## Leading staff renewal through Instructional leadership strategies of Looking at Student Work Protocols and Principal led Walkthroughs

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***Overview***

This paper sets out to provide a brief overview of some of the educational research behind two practices, student work protocols and walkthroughs. These practices were selected by the leadership team at Elsternwick Primary School to help improve instruction. Instruction that was responsive to student learning rather than just the implementation of a prescribed curriculum. What we found was that it was not the practices in themselves that led to improved instructional capacity, but rather, the conversations that ensued. The paper will also include our reflections and learning experiences as we implemented these practices.

***The question of school reform?***

Who amongst us would not want our schools to be focussed on sustainable improvement? If such improvement were that easy then we would not have the perceived educational crises that we hear about almost daily in the national media. Indeed recently, we heard from our Prime Minister of the priority that education has in this Government’s agenda, the ‘education revolution’. Kevin Rudd (2008)argued that “ Our focus must be on the basics: ensuring that all of our children emerge from school able to read and write, with basic maths and science skills and the ability to enter the workforce, vocational training or university study.” Certainly one could imagine that all educators agree that our aim is for all students to be literate and numerate and have what is required to be contributors to society. It is the Prime Minister’s later point in his address that was so pleasing. He concluded that we need our teachers to be focussed on realising the potential of each child we teach and that one of the essential elements to do this was to lift the quality of teaching. He went on to say that “research shows that nothing at school influences student outcomes more than excellent teaching” (Rudd, 2008). With our goal of improving teacher instructional capacity and developing more personalised learning, we began our quest.

Our story is not unlike many school reform stories, and like so many, it is a work in progress. Elsternwick Primary School is a medium sized Government school nestled in the inner south bayside suburb of Brighton in Melbourne. Brighton is known as a high socio economic area and is endowed with a number of Melbourne’s older independent schools as well as many Government primary and some secondary schools.

Elsternwick Primary School has a caring and increasingly diverse community. It caters for children from families in the surrounding neighbourhood which includes the adjoining Government Housing Estate. It has a small group of students with disabilities, a small group of refugee students, a population with a growing number of boys, a larger junior population than in the senior years and a staff, many of whom are closer to retirement than at the start of their careers.

***Why we did what we did?***

What follows is a recount of our journey towards improved instructional strategies that are responsive to student learning, some of the research that underpinned our strategies and an outline of some of our learning along the way.

Rowe(2003)argued that studies have consistently shown that in order to bring about change, “what really matters in affecting students’ experiences and outcomes of schooling, [is] teacher quality”. Hattie(2003) who has researched the major sources of variance in student learning concluded that students themselves account for 50% of the variance, home for 5-10%, schools 5-10%, peer effects 5 – 10% and teachers accounting for about 30% of the variance found in student learning.

With these effect sizes in mind, it would appear that schools have little influence over the largest variance, that of students themselves. Instead what they do have direct influence over is building the instructional capacity of their staff and with an effect size of 30%, it is a significant variance that needs to be addressed.

Fullan, Hill and Crevola (2006) outlined their beliefs about learning concluding that “all students can achieve high standards, given significant time and support. All teachers can teach to high standards, given the right conditions and assistance. …Teachers need to learn all the time and they need to be able to articulate both what they do and why they do it”. In order to achieve this they proposed a model where the core components are personalisation, precision and professional learning.

In addition, Richard Elmore (2008), an esteemed professor at Harvard, who has been advising the Victorian Education sector for the past few years, contended that there are only three ways that you can increase learning and performance: increase the knowledge and skill of teachers, change the learning content and alter the relationship of the student to the teacher and the content. His point being that you can’t change one without the other and that in order to develop the skill and knowledge of teachers, you have to move to a more high level curriculum that one might perhaps describe as a curriculum based on rich tasks that seek to challenge and engage students.

As leaders of the school, it is our role to ensure that the conditions exist so that our teachers can learn continuously and become better at articulating what they are doing and why they are doing it so that their focus will be on learning. Fullan et al’s. (2006) core components of personalised learning and precision, underpinned by professional learning we believe, can be supported though the use of student protocols and walkthroughs. Using Student Work Protocols certainly provides the environment where teachers can discuss and seek to answer the critical questions about curriculum and quality instruction and what constitutes quality work. Similarly in walking through their school, a Principal can pose the same sort of questions about what quality instruction looks like in a whole school sense.

