

## ***An interview with 2010 Linking Minds award recipients***

Linking Minds is a prestigious international award for young teachers who identify themselves as emerging leaders.

During the July holidays, the 2010 award recipients, Zoe Bridewell from Henry Hill School, Tim Watson from Wellington Girls' College, Alison Derbyshire from Botany Downs Secondary College and Aimee Warrender from Little Lights Kindy, became immersed in the experiences of their teaching colleagues in the Northern Hemisphere.

ForTeachers interviewed each of the award recipients. Below are their responses:



*L to R: Tim Watson, Alison Derbyshire, Aimee Warrender and Zoe Bridewell in Cardiff*

### ***Aimee Warrender, Little Lights Kindy***

Linking Minds has been a wonderful inspiring experience. I have not only learnt from our time in Wales but also from the three other emerging leaders that I travelled with. The educational conversations and connections that have been formed will affect my practice and goals for the future. This scholarship has been named very appropriately.

**Q: How do you think your experience in the UK will influence future teaching leadership roles you take on in New Zealand?**

A: The Linking Minds scholarship has inspired me through many mediums to excel in leadership within my sector. It has allowed me to 'link minds' with other New Zealand teachers who face the same challenges as emerging leaders in education. These

friendships will continue to be used as a support and for inspiration. Wales recognises emerging young leaders in education and supports them to achieve their professional goals, increasing quality teaching, new ideas and a new generation of leaders. My time spent in Wales has allowed me to reflect on my practice and become more focused in my professional goals.

**Q: What struck you as one of the major differences between teaching leadership in the UK and here?**

A: In Wales the emerging leaders were evident within schools. Their practice and teaching manner was exciting, while they were very respectful to children's opinions and ideas.

**Q: Was there any innovative educational initiative you witnessed in the UK that you would like to see implemented in your own school, kura or early childhood education setting?**

A: Wales has recently introduced a new curriculum for children aged three to seven called the Foundation Phase. The Foundation Phase is based upon Scandinavian educational models and is also very similar to Te Whāriki. It is a combination of child initiated and teacher lead learning covering seven main curriculum areas. This model of teaching is now being introduced to six year olds and next year to the seven year old classes. The Foundation Phase has been a great success, and a major change to practice, mindset and teaching philosophy. It has seen amazing results, including higher literacy and mathematical comprehension, as well as high involvement and achievement from boys. I believe that the primary sector in New Zealand would have very positive results if Te Whāriki was used as the curriculum until age six and seven.

**Q: How does the UK and New Zealand differ in the way their leadership structures operate?**

A: Leadership structures within Wales foster emerging leaders to grow and develop. Schools pride themselves and their reputations on the achievements of young leaders within their settings. Young leaders are encouraged to exceed expectations regardless of age or gender. The emerging leaders are driven by the exceptional attitudes of the school principal and other members of the leadership team to achieve their goals, challenge themselves, and improve. They critically assess the young leaders' ability regularly.

**Q: What were the ideas or skills you learned from this experience that made the biggest impression on you?**

A:

1. The Foundation Phase curriculum that is used to teach three to seven year olds. It provides children with the opportunity to learn about what they are interested in, therefore maintaining interest and enthusiasm longer. When scaffolded and supported correctly by a teacher the child's interest can be used to cover all curriculum areas. The Foundation Phase is a major change for the Welsh education system and newly introduced. At one school they followed the Foundation Phase with a teaching style taken from the Leonardo Di Vinci Model based on child led learning. The teacher did a skills lesson on a Monday morning and then facilitated and scaffolded the children's learning.

Before the end of term the children chose a topic, for example, 'The Jungle'. The children then write a list of questions they want to learn about. We viewed some of this learning from a class of eight year olds. The questions ranged from 'why do hedgehogs have spikes?' to 'how to survive in the jungle?' and everything in between. The teacher then prepares resources that will aid the children in their investigation, working in a variety of styles from individual, small groups and whole class. Working on one question at a time, from answering that initial question of 'why do hedgehogs have spikes?' comes more and more questions. The children then assess the topic at the end of the term, including skills and things they want or need to work on. These are then noted by the teacher and taught in the next term's topic. It was amazing to see everyone engaged, excited and inspired. The children's literacy, numeracy and comprehension were extremely high compared to national statistics. I am going to follow this school with great interest over the next few years to see what the results of using this teaching technique will be.

