

“High performance cycles: what structures and processes do schools adopt to promote continuous learning? How do schools use Learning Walks and other processes to improve teacher capability?”

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Executive summary

School effectiveness monitoring in the UK is carried out by OFSTED. This is a strong compliance model, and there was extraordinary stress evident, in the schools that I visited, about the required paperwork and the nature of the testing.

When Head Teachers were questioned about improving teacher capability, all discussed student progress and achievement. This appeared to be a result of the National Testing. There was a significant narrowing of the ways that the United Kingdom measures teacher success/effectiveness. Attention was given more to summative exam results than formative practices. All schools had formal appraisal systems, where senior staff, usually the Head Teacher and/or the Deputy Head Teacher completed formal observations.

The majority of schools also had 'Pupil Progress meetings', where the Head Teacher and or Deputy Head teacher met with the classroom teacher and looked at the data from the testing each term to see if children had made expected progress.

There were a number of successful examples of systems in place to promote continuous learning and improve teacher capability: Parent Forums, Seeing is believing tours, Professional Learning- staff meetings 'Show and tell' where teachers were able to share what they had learnt and then applied in the classroom. The schools that I contacted in New Zealand were utilising Learning Walks effectively, across the different strata of the leadership within the school.

Study Purpose

Sunnyhills School was exploring the use of Learning Walks as part of the performance management cycle. We introduced the idea over the last year, with links to improving teacher capability and increased student voice within the 'Assessment To Learn' contract through the Ministry of Education. I wanted to find out what other schools were doing in this field. What other systems did schools have in place? How did children benefit?

Rationale and background information

'Learning Walks are a very structured method of gathering evidence of progress against a clearly defined issue, and planning ways forward. They are traditionally used to gather evidence about the quality of learning and teaching. What sets the Learning Walk apart is its collaborative nature. Walks are carried out by a team of people who together define or redefine an issue, design the best way to get evidence, and collectively use the evidence gathered to identify areas for development. The team members are chosen carefully and can consist of representatives of all the stakeholders involved.'(Carol Frankl '07)

Cheryl Doig (2010), suggests that the specific indicators for learning walks are jointly planned with staff. The timetable and the format of the feedback are discussed with everyone.

"Education is no longer just about teaching Johnny to read. It's about teaching him to think critically about what he reads, interpret what he reads, and relate what he reads to his own life. If we are asking students for critical examination and reflection, we must be willing to do the same.

These learning walks are our common journey to better understand the needs of children, to improve how we teach and to more clearly define what we expect of our students and ourselves."

James G. Merrill (2009)

The Downey Walk-Through model was slightly different:

There were 5 main ideas: there were short focused observations of 2-3 minutes duration; the major goal of those brief observations was to trigger a thought that might

be useful for a teacher- usually a reflective question; the principal would gather data on curriculum and pedagogy. Follow up conversations might only take place after as many as 8-10 visits. This model originated in the US and seemed to be mainly the function of the Principal.

The recent release in New Zealand of 'BES School Leadership and Student Outcomes' illustrated the impact of leadership on student outcomes. The largest effect size in the five dimensions of leadership measured was 'promoting and participating in teacher learning and development' (Robinson 2010: 95) The researchers found that 'Teachers in high-performing schools report that their leaders are actively involved in collegial discussion of instructional matters, including how instruction impacts on student achievement.' (Robinson 2010: 99) This emphasized the importance of leaders being actively involved in the teaching and learning in their schools. This study explored different ways that school leaders went about this work.

Activities undertaken (methodology)

I visited Primary Schools in London and the greater London area. There were two parts to the visit: I talked with Head Teachers and some Deputy Head Teachers, asking them about the questions in the title of my sabbatical. We walked around the school and talked about student learning. I also conducted phone interviews with schools in New Zealand.

During the time, I talked with key people- Cheryl Doig, Christchurch, New Zealand re. Learning Walks, Mick Brookes, National Association of Head Teachers, London about educational practice in the UK. Most of my reading was based on Carolyn Downey's model for 'The Three Minute Walk-Throughs', Cheryl Doig's 2010 power point about Learning Walks and the Best Evidence Synthesis for Leadership 2010.