***A Commitment to Professional Learning***

While this paper will discuss the two practices of walkthroughs and student work protocols, the reader should not be mistaken that these were the only strategies put in place to address the instructional capacity of staff. For strategically, there was a large commitment of the annual budget set aside for staff professional learning. Professional learning that was largely in-house and that addressed the curriculum needs identified by student achievement data and anecdotal observations of staff. At the time, perhaps we underestimated the changes that were required by members of our staff in order to build instructional capacity. However we marched bravely on.

Elmore (2007) posits that what is required in schools is strong normative structures for practice. His point is that schools should not rely on the few members of staff who are enthusiastic and pre disposed to learning but rather, they should put in place strong structures that are multi-faceted designed to bring about the instructional change that is required. We began by establishing long term relationships with esteemed educators highly regarded in their fields in Victoria. We were determined not to continue in the mould of short, loosely connected in-service education that had for so long been the main source of professional learning across school sectors. We brought in our educators and connected them to the schools asking them to model instruction in classrooms, work with staff in professional learning seminars and plan with teams of teachers for better learning. What wasn’t happening in the early stages was any discussion around the quality of instruction or the degree of learning (value added) being exhibited by the students being taught. We were still very much focussed on the ‘what’ and not the ‘how’.

It wasn’t until the first of the Blueprint reform agendas (Training, 2003) in the Victorian context that began to pay attention to the principles of learning and teaching that we also began to dialogue around this issue. Instead of adopting the Blueprint principles without question, we developed our own. In working on our own principles, we began to take ownership and discuss the ‘normative structures for practice’ appropriate for our school.

***Principal Led Walkthroughs***

It was at this point that we searched for a process that would enable us to ensure that these principles were being implemented in our classrooms. We began our Principal led walkthroughs.

The literature on Walkthroughs is diverse. Walkthroughs have a variety of names and variations. Whether called ‘classroom walkthroughs’, Principal led walkthroughs’, ‘walkthroughs’, ‘learning walks’ or somewhat facetiously ‘management by walking around’, they all involve the Principal and other leaders/teachers in the school taking a few minutes and walking through their teachers’ classes on a regular basis.

Pitler and Goodwyn (2008) argue that walkthroughs are a means by which a Principal can spend just minutes in classrooms and obtain a feel for the quality of instruction taking place. They quote a study where college students, asked to watch just seconds of soundless video tapes of Harvard professors in action, were able to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of instruction of those same professors. Amazingly, their conclusions agreed with the evaluations returned by students who actually took the classes offered by those same professors. So, it appears that in just a matter of seconds, the students in the study were able to provide a fairly accurate assessment of the Professor’s effectiveness. With this research in mind, one has to then pose the question, is it possible to gain an accurate picture of what is going on in a school and/or classroom in a similarly short period of time? Walkthroughs rely on just that premise!

Blatt, Linsley and Smith (2005)suggested that walkthroughs are a means by which data can be gathered about teacher practice and student learning and that they (walkthroughs) quickly become a critical component of a schools’ commitment to improve student learning. The walkthrough process outlined in these authors’ research involves the staff constructing a focus question prior to beginning the walkthrough so that their observations are then targeted towards finding data to help answer the question.

Cervone and Martinez-Miller (2007) take the practice of asking focus questions one further step and suggest that when the question comes from the very teachers being observed and joining in on the walkthroughs then the desire to become better teachers is at the centre. Thus posing questions or dilemmas that then become the purpose of the walkthrough heightens the active involvement and therefore the likelihood of a positive outcome. Further, they argue that the learning that results from a walkthrough is increased through the teacher conversations that result.

“Through conversations with colleagues, focussed talk about individual participation in productive professional conversations increases the capacity of the group to be a professional learning community – a safe place t ask hard questions about the links between results, content and teacher practices. Finally the walkthrough protocol is a tool that a learning community can use to deepen its collective understanding of instruction moving beyond identifying and ‘fixing’ problems to identifying and enhancing student mastery of content and skills”.

***What we looked for***

During our initial walkthroughs we searched for elements of our principles of learning and teaching such as ‘teachers put clear scaffolds and structures in place to support students’ thinking and learning’. We had ten principles of learning and teaching that we, as a staff, considered important. Each time we walked through we targeted one or two of our principles of teaching and learning. Ownership was already in place as the staff had co-constructed these principles and were in the process of implementing them in all areas of their instructional practice. Prior to each walkthrough, we published to all staff, the focus prior to visiting their rooms. We stayed only a short time in each room and we made notes to assist us with our memory of what was seen.

