Travel Diary
Westfield Scholarship
United States Travel
– March-April 2007

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Field of Study

1. Curriculum Differentiation
2. Assessment

Title

School leaders' evaluation o: curriculum reform associated with curriculum differentiation and appraisal of changing assessment and/or reporting processes.

Summary of proposal objectives

The Scholarship was used during April and May 2007 to undertake research into two allied areas of curriculum development and design in relation to 'differentiating the curriculum' and 'assessing for learning'. Dr Rimes attended a course at the Harvard Graduate School, Boston and then visited schools in the Washington DC area and then in Houston, Texas.

Diary notes:

March 21 – Travel from Hobart, Sydney, to Boston via Qantas

DAY 1: March 23 Attendance at the **Harvard Graduate School of Education** and the **Research Institute for Learning and Development.**

Dr Rimes attended the Learning Differences Conference which had a focus on 'Strategies for All Learners: RTI, Differentiated Instruction and Beyond'

The sessions were conducted by a panel of educational academics and experts, most notably:

Professor Lynn Meltzer, Director of Assessment and Research at the Institute for Learning and Development and Research, a fellow and Past-President of the prestigious International Academy for Research in Learning Disabilites.

Professor Kurt Fischer, Charles Warland Begelow Professor of Education and Human Development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

Professor Thomas Hehir, Ed.D. Distinguished Scholar from the Educational Development Centre in Newton, Mass.

Professor Anthony S. Bashir, Ph.D. Professor in the Department of Communication Sciences, Emerson College.

Professor Edward J. Kam'enui, Ph.D. founding Commissioner for the National Centre for Special Education Research (NCSER).

as well as being supported by 22 faculty staff and visiting lecturers.

The first sessions discussed the broad range of understandings and misunderstandings about the concepts of **Responsiveness to Intervention** and Differentiated Instruction. The speakers explored the latest work on differentiated instruction and methods for individualising the teaching process to meet the needs of a wide range of learners. There was also a focus on the implications for RTI for assessment and teaching across different content areas and grade levels.

Responsiveness to Intervention (RTI) represents a new term and construct and indeed a new paradigm that is requires clarification and historical perspective. The Responsiveness to Intervention or RTI as it is now referred to is an abridged rendering of language found in the US's IDEA 2004 legislation which stipulates that schools conduct an evaluation of a child to determine if a severe discrepancy exists between achievement and intellectual ability. As such RTI has the potential to eliminate the use of language such as severe discrepancy as a component of learning disabilities and as such warrants serious attention and consideration as an idea and practice. RTI is now conspicuously and actively invoked in the current discourse in special education and in the general education communities. As such, it is important to take stock of our thinking and practice in this area, and as with other classifications form based on scientific facts require continuous testing and validation.

The key difference in the RTI model compared with our current practice is the now clear and important stipulation that the interventions implemented in the practices of RTI are scientifically, research based interventions, and that measures are 'reliable and valid for the purposes of assessment, and importantly, implemented with fidelity.

Another important distinction in the discourse of RTI compared with former practices, is that RTI is multi-tiered. Different RTI versions have two to four tiers of instruction. The nature of the academic intervention changes at each tier, becoming more intensive as a student moves across tiers. Increasingly intensity is achieved by (a) using more teacher-centred, systematic, and explicit instruction; (b) conducting it more frequently; (c) adding to its duration; (d) creating smaller and more homogenous student groupings; or (e) relying on instructors with greater expertise.

Further valuable information concerned the concept of **Executive Function**. In our C21 technologically-oriented society, students' academic success is increasingly dependent on their ability to plan their time, organize and prioritise materials and information, distinguish main ideas from details, shift approaches flexibly, monitor their own progress, and reflect on their work. These executive function processes affect many academic areas and are critically important for reading comprehension, written language, studying, test-taking, and long-term projects. These processes are not taught systemically in schools and are often not a focus of the curriculum. The presentation provided a rational for systematic classroom-based strategy instruction that addresses executive function explicitly. Recent data from a multi-year program designed to train teachers to embed executive function strategies into their daily teaching and to create strategic classrooms that address the needs of a wide range of learners was presented. Discussion also focussed on practical classroom-based strategies for teaching executive function processes such as planning, organising, memorising, shifting approaches flexibly, and self-checking. We were also introduced to MetaCOG survey data and questionnaires which assess metacognitive strategies and effort and their connections with executive function processes. This information led me to consider how can a differentiated instruction model incorporate the teaching of executive function processes and indeed how can we create a school culture that fosters strategic mindsets in students from the earliest years and that generalises across year levels. This concept encapsulates much of the work that I do with students who are struggling in senior secondary levels. It gave me a vocabulary to describe the work I have been undertaking intuitively.

