

FOCUS:

**To Investigate Performance Management Systems
for Appraising Teachers in Schools and
their Impact on Teaching and Learning**

**PRINCIPALS' SABBATICAL LEAVE PROJECT
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For part of my period of Principal Sabbatical Leave taken from 15 August to 4 November, 2005. I undertook a small research study on Schools' Performance Management systems for appraising their teachers and on how the appraisal process impacted on teaching practice and student achievement. I also wanted to find out the status of the people schools considered appropriate to do the appraising of their teachers.

To do that research I visited 21 schools in NZ and 6 schools in Queensland, Australia and spoke with key people responsible for assessing and assisting teachers to achieve high-quality teaching and learning in their classrooms. Several weeks prior to the actual visit these key people received an 8-item questionnaire which indicated the line of my investigation and formed the basis of the discussion at my meeting with them.

In 4 schools I met with Senior Management Teams (3 or 4 people) and in 16 schools I met with the Principal and in 7 schools the discussion was with the Deputy Principal. The NZ schools visited were located in four regions of the country - West Auckland, Mangere, Rangitikei and Waihi with school rolls ranging from 32 students to 650 and teaching staff ranging from 2 to 34. The schools visited in Queensland were in Brisbane and in the Mooloolaba region, north of Brisbane with schools ranging in roll from 100 to 550.

Schools in NZ were visited first and the intent of my questionnaire focusing on the value of a teacher appraisal system in terms of improving teaching practice and enhancing learning was clearly understood by the people with whom I met. This same questionnaire held less relevance in the Queensland schools visited. None of the Queensland schools had formal appraisal systems nor could they point to any stand-alone documentation relating to teacher performance other than that required for first year teachers which is the only Education Queensland state requirement.

The difference between the mandated, formal and heavily documented system evident in many NZ schools was a stark contrast with the non-mandated, informal, integrated practices used in the Queensland schools I visited. This difference in the way the two education systems approach the maintenance and improvement of teaching practice became a major and unexpected element of this research.

The issue of who conducts the appraisal of teachers in NZ schools was a less-significant matter and can be summed up as follows:

- In most of the larger schools visited the D P and A P were responsible for carrying out the appraisal. Three schools also enlisted Syndicate Leaders to appraise some of their team.
- In schools with less than 6 teachers the Principal appraised the teachers.
- In 4 larger schools the D P and A P were appraised by an outside consultant who had

professional involvement with the school while in others such senior positions were appraised by the Principal.

- As a sole measure, appraisal by peers was not practiced by any of the schools visited.

It would appear that the conducting of teacher appraisal in NZ schools is mainly seen as part of the job description of D Ps and A Ps who at the same time, and depending on the size of the school, may also manage a Syndicate of teachers.

Peer appraisal is not widely used and outside consultants carry out appraisal usually at Management level only.

Self appraisal, which is mandatory in NZ, was in a few schools done alongside the Professional Standards, but more often self appraisal took the form of reflection on past and consideration of future teaching goals and intentions in conjunction with final appraisal interviews.

Returning to the nature of the teacher appraisal systems observed to be operating in New Zealand schools, it is apparent that appraisal looms large within the operational schedule of most schools. Many of the schools I visited had mounted systems originating from the performance-productivity model of the business world that on paper showed clear linear linkage from the school's charter statements to the annual plan and school targets with links to school-wide professional development and to school and personal goals while at the same time often incorporating the Professional Standards. Smaller schools eg. 2 to 4 teacher schools that I visited seemed to rely more on informal collegial support and guidance (as observed in Queensland schools) and were more relaxed about what they did.

As one Queensland Principal saw it, she said they didn't have the time or need for a layer of appraisal formality and documentation to sit on top of or alongside current integration of learning and teaching which centred on best practice within the New Basics project.

