GREAT EXPECTATIONS: WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP TO ENHANCE LEARNING AND STRENGTHEN TEACHING IN DIVERSE PRIMARY SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

The "Great expectations: Enhancing learning and strengthening teaching in primary schools with diverse student populations through action research" (GE) project began in early 2004. It is funded under the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TLRI) managed for the Ministry of Education by the New Zealand Council for Educational Research. The TRLI aims to build knowledge about how, as educators, we can improve educational outcomes and how teachers can support learning. A key principle of the TLRI projects is that they are partnership projects where practitioners and researchers work together to build knowledge about teaching and learning and increase both research and educative capability. Consequently, six schools are working with two University of Waikato researchers in the GE project.

One factor that is known to be of considerable importance in teaching and learning is teacher expectations (Galton, Hargreaves, Comber, Wall, & Tell, 1999; Phillips, McNaughton & MacDonald, 2001; Timperley & Phillips, 2003, for example). While professional development run externally to the school has been shown to have an effect on teacher expectations, perceptions of self-efficacy and student achievement (Timperley & Phillips, 2003) the rationale for the study described here is to investigate how schools themselves can draw on existing research and initiate and sustain high expectations and increase student achievement through their own effort. At the time the research proposal was co-constructed by the six teacher-researchers and the University researchers, all six schools held high academic expectation of their students. However, what is becoming clear as the project progresses is that wide variety in expectations exists among the schools. Furthermore, early work reveals variation and great complexity with regard to student achievement, both between and within the six schools.

This paper explores the sorts of expectations for achievement held in these six schools at the commencement of the project, as well as how the teachers within them conceptualise and set about measuring student achievement. Because another principle of the TLRI was that the funded projects should investigate teaching and learning in schools with diverse student populations, it must be emphasised that the schools in the GE project comprise very different communities of students within and between schools. Understanding why they hold the expectations and perceptions of student achievement that they do should be seen within both the New Zealand and local contexts. Therefore, this paper first briefly describes the diversity of the participating schools. It then summarises how the data for this paper was gathered and analysed. The early findings about the sorts of expectations that are held for students in these schools and how they set about measuring student achievement are then presented and discussed. Finally, although the paper describes the contextual complexity and diversity of these schools, it argues that it is the similarities between them, rather than the differences, that have led to their desire for professional learning through action research.
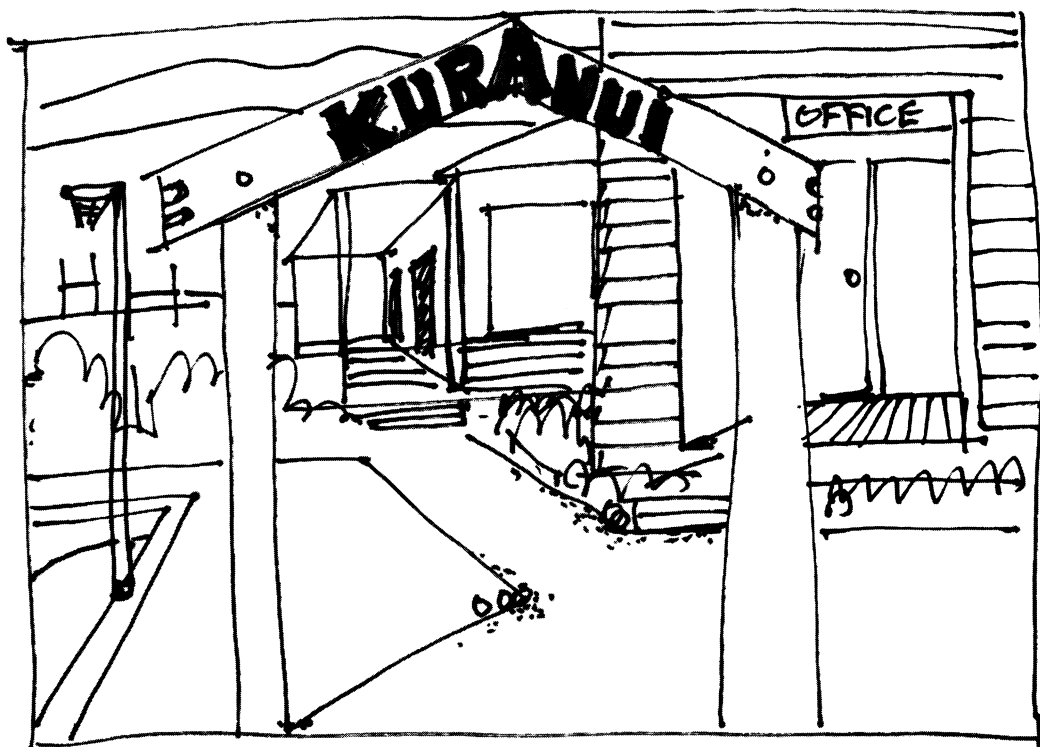
DIVERSITY OF SCHOOL CONTEXTS

