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Perspectives on New Zealand Education speech

New Zealand's schools were absolutely a wonder to behold. While they weren't completely perfect I know that our group was very impressed by their values, community, standards, technology, and ability to engage students in lessons. A particular strength of the New Zealand schools were the teachers.

Firstly their curriculum was incredibly flexible from school to school and even teacher to teacher. While there was a national set of standards it is far more open to interpretation and individualization than American or state standards. I know all of the education students that looked at the national New Zealand standards were shocked to find they were no thicker than a magazine. What stood out about New Zealand curriculum was that at its core they had a vision statement: "Young people will be confident, connected, actively involved, lifelong learners." So lessons were based around the standards and that vision statement rather than just detail recall for testing, as is sometimes the case in the U.S.

The flexible curriculum focused not on learning specifics but on building critical literacy in students and allowing creativity among teachers and students. Many teachers incorporated Māori (the native language and people in New Zealand) into their classrooms and lessons. This cultural addition to the classroom encouraged bilingualism and student awareness of their country. Teachers incorporated Māori into a social studies lesson for example by having kids work, via technology, to research the history of New Zealand's Māori to the island and make an creative representation of the people and their art.

At the time we travelled to New Zealand the nation was also marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) participation at the battle at Gallipoli in World War 1. Some schools used art to learn about this day- making paper poppy flowers- or creative writing, writing from the point of view of a soldier- while others used computer illustrators to depict battle scenes and memorials to put on their class blogs. At almost every school, whether elementary, middle, or high school,

was commemorating ANZAC Day. It wasn't restricted to social studies, teachers ties it into art lessons, English, math, and science. They could draw about the events at Gallipoli, they could learn about what the soldiers went through medically and emotionally for science, and they could tally the casualties for math. By tying it into various subjects they were able to make the time they spent studying ANZAC Day in social studies so much more meaningful. Or in Christchurch, a city that had suffered a dramatic earthquake a few years ago, classrooms learned about the science of earthquakes, the social impact on their city and other countries, and so much more. That's how teachers worked with relevant topics to make learning real and engaging for their students, taking what would be just a social studies lesson and tying it into various subjects and keeping it exciting to learn about. And each school and teacher did their instruction on the topic in different ways, showing the diversity of curriculum across the country.

Nowhere in the national standards does it say that you had to learn about ANZAC Day or you had to learn about the Christchurch earthquake. But the teachers across the nation took advantage of an important learning opportunity and historical event, incorporating it into various parts of the school day and encouraging creative learning and multimedia invention.

Many teachers set up their classrooms to use group work and centers work for almost every subject and throughout the whole day. In one 3rd grade class in particular a teacher set up various math centers where some pairs or individual students worked on worksheets, played math games, quized each other, or worked in a group with the teacher. While it required a little more work for the teacher the classroom worked so effectively allowing for students to work independently or with a friend. The students had as much time as was needed to work on the various center assignments so the lack of pressured rush let students feel comfortable asking for help. It was always expected of the student that they would finish their work so there was never a concern about students getting off task because the work was doable, engaging, and allowed students to work at their own pace. Teachers still often used whole group instruction but when it came time to do worksheets or expansive work there wasn't forced quiet or forced individual work.

It wasn't unusual for students to work with friends or talk out loud to understand material. The idea of talking during work and working in teams seems outlandish to some American teachers but the teamwork and increased classroom community encouraged by teachers was so tangible in the classes we visited.

Now Tea Time was perhaps our favorite part of every school visit. PollyRose will talk more about Tea Time but my favorite part of the midmorning break was the community built in that time. Whanau, or family, was a central part of New Zealand schools. The familial community that the teachers built with each other led to strengthening of their classrooms and lessons. Classrooms were so communal in New Zealand and it was not unusual to see co-teaching or large shared classrooms for whole grades. Teachers around the country told us how important it was that they had each other to work with and learn from to make them better teachers. Classrooms were always thoroughly decorated, teachers were relaxed and joyful, and this atmosphere of inclusiveness was so evident in the schools we visited. There's so much to be said about the way that New Zealand teachers operate but now I'm going to turn it over!