

Mending the Net: The Learning Zone

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Abstract

“The most important thing to learn is what you want to learn” Carl Rogers (1983, p. 12).

Mending the Net: The Learning Zone considers how the principles of Whole Schooling can be incorporated into the high school setting to reach students at risk of disassociating from their learning. Whereas schools strive to create a safety net to catch students in need, there are often holes in that net some students fall through. This project was based on the desire to catch those students and to ‘mend the net’. Designed to create a learning space for all, students were given the place, opportunity, skills, and community to ‘learn how to learn’ what they wanted to learn. This practice paper which recounts the experience of the Learning Zone (LZ), is told through brief descriptions of the students who used it and describes how they benefited from having access to this space.

Key words: independent inquiry, student directed learning, Universal Design for Learning, inclusion, student support

Introduction

A few weeks into the new school year I was invited by the principal of my high school to talk about learning supports in the school. He was looking at the safety net the school had in place and he was gazing at a potentially big hole. The school had recently instituted the whole school behavior program known as Positive Behavior for Learning (PB4L) (Reveley, 2016; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Prior to instituting PB4L, the staff had recourse to what was known as the ‘Withdrawal Room’. When a student’s behavior became disruptive and interfered with teaching and learning in the class, they could be sent to this ‘Withdrawal Room’. It was a straightforward solution: When a student was rude, noncompliant, clashing with the teacher or fellow students, they could be sent out of class to the Withdrawal Room. The Withdrawal Room was the depository, staffed by a teacher aide charged with monitoring the recalcitrant student.

The idea the principal had was to try to turn the concept of withdrawal upside down, not just by changing its name, but by incorporating principals of Whole Schooling (Loreman, 2007). How, we mused over coffee, can we try to create something new in the school, something that would also have the potential to pre-empt situations that lead to a teacher withdrawing a student (punishment) or the student withdrawing him or herself (and leaving school altogether), that does not punish or reward disruptive behavior? Would it be possible to find a solution that everybody could be happy with? Could we create a space where a student can leave a class, even change their subject, and begin to feel better about themselves as a learner? Could we create a place where the student can learn what *they* want to learn?

This practice paper explores the creation and use of such a space within a mainstream high school which is designed to not only catch those learners at risk of disengaging from their learning, but also designed to celebrate and re-engage that learning. The school was a co-

education high school for years 9 to 13 (Grades 8 to 12), with a student population of 600. The school served its learners with special needs through a high needs' unit and a learning support department. The Learning Zone (LZ) was designed to meet the needs of students who did not qualify for those services (although the LZ proved to be a welcoming place for students receiving other services as well). The intention behind the project was to fill any 'holes in the net', to catch any who may, for whatever reason, potentially fall through the net of school supports. This paper is based on the observational field notes I kept throughout the year and is told through brief descriptions of the students who used it, and how they benefitted from having access to the LZ.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

The New Zealand curriculum was originally designed to reflect different ways to learn and to show that learning, which are important aspects of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Universal Design for Learning aims to create learning environments that are accessible to all (Katz, 2013; Slee & Allan, 2001). UDL can be seen as an important part of the concept of inclusion, or even a vital prerequisite. With that in mind, barriers to learning are identified. UDL, in this sense, raises the profile of barriers, and improves our ability to notice what might be impeding participation, engagement, and achievement. UDL encourages us to ask why, in the school setting, a student may be failing, or struggling, or is disengaged. It encourages us to seek answers to those questions and to seek solutions or alternatives to our practice so that the student stays engaged in their learning.

Room A08 is a rectangular room measuring 6 meters by 8.8 meters (approx. 20 by 29 feet). It has a bench running the length of the back wall, and windows running the length of the

room. That was the canvas we had to work with, on which to apply, as well as possible, UDL principles (Katz, 2012; Rose & Meyer, 2006). We aimed to create a place in a 'typical' high school that offered students an opportunity to be the driver in their learning. A budget was set for furnishing the room, and color and comfort were prioritized. Furniture included a tall whiteboard table with adjustable stools, an oblong table with six ergonomic seats, bean bags and cushions, a low table with cushions around, a couch with detachable benches, and stools designed to encourage good posture. There was no 'teacher desk'. Students, and myself, found where we liked to work best.

