

Does reciprocal classroom observation and feedback translate into changes in classroom practice; and does it make a difference to student learning?

I am very grateful to the Ministry of Education for making sabbaticals available to New Zealand principals; and to the Kilbirnie School Board of Trustees for the encouragement to apply for this leave. The opportunity to take time from your place of work allows you to reflect about issues of schooling away from the everyday interruptions of the workplace. Like many principals taking this leave, I have been involved in education for a number of years. Strategic plans and personal goals have been numerous however we have not always had the luxury of being able to implement them before new plans and ideas have been imposed. To stand back from your school and have the opportunity to take stock has been invaluable. The opportunity to think about one specific educational topic, without the many and varied interruptions of the workplace, has also been worthwhile.

An Introduction:

“Teaching is a complex and demanding profession. Teachers require high quality support and training throughout their careers to ensure they have the strategies and skills to meet the needs of learners. Professional learning and development is central to maintaining and improving teacher quality”. (1)

Professional learning and development makes a difference.

An important component of professional learning and development is teachers learning from each other – **Reciprocal Classroom Observations**

Teachers do not always have the ability to learn from each other. We plan together, we sometimes teach together; however we rarely have the opportunity to discuss what we plan and how we teach. Many of us have excellent intentions however, due to time and resource constraints, few of us are able to sustain challenging professional learning and development programmes.

The last ten years has seen an intensification of **learning**. We are now more aware of differing learning needs, and through such initiatives as the Numeracy and Literacy contracts, teachers are now better able to meet the differing and varying needs of students. We are now better able to meet these needs through quality teaching and improved formative/summative assessment.

This has not always been mirrored by an intensification of **teaching**. How well are we teaching...are we meeting the needs of our students...how can we measure this? We have traditionally used checklists and observers for this; however it can well be argued that this does not always give an accurate assessment of teacher effectiveness. To put it in a literacy analogy, we have assessed the **surface** features of teachers/teaching, but not the **deeper** features.

We can observe the number of positive interactions a teacher uses: the way they question; the way they use technology or equipment; but is the feedback we are giving truly effective? Is the feedback given taken on board for sustained growth, or is it simply used as a one-off exercise for appraisal purposes? New Zealand teachers are known for their collegiality and co-operative working ability. The good practices in our rooms are rarely shared, good advice and guidance is not always given the opportunity to be utilized. I believe that the sharing of good practice is of tremendous benefit to all teachers and would truly like to see a more effective way of implementing this into our schools

This report will be in four parts:

- Part A: Background for choosing this topic
- Part B: The Principles of Reciprocal Classroom Observations
- Part C: The findings from various sources used and the conclusions reached as a result of these findings
- Part D: Thoughts and Recommendations

Part A: Background for choosing this topic

The improvement of teaching practices has traditionally been left to individual teachers working in isolation. Whether learning a new practice, or working to improve a current practice, teachers were expected to “work it out” on their own. One-shot in-service courses or workshops were rarely followed up with any effective or sustainable feedback and support. Professional development was not always seen by some teachers as an integral part of teaching. Many teachers felt their “training” was completed upon graduation from Teachers’ College. Professional development opportunities were not always available to many teachers. Residential courses were attended by a select few, and inspectors’ discretionary TOD’s were few and far between. Teaching methods rarely changed and new approaches were more often than not ignored. The curriculum had not changed a great deal, or the methods of delivering it. Many “poor” teachers were the result of poor professional learning and development opportunities, rather than incompetence!

The 1980’s saw a great number of changes to New Zealand schools, particularly with the structural changes at the end of the decade. Constructivism, brain research, learning and teaching styles...change was now part of the process of teaching and learning. All teachers needed to “get on board” if they wished to remain in the teaching profession.

Classroom observations have always been an integral part of the learning and teaching cycle. In the 1980’s many schools were involved in ICS - In Class Supervision. A teacher, usually senior, would leave their class to observe in another teacher’s classroom. Pre-observation discussions were held to decide on the focus of the observation. In a time of minimal management release, certainly before Classroom Release Time, the vital follow-up discussions would often be delayed until after school or even to another day, so losing the immediacy required for the model to be successful. As well, the formality of the process had the potential to have a detrimental effect on staff relationships, especially in small schools where the role of the principal as a team member and supervisor was often difficult to sustain. The process did not always give an accurate idea of what was actually going on in the classroom, particularly as it was often used for appraisal or assessment purposes. For the above reasons, In Class Supervision, in its original format, has been abandoned in many schools throughout the country.

Classroom observations have usually been part of the appraisal process, particularly with the introduction of professional standards, key indicators and the like. Under these situations, the teachers tended to “put on a show”, similar to the days of the inspectorate. While useful information was no doubt gathered, it did little to effect changes in the delivery of teaching, certainly any long term changes that improved teaching, and ultimately, student achievement.

