

Using assessment data and feedback to improve instructional practice

Mark Walker, Principal Elsternwick Primary School & Sarah Salter, Assistant Principal

Presenters Information

Mark Walker is the Principal of Elsternwick Primary School. He has worked in public education for over 35 years in a variety of roles and has been a principal for over 15 years in three different communities. He has studied here in Victoria and overseas and is currently completing a Master of Education at Monash University. He has presented at regional, state-wide and international conferences on school leadership and shares his work on his blog:

www.mwalker.com.au

Sarah Salter is the Vice Principal of Elsternwick Primary School has worked in public schools for over 25 years in a number of schools. Sarah is passionate about student and teacher learning and has co-presented with Mark Walker at an international conference in 2008.

Synopsis

The challenge facing principals all over the world is to improve student learning outcomes by strengthening teacher instructional capacity. Our work in supporting teacher learning is built on a web of simultaneously strategies which include teacher dialogue about student work protocols, learning walk feedback, the use of assessment for learning data and coaching. All of these are needed so that instruction can be more effective. Teacher inquiry into effective instructional strategies needs to deepen beyond what is taught and the way it is taught to how it is taught, for as Elmore posits: “If you can’t see it in the classroom it’s not there”.

ABSTRACT

The challenge facing principals all over the world is to improve student learning outcomes by strengthening teacher instructional capacity. Our work in supporting teacher learning is complex and challenging and is built on a web of simultaneously strategies. Strategies include teacher dialogue about curriculum planning, student work protocols, learning walk feedback as well as the use of assessment for learning data and coaching. All of these are needed so that instruction can be more effective. Our journey is not over; the web of strategies is now being extended to include professional learning teams across year levels. Teacher inquiry into effective instructional strategies needs to deepen beyond what is taught and the way it is taught to how it is taught, for as Elmore posits: “If you can’t see it in the classroom it’s not there”.

WHAT’S PREVIOUSLY HAPPENED: The Broad Context?

We have sometimes heard fellow principals speaking of instructional capacity as though it were easily accomplished with the throwaway line ‘it’s not rocket science’! To say that instructional improvement is easy, is contrary to our experience, and the further we go with our work, the more layers we peel away thus exposing the enormous complexity associated with building instructional improvement.

The analogy of aligning rocket science to building instructional capacity is not lost on us however, as the majority of our staff, along with ourselves, recall well, the space race of the 60’s and early 70’s and the incredible leaps in scientific knowledge and human achievement that occurred as a result. Marzano (2000) suggested that during this time in our history, the emphasis in educational research was on curriculum advances as opposed to the measure of teacher instructional effectiveness. When student achievement was in question, the solution was to be found in curriculum modification rather than questioning the instructional ability of the teacher him/herself.

Marzano (2000) suggested that teachers trained in this era had the importance of “subject matter knowledge affirmed” (p.71) as countries were engaged in the ‘race to the moon’. While ‘experts’ were engaged to write basic curricula, the implementation of it was left largely to the teacher in his/her own classroom. What eventuated was a range of approaches based on the same original curriculum - almost as many approaches as there were staff in a school. There was limited monitoring and teachers were left largely to their own devices. Thus, teachers developed as ‘kings of their own castles’ and within the four walls of their classrooms had absolute autonomy.

Marzano (2000) continued arguing that with the dawning of the 80’s came the new point of view suggesting that instructional capacity was a “phenomenon in its own right instead as a component of curriculum” (p.72). But the problem was how to improve the instructional capacity of such a band of autonomous teachers, used to working behind the closed doors of their classrooms and having few, if any, conversations with colleagues regarding their instruction. We have come to the conclusion that for some teachers trained in that era of the late 60’s and 70’s and still practising today, the shift to examine and make public their instructional practice as well as to focus on curriculum content remains a significant challenge. Our job however, is to overcome this.

Many researchers such as Hattie (2003), Fullan, Hill & Crevola (2006), Rowe (2003) contend that building teacher instructional capacity is a key factor in improving student learning. A set of 6 principles of learning and teaching (POLT) was designed by the Department of Education (2004) to support teachers improve their instruction. These principles have informed much of the work around teacher instruction in the Victorian context.

Our work on building instructional capacity started just three years ago and was in part driven by staff survey results which showed inconsistent teacher philosophies about learning. We

began by choosing two particular strategies: Student Work Protocols and Principal led Learning Walks, Salter and Walker (2008) to lead teacher conversation on what we considered to be sound instruction principles as well as what constituted quality student work.