School Management in the N.Z. schools usually viewed appraisal as a supportive, developmental process for both the teacher individually and the school collectively. In these systems, many of which seemed unweildy, the emphasis easily became one of maintaining the schedule and associated documentation of the process, -of keeping the process moving forward during the year, with the focus being on teachers' supporting the system in order for the school to achieve compliance instead of the system supporting teachers in order that they may teach better. The link between teachers' appraisal goals and a schools' professional development programme was strong in most schools with school-wide curriculum development goals a common feature. Fewer schools were allowing for goals relating to improving a teachers' academic qualifications or personal interest goals unless they were relevant school goals or identified by Management as being an area in need of strengthening. Through the professional development programmes teachers were receiving support and guidance with respect to new curriculum ideas and approaches and improving their pedagogy, often with in-school professional development activities.

Other commonly observed elements of appraisal systems investigated in NZ were scheduled classroom visits and interviews between appraiser and appraisee and written reports at the end

of the process, usually at the year's end. In the majority of schools where it was necessary, relieving teachers were engaged to allow these things to happen heightening the importance of the appraisal interview.

Several Senior Management people mentioned the value of having time to have a focused discussion with a teacher about how they felt their teaching programme was going and at the end of the year a time for reflection and to find out intentions and aspirations for the future. Teachers too, expressed satisfaction with this component of the process providing an opportunity to reflect on what they were doing and what they had achieved and what they might do next. Most appraisors appeared conscientious about the written documentation invariably including positive comments but also pointers for the future. There were some doubts about the value and status of these summary notes which in one sense completed compliance with the requirements set down in New Zealand by the Ministry for the annual appraisal of teachers to occur. While the written notes constitute feedback to the teacher (something one would hope was more than a once a year practice) less often were comments made on students' achievement that might reveal links between the achievement of a teacher's appraisal goals and students' outcomes. It was apparent from questions asked of key people that schools find it difficult to show with any precision how a teacher's focus on their appraisal goal has had an impact on the level of student achievement.

Piggot-Irvine and Cardno in their book – “Appraising Performance Productively – Integrating Accountability and Development”, stress the importance of the Appraisee collecting during the year data and documentary evidence to verify their focus on their appraisal goal. They recommend the tabling of a portfolio of evidence at the final appraisal interview – something very likely to be seen as a burden by many teachers and therefore unlikely to be done well. There are in fact so many influences playing a part in a students' learning it may be unrealistic to be overly concerned with trying to quantify pedagogical influences other than in a general sense. For example, how does one measure the effect of such things as a teacher's passion, commitment, and warm genuine relationships with students?

The link between student achievement and teachers' appraisal goals seems even more tenuous when appraisors and teachers most often point to the results of tests that are customarily taken in NZ schools such as PAT and STAR or “pre” and “post” tests as indicators of teaching impact. No examples were seen of how this impact had been measured and with the multitude of influences impacting on learning the reality is that it would be very difficult indeed, and probably impossible to accurately measure a single cause and effect indicator.

Two Queensland Principals spoke about the usefulness of informal indicators of teacher-impact and effectiveness - very simple indicators well-known to NZ Principals. A Principal of a larger school in the Mooloolaba hinterland believed the best indication of teacher performance came from parents and students – “and the Principal soon learns about it - especially when it is not up to scratch”.

Another Queensland Principal said “I've got a number of good teachers with students producing very good results each year. This indicates to me that these teachers are doing well and I leave them alone”. The idea of “leaving good teachers alone” does raise a bigger issue of the tendency

for formal appraisal systems, even though claiming a developmental support focus, to be seen as a system for checking up on teachers (big brother is watching) – over-emphasising the accountability aspect. This does not always lie easily with the competent, self-sufficient teacher and in some ways threatens teacher autonomy and the advantages that come from the freedom for teachers to practice the teaching craft as true professionals and passionate people. On the other hand the all encompassing system in NZ (everyone is appraised) can be viewed as equitable. Never-the-less the lack of a formal appraisal system in Queensland schools seemed to match up with a high level of respect shown for the integrity and professionalism of their teachers in what could be termed a high trust model of school organization.

