

Collaboration Across New Zealand Rural Primary Schools: A Virtual Learning Perspective

What are the challenges small rural schools face and how can collaborating online provide benefits to learners, teachers and principals



“Small rural schools in New Zealand are in the forefront of changes in the application of information and communication technologies to teaching and learning. The emergence of rural school electronic networks is an important step towards the development of virtual classes in New Zealand, requiring new ways of organising teaching and learning. It is particularly appropriate to reconsider the pedagogy of the one- and two-teacher school in relation to the emerging virtual class. These small schools could have a new role in the information age and should, accordingly, be repositioned within the national educational system” (Stevens, 1995, p. 93).



Virtual learning has been taking place in New Zealand for two decades and pioneered in our rural schools (Barbour, 2011; Roberts, 2010; Wenmoth, 1996). How has virtual learning evolved over the last twenty years? How have rural schools been leading the way and benefiting from virtual learning? To what extent are we seeing new ways of teaching and learning online?

The purpose of my research was to examine challenges faced by students and teachers at small rural schools, and explore how these may be alleviated by collaborative practice between schools in virtual learning environments. The design of this research is situated within an interpretivist framework and influenced by critical theory, as my research question seeks solutions to challenges that small rural schools face.

Research participants were teaching principals selected from eight small rural New Zealand primary schools who were all active in Virtual Learning Network (VLN) Primary School online programmes, and so had current experience of collaborating, and teaching and learning online.



References:
Barbour, M. K. (2011). *Primary and secondary e-learning: Examining the process of achieving maturity*. Christchurch, New Zealand: Distance Education Association of New Zealand.

Roberts, R. (2010). Increasing access for learners – The Virtual Learning Network. In V. Ham & D. Wenmoth (Eds.), *e-Learnings: Implementing a national strategy for ICT in education, 1998-2010* (pp. 144-152). Christchurch, New Zealand: CORE Education Ltd.

Stevens, K. (1995). The Technological Challenge to the Notion of Rurality in New Zealand Education – Repositioning the Small School. *The New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, 0(5).

Wenmoth, D. (1996). Learning in the distributed classroom. *SET Research Information for Teachers*, 2(4), 1-4. NZCER: Wellington

Findings

Principals' challenges and opportunities

The principals talked about a range of issues they found to be challenging in their jobs relating to:

- curriculum and PLD challenges;
- stress of a high workload and not enough time;
- expectations around their role as principal;
- having adequate staffing and resources;
- communicating and working with others outside the school.

Along with the issues raised, the principals also related the positive side of their role, outlining the benefits they experienced, and opportunities they could create to overcome challenges.

Professional collaboration

The principals described how being part of a professional group could provide them benefits. They shared their experience of what they thought made successful collaboration, the barriers to collaboration and the benefits that could be gained from being part of a professional group. Online learning was raised in this discussion by the principals as an example of how principals could teach collaboratively, and connect professionally.

Communities of Learning (CoLs), or Kāhui Ako as they are now named, drew a mixed response from principals as they discussed their experience with CoLs.

The nature of online learning

Success factors and challenges for students in learning online were discussed, along with benefits to learners and an exploration of how the role of the teachers is changing as students are learning more online. Technology, such as quicker broadband access, better infrastructure, and improved access to online tools, is identified by the principals as a driver for change in schools.

What the principals had to say centred around what they felt was important for their learners when they were part of online collaborations. They felt that children benefitted socially, the diverse needs of learners were supported, children had access to a breadth of learning opportunities, and they could develop a range of skills through their collaborative online learning experiences.

Principals' conversations often referenced the unique nature of the small rural school and its environment, which provides the main context of this study. Reciprocal relationships between school and community were described as a central part of how small rural schools work, and were an important factor for the support of the principal, the development of relevant local curriculum, and parental choice and involvement in their children's education.

Learner Benefits

- A connection to the wider world
- Access to curriculum subjects
- Catering for special interests & diverse learners
- Learning alongside peers their own age
- Interacting with teachers other than their own
- Prepared children to go to secondary school
- Engaged families & communities
- Students retained in their schools

Key Ideas

- Online learning is beneficial to learners but one small part of their whole learning experience.
- Local place based curriculum is really important for engaging students and involving community & not always the best fit for online collaboration across schools.
- Blended learning was considered to provide a good balance between online and face to face learning.
- Online collaboration is beneficial for teachers too - we should be doing more of it!

Ensure that new government policy, and the schools funding review is cognisant of the needs of small rural schools, and provide guidance and resourcing that support schools to collaborate online.

With fast reliable internet, the small rural school that is open, networked and collaborative can increase its capacity to provide learning opportunities for both students and teachers.



Author: Rachel Whalley