A further session that provided valuable insight related to Lynn Meltzer's work in **Strategies for Success** and focused on mathematics strategies. The session highlighted the cognitive and linguistic factors that underpin a student's ability to succeed in mathematics. These include: automaticity, sequencing, memory, visual-spatial organisation, congnitive flexibility, attention, planning and organising, processing speed, receptive language, expressive language, and emotional factors such as motivation, anxiety, learned helplessness. The thesis was that while it is critically important to identify students' prior maths knowledge, it is also critical to be aware of any cognitive and linguistic skills that affect maths learning. Once student weaknesses in these areas, along with

their strengths, have been identified it is possible to select strategies that enhance students' ability to learn the new material.

DAY 2: March 24 Attendance at the **Harvard Graduate School of Education** and the **Research Institute for Learning and Development.**

The first session looked at in-depth qualitative investigations of the practice of **co-teaching**. Various models of co-teaching were described: one teach –one assist, station teaching, parallel teaching, team teaching and alternate teaching. The benefits of co-teaching were identified, as well as the means used to differentiate instruction in co-taught classrooms were described. The general conclusions I drew from this discussion was that co-teaching has great potential for promoting the effective inclusion of students with diverse learning needs; many teachers, students, and school leaders like the model but most co-teaching is not generally being implemented as originally envisioned. Most successful models were those where both teachers were full partners in the process, and further that administrative support, time for planning, and co-teacher compatibility are important issues that should be carefully considered.

The second session focused on how **students process information** and the need to shift the focus from what we teach or present to students to how students use that information and process it. The assertion was that teachers can employ proven principles of pedagogy to create learning environments in general education classrooms that honour the diverse ways that people learn. These are: employ multiple modes of presentation, practice and assessment; guide practice, give feedback; divide complex tasks into steps/structure for success; identify and display essential steps or processes as well as content; allow time for processing during class time; differentiate the content, process and product to respond to a student's background knowledge, interests and learning profile; teach it back; think/pair/share; use the reduce/record/ recite/reflect/review cycle.

The third session I attended centred on **Digital Portfolios for Language and Learning: Innovations in Assessment and Instruction.** This session offered concrete strategies on how best to assess and teach all students using digital portfolios to combine formal and informal assessments. The benefits of digital portfolios to provide differentiated assessments was presented. The session presented case studies of student's assessment using digital portfolios as reflective tools for observing, documenting and keeping track of learning. The session concluded with a demonstration of a comprehensive assessment system using portfolios and new technologies. Overall the session described and demonstrated the work of expert teachers who apply multiple intelligences to link curriculum and assessment.

DAY 3: March 29 Working and observing at the **Thomas W. Pyle Middle School,** 6311 Wilson lane, Bethesda, MA. Pyle School is one of the largest middle schools in Montgomery County with a student intake of 1300 from Years 6,7 and 8. Students at this school continue to be among the highest achievers in the state on all standardized tests with over 60% of students on enriched and accelerated subject programs. The Pyle School was the 2006 national Blue Ribbon School for the US.

Here I was fortunate to spend the day working with and shadowing the Senior Administrative team. Michael Zarchin, the Principal had three assistant principals, Ann Dolan, Michael Kryder and Sydney Pinkard. I was able to attend a Master Scheduling meeting of the core team who were working on teaching programs and resourcing for the next academic year; I shadowed three teacher appraisal sessions; attended a focus group on school goals attended by 15 Year 7 students conducted by Sydney Pinkard; as well as a session with the School student management team and their law enforcement officer.

I was impressed with the performance targets the school had set taking into account national, state and local accountability mandates. My general impression was that they served to raise expectations and standards for student achievement and reinforce commitments to student outcomes and performance. For example, there was considerable focus on the number of students enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. As indicated earlier, 60% of students were achieving at this level. By closely examining school and student data, there was much evidence of tailoring instructional programs to help every chid succeed. This ongoing review and monitoring provided indications of improved teaching and learning, implementation of successful practices, development of new strategies to address student needs.

I was further impressed by the commitment to professional growth where teachers were actively encouraged and afforded time, support and opportunity for continuous growth and improvements. A consulting teacher program, for example, provided intensive support and guidance to novice and under performing teachers. Recently Principals in the district completed a course on instructional leadership through data-driven decision making. Generally speaking there was strong evidence of the deliberative, data-driven decision making considerable impact on student outcomes and school reform moves.

