Blue Sky High

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What happens when you take 15 years of teaching and leading at four different fairly traditional, fairly engaging, high-performing secondary schools, add 3 years of innovation incubation as part of the establishment senior leadership team at Hobsonville Point Secondary School, and throw in a bit of *Most Likely to Succeed* (the documentary and book)? For me it's resulted in the creation of Blue Sky High. In this piece I introduce you to Blue Sky High in an effort to condense down my long-range inquiry on how schools might change and provide readers with my top five recommendations. It is adapted from my January 2016 blog post at www.teachingandlearning.com.

Some people have imaginary friends. Not me. I'm all about the imaginary high school, Blue Sky High. Blue Sky High isn't a new school, because to me that's not where the potential necessarily lies. Blue Sky High is all of the schools I've worked in and all of the schools I dream of leading one day. It's a hypothetical "every school" that I continually assess and reassess in light of the learning I am doing at Hobsonville Point Secondary School (HPSS) (and believe me, the learning is huge) and the learning I do with every event I speak at, every conference I attend, every group or committee I sit on, every bit of research and stories I read or watch, and every educator I meet. I seem to spend an inordinate amount of time daydreaming, planning, and plotting about what I would change, what I would introduce and what I might take away if I was in the position to do so.

Of course every school has its own context and its own specific community needs and opportunities, and there is no one-size-fits-all solution, nor is it ever one person's job to affect or demand change. There are, however, a few key things I keep coming back to, that I reckon could improve any and every school I can think of—improving schools without taking away the special character or flavour that makes a school what it is. I believe that implementing the following five things would be a relatively easy way for any school to evolve so as to ensure students are gaining the skills needed now (not 100 years ago) and in the future. Whether you refer to them as the infuriatingly named "21st century skills", such as collaboration, problem solving, and critical thinking, or simply as a way of genuinely fostering what *The New Zealand curriculum* (*NZC*) (Ministry of Education, 2007) refers to as key competencies, particularly *relating to others*, *managing self*, and *participating and contributing*. And the awesome thing about New Zealand and our self-managing schools is that all of these things could be implemented tomorrow.

1. One-to-one devices with an open internet

I nearly didn't include this one since to me it has always been obvious. But I realise that for others it's still daunting. So, number one, get a solid wifi infrastructure and open up that Internet. Invest in

digital citizenship programmes over surveillance software. Students will binge on Facebook/Spotify/YouTube and the like for a time and then they won't, or at least they won't binge too much if the learning is engaging. Yes, you will have to be vigilant, you will need to move from the front of the classroom and be among your students. Stop fretting over filtering and control, and just get on and encourage and support each and every student to bring in a laptop and use it effectively. Yes, it is important to address that some students will struggle to afford a device. Increasingly suppliers are offering very affordable hire purchase options and what your school saves on computer labs can be invested in chrome books or affordable laptops that can be lent to those that need them through the library. "One-to-one" is the key, not optional BYOD as this will only add to teacher workload as they double up on paper and digital approaches—teachers will also use this as a handy excuse to not evolve their approaches, and fair enough too if it's all a bit "here and there". Teachers are busy, they deserve nothing less than one-to-one if they are going to learn and leverage new strategies, they need to be able to do so efficiently. Bite the bullet, just do it. It is only when you have all students connected that you can genuinely transform how you manage learning and can use e-learning to support, extend, and personalise learning and assessment. Or even better you can let the students take the lead, choose the tools, sources, and mode for capturing and evidencing learning in a way that engages and supports them. And of course students can still work by hand, make, create, talk, roll around in butcher's paper and connect face to face. Believe me, I have experienced every shade of BYOD: diving in the deep end is way less painless than nervously dipping your toes and wondering why learning isn't being transformed.

Now on to what I personally see as the more genuinely exciting ideas (each of which will be enhanced if kids develop digital literacy AND have digital freedom so as to support real agency).

2. Spend more time doing less

One thing of which I am sure—we are rushing teachers and students, doing too much, too quickly. For years I have heard teachers complain about the loss of flexibility, freedom and time, how we used to have time to play and dive deep. Well I have now come to believe that we have created the beast of busyness ourselves. We have added more and more and more and have failed to do anywhere near enough editing. We jam learning into bite size portions, insulting young people's ability to stay focused for any more that 40–50 minutes at a time. The reality is we over teach, over assess and often cover a whole lot of

"stuff" that we are clinging on to because we as teachers love it and are convinced that students need all of it. One of the biggest personal learning curves I have experienced at HPSS is that students don't need all that stuff and we don't need to teach all aspects of every learning area every year. At HPSS we are exploring the idea of "threshold concepts"—these are the concepts from each learning area that must be learnt and understood in order for students to progress. The other trick is making Year 9 and 10 a single 2-year programme—that way content can be almost halved in most learning areas, giving much more time and space for deep learning and inquiry.

However simply pruning programmes is not enough.