2. The 'Comenius Programme' run by the British Council, which recognises leaders in education from countries that are leading in education globally. They recognise isolation of countries and encourage the sharing of initiatives, education opportunities and professional development. It is a three-year programme where teachers are selected to visit other countries and become inspired to share their country's educational system. Currently the countries involved are Italy, Sweden, Germany, Northern Ireland, Portugal and Wales. I believe that New Zealand has a unique cultural and education system and as a country is extremely isolated and would benefit immensely from an opportunity to become involved.
3. The Welsh attitude and acceptance of their bilingual culture, which was evident in all schools and the community. With English medium and Welsh medium schools the element of Welsh as a language was evident and held in such high regard. The Welsh are leading the way in bilingual education and New Zealand could learn so much from the education model they used to implement the Welsh language.
4. The international links that every school was involved in. All primary schools had a sister school and a foreign country, for example, Bangladesh. The children would learn about the country and communicate with the children in the classrooms. Teachers would spend time visiting that country and school and a real connection was formed. The children gained better understanding of the world around them and the learning that the teachers experienced inspired many learning activities within the classroom, both whole school and community.

***Tim Watson – Assistant HOD English, Wellington Girls' College***

**Q: How do you think your experience in the UK will influence future teaching leadership roles you take on in New Zealand?**

A: The 'Linking Minds Scholarship' provided me with a greater understanding of educational leadership and the concerns that leaders have around the world. It was interesting to see the similarities that existed between New Zealand and Wales, particularly the way that leaders in both countries are implementing new educational initiatives. The major influence on me was the way in which leaders in Wales strive for a level of connectedness, both within their local community, as well as nationally.

There seems to be a strong drive to ensure that schools work together rather than work in opposition. The current development of a Schools Effectiveness Framework that reinforces this 'connectedness' was also interesting. There seems to be a real emphasis on taking the good practice that currently exists and devolving this to all teachers; something which is made possible by the connections that exist between schools and within communities. Seeing a different education system in operation allowed me to reflect on where there is potential to develop the way in which we currently operate within New Zealand.

**Q: What struck you as one of the major differences between teaching leadership in the UK and here?**

A: Teaching leadership is similar in many ways to that in New Zealand. However, there are differences derived from the strong immersion environment that school leaders operate in. This brings both advantages and disadvantages for leaders. For immersion school leaders, they have the benefit of a parent community that is very supportive of education for their children, but the added pressure of introducing students to a language that they are not exposed to at home or in the local community. For non-immersion schools they are struggling with a shrinking roll as parents make the decision to move their children to immersion schools. Another major difference is the way in which schools are governed – particularly the role of a local authority and therefore the influence of the local community on the delivery of education.

**Q: Was there any innovative educational initiative you witnessed in the UK that you would like to see implemented in your own school, kura or early childhood education setting?**

A: There were many innovative educational initiatives, but what struck me as the most interesting was the way in which secondary and primary schools work together to ensure smooth transitioning for students between their schools. Initiatives such as 'pre-secondary' camp where students from within the school zone go on a camp for three days, and teacher only days where staff from primary and secondary schools meet to discuss the students that are transitioning and what the previous school focused on in the previous year. What was interesting about this initiative was the strong focus on not 'losing' learning time for the students; the expectation being that when students begin secondary school the teacher already knows what prior learning has occurred and what the goals should be for the upcoming year. This is certainly something that could be further developed in New Zealand schools, which often work in isolation.

**Q: How does the UK and New Zealand differ in the way their leadership structures operate?**

A: Wales seems to have a greater focus on young leaders and they acknowledge the role that these leaders will play in the future. Some schools had formalised systems to encourage young leaders and grow their potential, while others had management structures that encourage teachers to take up leadership roles early in their careers. At the secondary level there seemed to be a move away from a small senior management team (e.g. three deputy heads and a head teacher) towards a slightly larger team of management that have a higher teaching load, but are given exposure to leadership (e.g. one deputy head, a head, and six assistant heads). The structure did seem to have benefits – in one school there was an assistant head whose sole focus was on developing global communities.

**Q: What were the three ideas or skills you learned from this experience that made the biggest impression on you?**

A:

1. The importance of giving students a real voice in curriculum development. Many schools were moving beyond student voice just being about taking care of 'practical' aspects of the school (recycling, school dances etc), but moving towards giving them a genuine say in what they are learning, the way they receive lessons and even the teachers that teach them.
2. The importance of promoting global connectedness. It was striking to see students develop relationships with other students from all around the world (generally through the use of technology). There was a real sense that students had an understanding of the wider world and the global community that they were a part of.
3. The importance of passion in leadership. I was exposed to leaders who truly believed that what they were doing made a difference. They were proud of their school, the students that they were responsible for and the staff that they managed. Many of them were very inspirational and demonstrated what was possible.

***Zoe Bridewell – Henry Hill School, Napier***

**Q: How do you think your experience in the UK will influence future teaching leadership roles you take on in New Zealand?**

A: I believe that my experience in Wales highlighted the need for more collaboration between schools and between teachers in New Zealand. Part of a new educational strategy in Wales encourages the sharing of knowledge and resources between teaching professionals. I think this is really important, and should be encouraged in New Zealand schools.