As mentioned previously, in the schools in Queensland that I visited, talk of teacher appraisal ‘systems’ seemed to have little meaning - the questionnaire I had prepared was totally irrelevant to their ways and means of monitoring and maintaining teacher standards and enhanced learning. Four of the schools I visited are involved in the well-regarded Queensland New Basics Initiative (now in its fourth year) with its tripartite of Productive Pedagogies, Future Curriculum and Rich Task Assessment. All of these schools seemed to have a strong emphasis on effective and reflective teaching, sharing good practice and on equipping students for a different future. The importance of the teachers’ role was reinforced by the State Education Minister in a recent education weekly “if students are to fulfill their full potential for their future our number one priority must be supporting our teachers to be the best teachers they can possibly be - the true point of leverage is the quality of the teaching”.

Although I spoke only to six Principals in Queensland it seemed to me that these schools, at least, had embraced the importance of facilitating high-quality teaching and this was reflected in their schools’ professional development activities such as New Basics and KLA (Key Learning Areas) and the clustering of schools to share in the moderation and analysis of student achievement. Appraising teacher effectiveness and fostering good practice were integrated into the school’s professional development focus and teaching programme and not identified as a stand-alone entity with its own infra-structure dealt to teachers individually as we tend to do in New Zealand.

Several of the Principals in Queensland talked about the importance of frequently having opportunities for conversations between teachers. At one level conversations were the pre-cursor to a support and guidance programme for a failing teacher while at another level education learning conversations were the important element of a school’s system of managing performance and providing professional development and as such the main feature of staff meetings. Through a stated intention to participate in and learn from open dialogue and to link this with the school’s professional development programme Principals aimed to foster good teaching practice while at the same time identify and address needs and weaknesses. The D.P at of one Queensland school strongly supported this view of appraisal and was very clear about his school’s approach to improving teaching and learning. He believed the best professional development and the best the best way to monitor and maintain teaching practice was to build into the culture of the school a regular time and place, context and group structure for educational learning conversations amongst the staff about curriculum content and students’ engagement in the learning process.

Unlike NZ schools, Queensland does not have an agreed set of Professional Standards for teachers to point to, nor do they have ERO visits and as already stated they do not have a requirement to have a performance management system for appraising teachers. However, Principals are accountable to a District Office and to state-wide accountabilities which do impact on teaching performance and a school's rating. At Primary level all Year 3, 5 and 7 students face state-wide tests on seven Maths and Literacy proficiencies. The school's results are matched alongside state means and as from 2006 these must be published on the school's website. Likewise Education Queensland conducts an annual school satisfaction survey for every school in the state. The survey is conducted using a random selection of 10% of the parents all Year 5 and 7 students and all the school's staff. The results of the school mean as related to the state Benchmark are published graded from Very Dissatisfied to Very Satisfied.

In 2006 selected schools will be trialing new standards and a state-wide (and possibly Federal-wide) standardised student Report Form with a 1-5 assessment scale so that "an A in Coolangatta will be equal to an A in Cooktown". It is intended that standardised comparative assessment and reporting will be universal and mandatory by 2008. (Evidence from other countries does not appear to have persuaded Australian authorities that national testing is a crude and ineffective way of improving student achievement and teaching performance).

While the goals may be similar, this move in Queensland (and Australia as a whole) to global state-wide measures to improve teaching practice and monitor and raise student achievement, contrasts with the continuing strong preference in NZ schools for more localized school or cluster based practices for improving teaching and levels of student achievement.

SUMMARY COMMENTS

Based on my small amount of investigation I would say that Teacher Appraisal systems are a significant and even a dominating feature of the operation of many Primary schools in NZ. In the 6 schools in Queensland that I visited, Teacher Appraisal, as a stand-alone system, did not feature.