Classes need to be respectful of a student's need to take time. This means time to not just "be taught", but time to engage in deep learning and independent inquiry. It cannot be achieved in 45 minutes. After 15 years of 45–60 minute periods in a range of schools and 3 years of 90-minute blocks at HPSS I am embarrassed that I ever gave students less time and expected deep learning to occur. Students and teachers need time for a whole raft of reasons. Students need it so they have time to engage in deep learning, they need time so they can engage in self-directed learning, they need time to think/wonder/ponder, they need time to create, time to fail, they need time to simply learn how to manage time. Teachers need time to get out of the way. So often in a 45–50 minute block we really only have the time to share our "brilliance" with our students. I had the pleasure of meeting and working with John Hattie last year and he out and out challenged me when I declared I only spent 15 minutes in a block direct teaching. He said that even if my direct teaching time was minimal he doubted I clocked less than 30 minutes' airtime (and of course he had data to back this up). And he was probably right. The joy of a 90 minute block is I can engage in direct teaching for up to 30 minutes (if it's even necessary) and still have 60 minutes for group or self-directed work, completing challenges, discussion, inquiry, and creation. Suck 30 minutes out of 45 minutes and you barely have time for

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students to arrive and settle at the beginning and pack up at the end. At HPSS we have 90-minute blocks and no bells and surprisingly students often need to be prompted to stop working. Deep learning is near impossible to achieve when you barely have time to breathe.

3. Connected interdisciplinary learning

Another huge learning curve I have experienced at HPSS is the power of connected interdisciplinary learning. Our foundation programme (a composite 2-year Year 9 and 10 programme) includes a number of co-taught modules where two learning areas come together to teach under a common concept or theme. For example I have taught an English and Science module with Danielle Myburgh called "Game Over" (Amos, 2014) that looked at the gamification of war through the novel *Enders Game*, explored the nature of science through a science fiction lens and researched the science of gaming. I taught an English and Social Science module with Sarah Wakeford called "Freedom Fighters to Freedom Writers" which looked at black civil rights in history and through the text *Freedom Writers Diary* and went on to explore this in a New Zealand context through the Treaty of Waitangi and Parihaka through a social studies and literature lens. There is no question, learning is deeper if it is connected and contextualised. Time and time again I have seen students experiencing enhanced learning in each learning area by the addition of a second one. Maths is given an authentic context by applying it to Technology, representations of ideas in English are taken to the next level when explored through the Arts. Combining two learning areas has been made possible by our physical learning environment at HPSS with two teachers being able to teach 50+ students in an large learning common (we are working from the same student teaching ratio as any other school in New Zealand). This of course is nigh-on impossible in the traditional single-cell classroom environment. However, all is not lost. Often, in many schools, junior programmes are organised in form classes that move through much of the day together. All it would take for many schools to make this shift is for a series of common concepts or themes to be established and a mechanism whereby the teachers of each form class commit to some serious time and effort to connect their learning by planning together. Maybe you could allow the students to work smarter by completing overarching inquiries and projects that counted for more than one learning area. Yes this would take time and fair bit of effort (although platforms such as Hapara Workspace (Hapara, n.d.) can make this surprising easy to manage) but imagine what you could achieve and how all of you might learn from each other and the way you might share and learn from one another's student data. This

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would of course rely on schools giving each and every one of their teachers the autonomy to plan their courses as they see fit for their learners—now isn't that a marvellous idea!

4. Large-scale long-term project learning

Connecting the learning as outlined above is an awesome first step in deepening learning. It doesn't however allow for the genuine interdisciplinary learning that can be achieved through large-scale and long-term project learning. I know many schools collapse a week or a few days here and there to engage in rich tasks or cross-curricular project learning events. These are great, but I have come to see that the skills and dispositions developed through interdisciplinary project learning are best experienced over time, deserving the same status as any one of the "core subjects" we seem to defend, obsess, and froth over. I have long admired the work that Albany Senior High School (ASHS) do through their Impact Projects and am surprised that more haven't followed suit. In many ways ASHS have pioneered and paved the way for what we are doing at HPSS, giving students two-thirds of every Wednesday to engage in large-scale, long-term projects which run for a semester (half a school year) which see them addressing an issue or need, providing a solution, a service, or designing a product for a very real client or partner. This is a great way to authentically introduce "service learning" and has been a great way for students to explore and address issues around sustainability within a very real community context. In the junior programme these programmes are led and managed by the teachers (project guides) with