The years preceding the adoption of these two strategies had seen us devote much time to teams of teachers planning a curriculum together. However as Elmore (2008) argued, you have to simultaneously work on three levels to improve student performance: increase the knowledge and skills of the teacher, change the learning content , which we suggest is the team curriculum planning, and alter the relationship of the student to the teacher and the content.

Our use of the Atlas Tuning Protocols Buchovecky and Thompson-Grove (2000) and teacher feedback after learning walks informed our ongoing work that you cannot leave these reflective teacher conversations about instruction to chance. If we want our teachers to become ‘mindful practitioners’ as Fullan, (2008) suggests, then we must continue to structure opportunities for mindful conversation.

Our experience has been that the use of Protocols and Learning Walks together with team planning where not proving sufficient to change the instructional practice of our staff. We needed to broaden our array of strategies. This paper describes two further strategies we have implemented to build instructional capacity: coaching in classrooms and training teachers to collect and use data to better inform their instruction. The paper will also comment on the importance of leadership throughout this journey.

Student Writing and Coaching

The Year 5 and 6 teachers had been collecting samples of student writing and using the student work protocols to structure their conversation in order to ascertain what the students could do and, more importantly, what they needed to learn next. The teacher conversations

were found to be almost entirely focused around the surface structures of writing. Learning Walk feedback confirmed this. Van Nostrand, Pettigrew and Shaw (1980) contended that writing instruction is complex “requir[ing] the students to generate substance and to frame it” (p.124). Teachers themselves pinpointed their lack of instructional expertise and ability to address the deeper aspects of student writing.

It was at this point that the leadership team made some recommendations concerning the need for teachers to be coached in different instructional strategies. Joyce and Showers, (1996) in their influential research into professional learning recommended that the study of teaching and curriculum must be the focus of peer coaching. Our teachers needed to develop a greater knowledge not just of the craft of teaching, but more importantly of the depth with which they needed to work with their students to develop them as writers who truly mastered the art of writing in the many genres studied.

An author of this paper modelled a series of writing workshops in classrooms focused around exploring aspects of the narrative writing form and how students could find their ‘voice’ as writers. Sheehy, (2003) suggested that “writing develops out of uncertainty, and certainty developed out of writing”(p.369). The author found that it was critical for children to wrestle with character development for example when exploring the narrative form in order to reach this state of uncertainty that Sheehy so vividly describes. Further to this the author found that verbalising that uncertainty was important for students to hear.

Following the modelling, the class teachers then chose an aspect of character development and committed to practising that lesson with several groups of students. Teachers met after these lessons and talked about their reflections on their instruction and any indicators of student progress. These ‘teacher led discussions’ were helping as Wagner (2003), submits, ‘to develop a clearer picture of what good teaching looked liked’. The effects of these

workshops and lessons are still evident today when teachers during professional performance reviews both talk about how their instruction in writing has improved and point out improved student results.

Prep Planning and Coaching

The second example of the use of coaching in classrooms to strengthen teacher instructional capacity occurred in our Year Prep classrooms. To set the context for this example our walkthrough feedback had identified inconsistent or different practices in reading and writing workshops between classrooms in this year level. Teacher discussion about this feedback showed that the staff had different understandings about the purpose of particular instructional tools and strategies: i.e. word walls and that team planning lacked clarity on the purpose of each lesson. We contracted an educator to work with the team in changing its planning model and coach two members in the use of particular literacy strategies.

The coach observed the teachers during literacy workshops and the feedback and subsequent teacher conversation indicated that most teachers were trying to teach too many concepts at one time and that their feedback to students during the lesson often lacked connection back to the initial lesson focus. Marzano (2003) suggested that the setting of clear learning goals is not always straightforward as the content often has many potential elements i.e. the terms we use, sequences in the skills or the associated facts we think are important.

Our coach put forward the view that often students were confused about the lesson focus with some, usually those who were behind the general expected standards, totally lost. Our student achievement data supported this observation. The data showed that those students not reaching expected standards were not making the same level of progress as the other students in the class. This provided the stimulus for the team to change their lesson plans and make explicit in the plan and to the students at the start of each lesson the main teaching focus and what was expected of them at the end of the lesson. The level of detailed planning increased

and their instruction became more focused. Teacher feedback to students was strictly linked to the explicit focus of the lesson, was specific and more manageable and as Hattie (2003) found became a powerful influence on student achievement. As a result of this process teacher skill improved as well as student results.

