

THE WINSTON CHURCHILL MEMORIAL TRUST OF AUSTRALIA

Report by

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2005 CHURCHILL FELLOW**

The James Love Fellowship.....

'To note and explore strategies for ensuring Teenage Education is valued and successful for a community, school and student'.

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Signed: Colin Allen-waters

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CONTENTS

Introduction and Acknowledgements	1
Executive Summary	2
Program	3
Major Findings and Observations	4-10
Conclusions	11-13
Recommendations	13-14

The data collection, research and synthesis of information for this project is NOT intended to be an academic treatise of this subject. It is designed to gather opinions and thoughts from a small sample of schools, school personnel and educational practitioners about what is perceived to be working for teenage education in a range of community-based schools, in a range of communities, and in a range of countries.

The author has spent time in significant provincial schools, their classrooms and their communities, asking questions and observing working students, their teachers and their school Administration. Schools in Finland, Norway, Ireland and England were explored and below is a summary of the findings.

INTRODUCTION

Within the field of Secondary Education throughout Australia, a number of teachers, school Administrators and school communities have been seeking answers to:

- What is working in Education for 13-18 year olds;
- What is valued by students, educators and community.

The answers to these questions will provide valuable insight into “How to do business better” when educating teenagers at Secondary Schools.

Australia has always scored comfortably in OECD (Economic Organization for Co-operation & Development) Education reviews, often following trends established by United Kingdom Education. The latest data released by OECD on the success of 15 year old students shows that while Australia remained comfortable in the top 10 (of 41 countries), the United Kingdom appears to be slipping. However, Scandinavian countries strengthened their relative positions. They are now being recognized as world leaders.

As a Principal of a Secondary High School in Australia, I wanted to examine first-hand some educational institutions of these countries to seek answers from real, on-the-ground practitioners to the above questions. This examination has led to some understanding of factors driving educational success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- The James Love Churchill Fellowship enabled me to travel Finland, Norway, Ireland and England. I wish to acknowledge the Winston Churchill Fellowship Memorial Trust for providing this opportunity which has proven to be one of the highlights of both my person and professional career. An opportunity to pursue one’s passion is indeed priceless.
- My family, Julie, Nicholas and Kit for their patience and support during my Fellowship endeavours.
- All the contacts, both domestic and overseas who freely gave their time, thoughts and opinions to help shape my project.
- My work colleagues for “holding the fort” while I was away and allowing me to focus on my project.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Project

To note and explore strategies for ensuring Teenage Education is valued and successful for a community, school and student.

This fellowship culminated in travel during Autumn, 2006. The aim was to explore:

- What is working in education for 13-18 year olds, and
- What is valued by students, educators and communities.

Schools and communities in Scandinavia and Europe were visited.

Major Schools:

Finland	Hameenlinna Lyseo- Hameenlinna Yhteiskoulu Lukio- Hameenlinna
Norway	Kommherad Kvinnune-Rosendal Lardal Kommune-Lardal
Ireland	The Dublin High School, Dublin Marion College, Dublin
England	The Cherwell High School, Oxford John Mason School, Abingdon

The student's ability to engage with and have success in education was found to be aligned with three main issues:

- Curriculum- national, common curriculum was found across all schools. When this is known, predictable and relevant, success flowed.
- Valued Relationships- strong understandings of the role and responsibilities students, parents, teachers and community play in forming a "team" to address education is critical for success. Student Engagement- Students tend to engage in a positive learning experience when they view their learning as relevant and 'predictable'.