The 'conference'

The 'conference' played an instrumental part in a student's introduction to the Learning Zone. The first question a student was asked (after introductions) was: What are you interested in? That is a surprisingly difficult question for many teenagers to answer. I think that part of the difficulty comes from them rarely, if ever, being asked it. Most of the time the first answer I got was: Nothing. But the purpose of the conference was to tease out what that interest was. Often a piece of large paper was used to both model mind mapping, and to help the student begin to plan. Conferences were a creative process that was question-based. Here is an example of one with a girl from Year 10 (Grade 9):

Me: *What are you interested in?*

Student: *Nothing.*

Me: *What do you like to do at home?*

Student: *Nothing. Watch TV.*

Me: *What do you watch?*

Student: *Neighbours and Home and Away.*

Me: *Hey, I know those. I play a game sometimes when those are on. I call it, 'Spot the Brown Person.' (That caught her attention). Have you noticed how a lot of Australian shows have no brown people in them?*

Student: *Yeah!*

Me: *Do you watch Shortland street? A Kiwi show.*

Student: *There's lots of different people in that.*

And we were off, discussing culture, racism and media analysis. Watching your favorite TV show can be a study, I explained. Once an interest was identified the student was encouraged to explore it. Sometimes topics changed. No topic was off limits. There were standards of common decency, such as graphic or pornographic images, but these were never breached. In fact, there was no topic identified by a student that might have been deemed offensive.

Students and uses

The short descriptions below depict some of the students who used the Learning Zone (LZ) during the year. There were many others who used the room, and those below are presented as examples about actual use and indications of what is possible. They are merely a sample of those who used the LZ. I have divided them into headings that describe the use or the need that was served. Throughout the year the types of uses continued to expand, as deans, teachers, and students started to recognize the potential the LZ offered.

Flexibility in special education

Larry (all names used in this paper are pseudonyms) came by with a deputy principal during period two, asking for a calm place where he could stay for a couple of periods. We did not discuss any reason; I did not ask about his red eyes that suggested he recently been crying. I learned later that his aunty had made quite a scene in the front office with an audience, shouting abuse at him. Jody had shepherded Larry away to protect and remove him from it. Larry had burnt several bridges behind him, including with the student support classroom teacher. He needed a place and the Learning Zone provided it.

At first, Larry was quite content to watch videos of trucks on a Chromebook. Once he settled and felt supported, I started to look for connections between his interests and subject teachers. He saw what some senior students were working on while they utilized the Learning Zone. He was interested in computers, in what the older students were doing, and the graphic design teacher was very open to letting Larry work on a similar project designing graphics for a shirt.

Houston, similarly, was a student the school found difficult to place. He started to attend the Learning Zone as there was no other place to go. Slowly, and after a few conversations, more opportunities presented themselves. Hands-on learning he could relate to was put into place for him such as: Makerspace, a PE class with a teacher he knew, and even one-to-one remediation work. Teacher aide support helped introduce new settings and teachers, support which was then faded when no longer needed. The LZ allowed these students otherwise deemed ‘special education’ to access the mainstream in a way that helped ensure success, as well as offer a safe place in school.

A safe place to be

Some referrals to attend the Learning Zone came from the school counselor, and in those cases, the room acted as a type of sanctuary. Katy was one student for whom the door was always open. The counselor was concerned about Katy's issues around anxiety and crowds. She needed a calm and secure place to work whenever she found the hustle and bustle of the mainstream too hard to manage. Another student who identified with a gender she was not born with, found PE difficult. As the school did not have a gender-neutral changing facility. The Learning Zone became her class until her schedule could be made more accommodating.

Re-engaging in learning

May came to the Learning Zone escorted by a dean. The dean explained that May had very poor attendance, and as far as she could elicit, there was little of interest to May. After a couple of sessions exploring topics, May came in and said she wanted to study makeup. I asked her about what was in makeup. I mused that it cannot be too healthy having stuff on your face all day. At the end of the session, she told me about the documentary she watched about how some cosmetics are even carcinogenic. Her attendance continued to be hit and miss, but every time she came to the LZ she continued to learn more about makeup and ingredients. It was a mutual learning journey. I looked at some links she asked about, such as tattoo inks, wondering about what I put on or in my own body. I showed her some henna dye and in one session introduced her to Wendy, a teacher aide working in a nearby class, who I knew to also be interested in natural products, and left the two to talk shop.