Professional Learning and Development has certainly advanced since the year 2000. Brian Caldwell talked about a new professionalism in his work on Changing Focus for Education. (2) He spoke of the following:

- ✚ **Teacher growth should not be left to chance or individual motivation.** He said that teaching growth should not be seen as a remedial activity, but rather that all teachers were expected to take active part in professional development, and that teachers who didn't would be squeezed out of the profession. He discussed a greater linkage of professional development to professional goals, with the most effective training in schools
- ✚ **Effective schools involve collaboration among teachers.** He said that teacher growth had often been stifled due to isolation, and the capacity to work in teams would be required in virtually every facet of professional practice
- ✚ **The quality of professional talk among teachers is a measure of the quality of teacher learning.** It was Important to structure school so that teachers had the opportunity to discuss relevant professional issues – professional meeting times within the day – and that time should be given for groups of teachers to reflect on and discuss their work – **involving reciprocal visits**. It was important to quietly model excellent practice in a way that leads people to **want** to develop
- ✚ **Teacher growth means looking honestly at strengths and weaknesses.** It was important to break down the notion that a weakness is equitable to being seen as a failure and that there were very few poor teachers around now – just ones that have not had the right professional development. If teachers wanted to be involved in their own development they must take ownership of the evaluation process

And finally:

- ✚ **Good teaching leads to improved learning. Student learning and achievement is the real test of effective teaching**

The Best Evidence Synthesis work by New Zealand educators mirrored the above findings and New Zealand schools, through the Numeracy and Literacy contracts, began to put these ideas into practice.

Kilbirnie School's recent Education Review Office report looked at the work we had done in both Numeracy and Professional Learning and Development. We used the report as a basis for not only taking stock of our progress to date, but also as an indicator of our future direction.

Education Review Report for Kilbirnie School June 2008.

Area for improvement:

- ✚ Through robust self review the school has identified making use of **reciprocal observations** and feedback among teachers to enhance teaching practice as an area for ongoing development

In term 3 we started reciprocal classroom visits. It was also at this stage I was awarded sabbatical leave for the following year. This was a timely award as I wanted to find out what other schools were doing, how well they were doing it and, and how we could enhance our own process.






Part B: The Principles of Reciprocal Classroom Observations

What is Peer Observation of Teaching?

It is a collaborative and reciprocal approach whereby one peer observes another's teaching and provides supportive and constructive feedback.

The aim is to provide continued professional development in teaching and learning through critical reflection, by both observer and observee.

It enables both the observer and the observee to

-  share good teaching practices
-  develop their own reflective practices
-  gain new ideas and fresh perspectives about their teaching
-  enhance their own teaching skills
-  improve the quality of the learning for students

It is **not** to be confused with observation of teaching for appraisal purposes.

What are the advantages of Peer Observation?

Peer observation is of value for **all** staff – beginning teachers, teachers facing difficulties in the classroom, and, equally importantly, for experienced teachers.

It can often be reassuring and confidence building to receive positive feedback from a peer who has observed you in action.

Observing a colleague teach can be a good way to gather ideas for your own teaching, as well as to start you thinking more critically about how you teach.

It can be a good tool to share and evaluate teaching innovations, and highlight good teaching practice

Constructive feedback amongst peers can increase trust and help build positive working relationships.

It can help pinpoint the precise nature of problems and identify ways of addressing these.

It raises the profile of teaching and learning and encourages colleagues to debate and engage in dialogue about teaching and share good practice informally.

It provides an opportunity to record and report teaching achievements for personal portfolios and such.

Some tips for giving and receiving feedback

Giving:

- ✚ Invite the observee to begin the discussion by giving their perceptions
- ✚ Begin by building observee's confidence in themselves and the process – tell them what you liked about the process
- ✚ Balance the positive and negative feedback. Too much positive can leave the observee feeling complacent; too much negative can leave the observee feeling too despondent.
- ✚ Discuss the observation from a mutual problem-solving angle
- ✚ Focus on teaching strategies rather than content
- ✚ Focus on areas for change over which the observees has some control and can therefore influence
- ✚ Be sensitive and respect the observee's point of view as much as your own.

Receiving:

- ✚ Make clear before the observation what kind of feedback you are looking for
- ✚ Be open to the feedback, and prepared to consider the observations, even when these challenge your own views and perceptions.
- ✚ View the feedback as an opportunity for professional dialogue with a colleague
- ✚ Be aware of the impact of your own reactions and emotions and try to stay rational
- ✚ Listen carefully, avoiding the temptation to immediately justify and defend.

What should the observer be looking for?

Is the material appropriate for the level of the class?

Do the teacher's goals emphasize higher-order thinking skills and critical thinking?

Does the method of teaching seem appropriate for the material?

Is the lesson appropriately sequenced and paced?

How well does the instruction match the teacher's goals for the lesson?

Does the teacher appear to be enthusiastic about teaching, and about the subject matter?

Are the teacher's interactions with students conducive to learning?

How effectively does the teacher respond to questioning?

How are the students reacting to the lesson – are they attentive, engaged, actively involved...?

What evidence is there that the lessons cater for all learners in the classroom?

Characteristics of a good observer:

They can empathize with the person being observed.

They see teaching improvement as an important part of the observation process.