Recommendations

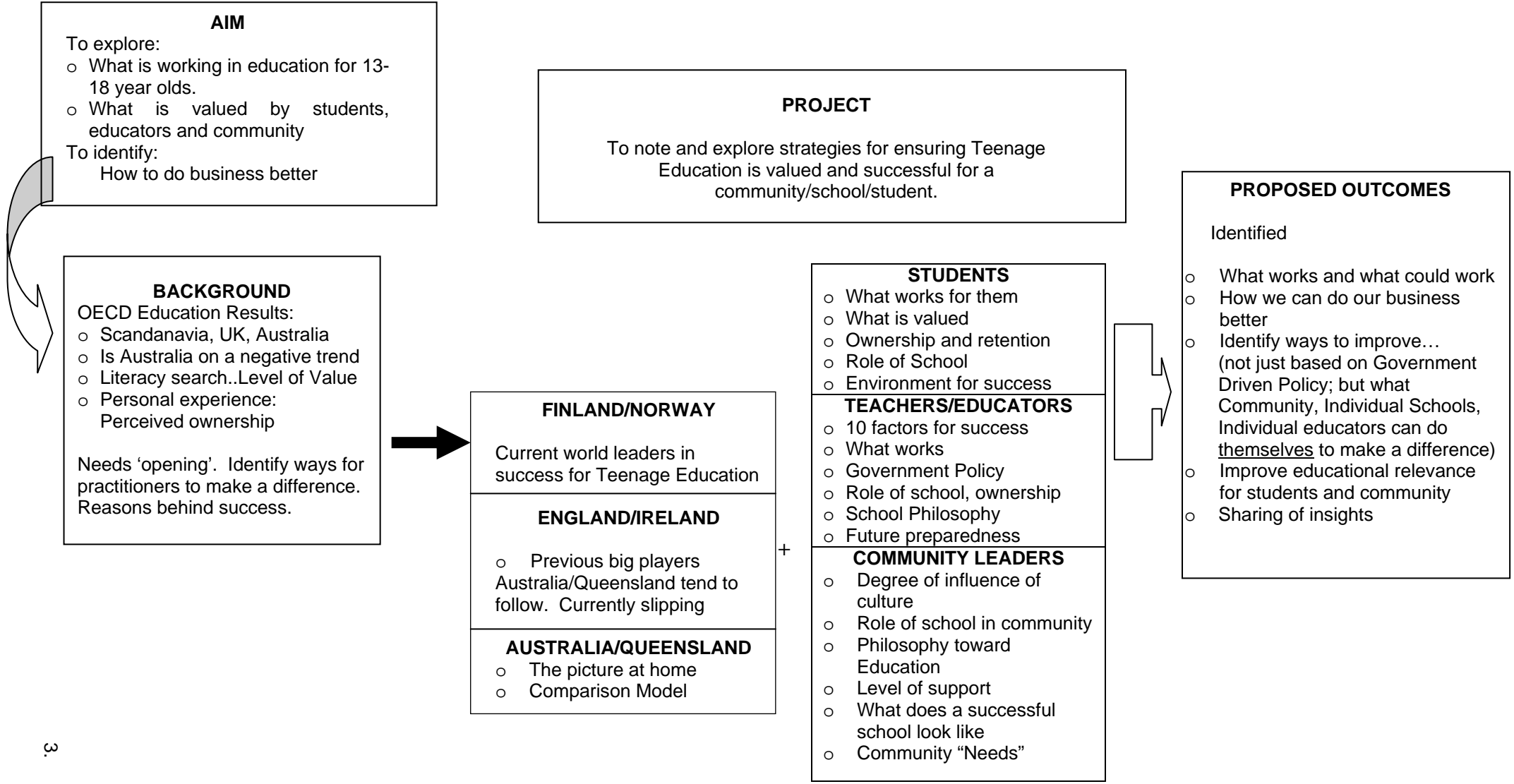
If students, teachers and community are to value education to a greater level (and therefore promote more success), then Australian educators and their school communities need to take stock of the models presented by successful school systems.

- Ensure the curriculum is relevant, but more importantly, known and delivered/assessed in a very predictable fashion.
- Ensure a climate of 'optimism' prevails throughout the school. All school players need to be seen to understand their responsibilities towards contributing as a team.
- Student engagement can be enhanced by creating a climate of predictability. An assured approach to curriculum, teaching styles, delivery and assessment promotes confidence and trust.

-Implementation and dissemination

- The findings learned will directly inform my development of a valued and successful school.
- Findings will be shared through workshops, seminars and conferences to fellow professionals and community groups.
- Papers written and submitted to professional publications.

ENSURING EDUCATION WORKS FOR OUR COMMUNITIES, SCHOOLS AND STUDENTS
Colin Allen-Waters



MAJOR FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

1. FINLAND



Education in Finnish schools is heavily controlled by Government Policy and National Curriculum. Comprehensive, compulsory education is delivered to all students up to Year 9 (15 years old). Success at this level is highly valued by parents, community and most students. Success (in exams) leads to places in Upper Secondary (Academic, 55%), Schools or Vocational (35%) Schools. Students of Finland, at all levels, are under pressure from family and community to value their educational opportunities. It is expected that students will improve Finland and add their part to National pride.

Most of Upper Secondary Education is directed towards the final National Test (Matriculation). Success at this level is valued by students, teachers and the community. (Schools are graded by student success in this test). Students receive a white cap on matriculation. This cap is worn with pride by people of all ages, on special days, e.g. May Day celebrations.

