

Putting the children at the centre of all curriculum decision making

Alfriston School in Auckland has a roll of about 350 children in Years 1 to 8. Approximately one-third are either Māori or Pacific, more than one-third Pākehā/European, and the remainder predominantly Indian.

Since the appointment of a new principal five years ago, the school has implemented many changes designed to make sure the focus is on the needs of the children rather than those who work with them. Improved student engagement and achievement reflect:

- > a carefully considered change-management strategy
- > a drive to make learning more visible for students
- > the use of a rich curriculum to fully engage students.

Change management

As a first step in managing change, the principal had to decide where to invest most energy. She decided to delay a possible review of the school vision and concentrate instead on the teaching and learning as this would have more immediate benefits for the children. The principal worked with the staff and community to make sure the new direction was clear.

A small number of teachers left and a strategic appointment process was introduced to make sure new teachers would be committed to the new direction. The assistant principal and deputy principal took on teaching commitments so they could understand what teachers needed to implement the improvement strategies. The school developed interim, non-negotiable expectations about practices designed to improve student achievement.

At first, the principal took the leading role in driving change to all aspects of teaching practice. She was part of every development in the school. Her close involvement in appraisals, team meetings and behaviour management issues helped influenced everything, including the thinking behind practices that needed to change. All change management decisions were arrived at following careful investigation into how best to promote student learning.

Teachers and leaders looked in depth at National Standards expectations. Moderation meetings were scheduled for the whole staff and syndicates. Through principal-led professional learning and development (PLD), teachers learned how to have 'dialogue conversations' in their meetings, using framing questions to scaffold achievement-focused discussion. Collegiality and collaboration improved, with the result that teachers were regularly discussing achievement and target students. A set of guidelines was developed to help teachers gather achievement evidence from multiple sources. These guidelines also highlighted things to be considered when reporting to parents and whānau.



"Relational trust allows us to talk numbers and data and for teachers to not feel threatened by that. 'Now these are our akonga that we need to shift from A to B.'"

"Weekly team meetings have a relentless focus on student achievement. Relational trust is at the base in this school."

Leaders

When looking in depth at National Standards, teachers found gaps in their knowledge that needed filling. They also identified the need (i) to broaden the curriculum so that it included more motivating and purposeful activities from across *The New Zealand Curriculum* and (ii) to make learning more visible for students.

Leaders and teachers engaged in a range of PLD initiatives designed to support the changes they were making. This included Accelerating Learning in Mathematics (**ALIM**), Accelerating Literacy Learning (**ALL**), and a focus on gifted and talented learners. A further PLD initiative aimed to build a team of teachers with e-learning expertise.

Leaders and teachers set out to find better ways of communicating with parents and whānau about their children's learning, achievement and progress. The school joined the **Mutukaroa** project with the aim of learning how to develop genuine learning partnerships, particularly in the junior school. We found processes introduced as a result of participation in this project were well embedded, to the

benefit of the children and their parents. Parents and whānau were well informed, had a good understanding of the school's approach to teaching and learning, were accessing learning tasks and homework posted by teachers on Google Classroom, and generally felt respected and valued as partners in their children's learning.

Leaders aimed to have new structures, processes and practices strengthened through focused PLD and collaborative activities. Managing all these changes in such a way that everyone felt ownership was a constant challenge. Relational trust was strengthened through the use of 'checkpoints' designed to find out which strategies were working and should be continued. Checkpoints involved collecting teacher and child responses to pertinent questions at regular intervals in a spiral of inquiry. Teachers told us they didn't tire of responding to the checkpoints because they recognised they helped leaders understand the full picture. The following table illustrates the checkpoint process: two teachers respond to questions that require them to reflect on how the writing progressions were making a difference for their learners.

May 2016	How have you been using the writing progressions this year?	How are these visible in your class? How are students using them? Do all your students know their current phase?	What questions remain for you about the writing progressions and their use?
Room X	I have talked about the poster and what writing looks like at different levels. Children are yet to put their pencils on where they are working at.	Displayed on the wall. Children are going to put pencils up where they are working at. The plan is to conference with the children and complete raindrops, which are going to be at the front of their writing books. Many children still don't understand how the posters link to their own writing.	Children find them hard to understand – can we make the posters clearer? The posters need to be simpler.

May 2016	How have you been using the writing progressions this year?	How are these visible in your class? How are students using them? Do all your students know their current phase?	What questions remain for you about the writing progressions and their use?
Room Y	Yes, students based their goals around the progressions and we have been discussing what our hotspots are according to what AT and ABOVE looks like for their year group. They will be checking things off on their digital progressions soon.	A range of phrases displayed in my writing are on the windows with students' names. They will have their individual digital copies soon. (I've held back from sharing the original ones with them because I want to know if we can use the compacted versions.) We have had many discussions around where they are, so hopefully it has stuck with the writers that need the most support. The more capable writers can all talk about their phases and one weakness.	Can we compact the other phases as well so it seems less overwhelming, in language that is a bit more child friendly for the writers that need extra support?

Once the new teaching and learning strategies were in place, and reviewed and refined, Alfriston leaders were able to make time to review and redevelop their school vision.