Relationship breakdown

When I first met Ronda she reminded me of a frightened deer. Her dean explained that she was having trouble with her science teacher. We were both perplexed as to the reason. He was a popular teacher. Rather than continue fighting or disrupting that class, her dean wondered if the Learning Zone might offer something. Once Ronda realized she was not being punished she opened up more. She explored some initial topics before settling on origami. This topic involved researching patterns and following instructions. We initially made square paper out of sheets of A4 until I ordered beautifully patterned origami paper for a few dollars from Trademe (an online platform similar to eBay). Ronda smiled more, conversed more, and began to stretch herself in the designs she attempted. In the process, she was learning not only perseverance but study skills. At the end of the term, I gave her the book, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes*, about a young girl affected by the radiation of the Hiroshima bomb. Ronda gave me a hug.

Whitu's relationship with his social studies teacher reached an impasse, and the Learning Zone became a regular period in his schedule. During his time in the LZ, he followed an interest he initially identified as 'drugs'. What he was actually interested in was addiction. He was guided in his study with a question he devised (and so learned about the importance of having a research question): Why are some people more susceptible to addiction than others? We mapped out what he was learning on the class whiteboard, considered genetics and environment and looked into other ways to stimulate dopamine. Other students saw our work and joined the conversation, and Whitu became a facilitator in class rather than a disruption.

Kaimoni had a clash with his year 10 (Grade 11) math teacher and the restorative meeting took a couple of weeks to organize. I asked him my standard question and he offered the most articulate answer I heard all year. 'What do you want to study?' I asked, and he said, 'I want to

study what will help me in my life.’ That turned out to be building. I motioned an older student over to describe his dream of a school Panna court, a portable arena for soccer duels and fancy footwork. Kaimoni’s project became designing the court, including visits to the architecture class to learn how to draw plans to scale.

Emergency drop-ins

Daniel was having a hard time at school for some reason. He is a student from the learning support department and is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. He was walking around with a teacher on supervision who asked me if he could come in and calm down with a Chromebook. Daniel greeted me with questions: How many students are in your class? Who are they? He started by sitting outside the room on a chair I brought out for him, but he later came inside to sit at the back bench when he felt safe enough. Headphones on, facing the wall, attention fixed on the screen, he calmed down enough to continue his day. He went back to class after his needed break, knowing the door was always open.

Sometimes deans would show up with a student and ask for a space in the LZ. I was wary of falling into a ‘withdrawal room’ type of role. However, the LZ proved its use on these occasions. Often these requests would come because a restorative meeting was scheduled but had not yet occurred. The restorative meeting was an opportunity for the teacher and student to process what may have happened and move forward together. I saw that the LZ offered both teacher and student a breathing space. The students also decompressed in a judgement free environment. When they were ready, I talked with them about themselves and their interests, not about anything that may have happened elsewhere.

Deciding for themselves

Ngahui and Ashley arrived one day. Ngahui, I had been told about. She was simply not going to art because she was not interested, but I did not expect Ashley. Both had decided they did not want to do that subject. So, they talked to their dean, who agreed that the Learning Zone might be better than not attending class. I conferenced with the two about what they could do here: studying what they want. I saw that that sounded kind of strange to them. 'What do you think I mean?' I asked. They said, 'like English and stuff?' To illustrate independent inquiry for them I went through what I might study were I a student in the Learning Zone. On a blank piece of A4 paper I made a circle that said Tibet, and another that said 'Religion, because I am interested in their Buddhism'. I then added another that said Dream Yoga, and explained a little of what that was. I said that if I had the chance to study what I wanted in school; I would study that. I told them, I do study that, at home. I then asked if they noticed what I did not say, and before they could answer I said, "yep, English and stuff ..."

I gave them both their own sheets of paper, and showed them where the resources were. Ngahui was interested in hunting. She even showed me a picture that was on her phone of a huge buck. Some of the bubbles on her mind map I helped her with were: types of deer, venison recipes, how to butcher ... Ashley knew right away she was interested in social work, especially child placement. I showed her the careers site, as well as some university information (like what courses she should take in the following years) and left them alone to explore and discuss. They whispered together and shared their plans with me at the end of the session. Ashley took her interest in social work to help out in the high needs unit from time to time. When a deputy principal heard of Ngahui's interest, he donated a leg of venison, which the two girls turned into venison tacos (from her recipe research) at the end of the term. "I learned more in here than in

any class,” they both said.

‘End of termers’

Around weeks six and seven of school term I would be contacted by deans to talk about specific students. Once it was recognized that a situation in class (such as continued truancy or inappropriate behavior, for example) might just continue to grow worse, an option was presented to both teacher and student, that allowed both the potential to save face and leave a chance for the relationship to be resolved. What the Learning Zone offered was a way to pre-empt a situation before it got to that level. The student was offered the opportunity to attend the LZ and study their own topic, and all were happy to share their Google documents or slides with me so I could encourage their learning.