Our version of the walkthrough, like the one outlined by Blatt (2005) is non-evaluative and is designed to collect data that is useful for whole school development and not necessarily individual teacher development. Our experiences have reflected that of much of the research, that the important parts of the walkthrough, are not the practice itself, although that is the informative part for those attending, but it is the conversations that follow, that lead to the real learning.

Our experience is that trust is so very important. Even if you think you have made it clear that the walkthrough is not an evaluative process, there will be some staff who will still assume that you are there to judge their teaching. In order to walk regularly through all your teachers rooms, trust must be built. We made the mistake early on of walking into a graduate teachers’ class without allowing them enough of a breathing space to establish themselves in a new setting and with new practices. We know now that even two years on from our early walkthroughs there are members of our experienced staff who still cringe at the thought of Principals and other staff members walking through their classes and watching them teach. Elmore (2007)calls this the de-privatisation of teaching effect. Opening up teachers’ practice, not only to their peers, but to school leaders as well presents a significant challenge for many.

***After the Walkthrough…***

Following a walkthrough we use a Staff Meeting to share some of the insights we gained. Sometimes we give this feedback using the co-operative learning ‘fishbowl’ strategy where our staff are seated in a circle surrounding the staff that have been on the walkthrough. The walkthrough staff then proceed to have a conversation around what they observed. Sometimes our staff are asked to listen and other times, we invite reflections from them. We have also used digital photos and short video clips (with permission of the class teacher in whose room the video was filmed) to illustrate aspects that we saw that supported the norm we were looking for. Feedback is always focussed on the principle of learning and teaching we set out to observe. As trust is so important to the success of this strategy, to give feedback about practices that were not on the agenda would devalue the effect.

The feedback and the resulting conversations amongst staff are the critical part of the process as it is only through these conversations and individual reflection that increased instructional capacity can result. We have found that it is important to pose the question to our teachers –‘What does this feedback mean for you and your personal practice?’ in order for staff to personalise the feedback offered. We continue to learn about the need to be more and more explicit in what we expect of teachers and in how we get them to try and make connections between their own practice and the feedback they are being given.

***The Question of Consistency***

When we began our walkthroughs, we started looking for certain visual elements in classrooms that would signify to us that the teacher’s practice in that classroom was in alignment with our expectation as outlined in our processes of teaching and learning. We saw similar charts on walls and saw this as representative of continuity between classroom practices. As Hill and Crevola (1997) pointed out in their early research into Literacy practices in Victoria in the 1990’s, there is greater variation between classes in the same school than between schools. Initially we saw it as a positive sign to see similar practices evident in classrooms however more recently still, a dilemma has arisen around the question of ‘sameness’. Is similarity too much like replication and should we be looking for something deeper than surface elements such as consistent charts and weekly goals? Is it that we should be looking for teachers displaying ‘mindfulness’ as opposed to ‘sameness’?

Fullan, Hill et al. (2006)call this dilemma, one of replication rather than mindfulness, ‘the prescription trap’ suggesting that if external performance standards do not get inside classrooms then schools and teachers are left to their own devices and provide inconsistent results. Fullan (2008)expanded on the idea of ‘mindfulness’ when discussing the difference between a number of manufacturing organisations. He claimed that the level of understanding evident in Toyota’s workers implied an “intentional mindfulness as opposed to a “mindless conforming”. Further, he suggested that principals need to foster relentless consistency in their determination for quality research based practices to be implemented in their schools and to ensure that there is a high value placed on teacher understanding, problem solving and creativity as in the case with Toyota. Our goal is to ensure consistency between classrooms in the school through clearly understood practices implemented by teachers in those classes. Cervone (2007), also illustrates this idea contending that

“While we are comprehensive in our efforts to ensure teachers are ‘doing it right’ and delivering curriculum programs with fidelity, we have no formal method of ensuring we are ‘doing the right thing’ by reflecting on how students are understanding and embracing both the content and skills we want them to have”.