The pressure on schools to improve and to raise achievement has increased since restructuring in education in the 1990s and is unlikely to abate in the near future. In New Zealand, as elsewhere (Harris, 2002; Harris, 2004) education policy is firmly focused on increasing student and school performance. All six schools in the study reported here are focused upon improvement and hold "high" expectations for their students. However, what was not clear at the beginning of this study was what those expectations were and how they might contribute to achievement. Furthermore, as the project got underway and the schools introduced themselves to one another, it became obvious that they were very diverse in a range of ways. For example, the schools are located in large urban settings and rural towns, range from decile 1 to decile 10, draw on vastly different communities culturally and include full primary, contributing, intermediate and integrated schools. Table 1 summarises some of this diversity.

Table 1   Characteristics of the six participating schools

School Code	Size by approximate student numbers	Location	Decile	Type	Ethnic composition
A	700	Large city suburban	10	Contributing primary	Pākehā 40%, Chinese 30% Indian 10% Māori 1% Other 19%
B	600	Small city suburban	3	Intermediate	Pākehā 50% Māori 30% Other 20%
C	150	Rural	1	Full primary	Māori 80% Pākehā /other 20%
D	570	Small city suburban	2	Contributing primary	Māori 50% Pākehā 34% Pacific Islands 7% Asian 7% Other 2%
E	300	Large city suburban	1	Integrated full primary	Pacific Islands 96% Predominantly Samoan Māori 4%
F	400	Small city suburban	5	Contributing primary	Pākehā 59 % Māori 25% Other 16%

But in addition to these common descriptors and categories, other aspects contribute to their diversity. For example, while the two decile 1 schools are similar in terms of their socio-economic status, they are very different in nearly all other ways. One, School C, explained that even though they are located in a rural area far from a main centre and the mainly Māori students come mostly from low-income homes, three computer suites are shared between the six classrooms and there is an emphasis on using information communication technology for learning and teaching. The school environment, curriculum and ethos reflect the predominantly Māori student population and there is an emphasis on using the students' experiences in progressing their learning. For example, the outdoors, local businesses, artisans and amenities are infused throughout the programme. There is a school-wide focus on numeracy and literacy.

The other decile 1 school, also a full primary, is located in New Zealand's largest metropolis. In contrast with School C's large Māori population, School E's students come predominantly from Samoan and a range of other Pacific Island backgrounds. Most of the students at this school speak another language at home and do not have strong English-speaking role models at home. Because it is an integrated Catholic school, spirituality infuses the curriculum.

Like School E, School A, also has a high proportion of students from homes where English is not the predominant language, but this is the decile 10 school in a large city. An increasing number of children arrive at this school speaking little or no English and the school has established bilingual classes to meet the needs of these children. This school has instituted "student learning meetings" among the teachers with the goal of lifting student achievement in line with their yearly goals.

As these three brief profiles show, the schools in this project are diverse in a range of ways, including decile, location,

ethnic composition, spoken languages and community contexts. But they are also very similar in others. All six sought to become part of this study in order to better understand how they could improve student learning and strengthen teaching in their school. All are prepared to investigate their own practices to see how productive of improvement they are. All have proactive leaders in their principals and deputy/assistant principals, who gather evidence in order to judge their success in school improvement. All of these six schools can describe and explain how they measure student achievement and what they expect their students to achieve. This paper attempts to explicate some of these expectations and describe some of the ways these schools currently measure and report student achievement. As it will show, they are diverse in these aspects as well.