Days 4,5,6 in schools in Houston Texas 9,10 & 11 April. In Houston I was working with an educational **consultant Dr Linda Robinson** who had set up a series of school visits and meetings with educational advisors and principals. Linda is a past-president o f the National Middle Schools Association, and now a consultant to schools nationally as well as maintaining a position on the NMSA. The schools I visited were **Friendswood Junior High** for 1000 students in Years 7 & 8. The Principal Robin Lowe was named 2004 Texas Principal of the Year.

In 2006 in the School Accountability Rating the school gained the following exemplary Gold Performance Acknowledgments: *Attendance; Commended on Reading/ELA; Commended on Writing; Commended on Mathematics; Commended on Social Studies; Comparable Improvement: Mathematics* The campus is a TEA Exemplary campus. Friendswood Junior High offers four foreign languages, world geography, algebra, geometry and keyboarding that can be taken for high school credit. FJHS has an active sports program, band, choral music, robotics, competitive speech and theatre programs.

The second school I visited was the **Zue S. Bales Intermediate School** at 211 Stadium Lane. It is a Years 4,5 and 6 school headed by principal Jay Stailey. Bales Intermediate School has an enrolment of 630 students Bales has a strong emphasis on the arts. Bales has been a TEA Exemplary campus for the past nine out of ten years. Students have advanced to regional and world competition in the Odyssey of the Mind program and were state finalists in the TCEA robotics competition, and were 2005 state champions in the Academic Decathon's "Lone Star Challenge. Bales students also participate in advanced maths programs, gifted and talented classes, Student Council, journalism club, after school sports programs, running club, and chess club. All students participate in community service projects throughout the year. This was an impressive school with well maintained environment and evidence of engaged staff and students.

The last school I visited was the **C. E. King High School** at 8540 C. E. King Parkway Houston, Texas. This was a school which was at risk of being 'reconstituted' if academic results did not improve. As a result Principal Cynthia Worley was trying to raise expectation s for students and staff. For example, the school of 1600 students had been divided into four learning academies in an effort to build better relationships between staff and students. There was a high commitment to help students have greater success in their academic classes and on their state testing. For example, they have Saturday classes and after school camps as well as teacher tutorials to help students who need extra assistance. In addition, athletics, extra-curricular and co-curricular programs are making an impact on student performance. Principal Worley had been given considerable financial support to help build achievement. She had also taken on a number of external consultants to help guide her personal performance and school management. She had, for instance, three former principals working with her to provide advice and support.

Summary Statement

The studies at Harvard were excellent high quality sources of information and stimulation. This provided a real stimulus for intellectual engagement and reflection. The excellence of the conference proceedings and materials made this a very worthwhile part of the trip in its own right.

The school visits I found fascinating. A strong case has evolved in the literature on the importance of learning in all its form as a means of improving

organisational effectiveness and performance and the importance of creating 'communities of practice'. I was impressed to see much evidence of teachers engaging in continuous, formal and informal learning and basing much of their discussion on performance components of student work. The evidence of informal learning I saw was relaxed sharing of knowledge in unstructured discussions, seeking each other's advice and generally trying to capture and store the knowledge of other colleagues in order to improve their own performance. There was also emphasis placed, in all schools, on having shared planning time for teams and faculty groups. Up to two periods a day in most schools was put aside for core teams to meet and plan.

At the same time I was conscious of the UNESCO 2007 rating for schools in the US which placed them at the 24th position on an international scale. There is no doubt that the schools I visited were earnestly seeking solutions, and were notably successful in their quest. At the same time, it is a worry that led by the desire for achievement, many educational institutions are conditioned to join the quest for certainty and focus on those learning objectives that can be actually measured. The efforts to eliminate complexity and control risks undoubtedly pose serious problems for the curriculum such as narrowing of the curriculum, the proliferation of instructional practices aimed at teaching to the test, and the marginalisation of important dimensions of our being such as developing the imagination and a sense of mystery. The reality is that teaching is a complex task marked by uncertainty, complexity and instability. No one can know which teaching approach will guarantee success in each and every situation. There was certainly an emphasis on standardisation, testing and measurement and an observable desire for students to acquire those techniques that are aimed at helping them to do well on the tests. For example, at the C.E. King High School they had spent a considerable amount of funding inviting in a motivational speaker to help 'rev' up students to do well on forthcoming state tests (TAKS) and to instil in student '12 powerful words' to help them score well in tests. It could be argued that the current emphasis on standardization and testing in the United States can be viewed as an attempt to better control students' learning and behaviour in a time of declining school performance and high student drop-out rates. The mandated emphasis in the 2001 NCLB Act on 'scientifically based research' which relies on measurement, observational methods, analysis and data of knowledge that can be accurately measured and quantified and by its nature excludes other important sources of knowledge such as intuition, imagination, feeling and so on. While data driven improvement is fundamental, it must not be at the omission of other valid forms of knowing and being.