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Project-based learning in the NCEA context: the benefits and constraints of cross-curricular implementation of project-based learning in New Zealand secondary schools.

A thesis presented as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education,
at Massey University, Manawatu, New Zealand

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2019
Abstract

Project-based learning (PBL) has been described as a future-focused learning strategy that helps to address the challenge of equipping young people with 21st century capabilities needed for a rapidly changing future. However, PBL is not commonly utilised at the senior National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) level, even though this is a crucial time for learners to prepare for a world beyond school. This thesis examines how New Zealand secondary schools could implement cross-curricular PBL in the NCEA context, what benefits and constraints there may be from a teacher and student perspective, and whether there are differences in perspectives regarding PBL in students with different levels of motivation.

The research design utilised a mixed method, multiple case study approach, where both quantitative and qualitative data was collected from three case study schools who currently use PBL at the NCEA level. Both teacher and student perspectives were gathered by an online survey in phase one of the study, followed by purposeful sampling of participants in phase two to further explore their perspectives using a semi-structured individual or focus group interview.

The research findings indicate that PBL can be successfully implemented in the NCEA context, provided key design features are in place. These include developing a strong PBL design framework, ensuring that projects have authentic purpose beyond the classroom, and fostering connections with community partners. There are clear potential benefits in engaging senior students in opportunities to participate in projects. Engagement in learning can be increased, 21st century capabilities developed, and self-regulated learning dispositions promoted. Student motivation is influenced by their ability to self-manage and they need specific pedagogical experiences that targets the development and utilisation of self-directed learning capabilities. PBL in the NCEA context is not without its challenges. These include school structural issues, the ability for schools to develop a learner-centred culture, teacher capability to project manage, and difficulties in aligning current NCEA standards with projects.

This study concludes by suggesting that schools should consider implementing PBL in the NCEA context, as part of a future-focused education orientation, as potentially there are considerable benefits to be gained.
Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to express my gratitude to my two Massey University supervisors, Dr Peter Rawlins and Dr Brian Tweed. Thank-you for agreeing to supervise me and for providing me with positive encouragement, guidance, and helpful critical feedback throughout this last year. I appreciate how you made contact time work via Skype and email and I am glad I got to meet you once in person. I am also grateful to Massey University Institute of Education for the Pathways Scholarship that paid for my fees in this last half year.

To the teachers and students in the three case study schools where I gathered my data; thank-you so much for generously giving your time and energy to complete questionnaires and participate in interviews to talk with me about project-based learning. I am inspired by your innovative approach to learning and your willingness to share your knowledge.

Completing a thesis as a distance learner can be challenging at times, so I would like to acknowledge my friends and family who have been so supportive and encouraging throughout this last year. Special thanks to my friend, Cathy Diggins, for boosting my confidence and being a great sounding board when I have needed it. Many thanks to my family who helped with the final draft of my thesis, especially my sister-in-law Bronwyn, for your thesis formatting expertise and my mother Carole, and son Liam, for your proof reading efforts. Thanks also to my daughter Finella, for distracting me in a good way, just when I needed it, to escape on some adventures in this last year. Lastly, I want to especially thank my husband Mark who was hijacked into filling the role of my ‘default’ study-buddy. Thanks so much for patiently listening and discussing ideas with me, and also for providing me with endless encouragement and cappuccinos throughout this last year.

I would like to dedicate this work to my late father, Ian Hamilton. He was a secondary school principal who had vision and vitality for education and always tried to make a meaningful difference for young people. He would have enjoyed the discussion that this research provokes. Education continues to need leaders who have the courage to try different pedagogical approaches that may empower young people to become self-actualised global citizens.
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