DATA GATHERING DESCRIPTION

Due to the diversity of the six schools, the fact that they wanted to use action research to explore and improve their own situations and the collaborative nature of this research, it was not possible (or desirable) to conduct an empirical study with standardised procedures to investigate the practices in each school. Therefore, we decided to design a conceptual framework to guide our enquiry into enhancing learning, strengthening teaching and investigating leadership (for details see Robertson & Hill, in progress). Within this framework, each school identified theoretical assumptions, research questions and methods of exploration suitable for their own school project. These plans were generated collaboratively at in-school project meetings and project-wide symposia.

The teacher-researchers from each school are meeting regularly at symposia to contribute information from their own school action research projects and work collaboratively on the findings of the across-schools project. Working papers are being used as the vehicle through which our overall findings will be developed. The first of these symposia was held in March 2004 and much of the time was spent pursuing how these schools measured student achievement and what expectations they held for their students. The teacher-researchers from each school brought information about each of these aspects to the symposium and as a group we set about the analysis. Large charts were produced on which we attempted to collate this information. As the findings below indicate this was far from a simple or achievable task within the timeframe.

In this paper we address the expectations held by the six schools as they were described and discussed at the first symposium and revised at the second. This paper progressed through several iterations using the school-based teacher-researchers and the reference group as peer reviewers as we worked toward understanding how student achievement and school expectations are addressed in these schools. By writing and circulating this paper for comment, emendation and confirmation we worked collaboratively and systematically to combine the school specific data from these diverse schools in an attempt to distil our findings about student expectations and achievements. Our progress to date also suggests that further, more focused questions will emerge from this process of collaborative paper writing.

PATTERNS OF EXPECTATIONS AND MEASUREMENTS OF ACHIEVEMENT

As Harris (2004) warns, "while the school leadership and school improvement equation appears to be relatively simple and straightforward in theory, in practice it is inherently complex, messy and unpredictable for those seeking to achieve it" (p. 3). The first symposium held to initiate the research and begin gathering data immediately began to reveal the complexity of that which we had set out to investigate. We decided to start at the beginning and investigate how well the students in each participating school were achieving. Participants from each school brought achievement reports and data and we worked around the room to collate the information. Drawing up a large chart on brown paper we put a code for each school down the side and then, because each school had information on a wide range of areas, made a decision to look at just the "reading" data for a start. In this paper we have restricted the discussion to "reading" simply because the range of issues about collecting information about student expectations and achievement is well represented by this aspect of the curriculum and space does not allow other aspects to be included. But it should be remembered that this is but one (though extremely important) area of the primary school curriculum and each school did have information about achievement across the curriculum that we could have delved into.

Reading is an aspect of the English curriculum that all the schools had expectations for and collected student achievement information about. All of the full primary and contributing schools used running records to ascertain reading achievement in the junior school area. However, while four used the "PM benchmarks" (levelled set texts with accompanying comprehension questions) the remaining school that taught year 1-3 children had decided to use their own school-designed system for within-school consistency. Achievement in reading as measured by running records in these junior school departments was then aggregated to assess achievement within each year group. For example, School F reported that in 2003, 57% of year one students were reading at "blue" level or above; 75% of year twos were reading at or above "turquoise". In contrast, School A reported in more general terms, that, using the PM benchmarks, 93% of their students (excluding phase 1 non-English speaking background -NESB- students) were reading at or above their chronological age.

But from here the similarities started to unravel and the complexity accumulated. Putting aside issues of validity and reliability (e.g., Were the texts suitable to provide a valid result? Did the teachers administer the running records consistently enough so that results could be meaningfully aggregated for this purpose? And so on), there was a great deal of discussion about how these results were comprised. For example, there was discussion regarding what "reading at or above turquoise" actually meant.