Perhaps this means that our teachers require more feedback on their teaching delivery specifically taking into account the feedback that comes from analysing the learning demonstrated by their students rather than the more simplified feedback from a walkthrough where visual illustrations were often regarded as evidence of consistent delivery. As well, they need the relentless leadership of a Principal who is uncompromising on the instructional delivery expected in their school.

A discussion with our staff following a recent walkthrough tackled the difference between a mindful approach and one that sought to replicate. This dilemma here is a ‘cart before a horse’ question. Is it that for all teachers, they need to fully understand before they can ‘do’ the practice? Surly we train many an apprentice teacher to watch and then replicate many times before they truly understand the theoretical underpinnings of the practice. In coaching, a coach may model how something is done and then watch and give feedback allowing the practitioner to develop their expertise in the area in which they are being coached. Again without the discussion that follows a walkthrough, the feedback may not in itself promote the reflections and understandings that change practice and improve instruction. There are still further steps; a requirement of an intentional commitment by staff to pursue instructional change and the relentless principal Fullan (2008)so vividly describes.

Teachers do want feedback from their peers and their leaders however feedback is challenging for those who seek it as well as those whose task it is to deliver it. It is not always as simple as posing the question – ‘Am I doing it right?” If there were an easy answer to this question, we would be able to prescribe and say this is the way it should be done. It is the author’s opinion that this is a reason why so many ‘programs’ implemented in schools ultimately fail, or work for a while successfully and then fail or work while the person whose passion the program was is present at the school but once that person leaves, the program also dies. Prescription can be useful in the short term but ultimately it doesn’t deal with instructional transformation. In some cases, argue Fullan et al. (2006)it can lead to short term gains but does not address the deep changes required of teachers in the 21st century. In other words what we get is teachers who follow the script but fall short of fully understanding why they are doing what they are doing – they lack the mindful response.

So perhaps the role of the ‘relentless principal’ at this point is to re-direct teachers back to the core question, ‘Why do we do what we do’?, to ensure a mindful approach to instruction and not a prescriptive one.

***Implementing the use of Student Work Protocols***

In order for our staff to develop better shared understanding of the work their students were doing, we began to train them in the use of ‘Student Work Protocols’. Student work Protocols emerged from the work of the ‘Evidence Project’ developed by the Harvard Project Zero team. Members of the evidence project team saw the development of protocols as an opportunity to “organise time and space so that teachers could interweave individual inquiry with collegial conversations about teaching and learning” (Little et al., 2003).

***What are protocols and why use them?***

Allen and Blythe (2004) intimate that protocols are ‘structures that enable educators and, sometimes, others to look carefully and collaboratively at student and teacher work in order to learn from it”. Protocols have several things in common. They provide the structure for the learning conversations and ensure that those participating take on different roles eg facilitator and presenter of student work. We developed some expertise in the use of these protocols and the facilitator’s role that was required by practising the protocols with our leadership team members. The protocol that we utilized was the Atlas tuning protocol. (Buchovecky and Thompson-Grove, 2000)

Cushman (1996) points out that the use of student work protocols can help bring teachers out of the isolation that has been typically associated with the profession. Protocols provide a vehicle for teachers to discuss together their students’ work and what they observe in it. Typically a protocol begins by asking the teachers to describe what they see in the work they are looking at. Having teachers simply describe what is evident in the work is extraordinarily difficult. Teachers look at a piece of student writing and without even realising it begin to make judgements about the neatness of the handwriting, the content or the use of language the student shows. The scripted conversation then moves past simply describing and on to interpreting the understanding demonstrated by the student through their work. The conversation is brought to a conclusion by looking at the implications for classroom practice. Again, discussion of this kind requires the same levels of trust we spoke of earlier that were required for feedback on the walkthrough strategy. Further still, an intentional commitment by teachers to implement the suggested classroom practice is implicit.

***Talking about Student Work***

Looking at student work one could argue is the lifeblood of a teacher’s work. Little, Gearhart, Curry and Kafka (2003)asserted that “teachers examine artefacts produced by students all the time. They read, review, grade, and celebrate student work every day. However, they do so most often on their own, possibly in conference with a student or parent, but almost always in isolation.” Working in isolation makes it difficult for schools to achieve the collegiality that Barth suggests are indicative of a healthy school. They claimed that there are several conditions to look for: adults talking about their practice, adults observing each other engaged in practice, adults engaged in working on curriculum, planning, designing researching and evaluating curriculum together and adults teaching each other what they know about teaching and learning.

