Each school is now working through an individual implementation plan co-constructed with support from Starpath.

From monitoring interviews last year it was evident that schools were eager for immediate support with academic counselling. In February Starpath held workshops in Auckland, Whangarei and Paihia . At these workshops teachers viewed and discussed the Academic Counselling DVD produced for the Starpath tool kit with the help of Massey and Manurewa High Schools. Schools also wanted more discussion about data interpretation. With this in mind Starpath is developing a series of workshops to assist schools to investigate achievement issues identified through their data and evidence.

The group of schools that joined the Starpath Project in 2011 (Group A) are currently attending a professional development series focused on two key strands of Starpath work. One strand discusses the important role of leadership in the change process and the other concentrates on developing literacy strategies to tackle the persistent barrier of attaining University Entrance literacy. These workshops will be available for this year for schools that joined Starpath in 2012 (Group B) and start with classroom observations during term two.

Alongside the professional development opportunities, Starpath has a commitment to provide feedback to schools as they implement their plans. To do this, Starpath will seek to observe tracking, academic counselling and whānau conferencing events that happen in schools during term two. The year will culminate with a return to Group A schools to start the evaluation interviews and discussions that will be reflected in the final report.

At the same time, research work continues with several allied projects. Starpath is further investigating schools' capacity to utilize and interpret the data for evidence informed decision making and taking a deeper look at student achievement data in science departments across partner schools.

Leading improvements by engaging teachers' theories of action: Using Open-to-Learning Conversations

Distinguished Professor Viviane Robinson and Dr Linda Bendikson
The University of Auckland Centre for Educational Leadership

School leaders are frequently reminded of their critical role in leading improvement, but little attention is given in most literature as to how they get others 'on board' with these change agendas. 'Open-to-Learning Conversations' is a phrase we use to describe the type of constructive problem talk that can help leaders to engage others in trying different strategies in order to get different results.

The genesis of this work lies in the studies done over the last thirty years by Chris Argyris and Donald Schōn (1974). They carried out extensive research into the interpersonal effectiveness of leaders and the capacity of those leaders and their leaders to engage in double loop learning. They developed the concept of a 'theory of action'. Theories of action describe the links between people's actions, the beliefs and values that explain their actions, and the intended and unintended consequences of those actions. In an educational setting, it is these theories that help to explain teachers' responses to leaders' requests for a change in approach. If teachers believe their current practices are effective for teaching their subject (their theory), for example, this belief will shape how they evaluate messages about alternative approaches that they receive from a leader.

Two Strategies for Leading Change

Figure 1: Two Strategies for Leading Teacher Change (Robinson, 2011, p. 118)

This can be best illustrated with an example. If a secondary leader has learnt that all teachers need to 'be teachers of literacy', they may well have issues convincing all staff of this view. When such messages are passed onto staff, a teacher of a subject may well think something akin to the following:

- It is not my job to teach literacy.

- The students should be more literate by the time they get to secondary school.

- I don't have time to teach literacy as well as my subject.

These beliefs and the practices that follow from them constitute their 'theory of action'. When leaders over-rule such objections, or continue to try to persuade the teacher of the 'rightness' of their alternative view, they are effectively bypassing the teachers' theories. The consequence of such bypass is likely to be that the teacher will not adopt or even try any of these practices, or they may try them, but in a superficial way.

Alternately, if the leader first listens deeply to the teachers' views, checks that they understand them accurately (for example, by paraphrasing those views, inquiring, and checking for accuracy), and then respectfully critiques their views, where appropriate, they may well find they are not too far apart and at least will be able to plan a course of action that is satisfactory to both. In this case, it may mean that the teacher really does try one of the suggested strategies, and then debriefs with the leader about what occurred. If successful, the teacher is likely to keep using those strategies. Our recent research indicates that principals are not strong at inquiring into others' point of view and actively engaging with their 'theories'. Instead, like most people, they tend to be strong at advocating their own point of view (Robinson & Le Fevre, 2011).

There are three values that guide this type of constructive problem talk that we call 'open-to-learning'. The first is respect – both for the other person (eg, demonstrated by listening carefully and checking that you have understood a person's point of view), and respect for yourself (shown by a willingness to put your own view forward in an honest and

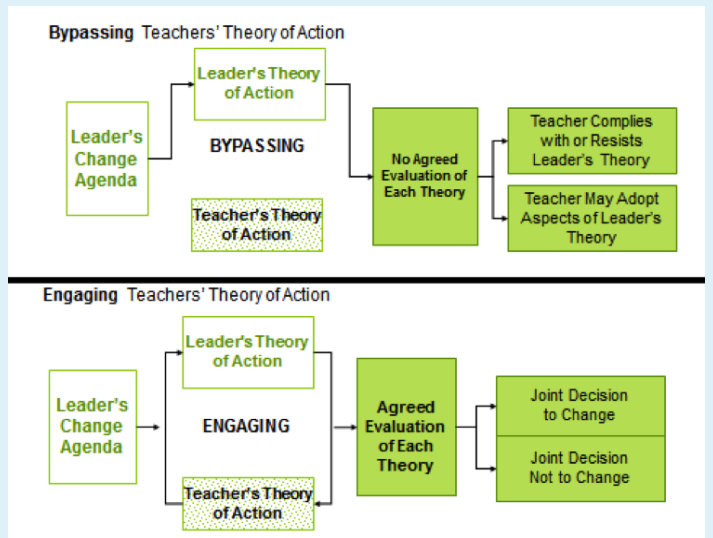straight forward way). The second and possibly the most important, is the pursuit of valid information. This value demands that a person treats their own view as a 'theory' and is prepared to check its validity by listening to information that may conflict with or negate that theory. You do not treat your own view as infallible or as 'truth'. The third value requires that you seek internal commitment to any change. This is more likely if a leader really has treated their own view as fallible, has listened carefully, and been prepared to problem solve constructively with others.

