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Effective Teacher Appraisal and the Link to Student Achievement

Many years ago, appraisal used to be something that was 'done to you' by a senior teacher or principal. It was a process that probably involved the 'handing in' of planning and assessment documents and an observation where a checklist of criteria was ticked off. Planning would perhaps be 'collected' once a term and the observation and checklist would usually take place at the end of the year. The focus was on accountability but not on improving teacher capability.

In 2015 it is not enough to develop an appraisal system that focuses on professional accountability alone, schools need to focus on improvement as well. The decision to recommend renewal of a practising certificate based on the Registered Teacher Criteria is only one part of the appraisal process. In recent years, appraisal processes are more focussed on developing teacher capability in a trusting, nurturing environment, making the process more worthwhile. There is more care and rigour in signing off registration.

One of the key components is to have a sound culture for appraisal within the school. Where little attention is paid to creating an effective appraisal culture, the system focuses on compliance rather than creating an effective learning environment. Appraisers focus on completing the appraisal documentation rather than improving learning. School leaders don't model receiving and acting on feedback. Teachers don't feel safe to take risks or make mistakes. Teachers feel threatened or uncomfortable having observers in their classrooms.

Where there is an effective appraisal culture, appraisers focus on teacher learning and the system allows flexibility in order to meet teachers' needs. Angela Roberts, PPTA (Post Primary Teachers Association) president posed the question of what really helps school leaders make sound appraisal decisions.

'What really helps school leaders make sound appraisal systems? A tightened accountability regime? Or building professional capacity through PLD, mentoring, and allowing honest sharing of practice?' (Principal Today, Term 1, 2015: p 6)

The Education Review Office evaluated schools' approaches to teacher appraisal in Term 1 2013. They gathered information from 173 schools with Year 1-8 students and 27 schools with Year 9-13 students. They found that 20 percent of primary schools and four percent of secondary schools had high quality appraisal systems which contributed to improvements in teacher capability and which valued student outcomes.

These schools examined their student achievement data to determine the impacts of changes in teaching practice and to decide what aspects of their teaching they needed to improve. The *Teaching as Inquiry* process was often used to identify the necessary teaching improvements that contributed to their appraisal goals. There was a balance of professional accountability with the teacher's strong focus on making improvements for their students.

'Effective appraisal should be experienced as a component within a self-review framework that focuses on improving achievement for all students in the school.' (Education Review Office, May 2014. P.1)

The Teachers Council, the Education Review Office and the Education Group Ltd have all found some common practices that assist to build professional leaders' knowledge and confidence to promote teachers professional learning and development.

The Teachers' Council promote a culture of self-responsibility, accountability and improvement. To strengthen this culture, teachers need an understanding about what effective practice reflecting the Registered Teacher Criteria and Tataiako looks like and how it links to valued outcomes for students.

Consistency of best practice across a school is a goal school leaders aspire to achieve. A suggestion to achieve this is for a school to decide things like; "What could an observer expect to see in any lesson in an effective classroom?" Some examples of consistency could be relationships with students, formative assessment and differentiation.

By articulating the key effective teaching and learning processes and what this looks like and sounds like in the classroom sets clear expectations. If teachers don't know what the expected standard is, this can lead to inconsistency of practice across the school.

Appraisers need to focus on teacher learning rather than compliance and the system needs to be flexible enough to meet teachers' needs. The two processes can be separated both with different time frames and documentation.

'Give status and resourcing to the process so that those involved value and commit to the process and have the resources to do the job.' (The Education Group Ltd, 2008.p.2)

Goals set by teachers need to be important and challenging. The goals need to ask a difference to teacher performance and/or behaviour. The action plan needs explicit information about the nature of the support to be in place. It is also suggested that teacher do not set too many goals or goals that are unable to be adequately resourced.

School and personal goals need to be specific and targeted to each teacher's needs. They must focus on what is important for that teacher. Evidence to measure the success of a goal may be in a variety of ways. Some examples of evidence may be formal e.g. Classroom observations, feedback from colleagues, feedback from students and student achievement and progress data. Some examples of evidence that may be informal e.g. level of contribution to curriculum development, relationships with parents, colleagues, conduct at meetings, feedback/ comments/ from parents, timeliness of completing administration tasks, quality of documents, walkthroughs.

