

Fully engaging children in learning through an innovative curriculum

Sylvia Park School in Auckland has well over 500 children in Years 1 to 8. Almost half are of Pacific ethnicity and more than one-third Māori. Of the remainder, a significant number are Asian.

ERO saw that from the time they started school until they left at the end of Year 8, children were engaged in learning that motivated them because it linked to their homes and communities and to national and world events and issues. Learning was more than a pen-and-paper or information technology exercise; it touched the heart as well as the head. Many of the outcomes of this learning were visible in the environment, where the outcomes were helping improve the lives of the children and those in their communities.

Although the innovative curriculum has been a feature of the school for some years, the leaders have worked hard to transform a culture and learning environment not benefiting children into the vibrant and exciting place we saw during our visit. Currently, the proportion of children achieving success in reading, writing and mathematics is greater in Year 8 than at any other level.

To bring about this positive achievement trajectory the leaders had focused on three aspects:

- > pedagogy – developing teaching practice
- > school culture – developing a positive, relational culture
- > success for every child.

The following section describes the curriculum. Subsequent sections unpack the three focus aspects.

The school's curriculum

Each term the children were involved in a whole-school inquiry designed to make them curious about what was happening in their lives, their community and the world. Contexts were selected for their current relevance.

The starting points for the inquiry were a statement centred on a curriculum area and a question that linked to the children's lives. See the table for recent examples:

Term 1, 2015	Term 4, 2015	Term 1, 2016	Term 4, 2016
<p>Statement</p> <p>'Keep calm and carry on'</p>	<p>Statement</p> <p>'For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction'</p>	<p>Statement</p> <p>'Growing a good idea'</p>	<p>Statement</p> <p>'Sing out for change'</p>
<p>Question</p> <p><i>How can we deal with conflict?</i></p> <p>The context was the centenary of World War I.</p>	<p>Question</p> <p><i>How can we use force to create a successful fitness course?</i></p> <p>Resulted in a new fitness course with elements designed by children.</p>	<p>Question</p> <p><i>How can we ensure that we don't need Mars as our Plan B planet?</i></p> <p>Resulted in an outdoor classroom and other new environment and built features designed by children.</p>	<p>Question</p> <p><i>How can we make our story sing?</i></p> <p>Students composed, performed and created music videos for school Grammy Awards held at the local Hoyts Cinema.</p>

An inquiry team and a literacy team comprising of teachers and learners undertook the planning and monitoring. Joint planning by the two teams made sure consistent practices built on what had gone before, and that children experienced learning opportunities across *The New Zealand Curriculum*.



The New Zealand Curriculum is a fantastic and innovative curriculum designed for people to make their own local curriculum. But it needs progressive and innovative people to elevate it to what it could be. It is encouraging to always work with your community, think about your children, think about the place you are situated, and then knit those together.

Principal

The inquiry was often broad, offering opportunities for children to explore different contexts and to relate learning to their lives and aspirations. Sometimes each whānau group would take a different aspect of the topic, as they did in the 'Keep calm and carry on – How can we deal with conflict' inquiry. In this case, children not only immersed themselves in and explored the events of World War I but they also **examined their own role in conflict situations**.

The teachers in each whānau team would take the curriculum overview and, using their creativity, devise innovative activities to support the children to pursue the inquiry into the different learning areas. If it was identified that staff did not have the expertise to fully explore the inquiry question, leaders would use their networks and the web to find appropriate external expertise.

Each new inquiry would begin with an activity designed to provoke the children's thinking and get them asking questions related to the topic. These 'provocative' activities have included a trip on the first day back at school, a market where teachers sold products to children, and a disco to evoke feelings about dance and movement.

One child told us they were always excited to come back to school after the holidays and find out what their teachers had in store for them.

The children were involved in the planning and contributed their ideas about what they would like to learn. They were also continuously involved in decision making relating to the direction of the inquiry and possible answers to the inquiry question.

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“Throughout the week we have been asking questions about our inquiry question, which is ‘How can I become a champion within?’ We looked at and discussed about what we know. We have been thinking about key words like ‘talent’, ‘champion’ and ‘character’. We talked about what those key words mean. Next we asked questions about what we wanted to know. We asked questions about the Olympics, talent within ourselves and the character you need to have to reach your dreams and aspirations!”

Years 5 and 6 children

An **inquiry about equity** started with the statement ‘It’s worth the fight for equal rights’ and the question ‘How can we make a dramatic impact?’ Children learned about leaders such as Dame Whina Cooper, Martin Luther King, Kate Sheppard and Rosa Parks who fought to reduce inequality. In visual arts, they explored and drew freedom quilt designs used by Harriet Tubman. They worked as script writers, costume designers, set designers and actors to create and stage a major production that highlighted what they had learned, namely, that they should be treated equally and should treat others equally.

Sometimes the children’s ideas took an inquiry into areas their teachers had not anticipated, as these two examples illustrate:



Children planning their question to explore in the inquiry.



This group of children enact Dame Whina Cooper taking a stand against inequity.