Eli was one such student. His dean came by in the last period of the day to talk about concerns she had with a student. He was a year 11 (grade 10) student who was acting out in a couple of classes. Catering was one of them. She was going to speak to the catering teacher and arranged for me to meet Eli and explain to him how the room functioned. Once attending the LZ, Eli worked diligently completing an English standard (a credit of completion in that subject), and used his ‘down-time’ watching interesting documentaries. Like almost every student who left a class, for whatever reason, once settled into the Learning Zone they were polite, respectful to others and property, and interesting to be around. They were allowed to be themselves, and I felt privileged to meet them.

Following their interests

For some students, explaining the Learning Zone was unnecessary. They already got it. At the point in the year when the seniors' schedules changed (at the semester break), several students did not want to study what was offered and utilized the Learning Zone to continue or pursue their own interests. Each of the students described here were in year 11 (grade 10).

Ella spent an enjoyable first semester in Media Studies and was disappointed that it was not a yearlong course. Negotiating with her teacher, she made it one and employed her time in the Learning Zone working on standards, using her teacher as an advisor.

Megan was mad about drones and was enthusiastic about investigating that passion. She was very interested in the brushless motors used by drones. We looked at possible National Certificate in Educational Achievement (NCEA) to apply her work to and located one in science. Megan was a visual and kinetic learner. She would sit at the high whiteboard table and take notes and draw diagrams. At the end of each session, she would take a picture of her work, many of which were used in the presentation of her completed standard (see Figure 1). When she reached a point where we were both scratching our heads, I looked outside the room for help. There was an electric motor repair shop in town, so on the way home I asked if they would mind having a helper for a couple of hours one morning. One of the mechanics was a woman who had previously attended the high school. The business was very accommodating. Megan worked one day at the shop, then returned to school and wrote down everything she had learned. At the end of the year she approached the shop again, asking if they had any part-time work available.

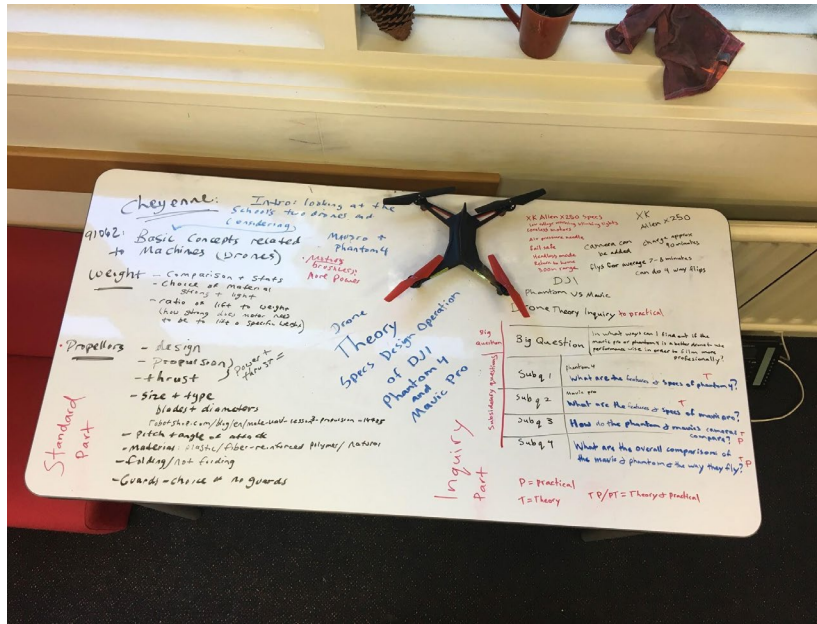


Figure 1: Brainstorming and note taking for research about drone motors (authors own photo)

Ford was not interested in credits. He was more interested in learning what he wanted to learn. Stepping aside from NCEA, or ignoring standardized assessment and concentrating on the student’s interest, gave him great latitude in his research, and meant I could focus on encouraging his research skills. Ford’s dad owns a hunting store in town and both are avid collectors of antique rifles. The Learning Zone gave him the opportunity to learn as much as he could about rare models. His specialty was bolt action rifles from the first half of the 20th century. He is probably the most knowledgeable person on the subject in town. Another topic that seized his interest was foreign soldiers fighting for the Wehrmacht in World War 2. If he was a graduate student, his work would have been recognized. Hopefully, this research experience will one day be used in higher education, should he decide to continue his studies. The topics were interesting and unique enough for a graduate research proposal.