Findings

For the purposes of this report, I have shared features of each school which might be different to regular practice in New Zealand rather than simply record information or double up. I have selected highlights from each visit or conversation.

School A, UK:

The Head Teacher at this school was a nationally recognised leader who spent time supporting other schools. The children were aged 4-11 years and were mainly white British. There were strong links to international schools, utilising IT. High standards of achievement were evident. There were 30 children in every class, including reception.

Parent representatives- There was a meeting once a term with the Head Teacher- the P.T.A nominated a parent from each year group. Tea and coffee was provided and the parents voiced any concerns that they might have to the Head Teacher.

There were 'Seeing is believing' tours- once a term, at 9.15 am. (A different year band each term) A letter was sent out to invite parents of a particular year level to participate in the tour. The Head Teacher talked about what they were currently doing in school and what they were aspiring to achieve, and then the parents did a tour of the working school, so they saw what the children were doing. The group then had another coffee and asked any questions about what they had seen and discussed any issues. They found out how the Head Teacher was dealing with concerns, so what the parents got was a package. As guests in the school, they were watching their children in a working environment.

The Head Teacher did Walk Throughs. She was looking for teachers to show her the desired practice. She viewed it as a celebration walk, picking up different things and linking back to 'show and tell' at staff meetings. However the Head Teacher would also make comment at the time if she viewed something inappropriate in a classroom and directed the teacher to 'the policy'.

There were formal appraisals in July which was the end of the academic year. Appraisals are all linked to student learning. As part of the appraisal, the senior staff went through children's results- where they were at, how much progress they had made their coordinator role, their aims, goals and school aims. One strand was the teaching and its impact, and the other strand was the teacher's personal development.

There were lots of examples of evidence based learning at this school, rather than data driven, despite the National Testing. There were well documented examples, in Principal's office, which were summaries and celebration of the successes of each class. The school used lots of real world examples like a recent competition across classes based on the TV programme 'The Lion's Den' with judges from the local business community as part of PreP.

School B, UK:

The school conducted 3 types of observation.

1. Formal observations to judge standards, performance management, pay progressions and grades. These might be shared with the teacher.
2. Informal: non judgemental support. Peer observations, drop-in observations by the Head Teacher or Deputy Head Teacher that could take place any time, without notice.
3. Coaching Model: designed to improve teacher practice. Usually carried out by Curriculum Leaders. There was a support framework with in-class visits, along with dialogue about ways to improve the quality of the learning.

Learning Assistants were also observed. During a lesson observation, there were 3 key elements: 1. Pupil progress 2. Student personal development. 3. Teaching.

This Head Teacher shared with me significant amounts of student achievement data for every year group. There was tracking with data and predictions for the remainder of the year based on prior attainment. The school identified children who were not going to meet targets, so they could provide support and show value added. It seemed that the test scores were the main measure of children's learning and the teacher's teaching. This was not surprising, given the compliances that schools were expected to meet annually.

School C, UK:

A large, multicultural school in central London. The Head Teacher had pulled the school up from Unsatisfactory to Satisfactory. The strategic plan included very detailed learning intentions and success criteria with % targets identified for student achievement. Following on from this, the Head Teacher had a very detailed term plan which showed what the leadership team were focusing on each week - of particular interest was the column 'monitoring' This was a smart way to ensure that the leadership team actioned what was required.

Parents Form: This Head Teacher also met once a month with parents representing each year level. They discussed strengths/ areas for development in children's learning, curriculum and child welfare. The Head Teacher found that this structure had proved invaluable in giving parents a voice at school.

Formal appraisal system: These were conducted by the Head Teacher or sometimes it might be the Deputy Head Teacher. Teachers knew to expect a visit in a specific week and they knew whether it would be Numeracy or Literacy.