Throughout Finland, it was evident that much emphasis has been placed on clearly identifying the role students must play in taking responsibility for their own learning. The role of teachers is also clear but the responsibility for learning lies heavily at the feet of the students. It is their role to take the opportunities on offer, to make the most of their education, without disrupting others around them. This position is understood by all.

There was a clear working partnership between student, teacher and school. This partnership towards achieving success was strong amongst most of the students and teachers. Teachers were expected to create every opportunity for students to achieve in the National Matriculation Test. Teachers were very possessive of their class time, being businesslike and professional. This added to the sense of 'we are here to get the job done' feeling in the schools visited.

The learning process in classrooms is heavily teacher directed. Many classrooms observed were lecture-style in approach throughout most of the lesson. Teachers indicated that their limited class time and the need to prepare students for the National Test was the major factor in controlling their approaches to teaching. Very little 'innovation' or true 'student-centred' learning was evident.

The standard of teaching and the standard of student results across schools in Finland only vary a small degree. The level of teacher training is high and teachers follow the National curriculum to a significant extent. There are no private schools in Finland (of any significance) and the Board of Education determines what schools (Lower, Upper or Vocational) a student will attend. This "equality" is something that is treasured in Finland.

School Governance is heavily controlled by the City or County Board (administering all schools in a geographic area). This Board, with the Principal, sets directions for the school and determines the level of funding the school will receive. Parents and teachers have very little say in school affairs. The Board's decisions are usually final. Parents in general comfortably accept that the School and the Board are autocratic in decision-making, having faith that the best interests of the students and community are served.

The strength of the Finnish system appears to be the very strong comprehensive education that all students receive up to Year 9. A very strong emphasis is placed on Literacy and Numeracy. Students are expected to achieve in order to gain access to further educational options. This expectation is held by parents, community, school and most students. A great deal of trust is placed in the National compulsory curriculum at both lower and upper secondary levels.

The role and responsibilities of students, teachers and school are clear to all. There appears to be very little confusion about the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning. Teaching is focused on the National curriculum.

The school Principal is an Educational Manager- with most of their time directed towards delivering the curriculum in the school. Their focus is instructional leadership and school standards. A sense of partnership (students and teachers) towards achieving was evident in all schools. The County/City Board was a strong governor, but the community and parents had very limited involvement in the schools and no decision-making roles. This in turn created a strong understanding of the school's role and direction. The role and direction evident in following the National Curriculum.

2. NORWAY

Norwegian education, like in Finland, has controls based in Government Policy, National Curriculum and Testing. The National Testing Program (under review) dictates the need for students and teachers to be actively working towards quality results in order for students to access courses in Upper Secondary School and beyond Secondary School.

Nearly all students (~98%) continue beyond the compulsory age of schooling to access 3 years of upper secondary education, choosing vocational and academic streams in roughly equal degrees. There is some flexibility of choice between streams, but this in reality is minor. The National curriculum is prescriptive, but not as rigid as to restrict a teacher's or class's innovative approaches to Teaching and Learning. It provides a 'skeleton' from which School and teacher initiatives are possible to some limited extent.

The basic precept of Norwegian Educational Policy is "Education for All". Wherever they live in the country, all girls and boys shall have an equal right to education. All public school education in Norway (which is ~95%) is free and each community's governing board takes great effort to ensure this is actualized in all ways including books, excursions and tuition.

The compulsory years of schooling (up to the end of Year 10) are characterized by a strong National Curriculum where all students essentially study the same course. Content and process covered is not dissimilar to the Australian Curriculum with strong Literacy and Numeracy aspects embedded in subjects. Most schools choose to limit the exposure of students to about 2 or 3 teachers only- where teachers are skilled and expected to deliver across the curriculum. This in turn allows strong relationships to develop between students and their teachers which then serve as stimulates for success. The relationships are in general relaxed and supportive and steeped in each partner's knowledge and understanding of their roles. The role of the student is rarely debated by student, teacher or home. The responsibility for learning lies with the student, while the teacher (and school) provides the framework.

Students are generally given a work plan by teachers and are allowed to engage as their learning style develops- but there is a clear expectation by home, community and school that engagement will occur as this is the responsibility the student has in the learning process.