What the school does not offer

Connor, in Year 11, came by the Learning Zone to show me an online course he had located with his mother. He wanted to study distance courses offered by the Coast Guard: Day Skipper, Radio Operator, and Boatmaster. The Senior Leadership Team was interested in using Connor as a test case to see how that could work. They saw no reason why more students could not take advantage of such opportunities. I like the initiative he showed as well; seeking me out, recognizing the possibility being presented by the LZ.

Kelly's passion was Korean, a language few schools offer. The senior leadership team offered to pay subscription fees for an online course, Kelly brought her own books, and the Learning Zone provided time and space for her to study. In the ensuing weeks, she and her mother also located a Korean speaker, the owner of a cafe in town who was delighted to see a local interested in her language. With some negotiating one of Kelly's LZ periods was devoted to spending time at the cafe for oral practice.

Catching up

Parent conferences presented an unforeseen opportunity for the Learning Zone. Some parents felt their children's schedules were too full and wanted them to be able to have time to stay on top of their coursework. Schedules were changed and these (Year 11/Grade 12) students had a 'study' period build into their schedule. Off the schedule was a course they were not interested in, and they came with unfinished work. Not only did the Learning Zone provide a study place, it also provided (myself) a trained teacher who could tutor and assist.

Class outside of class

My first impression of Ash was not that flattering. This from my notes that day: *Ash showed a real lack of respect to personal property. Sauntering in, taking a notepad I had just set down and began drawing in it, even taking the chair I was sitting in. I don't know what would work with him or what he would even buy into.* Several times during the first two weeks Ash would arrive with a few mates. I had two rules I kept firmly to with the Year 12s. If they were here during a study period, they had to have work. I was not a hangout zone. The other rule was that if their schedule showed they should be somewhere else, they had to leave. I was not a truancy zone. Consistently re-enforcing these rules meant that Ash started showing up on his own. The time together meant we could develop a relationship. I was able to discover his interests and we could both meet each other as fellow human beings. Ash was very interested in creating electronic music. His interest was so keen that he saw little purpose in his other subjects. School, to him, seemed increasingly futile. He wanted to make music and develop his skills, but the school lacked the flexibility and resources.

With him in mind, during the school holidays I stopped by a large media outlet and inquired about internships. When school started, we had a meeting arranged, and I brought Ash to meet the station manager. He was straight to the point, asking questions about what Ash knew and his personal work values. He said it was not a 'three strikes and you're out' thing, it was one strike and you're out. A ten-week placement was organized, one day per week. Each week would have a different focus culminating in Ash producing a two-hour broadcast. He was to become familiar with all aspects of the business, and was required to show up for certain events. He showed us around the station, including a lounge area Ash would be welcome at whenever he came. For the ten weeks, he would be treated as a colleague, not an intern, which also means he

would be expected to treat it as a job and be on time, be professional, etc. The last room he showed us was the ‘playroom’, the sound editing and recording suite. During off time it would be possible for Ash to book slots to even work on his own projects.

What I saw next will stay with me as a memorable ‘teachable moment’ (Grover, 2015). Ash, usually stoic and straight-faced, formed a small smile as he realized a door was being presented, a possible path opening up to a future in music. He learned about MAINZ (an institute of higher learning focused on digital media) in Auckland, saw the routes they have to apply, and even visited the campus while on a visit to his brother in Auckland.

Transition in/transition out

Students used the Learning Zone to both return to and leave school. Those coming from an alternative setting would use the LZ as a base while they got used to their new schedule, and in a couple of cases, students used the focused area and teacher present to complete remaining credits. During one session a dean showed up at the Learning Zone with Auburn. Rather than stand him down, it was decided that the school could help him more by finding an option to interest him. There is a service provider in town that is trades based and he identified that Auburn is interested in automotives. It was hands-on and practical, preparing students for an apprenticeship. To qualify, Auburn needed to finish ten Level 1 credits in math. The goal was to work through those in the LZ. After tutoring from me and practice work provided by the math department, he hammered through the first one. He handed his into his math teacher and was 4 credits closer to finishing. During the two weeks that Auburn attended the Learning Zone, he worked extremely hard, as he had a goal to achieve. When he finished the standard needed, he left school to travel his own path.

Year 12 study (Grade 11)

Year 12s were offered a study period during their schedules this year. There was some year 12s who lacked the prerequisite skills to use such a period effectively. These students were soon recognized and alternative classes found for them. The remaining Year 12s had the choice of the library or the Learning Zone to work in. A strong cohort chose to work in the LZ, and some periods were positively buzzing with energy. These Year 12s helped create an atmosphere of work in the early days of the room and provided an example to the younger students as they started to attend.