It is this kind of problem talk whereby leaders actively engage the theories of teachers that we promote as the means to gain improvement in teaching practice. Leaders must be open to hearing the teachers' views and genuinely engage with them. We teach leaders to be open to other views, yet not to be afraid to put their own views honestly on the table, and to critique others' views respectfully – whilst always seeking valid information. This is what we mean by having 'Open-to-Learning Conversations'.

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Giving subject literacy a lift

Aaron Wilson, researcher at the Woolf Fisher Research Centre, believes that fine-tuning literacy instruction can help raise students subject literacy and have a positive impact on their success at NCEA and University Entrance. "By maximising students' opportunities to read and write the kinds of texts valued in the senior secondary school curriculum can improve student literacy," says Aaron. "Engaging students in discussion about the texts they are reading also has a positive effect on students comprehension and subsequent learning in the subject."

The team at the Woolf Fisher Research Centre have worked with national subject experts to identify a set of achievement standards in English, mathematics and science that have high literacy demands and can be used as indicators of students' subject literacy. Analyses have shown that, for the Starpath partner schools that joined in 2011, the pass rates and entry rates in these standards were, on average, below national levels.

Throughout 2012 Centre researchers conducted classroom observations in English, mathematics and science clases at each school to identify aspects of subject literacy teaching that could be fine-tuned.

Several patterns of literacy teaching within many of the schools were identified as important areas for development. In some classes students had relatively few opportunities to read in lessons and at times the texts were simplified so that there was a mismatch between the kinds of texts used in class and those valued in the curriculum. Students also had few opportunities to engage in extended discussions about the texts they read in class.

Through a series of workshops held in partnership with The University of Auckland Centre for Educational Leadership earlier this year, senior and middle leaders from the schools were presented with the detailed analysis of the observations and research about the role of texts and discussion in developing students' literacy.

Throughout 2013 schools will be supported to conduct their own literacy inquiries using tools provided by the Centre. This process will allow middle and senior leaders to learn more about the opportunities students have to read, write and discuss texts in class and implement any necessary changes or improvements.

Data visualisation software takes the aches out of data analysis

The potential for data to inform and improve teaching practice is huge. Schools and teachers around the country are progressively realising the power of data to monitor students' progress, provide timely feedback to those who are not meeting expectations and inform and modify their teaching to better suit the learning needs of their students. Collecting, analysing and making effective use of data is a critical aspect of Starpath's Data Utilisation, Academic Counselling and Target Setting programme and is a key focus for implementation with Starpath partner schools.

Late last year, researcher Dr Mark Gan ran a series of workshops for Starpath partner schools to introduce Fathom™, a data visualisation tool which allows users to explore their data visually and create dynamically linked representations without extensive theoretical training or background in statistics. "This makes the data much more accessible to classroom teachers," says Mark. "It is easy to import data directly from the school's Evidential Database (EDB) and plot interactive graphs that allow teachers to examine their students' performance in a meaningful way. At the departmental level, collaborative sharing of data is also possible through visualising trends in students' performance across subject-specific unit and achievement standards and drawing connections with

participation rates in internals/externals or in-class attendance records."

Fathom™ allows teachers the autonomy to start their own inquiries into students' learning progress, asking probing questions that can be investigated by bringing demographic indicators and performance data together. Those who attended the workshops were excited about the potential of using Fathom™ to analyse their own data more closely and were impressed by how the software presented often complex sets of data in a dynamic and visual way that they could easily understand.

More Fathom™ workshops are being planned for Starpath partner schools in Term 2.

Postgraduate course broadens access to Starpath Research

In Semester Two the Starpath team is offering a masters-level course at the Epsom Campus to broaden access to Starpath research and development for teachers and educators wishing to advance their knowledge.

EDPROFM 701 Special Topic entitled "*Using Data to measure Equity in Schools.*" is designed for educators who are passionate about addressing one of Aotearoa New Zealand's most enduring educational challenges: equity in schools.

The course will examine how teachers and schools can use data to address Māori student achievement specifically and improve school performance. Content will also examine how a focus on data and equity has the potential to impact on classroom practices and school systems.

Delivered one evening each week at the Epsom campus, the course will present a dynamic mix of lectures, visiting guest speakers, computer lab data analysis and practical workshops co-ordinated by Professor Liz McKinley and the Starpath team. This 30 point masters-level course can also be credited to postgraduate programmes at the Faculty of Education, including the Postgraduate Diploma in Education, Master of Education and Master of Professional Studies in Education.

Data, equity and education

Use data to unlock students' potential for academic success

Enrol now for Semester Two

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