In the ‘**Growing a good idea**’ inquiry, one suggestion was to have a space where children could get together for forum discussions. This idea morphed into designs for an outdoor classroom. Because the inquiry also had a sustainability focus, everything in the classroom was built with recycled materials.



This outdoor classroom was an outcome of an inquiry.

During the **'Step up, step out – why dance?'** inquiry some senior boys shared an interest in parkour, which involves moving across and between obstacles. Their teachers found a local expert to assist the boys and others to develop their physical skills.

Teachers deliberately sought ongoing feedback from the children about each inquiry, while a review at the end gathered perspectives and ideas from each whānau group. Using an audit framework, teachers asked the children what they had enjoyed the most, what had challenged them, and what topics they would like to learn about in the future. Information from these reviews fed into future inquiries.

Wherever possible, reading, writing and mathematics programmes were tied into the inquiry topic. Before the start of an inquiry, the literacy team would provide detailed plans about how to relate teaching to the focus. Whānau groups filled in the specifics. In 2016, one of the school's charter targets concerned improvements in writing. In response to this, whānau leaders entered details of each week's writing activities into the electronic plan. The literacy leaders then monitored what was being taught and how well it linked to the inquiry question and success criteria.



The fitness circuit under construction.

At the same time the children’s progress in terms of writing levels and success criteria was also tracked. In this way, teachers and leaders could see which activities were associated with the greatest progress. At weekly assemblies, children shared what they had been learning and this was also a measure of how the planned activities were working.

Funding was sourced to action the very best ideas, with the board of trustees being involved in such decisions. Recent permanent structures built as a result of an inquiry included a fitness circuit, art works, outdoor classroom and a buddy bench for the junior school. Resources were also sought and obtained from the wider community.

The **Auckland Council** funded many worthwhile improvements to the wider environment. These were in response to letters sent by the children in conjunction with the inquiry, ‘If you want traction, you have to take action: what is your path for change?’ This inquiry led to improved traffic signage, calming tables, changes to street parking, a completely renovated alleyway and staff parking signs designed by the children.

Working with the community has made learning come alive for the children. Every inquiry concludes with an end-of-term ‘Big Reveal’, when the community comes together to celebrate the outcomes of learning – often things that benefit the community too. Children were empowered to do their best as they knew the outcomes from their inquiries were appreciated and highly visible in their community.



“Things we do help the community, and the community helps us too with our learning.”

Year 8 student

Pedagogy – developing teaching practice

When the current principal was appointed a few years ago, the school was plagued by poor behaviour, graffiti, and lack of community confidence. The first step was to work with teachers to examine the expectations and current practices before redefining teachers' purpose. Leaders stressed that if children were not succeeding, teachers had to do something different. Leaders recognised good teaching every day and in every classroom would make the difference. The principal highlighted there was plenty of research evidence about 'what works' and teachers must use it to ensure the children's success. Leaders decided to get the core teaching right before moving into other areas of the curriculum and school-wide inquiry.



“Reading, writing and mathematics are critical for being a successful inquirer.”

Principal

Firstly, the staff undertook PLD to improve their content knowledge and data literacy. Early emphasis to improve data literacy was a deliberate strategy used by the principal who wanted teachers to use the data to identify the outcomes resulting from their changed teaching actions. When teachers could see the impact of changed practices, their views about the children's potential also changed. Early, but unmistakable, evidence confirmed for them the teaching was responsible for the success or failure rather than the child being seen as solely responsible for the failure. This realisation contributed to a groundswell of change.

Leaders used external experts extensively to build school-wide review and development. Each PLD programme (reading, writing, mathematics) started with a situation analysis in which school leaders asked:

- > What do we know already?
- > What do we need?
- > How will we do it?

Their initial analysis would usually be modified as they worked with a facilitator to construct a plan that responded to the gaps identified. The plan was monitored to see if the actions were having the intended positive outcomes. If the PLD was not working, it was terminated.

Prior to the start of each of the different PLD programmes, leaders made it clear to facilitators they were not being engaged to impart knowledge to teachers but to mentor them in the skills of carrying out observations, leading developments, monitoring progress, supporting and reviewing change. One of the biggest financial costs was that of releasing people to do the analysis, observations and mentoring. However, the cost was considered necessary to make sure the improvements were sustained and continued after the external experts left.

Responding to children’s diverse cultures

Leaders and teachers cultivated a deep knowledge of the child as a learner and as an individual to recognise and value what the children brought to their learning. They developed responsive inquiries and learning by:

- > setting challenging expectations and providing contexts in which children could reach them
- > providing many opportunities for children to work with their peers
- > using the children’s interests and things they bring from their home life
- > pushing children’s boundaries.

Each year, a new mantra was introduced to unify the school around a common purpose; for example, ‘It’s our time to shine’. Each whole-school inquiry linked to the mantra and supported the positive culture.