Making learning visible

The catalyst for this change was the recognition that the children weren't owning or taking responsibility for their learning. For teachers this meant a paradigm shift was necessary, one in which their role changed from 'holder of all knowledge' to 'facilitator of learning'. As first steps, they participated in visible learning workshops and looked at how other schools had made a similar change.



“This blew a lot of myths out of the water. Our teachers really lapped it up. You could see the light bulb go on for teachers. A teacher said ‘It was like getting the keys to a treasure chest.’ It was liberating. Teachers are challenged to know more about the learning process, because their students demand that of them.”

Leader

The visible learning facilitator worked with the school to co-construct a PLD action plan. This required them to work out exactly what it was they wanted to achieve. It was to make the learning steps transparent to children before, during and after a task. Initially they concentrated on trying to do this in their writing programmes.

Some of the strategies they used were:

- > Developing children’s confidence to critique the work of their peers and give useful feedback. The children recorded their oral feedback and then reviewed the clip to reflect on the quality of their critique. The youngest children started by giving feedback on handwriting; they then moved on to giving feedback on personal writing.
- > Sharing information in team assemblies about how they were making overall teacher judgments (OTJs) and moderating writing judgments and mathematics stages. The children were also told more about assessments such as **e-asTTle**.
- > Requiring children in Years 7 and 8 to complete a digital writing header descriptor (below) before creating a piece of writing. After completing their writing, the children recorded reflective comments and whether they had met the success criteria.

Write the learning intention	Identify the current writing phase	Explain the purpose for the writing
Outline the success criteria	Identify the writing phase you are working towards	Outline indicators from your future focus to work on
Highlight the rubric showing what success looks like	Decide the audience for the writing	Indicate any previous feedback from a peer or teacher you will work on

- > Teaching Years 7 and 8 children to interpret their own **e-asTTle** reading and mathematics results. They recorded their interpretation and included the clip in their learning portfolio. They used their analysis of the questions to identify what the different boxes in the report were showing, what they had mastered, and what gaps they needed to address.
- > Children were given increased opportunities to collaborate in their learning and to engage in peer coaching. For example, children in Years 5 to 8 ran instructional workshops in reading, writing and mathematics for children of their year level and across year levels. Some of the children who had leading roles in the school production coached younger students in their supporting roles.

Senior students told us how they valued having learning made visible. They confidently identified their own learning needs and used self-assessment skills to evaluate their own work.



“When we make our own Google Slides to explain our e-asTTle results, it helps you get an idea of why you got the score you did and what can do to improve.”

“The learning intention sets the bar for our work and the success criteria give us standards to meet to reach that bar. We are able to set own learning intentions and success criteria by using the writing progressions we have.”

“By using the progressions we are making decisions about what we need to learn. If it is transparent you have nothing to hide behind. I know I am below the standard in writing, however I have moved up two sublevels in writing this year and have moved from ‘well-below’ to ‘below’. The progressions help me focus on what I have to do to improve.”

Children, Years 5–8

When in 2012 teachers asked children what made a good learner, their answers were of the ‘sitting up’ and ‘listening to the teacher’ kind. Asked the same question in 2015, children would refer to the learning progressions, knowing where they were at, and knowing what they needed to do to improve.

Parents had noticed their children:

- > talked more confidently about their learning than their older siblings had; they knew what they were learning, why it was important and what they needed to work on
- > had a strong learning focus and were eager to talk about their learning

- > were engaged in healthy competition with themselves to improve, motivated by the success criteria and improving results
- > had relationships with teachers that were positive and learning focused
- > liked sharing information and learning tasks through the Google platform.

A rich curriculum to fully engage students

Teachers learned it was important to give children sufficient related opportunities over time to revisit and consolidate learning through practice and review, and to apply new skills in purposeful ways.

They worked collaboratively to plan and implement a curriculum that would engage children in experiences across the learning areas and use their own and the teachers' strengths.

In 2015, science was a major focus and was explored through the school's major production, 'This is Your life!', featuring a fictional science professor, and was integrated through reading, writing, mathematics, drama, dance and e-learning.



A scene from the school's production.

To begin the planning, teachers met in the holidays and considered a series of questions designed to elicit a shared understanding of what they wanted the children to learn and how they would go about promoting it:

- > What are the main scientific outcomes you want for your students?
- > Do you need to add to your own scientific knowledge? What is that knowledge?
- > What experiments will your students undertake and how will they be recorded?
- > What artwork will be integrated/displayed?
- > How will the physical appearance of your classroom promote science learning?
- > What format will the open afternoons take for your class?
- > What format will the open afternoons take for your whānau?
- > Have you addressed all the outcomes (oral language, written language, visual arts, digital etc.) specified in the planning templates?
- > How will you promote assessment capability and visible learning principles throughout this learning?
- > How will you manage the differing capabilities and levels of science knowledge in your class?
- > How will you cater for students who have a developed base of science knowledge?