The school also used peer observations, where a teacher went and observed alongside the DP. This was a way for the staff to compare notes and up skill in specific areas of curriculum. Teachers also modelled for each other.

School D, UK:

A large urban Junior School: 360 children age 7-11 years.

Teachers knew that children had to make 2 sub levels of progress each year. The school tested every child each term, following up with a 'Pupil Progress Meeting' with each teacher each term. The Head Teacher and the Deputy Head Teacher did this together. Ideally the Head Teacher would like the Literacy, Numeracy and SENCO teachers to do this in the future.

Observations were carried out by the senior leaders- so that they could see teachers were satisfactory. They also looked at books and planning. There was significant monitoring. Everyone knew what % of children was making the progress as expected. Different subject leaders might work with teachers to provide support for required tasks.

School E, NZ:

A decile 10 primary with 431 children.

The school had developed their processes for Learning Walks over a 3 year period.

The process was collaborative with different teachers involved, depending on the focus. For example, if it was Numeracy, the Numeracy Team leader was involved.

The team of teachers decided together what the specific aspects of the walks would be and this information was shared with the staff. This team met first to discuss the desired Learning Intentions, and then walked together, usually spending 10 minutes in each room, across 2 days. The team didn't talk to the teacher, but might talk to children to ascertain what they were learning and the level of student engagement.

The information from the walks was collated. The feedback was shared with staff at a staff meeting and sometimes at team meetings too. No names were used in the feedback and confidentiality was maintained.

The Principal also conducted 4 minute Walk- Throughs on a specific aspect of learning. This gave the Principal a school wide picture in various curriculum. She used reflective questions to discuss pedagogy with the teachers. The evidence collected from observations was used in a twice yearly appraisal meeting with each teacher.

The team leaders also conducted Learning Walks within their teams. The feedback was presented individually to teachers. Sometimes, curriculum team leaders, of a focus group, would do a Learning Walk across the school.

The school suggested that although the Learning Walks were time consuming, they had proven to be a non- threatening and effective way to manage change across the school. Teachers did respond and make changes and there was a collective responsibility.

School F, NZ:

A decile 6 school with a roll of 227.

Learning Walks occurred at different layers across the school.

The Principal conducted regular Learning Walks. Sometimes she told the staff if there was a specific focus and other times it was a more generic look. This Principal had tried the Downey approach with the 3 minute Walk- Through, but found that there was a lot of information to collect and it wasn't always effective. Her feeling was that staff felt anxious if she was writing notes and the visit felt more like a judgement.

Recently, the Principal was in and out of classrooms talking with children. She would wander and did sit alongside children.

There were also teams of teachers who conducted Learning Walks. The staff decided at this school whether they would like to know the criteria of a walk or not. In the early days, teachers did want to know and it wasn't uncommon to see some staff members doing some things especially for a Learning Walk coming up. More recently, the teachers didn't want to know the criteria. They felt that this gave a more genuine picture of the school. Staff also used the Learning Walk format to gather data in a specific curriculum area. The school found that it was an effective way of monitoring the progress.

All teachers at this school were involved in Teaching as Inquiry. This involved researching different aspects of learning. The feedback was shared with the quality learning circles within the school. The school were also using peer tutoring where teachers observed and gave each other feedback on their teaching. They had tried set days, but were moving towards the teachers setting up the visits to suit the class timetable and better meet the needs of individual teachers.

As the school had built up a culture of transparency and sharing of pedagogy, the 'appraisal' was not a big deal- instead the school made the most of all the valuable information gained from the Learning Walks across different areas of the school. The Principal did use the knowledge gained from her Learning Walks as ongoing evidence for attestation of staff each year.

Implications

Schools in the United Kingdom had a greater level of compliance than schools in New Zealand. OFSTED might visit with 48 hours notice. National testing was compulsory with results for each school published. Therefore, there was a greater emphasis on test data as a measure of success. In 2007, there was a Learning Walks strategy and template in the UK, but as time has progressed, there was little evidence of those structures in place in the schools that I visited as part of my trip. All schools used formal observations however none of the schools were following the Learning Walks structure as documented in the UK Strategy.