> KM at School D: What is your age level for turquoise?
>
> RA at School F: Six and a half. End of year two.
>
> KM at School D: Are you meaning that turquoise is at the six and a half year old level?
>
> MH (Uni researcher): But wouldn't children be at different ages at the end of year two if they begin on their fifth birthday? They could be between just under 6 and a half and just over seven by the end of year two.
>
> RA at School F: That's why we're saying "at or above"

There followed some general discussion with several people talking at once and disagreeing about what level "turquoise" actually represented. Hence, although reading running records appeared to be regarded as "what works" for measuring achievement and setting expectations (particularly from a management point of view), there was a great deal of debate about how they should be interpreted, administered and used in general.

As well as raising issues of comparability, this discussion also alerted us to the fact that such statements had very little to do with driving teaching. The teachers explained that they reported in percentage terms in order to simplify student achievement measures for mandatory reporting to their boards of trustees, communities and the Ministry of Education. In fact, because these measurements required a reasonable level of consistency in order for them to be aggregated for reporting, the running records were generally carried out as fast as possible in a short space of time and were not generally analysed in order to ascertain the strategies children were using (or not using). This issue of tension in the purposes of assessment will be returned to later in this paper.

There was even less consistency when it came to measuring the reading achievement of children above year three. Four of the schools used the Progressive Achievement Tests (PATs), but differed in whether they used the reading vocabulary or comprehension forms or both. Others used Supplementary Tests of Reading Achievement (STAR), Prose Reading Observation, Behaviour and Evaluation of Comprehension test (PROBE), asTTle (Assessment Tools for Teaching and Learning) tests, the NSW reading competition test, running records, or various combinations of each of these. One school designed their own reading comprehension test in addition to using the asTTle tools and the PAT comprehension test each year. When we discussed why this was, the school explained that they needed to triangulate the results in order to ensure they were getting an accurate picture of achievement. The school-designed tests are graded, use extracts from school journals and, in contrast with asTTle and the PATs, require a constructed response rather than a selected response from the students. The principal explained that this aspect alerted them to instances where students had simply randomly picked answers in the PAT but were working well below the level their PAT score had indicated.

Due to these differences in the assessment instruments used, student achievement is measured and reported idiosyncratically in each case. But interestingly, as all of the schools were combining the "Planning and Reporting" requirements (Ministry of Education, 2002) with their school achievement monitoring, they had all set targets in terms of what they expected students in their school to achieve and are reporting against these. In all cases, these schools are using externally designed assessments, applied systematically within their school to enable them to measure and report progress and achievement over time. The targets schools had set were, in essence, their academic expectations of special focus for that year and were either phrased in terms of an expectation (for example, a certain percentage of children reading at or above their chronological age level) or as a stanine in the case where they used tests that provided these, or both.

It should be remembered that each of these schools is seen (and sees themselves) as successful. For reasons of manageability, these schools focus on one or two major targets, but there is complexity sitting behind the implied simplicity of annual reporting. In developing their annual targets, every one of these schools had made a decision to keep these manageable and had set one or very few (not more than 5) targets that they would measure and report on an annual basis as required by the Education Standards Act (2001). In School F, where five annual targets are set, the practice of setting school-wide goals was in place before the national requirements to do so came into being. This school has continued its policy of setting five, but plans to focus on one key goal each year. This year the key target is in the literacy area.

In contrast to anecdotal information that suggests some schools are setting a very large number of targets, these six schools have targeted a priority area, such as the aspect of literacy in School F. These priority areas were decided on by the staff and board of trustees through collecting data on student achievement and comparing it with national (and other) norms in order to select the most relevant targets for their school, for that year. School A, for example, which is investigating the use of student learning meetings to improve expectation and achievement in 2004, has targeted numeracy achievement across the school. This dovetails with both national and local professional development initiatives and will provide information on a regular basis so that teachers can see, discuss and make plans to improve their teaching of throughout the year.