After getting an over-all feeling for what most often happens in NZ and seeing the situation in Queensland I began to feel that some NZ schools have lumbered themselves with burdensome systems for assessing and assisting their teachers. The negativity associated with a mandated requirement tends to drag down the developmental support and guidance slant to the process. It was obviously not a burden in the schools in Queensland that I visited where in some places the phrases "performance management" and "teacher appraisal" were rarely heard. In NZ these words are well known and sometimes accompanied by a sigh or other signals of stress - especially if ERO have deemed a system as not good enough in some respect or other. The "good" systems invariably have linkage to Charters, annual plans and targets and involve maintaining a schedule of observations, interviews and written documentation. In some cases it appears that keeping the system going threatens to take over from its purpose.

Many NZ systems for assessing and assisting teachers via teacher appraisal appear as stand-alone entities viewed as a package to be dealt with on set dates during the course of the year and somewhat set aside from the day to day teaching programme even though curriculum linkages

may have been devised.

In Queensland, support for teachers, while based around an initiative or themes, appeared to be more informal and from what I was able to ascertain centred around informal conversations as an integral part of the day to day learning and teaching programme.

I am not at all sure about the number of courses or seminars on Teacher Appraisal and/or Performance run in Queensland but I am pretty sure there would be more in NZ. I suspect and sense that the MOE emphasis has encouraged a band wagon effect in NZ with consultants and others benefiting from a fad. One result is that Teacher Appraisal has become more over-arching and complicated as a mechanism for strengthening teaching than it needs to be and showing little actual evidence of a result ie.in the form of a clear measure of improved student-achievement. There is a need to pay heed to the value of learning conversations and to foster, within our schools, a time and place and educational context for professional talk between teachers about curriculum matters and about how best to enhance achievement and engage students in the learning process. Within the generic NZ Teacher Appraisal system it has already been noted that the opportunity for one to one conversation at the interview stage of the process was considered by both parties to be a most valuable part of the exercise.

A positive element about formal appraisal is its usefulness as a mechanism for doing something about the weak or incompetent teacher. It provides a relevant and mutually agreed plan for a teacher to follow with the expectation of guidance and support. Indeed, in NZ and also in Queensland such a plan is a pre-requisite to application of Competency Procedures – or in the Queensland system, DWP (Diminished Work Performance). Although the case can be made for equity with all staff having annual appraisal “done to them” it does seem a circuitous way of ensuring the weak teacher is monitored and assisted.

While some Principals and Senior Managers in NZ did see their appraisal systems as a driver of change and improvement in the teaching and learning in their school most were reluctant to give that status to the process mainly because other factors such as the motivation of enlightened professional development, inherent enthusiasm and discussion about new ideas, and an ethos within their schools of a high level of trust and a constant striving for improved student achievement were more likely to be viewed as the sort of elements driving change. All schools I visited in NZ and Queensland had within their annual plans focus areas for professional development of staff and for improving teaching and student achievement. In NZ the formalities for appraisal, often framed around school-wide goals were added in to what had been determined as an area of emphasis for the year. However, schools did not seem able to muster much evidence to show how much a teacher’s appraisal goal per se had been a factor in improving the teaching and learning. It was assumed to have had some benefit. In Queensland schools such a line of enquiry was very likely not entertained.

One of the most positive aspects of formal appraisal practiced in NZ schools were the opportunities for professional discussions about teaching and learning within the framework of a teacher’s appraisal goals. These planned and prescribed meetings focusing on students’ learning and teachers’ teaching gave clarification and direction and positive vibes to both parties. This was one element that teachers and management in NZ and Queensland schools did hold in common, and for which, under different circumstances, all parties seemed to have enthusiasm.

My conclusion is that the 'stand alone' performance management model for appraising teachers that is widely used in NZ has, in the highly complex setting of a school, very little impact on teaching practice and even less effect on student learning and achievement. Taking into account the multitude of variable interactions that occur in the process of teaching and learning it is probably an unrealistic expectation that it would have an impact.