Much of the teaching took place in the children's usual class group and setting, but on 'whānau Fridays' classes were split into cross-level 'whānau' groups to better cover the four science strands and allow for tuakana-teina learning, in which older children helped the younger ones. These Fridays were an established and successful strategy, particularly for integrated learning. Older students said working with the younger children improved their own learning, while teachers found their role morphing from teacher of content to teacher of learning.



The following table suggests how learning in the Physical World strand of the science learning area was integrated with learning across the wider curriculum.

Procedural writing	Oral language	Numeracy
Building a rocket	Scientific discussions	Measurement – speed, distance, time
Dehydrating food	Making predictions	Geometry – angles
Making volcanoes, ice cream and ‘goop’	Hypothesising	Statistics – graphing experiment results
Writing scientific experiments	Explaining results	For Living World – measurement, capacity, mass, number, observing plant growth, size of orchid roots etc
Heat on the move – transferring heat through temperature difference	Making conclusions	
Music	Visual art	E-learning
Exploring sound wave, visible sound waves in a guitar	Themed around ‘light’	Google Apps suite to showcase and share learning with peer and families
Light and mirrors song performance, including dance	Scientific sketching	Using Google Sketchup to design science lab and sets for the production
Other music and dance from the production	Marble art force and movement	
	Silhouettes – using light and dark	

Teachers observed children gaining confidence and skills during rehearsals for the major production and they continuously monitored their engagement and learning in the science activities. They used the following template to reflect on their practice and the children’s learning, in this case, in the Physical World strand.

	How did you use Whānau Friday this week?	What hands-on science learning happened for your kids?
Week 3	Sound: We did individual work in the middle block, then in the afternoon got together. My class shared our learning from the morning and then we all did sound experiments with visible sound waves, using music to blow out candles	<p>Making cup microphones that made creepy noises</p> <p>Learning about how hearing works, ear diagram with labels and explanation</p> <p>Singing wine glasses</p> <p>Making salt jump from sound waves</p> <p>Demonstrating the above to the others and then watching sound waves blow out candles</p>
Week 5	This week we did a rotation in the middle block. We mixed up the four classes into three groups. Room 1 ran sessions on marble art, looking at force. Room 6 did electrical circuits. Room 11 did magnetism. In the afternoon we worked separately	<p>Building electrical circuits</p> <p>Using magnets and iron sand to create images</p> <p>Marble art</p> <p>Clay art-making vehicles to go with force and motion</p>

Here the teacher observations relate to the planet earth and beyond strand.

	How did you use Whānau Friday?	What hands-on science learning happened for your kids?	Breakthrough moments?
Week 3	<p>A lunch box was packed for the journey into space</p> <p>This has been left to see what happens over a period of time. Going into space requires lots of food. How will it stay edible?</p> <p>Rooms 7 and 14 split their classes for a rotation.</p>	<p>In Room 7 the students shared their oral language presentations, did some light research and played space trivia games</p> <p>Intermediates also taught the middles how to create PowToons, e-Mazes and made Kahoot quizzes</p> <p>Students were really engaged in these activities and it was great to see the intermediates and middles interact so well together. The middles were teachers to my intermediates as were the intermediates teachers to the middles</p>	<p>Students discussed why the matchstick rockets did not work as they should have. This sparked lots of interesting conversation from ideas such as how many match heads should or should not be used and which side of the tinfoil was or should have been used</p>

Leaders and teachers said that integrating curriculum with a major production had many benefits for the children. These included developing their:

- > creativity – imaginative play and performance stimulates and challenges the brain and encourages innovation and broadmindedness
- > self-discipline and self-motivation – performing arts are physical and test the individual like sports or athletics; children see the value of practising at home and scheduling personal training
- > language and musical skills – through exposure to culture and art, making for a richer, more liberal-minded adulthood
- > problem-solving skills and confidence – performers learn to deal constructively with creative challenges and unexpected situations, such as when words are forgotten or things go otherwise wrong.



The students' enthusiasm for their learning, both in terms of science and the production, come through in their reflections:



"This year the production has been amazing. Like always, there is a mix of dialogue, dance and singing. This year I have learnt how to speak at a 10, which means 'speak very loudly'. I have learnt the lyrics to the periodic table, which was a challenge for me at first but once I learnt it, it was a piece of cake. I have enjoyed learning about some awesome new scientific facts. This is my second year in the singing troupe and I am enjoying it so much it is so much fun. It is a very enjoyable part to play in the show. At Alfriston School we do amazing productions because we take pride in them and our teacher that leads it all helps us all the time to practise and gives us tips to make us better."

"This year I am a lead part. I am Brian the ad host. This is my first year as a lead part and I am hoping to have a lead part next year. I have learnt a lot of things around science such as some of the live experiments the scientists have done such as adding lots of chemicals and dry ice makes a booming sound. I have also learnt 63 of the 118 elements only 55 more to go!"

"The combination of the visible learning and the integrated curriculum has meant the children are experiencing much deeper learning. They have the responsibility of sharing their ideas, achievement and progress with the community and this is making them really think about what they are trying to do and learn."

Principal

The changes implemented by the school have led to greatly increased learner agency, with children engaged and motivated to learn and succeed, right through to Year 8.