

THA Travel Award 2010 Report

My project was based at Mission Heights Junior College (MHJC) in New Zealand, and aimed to establish links between this school, a school in my home county, Branston Community College (BCC), and other schools across the world participating in the DREAMS project. The DREAMS project is a scheme I founded in collaboration with BCC last year that aims to raise the aspirations, achievement, and engagement levels of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, by sharing best practice between schools across the world, and enabling students to collaborate on international projects that enthuse and inspire them. It was founded in response to incidences of drug taking, teenage pregnancy and destructive behaviour by bright but highly disadvantaged young students at BCC. MHJC will be the first New Zealand School to participate in the project. It is a newly established school where most students have English as Second Language, and many come from poor backgrounds.

An important part of my summer project involved working to introduce schemes to MHJC that I had used successfully to enthuse and inspire bright, disadvantaged students at BCC. Debating is an activity that has been shown to contribute significantly to improving students' academic abilities and success in university applications, and one that I have seen have impressive effects on young people I have worked with at BCC. To help create a successful debate club at MHJC, I prepared and delivered a half day workshop to 30 students nominated by their English teacher, which was well received by the participants. I also judged intra-school public speaking competitions for year 9 and 10 students. These activities generated enough interest in debating to warrant establishing a debate club, so my next step was to contact the Auckland University Debating Society and find an experienced debater willing to coach the school team. This done, I then spoke to staff members and the coach about ways to set up a successful debating society and opportunities and resources available to them. Students at the school are now looking to enter debating competitions from next year.

Equally, I was able to learn about projects that MHJC used successfully with its students, and develop strategies to introduce them to other schools involved in the DREAMS project. MHJC students introduced me to Community Problem Solving, an aspect of Future Problem Solving International for which groups of young people design and run a project that solves a problem in their local community, and then present their project at a national conference. If they are successful at that stage, they are then invited to an international conference in America. Teachers on both sides of the world agreed that this would be a really valuable project for BCC students to participate in, but a little research found that this scheme was not yet established in the UK. I therefore arranged a meeting with the directors of the scheme in New Zealand, who explained how the scheme could be established in the UK, and agreed to provide me with the necessary resources free of charge. To ensure DREAMS project students had the best possible chance of participating successfully in Community Problem Solving, I spoke to the MHJC coach about ways in which BCC students could shadow the MHJC school team's project for the first year, and then run one themselves for the second year, and arrangements were put in place to do this. A group of BCC students are now set to become the first from a UK secondary school to participate in Community Problem Solving.

Beyond to these specific projects, my time in Auckland allowed me to explore the school's IT facilities, curriculum structure and timetable to establish ways in which the school could most profitably participate in DREAMS project activities. Of the most interesting of my experiences to this end was an ongoing discussion with students and teachers about national recipes New Zealand could contribute to an international recipe book, and a fierce debate about whether there was a difference between an English meringue and a New Zealand pavlova. Taste tests finally persuaded sceptics that there was a (slight) difference...

In summary, the award provided a fantastic opportunity to work to inspire bright students from poor backgrounds, and helped to build a lasting link between schools from different parts of the world, and I'd like to thank the Trinity Hall association for their support. Students, teachers and I look forward to future collaborative projects between the schools, which are set to include an online student-run newspaper, and the international recipe book.

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