More realistic is the possibility that a school culture where there is a high level of trust, that encourages focused discussion and debate and the sharing of knowledge and experiences amongst teaching colleagues will have an impact on teaching practice and consequently the learning and achievement of its students.

EXTRACTS FROM SELECTED LITERATURE

According to John O'Neil in the series, Studies in School Development - "Teacher Appraisal in NZ - Beyond the Impossible Triangle", while formal teacher appraisal models have been trialed in a number of countries and while the systems may have ensured that teachers complied with mandatory requirements and temporarily enhanced their teaching performance, in no country was there tangible evidence of sustained improvement in learning and teaching practice as a result of formal appraisal.

An OFSTED paper in 1996, for instance, reported the following outcomes of formal appraisal:

- in only twenty percent of schools were observable improvements to teaching found, most of which were minor:
- appraisal contributed little to school and professional development planning in a majority of schools.
- although teachers accepted the appraisal process few could identify improvements in their teaching as a result of appraisal
- the criteria for and quality of classroom observation by the appraiser were inconsistent.
- as other management issues took precedence, time for appraisal observations, interviews and reports slipped down the list of school priorities.
- head teachers identified a need to "set sharper targets for appraisal more closely integrated into classroom programme and practice".

Piggot-Irvine and Cardno's book "Appraising Performance Productively – Integrating Accountability and Development", indicates by the title a belief that effective appraisal systems will deliver measurable improvement for both the organization and the individual. The authors suggest that currently in N.Z. appraisal may be skewed too far towards accountability and too little towards the developmental end. Reporting outcomes (accountability) being more easily achieved and judged than the developmental element aimed at improving teaching practice and student achievement.

O'Neil in "Teacher Appraisal - Beyond the Impossible Triangle" proposes learning conversations as a meaningful alternative to what he calls "the MOE bolt-on cycle of annual formal appraisal busyness". He goes on to say "by shifting the emphasis of appraisal from the individual to the group, all sorts of possibilities emerge, not least the opportunity for individual teachers to reflect on, better understand and improve their own teaching practice with the help

and support of syndicate colleagues in the context of their existing classroom work programme. Analysis of the work of the group is just as demanding a form of evaluation but is likely to be considerably less threatening for the individual teacher. In the final analysis, then, group appraisal simply seems to make more sense”.

A leading NZ advocate of this reflective approach to improving teaching practices David Stewart, (“The Reflective Principal: School Development Within a Learning Community”) (Stewart D, Prebble T 1993) advocates the use of group dynamics in what he terms Quality Learning Circles (QLC) as the forum for collaboratively celebrating professional growth. He advocates groups of 4 or 5 teachers with common goals meeting regularly in a trusting, supportive environment to exchange their ideas on the teaching and learning process within the context of their daily class programme sharing best teaching practice in a professional, non-threatening, trusting, collegial setting.

O’Neil sums it up this way: “A teacher’s professional knowledge and skills, the essential craft element of teaching, are better developed and analysed - challenged and evaluated:

- within the normal currency of teacher talk in staffroom, classroom and corridor.
- within the routines of the syndicate or collegial team.
- within the process of translating intangible school and community values into concrete learning opportunities within the classroom and its programme.”

Robinson and Lai in their recent publication (2006) “Practitioner Research for Educators” emphasise the value of learning conversations in educational settings to improve teaching practice and student achievement. The numerous examples they give involving collegial appraisal of teachers’ work and students’ achievement in the schools in Mangere where they did their research closely aligns with those authors and the Queensland principals previously mentioned who see focused teacher conversations as the best mechanism for appraising teachers and lifting their performance as well as the performance of their students.

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Robinson Road School
Koru School
Nga Iwi School
Sir Douglas Bader Intermediate
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Gary Moss