**Q: What struck you as one of the major differences between teaching leadership in the UK and here?**

A: Head Teachers (School Principals) must have completed a two-year training programme before being given the position.

**Q: Was there any innovative educational initiative you witnessed in the UK that you would like to see implemented in your own school, kura or early childhood education setting?**

A: I was very interested to see Ysgol Lon Las (a Primary school in Swansea) using a programme called the 'Leonardo' approach. It was a very child-centered method where children asked questions about a given topic at the beginning of each term, and were then able to choose ways of presenting the information that they found. The teacher then acted as a facilitator, teaching skills as they were required. At the end of each unit of work the children assessed what they had done, and the areas where they thought they needed to improve were used as their targets, or goals for improvement in the next unit.

Apart from an hour of mathematics each day, the rest of the time in class was spent using 'Leonardo'. All the teachers that we spoke to at the school said they were amazed at the learning that was taking place, simply because the children were able to choose aspects of the topics that interested them, which made it more meaningful to them.

**Q: How does the UK and New Zealand differ in the way their leadership structures operate?**

A: At Ysgol John Bright, a high school in Northern Wales, it was interesting to hear that the teachers shared the management units, so that no teacher was able to hold more than one of these. I know that in NZ it is possible to hold more than one unit, and I think that it would be good if units were more evenly distributed in schools so that all teachers could advance.

**Q: What were the three ideas or skills you learned from this experience that made the biggest impression on you?**

A:

1. The 'Leonardo' approach (see above)
2. Professional collaboration (see above)
3. Teaching support – all schools in Wales have a 1 to 8 ratio of adults to children, up until Year 3. I think it would be amazing to have a teacher aide every day, or even part of every day!

***Alison Derbyshire – Botany Downs Secondary College, Auckland***

**Q: How do you think your experience in the UK will influence future teaching leadership roles you take on in New Zealand?**

A: The experience allowed us to see a number of innovative and interesting ways of tackling educational issues that are common across continents; therefore, I will approach new roles with a broader perspective and a greater understanding of the challenges that face teachers. In addition, there will definitely be heightened enthusiasm, as I now have lots of new ideas that I would love to see put into practice!

**Q: What struck you as one of the major differences between teaching leadership in the UK and here?**

A: There is more importance put on developing emerging leaders throughout the schooling system in Wales. For example, at one school, Ysgol John Bright, we saw a dynamic programme in place aimed at young teachers who had been identified as future educational leaders and these teachers participated in an individualised leadership programme that helped them extend their expertise and skills. Part of the programme included involvement in the international professional development programme iNET. This programme was mutually beneficial to the school and the teachers involved. Furthermore, in all schools in Wales it is compulsory for those teachers wishing to progress to Headship of a school to complete a two year course preparing them for this role.

**Q: Was there any innovative educational initiative you witnessed in the UK that you would like to see implemented in your own school, kura or early childhood education setting?**

**A:** Definitely! One initiative that I was particularly impressed with was the Business Language Champions scheme run by the National Centre for Languages (CiLT). This involved language students being partnered with small and large businesses that used a modern foreign language in a commercial context. Students, in small groups, visited these businesses to not only gain an insight into the world of work, but also to see first-hand a variety of modern languages being used by company employees. This allowed students to see the relevance and benefits of having a second-language as they are able to see the importance of languages in the workplace.

**Q: How does the UK and New Zealand differ in the way their leadership structures operate?**

**A:** From observations in the schools that we visited, Wales and New Zealand appear to have similar leadership structures within schools. Senior management teams effectively ran the schools with input from staff and students. One key difference at a higher level was the local authorities that controlled education in each region – at times this led to a fragmentation of the over-arching leadership of education. However, these bodies also contributed to a range of new initiatives being produced and trialled, which allowed for those that were most successful to be collaborated on and taken up by neighboring learning authorities.

**Q: What were the three ideas or skills you learned from this experience that made the biggest impression on you?**

**A:** Internationalism, collaboration, and positive leadership. I believe that the key idea that I will take away from the experience is the need to reach beyond our own borders through our learning and develop international collaboration. These links can be made between classrooms and between teachers to enhance educational opportunities. For example, through the British Council's 'Connecting Classrooms' schemes we saw a number of schools in direct contact with schools in contrasting countries, such as India and Bangladesh. The learning opportunities that were open to students from all countries involved were genuine and extensive. Levels of engagement in these projects were considerable. Teachers also benefited from ongoing professional development by forming learning networks with fellow teachers from other countries.

The power of positive school leadership was also very much apparent. Each of the schools that we visited had an enigmatic and enthusiastic Head in place that encouraged and developed their staff and students at all levels.