The Impact of Leadership

Many principals and school leaders continue to dispute the viability of instructional leadership Leithwood (1990) suggested that even those “who acknowledge the responsibilities for teacher development often claim that it’s not a function they feel capable of performing well” (p.72).

Like Steiny (2009) we found some resistance from teachers as we left our offices and entered into classrooms. The fear of ‘inspection’ dominated most teachers’ minds as we entered classrooms on learning walks. Teachers would often stop instruction when we entered classrooms.

We have found that the most productive part of the learning happens at the end of the learning walk when the group of teachers discuss the details of what was observed. Our feedback strategies to teachers still need to develop so that they are more immediate and tied into the schools’ professional learning program. Often we have waited until the next staff meeting to share our learning when a letter or series of photos with captions via email would provide more immediate feedback that teachers can use the next day in classrooms.

We also understand through our experience that the challenges of instructional leadership, in the context of the movement towards self management of schools, are significant (Townsend, 1997).

Instructional leadership from an office is impossible and the pressures associated with managing the schools financial, infrastructure systems and dealing with parent concerns are

significant particularly when under resourced. Last year we were involved in a major construction project involving rebuilding 60% of all classrooms and understand the tussle between counting power points in buildings and being in classrooms as a leader modelling, discussing or observing instruction.

Dufour (2001) argued that “the single most effective way in which principals can function as staff development leaders is by providing a school context that fosters job-embedded professional development”(p15) The two examples of our work in this paper show DuFour’s view of job embedded professional learning in action.

The Use of Assessment Data

Using student work protocols enabled teachers to structure their conversation and focus on what instruction was required in order to move that student’s learning forward. This represented a change in our school culture from simply moderating student work to make judgements, to a more focused and engaged discussion on the next most appropriate instruction steps. However the protocols were not sufficient in themselves and we found the need for other assessment for learning data that teachers could use to make instructional decisions. The collection and analysis of further assessment for learning was the next part of our journey.

In 2009 we choose two different assessment instruments for teachers to use: the online maths interview (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009) for Year Prep to Four students and the Words Their Way Diagnostic Spelling Inventories, (Bear, Invernizzi, Templetor, & Johnston, 2008) for students from Year One to Year Six. To briefly explain the context, spelling had been identified by teachers through the national assessment plan for literacy and numeracy [NAPLAN] (Ministerial Council on Education, 2009) results as an area for improvement. Our network of schools’ results in mathematics in the same test was

not as strong as our literacy results hence the online interview to collect baseline mathematics data.

Both assessment instruments were new to most teachers and required additional resources to implement. For us, those additional resources included deploying additional staff to conduct the online mathematics interviews or release class teachers to do the same and scheduling whole staff professional learning sessions to learn how to interpret the data. This strategic resource provider role and the focus on curriculum and instruction are some of the characteristics of an instructional leader (Smith & Andrews, 1989).

We were, as Dufour (2001) urged, striving to set the context for a collaborative culture of professional learning by providing individuals and teams of teachers with valid assessment data of their student performance so they could improve the effectiveness of their instruction. Chappuis, Chappuis and Stiggins (2009) suggested that it is critical to the professional learning of teachers that there is provision of time after the data interpretation workshop in order to discuss the results and practice their intended actions. This level of professional interaction is designed to occur in team meetings. As principal class officers, one of our roles has been to support and attend these meeting, where able and participate in discussion.

After using the data to inform what to teach and how to group students we have found that the biggest challenge still remains that being how best to teach it. Marzano, Pickering and Pollock (2001) contend that there are nine instructional strategies that have the strongest effect on student achievement e.g. identifying similarities and differences, summarizing and note taking; our goal is to continue our work with teachers in their collaborative learning teams as well as our coaching program to enable our staff to be more effective users of such strategies in order to improve student learning.

Conclusion

As leaders we have extended our web of strategies i.e. student work protocols, teacher feedback from learning walks to now include coaching and the use of other assessment for learning data to support teachers in building their instructional capacity. These combined strategies when used simultaneously have been effective in the overall improvement of teacher's instructional skills particularly around lesson design and feedback. This multifaceted approach has been most effective for teachers trained or retrained since the era dominated by improvement solely through curriculum design. During our professional reviews of teachers they now regularly point to improved student learning.

What our work has revealed is that we need to add to the web of improvement strategies professional learning teams which may occur across year level so that we can deepen our understanding and practice of effective instructional strategies. The work of principals is to develop a culture of inquiry through professional learning teams, Dufour (2001), DuFour and Marzano (2009), Chappuis, Chappuis and Stiggins (2009). We contend that the use of professional learning teams should occur simultaneously with coaching, use of data, student work protocols, and learning walk feedback to assist our teachers to focus on instruction.