Parents and community want their children to be educated to a high level. This is a point of national pride, with the community believing that every student should take an education which allows them to pursue the 'higher-end' employment in their country and beyond. Both parents and the School Community Council (the Administrative and Governance power outside of the school) trust that each school (and teaching staff) will deliver the National Curriculum and professionally handle the learning processes. This trust in general is very high and there is very limited involvement in school affairs or doubting of the school's ability to support the student while at school. This trust is certainly a factor in ensuring students take the responsibility of their role seriously. The School Community Council governs in a very similar manner to those in Finland. Parents choose to have quite limited involvement in the affairs of the school-other than ensuring their children remain relatively focused.

Students engaged in upper education at the end of their third year are entitled to wear coloured overalls for the month immediately preceding their final exams (June). This tradition, going back many generations is highly prized by students who proudly wear their course colours. Sometimes this relaxed "schoolies time" places undue pressure on students to prepare themselves for their culminating exams.



The strengths of Norway's approach to secondary schooling appear to be in their strong belief that equal education access is for all. Norway as a rich country by world standards, comfortably fund this approach. They have developed a system which ensures a National Curriculum controls the breadth of expected study- but in such a way that allows teachers and students the flexibility to adapt the learning process to suit individual student, teacher and class needs. Innovation within the framework is encouraged- and as a result, the learning process can be delivered more as a partnership (teacher + student) rather than a restricted teacher directed model. This in turn encourages learning and teaching responsibilities which are taken seriously by all.

This strength is coupled with the very clear expectation from family and community, that students will achieve at school. This community and family support for the school is a powerful impetus towards ensuring students comply with expectations and responsibilities- even though there appears to be some diminishing of positions as worldly times change.

3. IRISH EDUCATION

Approximately 27% of the Irish populace is currently engaged in full time education. This high figure is indicative of the value the Irish society places upon education. It also reflects in the role that education plays in the everyday life of Irish men and women. Ireland is currently experiencing a booming economy and these times have heightened the Irish family's expectation that their children will be successful in their educational pursuits. Success is measured by achievement at their Junior (Secondary School) studies, which in turn opens opportunities for a quality leaving certificate and university pathways.

A National exam system is the key method of assessing students and the curriculum. Styles of teaching are all built around the need for the school and individual students to achieve well when passing these exams. The Junior exams determine upper school pathways (vocational or academic), while the key exams occur at the end of high school and determine placement in universities and technical institutes. The emphasis the Nation (and family unit) places on success in these exams strongly influences attitudes towards secondary schooling. Innovative teaching practices are hard to find, as all schools are teaching closely to the same core curriculum. The testing, at the end of the junior certificate and leaving certificate, keeps everyone focused. The one exception to this is the Transition Year (Year 10) where many schools are attempting some minor innovative approaches to teaching as no strong National Curriculum exists for this year.

There is no formal system of rating/ranking schools as yet, but the debate is currently raging (not dissimilar to Australia). There is a view amongst school administrators that, in the near future, the National Testing results will be published and used in ways to judge and compare schools. This in turn is encouraging even less desire for teachers to move away from their teacher-centred approach to curriculum delivery.

The stability of society has also contributed to the operations of schools and strong community acceptance of their school. Almost all students who start at a school finish their education at that same school. Indeed, as there is only minor movement of families while students are in the school system (and also over generations from a community), schools enjoy a position of acceptance for the way they do business. This acceptance had transpired into a stable and often unquestioned role for school and its students. This is slowly changing, as families and students are starting to query school strategies and behaviours (especially in inner city high schools).

This acceptance for school management has resulted in only limited parental involvement in school governance- even though the government and individual schools have been encouraging this involvement through 'required' School Management Committees or Boards. This lack of clear parental involvement and the perceived limited need to change from the tried and true direction set by the National Curriculum may contribute to a possible 'tiredness' in a school's approach. This 'tiredness' and the traditional approach and values have produced quality schools- but perhaps schools lacking innovation. Student engagement is now being challenged as more teenagers question the traditions and lack of innovation. Discipline issues are slowly on the rise.

Secondary education in Ireland is strong. It enjoys strong community acceptance –but slowly this acceptance (and world standing) is being questioned. Ireland may need to adapt to changing times if it is to ensure that students remain compliant to the educational directions on offer. The challenge will be to ensure clear understanding and acceptance of roles the school will play in preparing all students for addressing their futures.

4. ENGLISH EDUCATION



The range and quality of Secondary education in England appears to vary significantly as you move between schools in the city, country and the selective and non-selective sectors. My focus is directed towards large comprehensive schools in provincial cities.