Finishing off

Towards the end of the year, several students realized they needed to complete standards (credits, or units of study) if they wanted to finish the year or qualify for a course outside of school. These students were typically Year 11s, like Steve, who needed both English and math credits. Coming to the Learning Zone gave him not only a tutor, but a learning advisor and advocate. Concentrating solely on his writing he saw for the first time during the year that he not only could write but that he enjoyed it. I overheard him one morning proudly showing his creative writing to a friend. After two weeks of concentrated effort, he finished the ten credits he needed.

Discussion: The frustrations and flexibilities of NCEA

NCEA is a credit-based assessment scheme in New Zealand where students and educators have a great deal of freedom in adapting student interest and local culture to the requirements of school completion. The modular based National Certificate in Educational

Achievement, or NCEA, has, since 2004, been the main secondary school qualification for students of the New Zealand public education system. Assessment is both schools based and external (Hood, 2015; Wylie, 2012).

Credit accumulation is key in this system. Success and failure are measured in the number of credits gained. In Level One (Year 11), for example, 80 credits are needed. Within these 80 credits, a student is expected to achieve at least 10 in Mathematics and 10 in English. In Level Two (Year 12), the student is expected to achieve 60 credits. Level 3 (Year 13) has a similar expectation. The accumulation of credits assumes a pre-eminence in planning and delivering the school curriculum. It can even assume a pre-eminence over actual learning (Locke & Goodwin, 2004; Thomson, 2003; Yoon & Rata, 2018).

Here something predictable happens. The New Zealand Curriculum was designed to outline what should be covered in a student's educational journey. The second part of the curriculum is organized around traditional subjects (math, science, English, etc.). The first part, however, is based on Key Competencies, the learning and life skills deemed essential to become a lifelong and adaptable learner. These skills are: Thinking; Relating to others; Using language, symbols, and texts; Managing self; and Participating and contributing. These skills have been identified by many, not just in New Zealand, as essential skills for a '21st Century Learner'. The skills are cross-curricular; they cannot be limited by one subject (Fulton, 2003; Harris, 2017).

What has happened through a focus on credit accumulation is a focus on traditional subjects (Wyse, Hayward, Higgins & Livingston, 2018). With credit accumulation as the manner of assessment, subject delivery—what is covered and how—can be designed to maximize the accumulation of credits. Students are at times taught material they will never use in their lives, let alone remember after the assessment or exam. Imagine a dog with a tail. The Key

Competencies are the head (or the heart), the curriculum is the body, and assessment (through NCEA credits) is the tail. Just like with a dog, when it is happy, or interested in something, it wags its tail. That is how it should be in a healthy education system (Hood, 2015). However, what is happening in the New Zealand education system (and in many other assessment-driven systems, like the US), is that the tail is wagging the dog. It is as if the tail has become more important than the dog, or the only thing being measured (Croft, Roberts & Stenhouse, 2015; Kohn, 2000).

Many of those students I worked with in the Learning Zone did not like this arrangement. I think that many students tried to articulate that dislike, but they lacked the *key competencies* to articulate it clearly. Instead of calmly telling their teacher that they feel their valuable time is being wasted learning something that has no relevance or meaning in their lives, and that they most likely will never use in their future, they fight with their teacher. Or worse. Some actually had a great deal of knowledge that was not recognized or acknowledged within the NCEA system.

In the Learning Zone, students had the opportunity to pursue their passion, and develop good research skills along the way. The Learning Zone provided a way to reach students who might otherwise have fallen through the school's support network. It allowed students to follow their interests, and be valued as learners and individuals. It fostered a work ethic of diligence and respect. An image that came to mind when I first started meeting students in the Learning Zone was of a dis-interested passenger sitting in the back of a car, not knowing, paying attention or even caring where they were going. That car journey was their educational experience, culminating with their few years in high school. In the Learning Zone, I saw those students start

to look out the window, to think about where they wanted to go, and to even look at taking the steering wheel in their hands.

This years' experience has shown that the Learning Zone offers the school an opportunity to use the flexibilities built into NCEA. Any student interests can be linked to standards. The Learning Zone teacher can then act as mentor and facilitator to encourage genuine learning, liaising with subject teachers to moderate standards. This approach can open a wide range of topics and standards to our students. Community links and expertise can be accessed. Students can not only be engaged with relevant learning, but become more empowered learners.

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