the idea that as students move into senior school they will have gained the skills required to start developing their own impact projects with the support of a project guide. Personally I can see a whole lot of sense in dedicating a day a week to project learning, that way making the entire school focus on the same thing and teachers and facilities from across the school are available as needed. It also requires having a person or team that can help develop partnerships with local community groups and businesses—imagine how your students might serve your (and their) local community if they had a dedicated day a week to do so. Of course you will need to make space in your curriculum to make this work (refer back to point 2, "Spend more time doing less"—this will require some healthy pruning in each of those core subject areas to make space for project learning that quite possibly dips into each of these subjects anyway). To make it genuinely engaging, students need to have options and choices as they select a project focus that interests them in the junior school and ultimately develop an impact project that lets them explore their interests and passions in the senior school. This requires project guides that are flexible and responsive—a challenge, but so worth it when you consider that projects allow students to really express and develop each of the key competencies and are far more likely, more so than any one subject, to prepare them for their lives and careers beyond school. As an aside I would love to see New Zealand adopt a project learning qualification similar to the one offered in South Australia where all Year 12 students engage in a year-long research project (South Australian Certificate of Education, n.d.). These projects are then celebrated through a state-wide exhibition of learning—what a great way to measure the development some of our key competencies through important and engaging context.
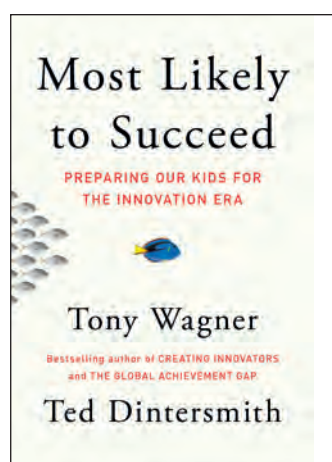
5. Home rooms with real academic coaching

Like projects, I believe form classes and home rooms deserve real time. Before HPSS I had only really experienced the 15-minute form time, which lay outside teaching contact time so often achieving little more than a quick hello, roll take, and, if you are lucky, a rousing rendition of the Daily Notices. We then try and add academic coaching and/or mentoring and wonder why they fail or result in very little. Deans take care of the meaty matters and teachers take care of admin. At HPSS we have Learning Hubs where teachers spend three 90-minute blocks a week, dedicated to looking after the whole student. In the last 2 years this has been shaped loosely around a curriculum divided into three

areas—my learning, my community, and my being. Hub time is a time for meeting with students one to one, setting goals, reflecting on learning, learning to learn developing dispositions we refer to as the "Hobsonville Habits". Coaches communicate home every 2 to 3 weeks and students stay (where possible—this is hard to achieve in establishment phase) with the same coach for their 5 years at high school. In many ways the coach is like a form teacher on steroids combined with a dean and career adviser—they are the "go-to adult" for that student throughout their secondary schooling. Many of you are probably baulking at the 3 x 90 minutes (yes, this means more subject-specific pruning), but I suggest at least 2 x 60–90 minute blocks of home-room time would be worth their weight in (pedagogical and wellbeing) gold. Imagine what might be achieved within a vertical group, the kind of student mentoring that could be developed, the way you could develop the skills and dispositions that would support your mentoring, academic coaching, restorative practice, and PB4L initiatives. This gives you the space for that important cross-curricular learning around such things as digital citizenship, anti-bullying, wellbeing and learning-to-learn strategies. This time becomes especially important as your school moves to an increasing student-centred approach where learner agency is encouraged: students can succeed at large stints of self-directed learning, but they are teenagers and will always need your guidance, challenge, and support.

Of course there are many other things we could change or do, such as ensuring every teacher engages in teaching as inquiry, or, even better, spirals of inquiry. Schools could develop a common language of learning, provide more student choice and encourage greater learner agency. But I strongly believe that if the five ideas above were adopted, many of these other things would occur in the long term anyway. I recognise that many schools are doing one or more of the things outlined above already. However, I believe the key is not glacial incremental adoption of one, two, or three of these things. It takes doing all of them and more depending on the particular needs of your students and community. I actually have an alternate daydream where I abolish all timetables and subjects in favour of a series of self-directed challenges and projects with learning guides helping students to navigate through the curriculum. But one thing I have learned at HPSS is the importance of taking people with you. The five ideas suggested above are completely doable—if you believe they aren't, I suspect you might be underestimating yourself as well as your staff, students, and wider community. To paraphrase Grant Lichtman: educational change isn't hard, it's simply uncomfortable (Lichtman, 2013). Remember the

purpose of education is not just good NCEA grades or achieving University Entrance. It has to be way bigger than that if we have any chance in preparing our young people for the ever changing and increasingly challenging world we live in. I like how Wagner and Dintersmith (2015) sum up what the purpose of education should be in their book *Most Likely to Succeed*:

> The purpose of education is to engage students with their passions and growing sense of purpose, teach them critical skills needed for career and citizenship, and inspire them to do their very best to make their world better.

Are we meeting that purpose with traditional, disconnected, single-subject learning, or could we be doing a whole lot better by making a few small but significant changes? What changes would you make at your Blue Sky High?

Acknowledgements and recommendations

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recommendations). Getting to meet and speak with High Tech High's Larry Rosenstock last year at EduTech had a profound impact, as did working and presenting with #EdJourney author Grant Lichtman at Ulearn and our very own staff-only day. The other two educators that provided influential earworms that firmed up my thinking were my new-found friends from Learning2 Manila—make sure you check out the Learning2 talks from Sam Sherratt and Reid Wilson.

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