They are a good listener

They have the ability to give advice and constructive feedback

They readily accept that there are other teaching methods and styles, even when they differ from their own

Constructive Criticism:

Provide a positive framework for the message.

Ground comments in specific, observable behaviour

Give the teacher a specific plan of action to follow

Provide feedback on behaviour that the teacher can actually change

Focus on the behaviour rather than the person

Ensure the teacher understands exactly what you are talking about

Agree that matters discussed are never revised outside of the feedback interview.

Questions to stimulate reflection:

Did the lesson proceed in the way you had planned it?

Did the students react to the lesson in the way you thought they would?

What specific things did you do to help the students understand difficult parts of the lesson?

How did the students react to your lesson?

During the lesson, did you feel confident and enthusiastic? Why?

What did you do in the lesson to allow for individual differences in learning styles or abilities?

Do you think your students learned all that you wanted them to learn in the lesson?

What did you do to encourage the students to participate actively in the lessons?

What did you learn about teaching from this class?

What did you learn about student learning from this class?

If you were to teach this lesson again tomorrow, what would you do differently, and why?

There are numerous sources available relating to the principles of reciprocal classroom observation, particularly online. The UTDC Guidelines from Victoria University (3) are particularly useful.

Part C: The findings from various sources used and the conclusions reached as a result of these findings

As part of my study I spent time discussing reciprocal observation methods with principals from a range of primary schools. Of the six principals surveyed, five had undertaken a modified version of reciprocal observations. The fifth principal has yet to start the process however is particularly interested in the concept.

What were some of the barriers faced, and possible solutions considered?

The obvious barrier for all schools was the nervousness of the teachers concerned. Most teachers tend to under-rate themselves, certainly from the point of providing constructive advice. All started in a small way, having teachers pair up and look at specific things such as student on and off task behaviour. An outcome of this approach from two of the schools was that teachers were able to relate on and off task behaviour to what the teacher was, or was not, actually doing. All schools stressed that they have spent considerable time and energy into “selling” the process to the staff. Only one school had a small number of unreceptive teachers however there were no refusals.

What degree of training was undertaken to instruct teachers about the process of giving and receiving feedback, both positive and constructive?

None of the schools has undertaken any specific training, mainly due to a lack of suitable professional development courses. All stated that by starting in a small way, and sticking to specific targets for discussion, the feedback was of use. Staff meetings were the main source of training, some taken by principals and some by senior staff. No schools had used external facilitators.

What steps were taken to ensure teachers felt comfortable with the process?

In all cases the teachers were allowed to pair up with teachers they felt comfortable with. There appeared to be a mixture of teachers and observers from same areas of the school and from different areas.

What degree of documentation is involved?

Some teachers originally kept minimal notes, however a familiar pattern was for subsequent visits to make use of more detailed observational notes.

An example:

	Criteria	Comment:
1.	Teacher planned appropriate learning objectives, and shared them with the class	
2.	Students aware of teacher expectations and acted upon them	
3.	Understanding demonstrated	
4.	Enthusiasm of subject demonstrated by teacher	
5.	Knowledge is built upon and made relevant	
6.	Positive working relationships exist between students and teacher	
7.	Positive – non confrontational corrected initiated and maintained	
8.	Students aware of the assessment criteria	
9.	Students show a pride in their work and excitement in the subject	
10.	Focus on improvement/Issues arising	

How was feedback given to the teachers?

In all cases the feedback was given within 24 hours of the observation. As the visits required teacher release, often by the principal, it was not always possible to provide immediate feedback. Classroom Release Time was used by three of the schools

Has there been a degree of teacher evaluation of the process?

In three out of the four schools feedback has been particularly positive and with one school the teachers are keen to see the observations being a component of appraisal. One common factor for schools continuing with this programme was time. The third term was a term to consider the implications and implementation of National Standards and it was apparent that this programme was not their number one focus area.

As mentioned previously, the schools I visited were all in the initial stages. There are obviously a great number of schools throughout the country that have been using this approach for some time and have embedded it into the school programme. Some use the process extensively for appraisal purposes. It could well be argued that when the process is used for appraisal, the honesty of teacher response and feedback could be compromised. The true aim of the programme is for honest feedback that improves teacher practice, and this will not always happen if used for appraisal. If, however, appraisal was linked to professional development and change in teaching practice, rather than compliance criteria, the process could be a great benefit, particularly if used as part of a professional portfolio.

I would hope that future appraisal systems, as part of future registration and attestation requirements, involve this programme and are not simply linked to competency criteria, or, dear I mention, performance pay!

Part D: Thoughts and Recommendations

1. **Reciprocal Classroom Observations should be seen as an integral part of Professional Learning and Development in all New Zealand schools**
2. **Schools should, through their Management Staffing and Classroom Release Teacher allocation, adequately resource this activity.**
3. **More professional in-service programmes should be devoted to reciprocal classroom observations**
4. **Teachers should be able to show reciprocal classroom observation feedback as evidence of professional growth in their registration/appraisal/attestation process**

References

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