Much of the decisions aligned to running and organizing English schools are based on reactions to National Data Collection and expectations created by the Government of the day. The emergence of National testing and School League tables over the past decade or more has ensured that all school administrators, teachers and parents (who have an interest) are in a position to judge and compare school performance. This in turn, has placed pressure on the school and its teachers to 'perform' for their students. Some think that the emphasis has shifted the responsibility for learning away from individual students-creating some growing tensions at the school site. The data collection emphasis of late has focused more upon 'distance travelled' by the school and its learners than the bland league tables. This in turn has encouraged schools to adapt a willingness to explore some non-traditional and innovative ways to deliver curriculum. Schools are constantly 'on guard' for Government inspections and reviews. This is a source of continual stress for school administrators and teachers, often encouraging them to place undue energy into 'preparing the data' rather than focused delivery and learning.

Each school is generally governed by the Local Authority and Board of Governors- who advise on strategic directions for the school and its community. They may also seek justification from the Principal for the decisions made at school and explanations of accountability to data generated. Mostly, these bodies are very supportive and not actively 'hands on'. These bodies often determine the level of funding received by a school. Parents have some say in the operations of the schools- but in general their degree of influence is distant. There is a small but growing trend to question the school on discipline and welfare decisions and student results.

Most schools are characterized as having non-threatening environments, with predictability to delivery, teaching and curriculum. This position works well for the majority of students and families, who are comfortable in allowing the school to go about the education business. Nearly all students (~98%) successfully complete their GCE and then choose academic or vocational pathways. Vocational students generally leave school at this point to pursue their education in a technical college. Partnerships between traditional schools and technical colleges are strengthening in many areas.

Students in general, believe their schools should "care about them". This welfare belief is promoted by most schools that strongly encourage all teachers (and systems) to advise and support individual students in their course and future planning, academic learnings and in traditional social and behavioural areas. Students are seen and increasingly treated as individuals and are learning to expect this approach. The respect a student holds for their school and their commitment to education/learning appears to be linked strongly to their belief of being cared about. Schools experiencing success are those actively encouraging the delivery of welfare to the individual in the planning and support areas.

A significant obstacle to the smooth attainment of educational success is the constant and rapid change expected of English schools. The continual analysis and reaction to collected data places each school and its teachers under constant pressure to change towards improvement. This in turn has effected the teachers (and school Administrators) motivation and self worth. Much needed funding is often linked to a school's ability to address change- this places further pressure on individual teachers and schools. A school staff's ability to address these issues has a direct affect on teaching/learning practices and in turn student engagement and behaviours.

Student attitude to learning and performance appears to be less aligned with the "traditional role of a student" and more aligned to the perceived attitudes of their parents (towards the school) and to the attitudes of their teachers towards the school. A shifting of responsibilities for learning away from the student onto the system. A well-performing, supported and supportive school tends to breed success as student attitude towards their school also strengthens. Good schools flourish, poor schools get worse.

The challenge for schools is to determine how they will address change and motivate staff, parents and students towards success.

CONCLUSION

The process of secondary school education is concerned with helping teenage students to learn and achieve. There appears to be three major issues for educators and their communities to address:

- Appropriate curricula for a rapidly changing world.
- Life-long learning relationships that are valued by students, parents and community.
- Engagement of every student in the curriculum.

A student's ability to learn is universal, but the way a school or school system approaches this learning is critical. The policies that a school system applies create the framework for schools to operate. A school's interpretation of these policies plays a significant factor on the learning opportunities and environment faced by the students. Most countries addressing modern world education have similar policies and only minor differences in application and interpretation was evident. But these minor differences may have considerable impact on student learning.

Curriculum

There are many successful education systems (and schools) around the world. One common trait is that very similar curriculum offerings were evident in all countries visited. The curriculum learnings and framework experienced by 15 year olds are essentially (90%) the same. Curriculum guidelines in most places are not prescriptive, allowing a small degree of interpretation, innovation and side-tracking to occur (an essential ingredient to create robust engagement). A National Curriculum and National Exams were the norm and it was commonplace that schools were judged (and sometimes funded) on how well their students performed in National testing and inspection programs.

This factor in itself created certainty and accountability in the system but also stifled broader student learning as energy was placed into delivery and receiving the set curriculum, at the expense focusing on the learner. Progressive education systems are beginning to understand that if we are to make every student a success, then the student should be the focus of our efforts (rather than the silent participator). We have to match our curriculum to the students' capabilities and needs- while still operating in a National framework.

Valued Relationships

Schools, students and communities that are optimistic in their attitudes and approaches to education often create an environment which promotes success at all levels. It was found that the countries visited which rated highly in the OECD/PISA research in general, were very optimistic about the role of education in addressing their own future (or their children's future). This optimism generated confidence and trust in the school and school systems- which in turn encouraged strong performances by the students. Students believed that they can make a difference in the future, and that education and their school will help them achieve this.