Student work protocols can assist leaders to create the healthy school they crave. They provide the medium for adults to talk about their practice and teaching and learning. Barth(1990) goes on to suggest that where collegiality exists, that staff morale and trust can be enhanced energy sustained and motivation and achievement of students can rise. What Barth calls ‘isolation’ and Elmore(2007), ‘de-privatisation’ is the all too common theme. Whether it is about opening your classroom and therefore your practice to the scrutiny or others, Principals and colleagues or whether it is opening your students’ work up to the same kind of scrutiny through a student work protocol, the issue for many staff is the same – no longer isolated.

We know the power of collegial conversation. Not only has that collegial conversation the possibility of changing instructional practice through reflecting on challenging feedback but conversation by its nature, cannot take place in isolation and the research is clear – teacher isolation needs to be overcome, and feedback acted upon if instructional capacity is to be increased.

Student work protocols have several advantages. Little, Gearhart et al. (2003) suggest that the structure that a protocol can provide is designed to slow down the automatic responses of those engaged in the discussion. They impose norms of conversation that require the participants to listen to and respond to their colleagues points of view that can provide challenging feedback to the participants. One difficulty we have observed can be in the skill required by the facilitator to summarise and keep the discussion flowing, to know when enough time has been devoted to a particular section of the protocol. Discussions that take place with a skilled facilitator can lead to much greater insight than those with someone less practised. Protocols when well used can provide a safe venue for difficult questions to be raised and challenging feedback to be given.

A further use of protocols can be in providing the venue for teachers to discuss what examples of work constitute proficient work, set standards, establish learning goals for the students’ further work and gain feedback on their own teaching through looking at the achievements of their students. Discussing student work with teacher peers can also provide a safe and supportive environment in which teachers can receive important feedback on their instruction. Our experiences indicate that teachers have too little time to discuss whether a piece of work is proficient or not and what is required for proficiency both in a teaching capacity as well as in work completed by students. In addition, these discussions can provide teachers with a venue to reflect on standards. Cushman further suggests that student work provides “a valuable mirror of how the school’s practice does or does not reflect its intentions”.

***Our Learning so far…***

So we have two strategies, both designed to provide different elements of feedback to our teachers. The first, a walkthrough addresses selected questions of practice for observation and collective, focussed feedback is the result. The second strategy is in the hands of the teachers themselves. The feedback comes from the students in their work and from teacher colleagues as they ponder what messages each piece of work holds for the practitioner as they plan the next learning for the students and as they reflect on the success of their previous teaching through the achievements of the students in their work.

Our original hypotheses were that through the use of these two practices, we would build teacher capacity and work towards greater personalisation of student work. As school leaders, what have we learned? We have learned that it is not the practices themselves that make the change, for that lies within the teachers themselves. Instead the practices are instrumental in providing opportunity for structured critical reflection, both as individual practitioners and as a whole staff. We have learned that as leaders, we cannot leave these conversations to chance. We must ask the questions of ourselves and each other about our instruction and whether it is meeting the personalised needs of our students as well as whether it is reflective of the goal of the school, or in our case, our chosen teaching and learning principles. As leaders, we need to give many opportunities to unpack our practice and learn from each other through conversation, through observing each others’ work and through de-privatising our profession.

If we want teachers to become mindful practitioners our teachers need time to discuss with their colleagues, time to mull over the successes of their teaching and to receive feedback in a variety of ways and from multiple sources. If we put these conditions in place, then our goal of improved instructional practice and greater personalisation of learning may be realised.

Our selection of two processes, both requiring teachers to let others ‘tramp’ through their classrooms as well as their students’ work make evident the need for our profession to hurriedly consider the need for us to de-privatise our practice. The processes require school leaders to ensure that they focus on developing a high level of trust in their organisation. As well, we have learned that as leaders, we need to be relentlessly focussed on ensuring that effective practices are implemented by our teachers in our schools. We learned also that as leaders we need to be regularly seen in our classrooms and participating in looking at the work our students are producing. Lastly we have learned not to leave things to chance, an intentional commitment from teachers for instructional improvement is a requirement and should be part of the cycle along the way. Without this how can we address Richard Elmore’s (2008) prophetic warning; “if you can’t see it in the classroom, it’s not there”.

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