The New Zealand Schools that I corresponded with about Learning Walks spoke positively about the impact on teaching and learning. There were key aspects critical to the success of the visits- confidentiality and transparency. The staff knew what the teams were looking for in their walks, and the emphasis was on 'a treasure hunt for best practice' and continuous improvement rather than a deficit model. Consequently, it was my belief that schools in New Zealand must view the National Standards as a sign post of success and one way only to illustrate student achievement. The use of formative assessment practices where children co-constructed their learning, student voice and teachers as facilitators of inquiry learning, was invaluable in providing evidence of quality teaching and learning. Therefore, I thought that the Learning Walk, as documented by Cheryl Doig was a valid and effective way to promote continuous learning in NZ Schools.

I also wanted to review the way that I visited classrooms as the Principal, by utilising the more formal cues from the Downey model. 'BES- School leadership and student outcomes' used research to illustrate the importance of the principals being involved in the instructional leadership of the school, leading pedagogy and teachers' professional learning. This would involve being in and around classrooms, observing the teaching and learning. The coaching style and use of reflective questioning, as part of the Downey Walk- Through, provided one possible strategy for this leadership.

It was evident in schools and families in the UK, the enormous impact of the joining of the UK to the European Union. It meant for children that a whole new world of possibilities had opened, as they could live and work in other European countries. This placed increased importance firstly, on children learning another language and secondly on having a global picture and knowledge of other cultures. Career opportunities in the global market were more widespread and suddenly there was more international competition.

The importance of Information Communication Technology in the future is more important than ever- connectivity, global communication and reducing distance. Along with the advancement in access to technology for children comes the increased need for teaching ethics, thinking critically and valuing of cultural diversity.

Principals face some challenges when considering the introduction of Learning Walks and/ or Walk Throughs.

It is also worth considering the roles for Associate Principals and Deputy Principals in the set up of a system to include Walks.

Conclusions

The impact of our leadership on student achievement is of the utmost importance. Therefore Appraisal, Walk Throughs, and Learning Walks should all be linked to student progress and achievement. However, in New Zealand with the introduction of National Standards, it is imperative that we are not reduced to looking at test scores and sub levels as the sole means of measuring student achievement and teacher effectiveness.

My next steps at Sunnyhills, following a term of research, readings and school visits:

- At Sunnyhills, we completed a two year contract, focusing on Formative Assessment practices. Our challenge is to use National Standards as a sign post of achievement and success whilst retaining our effective pedagogy and strategic direction.
- As part of appraisal process, include discussion re. 3-4 identified students' achievement. Ask the teacher for predictions and trends in student learning. Look at class patterns. Are the children achieving? What is working? Is it not working? If it is working, why is it? Examine trends in the classroom in terms of achievement and seek teacher's predictions of student progress. Is there anything we need to know about?
- Further develop the Learning Walks by co-constructing the success criteria. Teams of teachers could do visits. There would be professional dialogue to discuss what they found and the trends across the school collated and shared with staff. We could include Learning Assistants.
- Explore the idea of children doing Learning Walks. Children looking for evidence of kids talking about their learning and having ownership of their learning. A Treasure Hunt for best practice. The children could be detectives and publish in the newsletter and on the website, perhaps with some photos which would be powerful evidence of student learning and student voice. Maybe 4-5 children could go to each room- they could talk afterwards, about what is good learning.
- Principal will explore using the Downey model in the Walk- Throughs across the school, using reflective questions to promote continuous learning. Cue cards will be used as a memory jog and for monitoring purposes.
- Seeing is believing tours for parents to promote continuous learning
- Continue to gather a range of evidence of learning at school, beyond test scores. A celebration of the learning whereby all staff collect and retain examples of student learning to share with other classes and parents.

Finally, I have drafted procedures for our next steps at Sunnyhills. I am willing at any stage to share these outlines or talk to interested colleagues. Correspondence on this report is welcome by email: juliets@sunnyhills.school.nz

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