Leaders and teachers recognised the children came from a variety of different cultures but avoided stereotypical assumptions about their interests or attributes. The focus was on children learning *through* their culture not *about* their culture. Teachers expected to learn from the children. Leaders got teachers to identify differences and similarities and to value what they could bring to their learning. The children valued other cultures and enjoyed being part of a diverse community. Teachers tried to treat the children in their class as a big family.



“Children told us another of their mantras: ‘Once you join the whānau you never leave the whānau.’”

“They talked about how they liked having all the different cultures and hearing different languages.”

“During an art lesson with Year 8 boys we heard the teacher encourage the boys to value their own ideas and culture: ‘Your story is your story – own what you have inside you.’”

ERO evaluators

The school environment, where children's artwork, designs, stories and artefacts were proudly on display, contributed to a sense of purpose and high expectations. Senior students showed us around the school, talking about their learning and explaining the different artworks, presentations and structures. They demonstrated that at this school, doing well was not only OK, it was expected.

Respectful relationships and collaboration were the norm. Respectful, reciprocal relationships with parents and whānau benefited everyone: child, teachers and whānau. Teachers shared all assessments and the children's responses with their parents. Teacher and parents would discuss what an assessment revealed; next steps; and how the parents could support the child's learning at home. The parents were also given appropriate resources.

Whether children arrived at the beginning of, or during, the year, the expectation was they would start learning straightaway. They were assessed during their first week of school, again at six and 12 months, and after two years. Teachers shared assessment data with the children and parents, and used the data to determine appropriate learning activities for both home and school.

Parents we spoke to appreciated the sharing of information and resources. They felt it was a significant reason for the increasing numbers of children reaching the expected level in the senior years. They liked having specific information about their child's learning and goals. They felt, too, the regular changes of inquiry topics kept students motivated in the senior school.



"I have just come to this school and it is here with my seventh child that I find out that there is a basic word list children need to know in their first year of school. I should have known that with my first child. The school has to tell us so we can help. Thank goodness they do that here."

Parent

Strong community support has seen experts coming into the school to assist with inquiry learning. Besides the parkour instructor already mentioned, visitors have included dance specialists from **The University of Auckland** and the **Pacific Dance Company**, and art gallery staff. Parents have also come in and helped children with construction projects that have been outcomes of inquiries.

Many parents take the opportunity to attend daily morning assemblies, the bigger Friday assemblies and end-of-term Big Reveals. The latter became so popular that the school needed to hire the cinema at **Sylvia Park Shopping Centre** as a venue for screening video clips made by the children in which they shared the outcomes of their inquiries.

Parents we spoke to were proud to see their children's learning prominently displayed in the school environment. They brought visiting friends and whānau into the school during the weekend so they could share their children's achievements with them.

Success for every child

To promote success for every child, teachers had first to accept responsibility for every child. One early move was to discontinue withdrawal and mini programmes. Leaders made it clear, from now on, all children would learn in their class, with their peers and their teacher. If a child was not progressing as expected, teachers would examine the issues in the whānau group and discuss possible strategies. Taking responsibility for every student, knowing them well and responding to their strengths and needs became 'business as usual'.

Children worked together, sharing their thinking and developing their ideas. They knew their contribution mattered and was valued. The pace of learning encouraged focus. Because mixed-ability groups were the norm, students were constantly learning from and teaching each other.



Children voting for the best fitness circuit designs and then working together to construct one of the chosen designs.



“Our teachers keep us interested in our learning. You’re not waiting to do new things.”

Year 8 student

For example, students designed all the activity stations for the fitness circuit. The circuit was divided into seven stations, each to develop a different part of the body. Senior students chose which station they would research and then developed a prototype. All the children and parents then voted for the construction of equipment that best met the previously determined criteria for the seven fitness activities. A similar approach where parents and students voted for the best option was used for other inquiries.

Children maintained portfolios containing evidence of their learning in reading, writing, mathematics and inquiry topics, and these were shared with the parents. To increase their understanding of their own learning, the expectation was that as children moved through the school they would increasingly be involved in assessing their own work. When in Year 1, the work samples in their portfolios would be accompanied by teacher comments. In Year 2, the teacher would write in consultation with the child why they had chosen to share this piece of work and how it related to the success criteria. From Year 3 onwards, students were responsible for explaining why they had chosen to share each different piece of evidence.



“I have chosen this piece of evidence because it shows I can use doubling and halving to help me work out multiplication problems easily.”

Year 5 boy

“I have chosen this piece of evidence because it shows I have used paragraphs, commas and exclamation marks when writing a recount.”

Year 3 boy

This process helped children understand what they had achieved. It also simplified the assessment and tracking process for teachers.

Students talked about the value of knowing what they needed to learn to progress and the pride they had in their learning.



“Knowing everyone’s learning levels encourages you to help those in need. The progressions tell us the information that helps you help others so you can all cross the ‘finish line’ together.”

“Our inquiry questions make us work outside our comfort zones. It sets you up for lifelong skills.”

“Our learning is having an influence on our community.”

“I guess you could say we are a pretty ‘out there’ school. We are always asking how we can have a dramatic impact.”

Year 8 students