Evidence shows that with each goal set, there needs to be an action plan in place with enough detail to guide and monitor the learning. The structure of the plan needs to include the goal, the actions, timeframe, support needed, and the monitoring process. The content may include opportunity for theory (readings), research,

practice, coaching, observation of others, feedback. Regular meetings with reference to the goals and planned actions need to take place to support and to monitor. Research also indicates that appraisers need training in scaffolding teachers' learning. The training needs to improve their ability to engage in a range of appraisal conversations including those needed to address any gap between a teacher's current practice and agreed elements of practice to enhance student outcomes.

The Education Review Office identified the factors associated with an appraisal system's quality and grouped these into four interrelated dimensions: school culture focused on improvement

- coherence across school self-review components
- guidance in policy and procedures
- organisational support for appraisal

What made a difference was where conversations about teacher practice included frank and open discussions about the impact on learning and achievement of all students. Staff demonstrates a genuine commitment to make a difference for all students. Collegiality inspires individuals and teams to aim higher. They have created a shared responsibility for professional learning. School leaders drive teaching and learning and have planning interviews with teachers to monitor each teacher's personal and professional development.

In the schools with high quality teacher appraisal the system was implemented as part of their planning and reporting cycle. It was linked to the strategic plan, the annual plan, the principal's performance management system, and to decisions about teacher professional development (PLD).

At the beginning of 2014 after participating in the Teacher's Council workshop on teacher appraisal late in 2013, a new appraisal system was introduced to the staff at St Mary's school. The document was 'hard copy' and contained the Registration Criteria with corresponding Tataiako criteria. Included were examples of what the criteria might look like – examples were given. Teachers were asked to keep a record of evidence that met the criteria throughout the year. In addition to this document, teachers had two goals that would generate teacher improvement and as a result of this, improved student achievement.

Teachers were released to meet with the Principal to finalise the goals and to plan 'next steps'. Teachers met with the Principal every 5-6 weeks to discuss how things were progressing and what support may be needed to implement the next steps. In 2015, the format was changed to a google doc's format, making it easier to add information and insert links as evidence. This was shared online with the principal who was able to monitor their progress as well.

Teachers reported that they liked the process as they felt it was very helpful meeting with the principal as it made them reflect on their practice and try different strategies.

Comments from teachers when asked about the positive aspects of the appraisal process were:-

"I think I achieved more achievements throughout the year. It is good to be reaffirmed, recognised and acknowledged."

“It is not something I dread as I used to when it was ‘done’ to me at the end of the year when I was so busy.”

“It is good to have more input into the direction in which you want your learning to go. You have more control over your learning journey and it is a more positive experience.”

“You know what you need to learn and this process more enables you to choose the direction in which you wish to go”

“Yes I believe it is a learning process.”

Comments from teachers when asked about the negative aspects or ‘roadblocks’ in the appraisal process were:-

“Time restraints and mind on other things when working through the process (sometimes) eg class etc”

“Time; especially if after school as our minds are full. This doesn’t seem to be a productive time for me.”

Comments from teachers when asked to give suggestions to improve the process were:-

“A compulsory time set aside to update would be great eg staff meeting when we can work together if we need to.”

“I agree with a set time to update. Maybe discuss rtc’s and what evidence is needed to go in each box.”

Improvements and next steps planned for the appraisal process at St Mary’s School in 2016 are:

- To build in reflection time for teachers and time for them to record their journey online both individually and as a team so that evidence and strategies can be discussed and shared.
- To simplify the format by setting up ‘tabs’ to help locate the RTC’s more easily instead of scrolling through all RTC’s each time information is added.

Conclusion:

Teachers have demonstrated that they can take ownership of their appraisal processes. In doing so, teachers can improve their practice and engage in lifelong learning. The structured ‘portfolio’ not only allows this process to occur but also enables the integration of formative and summative assessment within one system, thus lessening the amount of work necessary to meet both attestation and registration requirements.

Through discussions and setting of ‘next step’s’ the professional development needs of the teachers becomes apparent– this is the key component that enables teachers to drive the process rather than being told what to do.

At the end of the appraisal process where specific goals were set and a teaching as inquiry model was followed, the link to improved student achievement was evident from both teachers’ professional judgement and end of year data.

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