Although all of the schools had set academic expectations, it is important to emphasise that these are not the only expectations that drive their practice. Each school also indicated a broader set of expectations for its students that encompassed a set of values and goals but was articulated differently in each case. There is not room in a paper such as this to spell out all of these expectations, but one example is included here because it shows how expectations tend to flow from the particular values held within the school. As explained earlier in the paper, School C is a rural decile 1 school. About 80% of the students are Māori and there is an emphasis on preparing students at this school for life-long learning and to succeed as citizens in New Zealand society. One part of achieving this expectation has been to construct a graduate profile for students to be achieved by the end of year eight. This profile begins:

Ideally, what would a student at School C "look like" when he/she leaves in year eight?
He/she would be:
Socially confident
A confident learner
Confident with personal relationships
Confident about the future
Personally confident
Emotionally confident
Confidently maintains personal safety
Confidently skilful

Figure 1   School C's school leaver at year 8 profile summary

Under each of these headings, the school has then described what each means in practice. For example as shown in Figure 2, in being socially confident, a student would

• Be comfortable greeting a variety of people in the community
• Be able to introduce themselves appropriately
• Be able to speak with confidence believing that what he/she has to say is of value and that people will listen.
• Be able to expresses him/herself freely though appropriately
• Be able to use non-verbal communication effectively
• Not shuffle when speaking to people
• Be able to respond appropriately in a variety of social and cultural settings
• Maintain personal integrity in all social situations
• Have a sense of fun
• Show leadership skills when appropriate
• See service to society as important

Figure 2   Socially confident behaviours indicated in School C's school leaver at year 8 profile

Holding such an agreed set of expectations as a school community, this school is now setting out to investigate how feedback, questioning and the development of a professional learning community can assist them to bring their profile to fruition. The indicators within the profile are clearly linked with characteristics of quality teaching (Alton-Lee, 2003; Harris, 2002) and provide a clear set of descriptors against which teachers can gather information, investigate progress, change teaching and report on progress and achievement. The academic expectations

in this school (as in all six involved in the study) are part of a broader conception of attributes needed to prepare for life in the 21st century.

It is about creating a climate or a culture in the classroom – and in the school more widely- that systematically cultivates habits and attitudes that enable young people to face difficulty and uncertainty calmly, confidently and creatively. (Claxton, 2002, p. 3)

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS SO FAR

In a paper such as this it is not possible (or desirable) to list the expectations that all six schools hold for their students and how they achieving them. But neither is it necessary to do this. Each school does this in a range of ways they believe are appropriate. Their charters and annual reports contain such information. Reports to parents, reports to the Education Review Office, and school prospectuses all reflect the expectations and achievements of these schools. Rather, what this paper seeks to argue is that, within the systematic accountability processes provided by the New Zealand educational context, there is appropriate flexibility for schools such as the six engaged in this project to build the learning power of their students and raise achievement in ways that respect the context of the school but also address the need to raise "standards". Our findings to date have provided evidence that all six schools hold clear, appropriate and challenging expectations for their students. To varying extents and using a range of appropriate tools, all measure academic achievement against national norms and all have developed mechanisms for reporting their performance to various audiences.

However, the early findings also suggest that though demonstrably different from each other, these six New Zealand schools are able to set performance expectations, are finding ways to monitor academic standards of performance in ways they find useful for their own purposes and assist young people to become better learners, motivated to keep learning. In other words, the similarities between these schools, as well as the differences, are of interest here. In all six schools the teachers are able to identify not only what they intend students to learn and teachers to teach, but the assumptions which underpin reasons for their educative actions. Drawing on the example of School C above, learning is not seen only, or even primarily, as a set of predetermined outcomes but rather as a process that works towards enabling their students to become skilfully confident "whole" people set for living and learning in life. The academic curriculum plays its part, but learning is viewed more as a process than a product. School C has

also identified and clarified other assumptions that follow from such a stance. For example, "the development of a community of learners, in which everyone and all school structures are dedicated to learning, will build the capacity of teachers for improved student learning" and "the ways teachers teach are grounded in their backgrounds, biographies and beliefs; therefore personal development needs to involve the 'whole' person" (from School C's conceptual framework, see Robertson and Hill, in progress).