This was particularly strong in Finland. The Scandinavian communities, parents, school employees and students had trust in their school, its curriculum and teachers. Very little 'questioning' or 'blame' was levelled at schools or teachers and in turn, although structures for parent and community involvement were evident, the level of involvement was low. The level of trust and support for the school was high (provided school maintained its clear and predicted role in curriculum delivery and success in the National testing program).

These observations were not as strong in English schools.

Student Engagement

The level of student engagement varied across all education systems and schools explored. This is the most critical aspect of ensuring success for teenagers' learning, and an understanding of "what is working" in this area is necessary if educators across the world are to make a difference to student outcomes.

A 'predictable' model of educational delivery is strongly needed. Countries experiencing high levels of success in teenage education deliver a highly predictable education package. It has been identified that if students, staff and parents KNOW what to expect, then they can adjust their behaviours and attitudes in advance to adapt to their role in the process. This in turn contributes to increasing understanding, confidence and trust in the education system. A sense of optimism by all then prevails which then has a positive effect on student learning.

A National curriculum which offers some flexibility is a necessary step- but this is only the framework for building a 'predictable' school system.

The manner of delivery of this curriculum needs to be predictable across the school and across all aspects and faculties of the school. Students need to be clearly aware of their role and the expectation teachers and communities have for their role. Similarly, teachers and parents need to be clear about behaviours and roles they must adopt to ensure success. Once an understanding of individual's roles and responsibilities are accepted and engrained and not changing from class to class or faculty to faculty or school to school- then a supportive and known environment for success can be achieved. So if students (and parents/teachers) know what is going to be taught, how it will be taught and in what way their learnings will be assessed- then their confidence in the school and confidence in addressing their learning will increase. This creates the clear opportunity for all to work as a team- with known roles, responsibilities and similar expectations- towards achieving the best possible results for individual students.

Adjustments to programs/goals/approaches- although possible, should be minimized to maintain a sense of 'predictability' in educational delivery. If a school and its community are possessive of an 'assured' and 'predicted' school experience, then there is greater acceptance, optimism and engagement for learning.

Schools with a clearly 'predictable' approach to education within a country and across countries, tend to perform better, have greater levels of community trust and have a happier environment for students, staff and parents.

It is proposed that the findings learned throughout the Fellowship study will directly inform my development of a valued and successful school. Programs will be implemented to model and encourage success in a school setting. Findings will be shared through workshops, seminars and conferences to fellow professionals and community groups. Papers will be written and submitted to professional publications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensuring teenage education is valued and successful should be a goal that all educators, parents and communities strive to achieve. I have identified ways for practitioners to make a difference in their school. It is easy to get lost in Government driven policies, but individuals and their schools can make a difference.

Curriculum

Identify community needs and then adapt curriculum to meet these needs. The National curriculum (similar across all countries visited) provides a great framework and only minor adjustments/additions should be considered. This in turn will create a sense of responsible certainty in curriculum, its delivery and assessment. Community trust will then follow.

Value Relationships

Create a sense of optimism and encourage all to play their role. An environment conducive for success will follow if appropriate roles and responsibilities can be established for students, teachers and community. These roles need to be open, assessed and expected. The predictable nature of each other's behaviours and expectations will serve as a way of encouraging the concept of working as a 'team'. If it is viewed that the student, school, parent and community are working together to help each other, then less tensions will surface and a more focused approach to learning will occur.

Student Engagement

Predictability is the key. Students need to believe that what they are learning is relevant, but more so, they need to know what they are doing and how they are doing it.

Schools displaying predictable structures to curriculum, lesson delivery and assessment create confidence in the learner. The students will be more aware of their role and what behaviours are acceptable and therefore are more likely to engage in a positive manner. If students and parents are clearly aware of their roles and their responsibilities and aware of what school (and system) expectations are in place, then they will have greater confidence and optimism for the learning process.

Changing the predictable nature of the learning process in a school should be considered very carefully. Any change to curriculum or structure should be accompanied by extensive consultation to ensure that confidence and predictability remains. Any uncertainty by students, teachers or parents can create tensions and fragmentation of the collective team effort needed for a successful school.

Schools enjoying the most success are one which have a very predictable approach to learning, teaching and parent roles. When this is coupled with acknowledgement and recognition of the learner as an individual, then success seems to be assured.