In Victoria, teachers will be supported by an instructional model called E⁵ which has just been released by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2009) This model together with the web of strategies mentioned above which now includes professional learning teams will be the core of our future work.

Each schools journey towards building instructional capacity which as Fullan (2008) suggested is fundamental to improving student learning, may have a different starting. The experiences gained on our journey suggest that we must make links, as a spider does in its web, by using a range of multifaceted strategies. Principals must be active in professional

learning with staff and in gathering feedback from classrooms if instruction is to become more effective for as Elmore (2008) said “If you can’t see it in the classroom it isn’t there”.

References

- Bear, D. R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2008).** *Words Their Way Diagnostic Spelling Inventories* (4th ed.). Columbus Ohio: Pearson - Prentice Hall.
- Buchovecky, E., & Thompson-Grove, G. (2000).** Atlas - Learning from Student Work, 2008, from http://wwwnsrfharmony.org/protocol/doc/atlas_lfsw.pdf

- Chappuis, S., Chappuis, J., & Stiggins, R. (2009). Supporting Teacher Learning Teams. *Educational leadership*, 66(5), 56 - 60.
- Development, D. o. E. a. E. C. (2009). *E⁵*. East Melbourne: Office for Government School Education.
- Development, D. o. E. a. E. C. (2009, April 15th 2009). Mathematics Online Interview 2. from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingresources/maths/assessment.htm#2>
- DuFour, R. (2001). In the Right Context: *The effective leaders concentrates on a foundation of programs, procedures, beliefs, expectations and habits.* . *Journal of Staff Development*, Winter, 14 -17.
- DuFour, R., & Marzano, R. (2009). High-Leverage Strategies for Principal Leadership. *Educational Leadership*, 66(5), 62 - 68.
- Education, D. o. (2004). The Principles of Learning and Teaching P - 12 A Background Paper, from <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingprinciples/background/default.htm>
- Elmore, R. (2008). The (only) three ways to improve performance in schools Retrieved 12-09-2008, 2008, from <http://www.uknow.gse.harvard.edu/leadership/leadership001a.html>
- Fullan, M. (2008). *What's Worth Fighting For in the Principalship* (2nd ed.). New York: Teacher's College Press.
- Fullan, M., Hill, P., & Crevola, C. (2006). *Breakthrough*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press.
- Hattie, J. (2003). *Teachers Make a Difference What is the Research Evidence?* Paper presented at the Australian Council for educational research, conference.
- Leithwood, K. A. (1990). The Principal's Role in Teacher Development. *Changing School Culture Through Staff Development*, 71 - 90.
- Marzano, R. (2000). 20th Century Advances in Instruction. *ASCD Year Book 2000 Education in a New Era.*, 246.
- Marzano, R. (2003). *What Works in Schools: Translating Research into Action*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Marzano, R., Pickering, D., & Pollock, J. (2001). *Classroom Instruction that Works: Research Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Ministerial Council on Education, E., Training and Youth Affairs (2009). from http://www.naplan.edu.au/home_page.html
- Rowe, K. (2003). *The Importance of Teacher Quality is a key to determining students' experiences and outcomes of schooling*. Paper presented at the Building Teacher Quality ACER Research Conference 2003, Melbourne.
- Salter, S., & Walker, M. (2008). *Leading Staff Renewal through Instructional Leadership Strategies of Looking at Student Work Protocols and Principal led Walkthroughs*. Paper presented at the 2008 ACEL Annual Conference: *New Metaphors for Leadership in Schools*.
- Sheehy, M. (July 2003). The Social Life of an Essay. Standardizing Forces in Writing. *Written Communication*, 20(3), 333 - 385.
- Smith, W., & Andrews, R. (1989). *Instructional Leadership: How Principals Make a Difference*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Steiny, J. (2009). Learning Walks: *Building Hearty Appetites for Professional Development*. *Journal of Staff Development*, 30(2), 31 - 36.
- Townsend, T. (1997). *Rhetoric, Reality and resources: the New 3'r for Victoria's Schools of the Future*. Paper presented at the The Tenth Annual International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement.
- Van Nostrand, A. D., Pettigrew, J., & Shaw, R. A. (1980). *Writing Instruction in the Elementary Grades: Deriving a Model by Collaborative Research*. Providence: Center for Research in Writing.
- Wagner, T. (2003). Reinventing America's Schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 84(9), 665-668.