Perhaps this ability for schools to see themselves as being about more than just achieving narrowly defined academic targets is due to the fact that these schools are not using testing in a mandated autocratic manner but are using both internal and external assessment tools to inform and guide their practices. This approach stems from the policy context in which these New Zealand schools find themselves. By the "policy context" we mean such things as the challenge and support to improve as a school; the "assess and assist" method of educational review; the national expectations for achievement evaluated and reported through low stakes monitoring (e.g., the National Educational Monitoring Project – NEMP); and the provision of nationally norm-referenced and standardised assessment instruments (e.g., asTTle and PATs) that schools can use to assist improvement. The teacher-researchers explained that they can use these nationally provided assessment tools alongside other standardised procedures such as running records in reading without the negative effects of narrowly prescriptive tests that, in England and elsewhere, have led to a decline in pupil behaviour "clearly linked to the nature of the curriculum and the structures (such as key stage testing) which frame it" (Mac Beath & Galton in Clare, 2004, p. 2). This recent report by Cambridge University's Faculty of Education into the "collapse" of secondary education in England blamed a rigid, overloaded curriculum, prescribed teaching methods, large classes, imposed targets and high-stakes testing for creating and atmosphere of tension and stress. Interestingly, in the face of the report the Department of Education in England was unconcerned as Ofsted (the inspectorate, parallel with NZ's ERO) "tells us that teaching standards have never been higher…and that the strategy for the early years in secondary schools has delivered the first sustained rise in performance at 14" (Clare, 2004, p. 3).

In contrast to educational jurisdictions that require national or state testing for children in primary schools, the teacher-researchers in our study explained at the first two research symposia that the New Zealand policy context provides opportunities for professional development and, they believe, drives achievement up through school-based initiatives rather than external tests and comparisons. They insisted that this approach provides the conditions for their schools to take responsibility for their own improvement, and, it is argued here, allows and encourages schools and teachers to focus on the whole person rather than on a very narrow set of academic skills.

But the reasons why the six schools in this project are focused on improvement are related to more than just the policy context, however. As this paper has shown, all the teacher-researchers as school leaders emphasise the importance of setting clear expectations, know about and learn from student achievement data and plan for investigations into their own practice. Data collected at the first symposium showed that many of the teacher-researchers are undertaking Masters or PhD level study in education or a related field. Clearly, however, the leaders of these schools also believe that they have more to learn about strengthening teaching within their individual school contexts. The lead teacher-researchers and/or the principal initiated contact with the University researchers to establish this project. Through our initial discussions and the collaborative preparation of the research proposal it became clear that, although they believed their schools were successful, they had responded to the TLRI opportunity because they wanted to investigate improvement further in order to raise expectations and achievement.

At the second research symposium it emerged that the five schools represented there (one school was not able to attend the second meeting) had several further characteristics in common. Each was concerned to improve the practice of teachers within their school; all had begun by extending their professional reading and learning; all had gathered baseline information about student achievement within their school in at least one area; and most had gathered other information about teaching, such as the staff reactions to student learning meetings, and information about the feedback they were providing on student writing samples. But while this self-initiating aspect has so far meant there is a strong commitment and responsibility to the project from each school, it also complicates the investigation process. This is because each school's focus is individual. Although all are concerned with improvement,

each school's action plan is unique. A forthcoming working paper will explore the conceptual framework we have developed to combine these individual projects and how each school's own research contributes to the wider project.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to begin to elucidate findings to do with teacher expectations and student achievement within the schools participating in the GE project. Rather than listing achievements and expectations, the approach taken in this paper has been to exemplify the complexity, diversity and the educative nature of both achievement and expectations within these schools. While all six schools could demonstrate, using a range of indicators, that they are meeting and/or exceeding the academic expectations they have for their students, it was clear that their intentions were wider and deeper than simply curriculum coverage. Every school has clear expectations and a well-articulated plan for improvement that they intend to implement and investigate over the next two years.

Rather than looking for differences between teachers and schools in their ability to achieve better tests results, this paper has argued that although these schools are diverse, the similarities between these schools are what make them successful. They have all developed strong contextually-based self-management practices aligned with high expectations for their students. They all have systems for monitoring and addressing student achievement. But the systems are not the same. In fact, the expectations for achievement and the systems developed for achieving these outcomes are clearly related to the context in which these schools find themselves. Through continued professional learning and support, it should be possible to sustain these strong professional learning communities and assist them to improve the outcomes for their students.

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