Why engage in improving teaching quality?

Ramon Dixon, BEd, MEd says that student performance is always linked with teachers’ abilities

"...the focus of every school, every educational system and every education department or faculty of education – should be student learning and achievement." Dinham, 2008

Until the mid-1960s the view was that schools made almost no difference to student achievement, which was largely pre-determined by socio-economic status, family circumstances and innate ability. However, research has powerfully refuted that view. We now know that teachers, teaching and schools make a significant difference to student success. As a result, there has been a major international emphasis on improving the quality of teachers and teaching since the 1980s.

Research shows that schools and teachers have very significant impact on students and their learning (Hattie, 2003). The influence schools and teachers have on the lives of students brings with it a duty and responsibility to continually strive to improve practice.


The Framework consists of eight interrelated domains. Each domain identifies an aspect of a school's day-to-day practices.

- An explicit improvement agenda
- Analysis and discussion of data
- A culture that promotes learning
- Targeted use of school resources
- An expert teaching team
- Systematic curriculum delivery
- Differentiated classroom learning
- Effective teaching practices

The focus for 2012 is seeing the school focus on the domain components and the relationships between them change. One of the important challenges for a model of effective teaching is to give expression to the evolving teacher. The model presented here could be viewed as a frame from a movie of a teacher's professional life with the relative significance of the components growing over time and in relation to the environment.

Internationally, there is unequivocal evidence that the quality of teaching is the most significant in-school factor affecting student outcomes. There is also strong evidence that better appraisal and feedback leading to targeted development can improve teacher performance. Yet according to the Gurrin Institute report, Better Teacher Appraisal and Feedback: Improving Performance, compiled by Ben Jensen, Australian teachers report that they do not always get the feedback they need to improve. In an OECD survey, 65% of Australian teachers report that appraisal of their work is largely done to fulfill administrative requirements. Schools should therefore aim to promote genuine professional conversations that improve teaching and learning. Schools that have established a strong learning and performance culture are moving schools. They are characterised by supportive and collaborative relationships. They take collective and personal responsibility for improving students’ learning and their teaching practice.

Teachers in such schools work and learn in teams, giving each other feedback, observing each other's teaching, and accepting feedback from colleagues, parents and their students. For continual school improvement, the emphasis needs to be placed on developing and maintaining quality teaching through professional growth with teachers engaging in student feedback, meaningful self-reflection and peer observation and feedback.

Schools should begin the development of a balanced scorecard with a discussion of what effective teaching looks like in

Figure 1: Performance Growth Model

- 100th percentile
- 90th percentile
- 60th percentile
- 50th percentile
- 40th percentile
- 30th percentile
- 20th percentile
- 10th percentile
- 1st percentile

Student with high-performing teacher
- Among the top 20% of teachers

Student with low-performing teacher
- Among the bottom 20% of teachers

Impact of teaching quality on student performance in the United States: 1996 (performance percentile)

The school improvement research has demonstrated the vital importance of teacher development in school improvement. There are consistent links showing that teacher development is inextricably linked with school development and is an essential part of school improvement (Hopkins, et al., 1994).

There is no one blueprint for action but approaches to improvement will vary across different types of schools, however the importance of focusing the attention at the student level and of improving teaching and learning conditions within the classroom has been emphasised (Hopkins and Jackson, 1997). A school culture that promotes collegiality, trust and collaborative working relationships and that focuses upon teaching and learning is more likely to be self-renewing and responsive to improvement efforts (Hopkins, 2000).

"There are wonderful things happening right across the hallway that I have no idea about because I'm in my own classroom." This statement would resonate with many teachers. Teachers can and often feel isolated, with limited opportunity to learn from their peers except through informal communications, teaching in the hallway, sharing lesson plans, connecting with staff at meetings or via email. But these strategies don't effectively allow teachers to share their wealth of experience, knowledge or diversity in techniques with others. A model that focuses on knowledge and skills with the demonstrated potential to improve teacher and student learning (Cuttance, 2001). A framework that allows teachers to observe each other and to provide constructive and meaningful feedback around teacher performance is required. Teachers, no matter what stage of their career they are at, need to be encouraged and supported to continually seek improvement and growth in their practice.

So rather than use the terminology of Performance Management or Enhancement, the school has adopted a Professional Growth model, as shown in Figure 1.

Teachers evolve over their life history and both the
Survey results
Initially, when the school's leadership team looked at the result it can be said that we were quite pleased in that the majority of the teachers said that they were happy with the effectiveness of their teaching. When the survey is further unpacked it became clear, however, that there are areas that need immediate improvement across the school for the teaching staff. The first area of concern is that 62% of the students said that their teachers are making the lessons engaging and interesting while acknowledging that their teachers are knowledgeable in the subject areas they teach (93%). Interpreting this, they are saying their teachers know the subject content but the lessons are not engaging or stimulating. This particular result was discussed at a whole staff meeting. At the completion of the discussion, staff generally accepted they needed to reflect on how they were delivering the subject knowledge and explore areas for their teaching practice that would improve the engagement of their students.
Self-reflection
What is most important about these results is that it begins the self-reflection process. Teachers now have some data from a reliable source (their students) about their perceived teaching practices. They can look at the data and ask themselves, for example "Am I making my lesson engaging and interesting?" and "If I'm not what can I do to improve this".
There is a significant body of literature on reflective practice and, concomitantly, on the concept of the teacher as a reflective practitioner. According to Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985), reflection is part of the process of learning and is a generic term for those intellectual and effective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation.
Peer observation
Peer observation in the classroom has been well recognised as a tool to improve teaching quality among teachers. It involves teachers observing and learning from other teachers. It is frequently conducted daily, weekly, biweekly during formal teaching and learning for some, teachers say that it improves teaching and learning and collegiality in schools. Classroom observations should focus on more than teaching since the objective of the class is to promote student learning, it is against this that teaching methods should be appraised. It is important that the observation focuses on teaching methods and their effect on student learning. Importantly, peer observation also encourages sharing of the teaching and learning experience more broadly across the school.
Kypriacos reported that "the vast majority of teachers said they found the classroom observation and subsequent discussion very useful. Most mentioned the experience as being very positive, affirming, and a valuable opportunity to get useful feedback from a colleague." Peer observation at Darwin Middle School is not about constraining teaching styles to a common form as there are many ways of teaching well and students enjoy being exposed to a range of different styles. It is aimed to:
- Strengthen and enhance the quality of teaching and learning by providing feedback to staff observed
- Help colleagues reflect on their teaching
- Provide opportunities for staff to learn from each other
- Assist with staff development and growth.
The guiding principle of peer observation should be that it is developmental and not judgemental.
Peer observation is "mutually owned" within a whole school approach to staff development and a culture of quality professional growth. Having teachers self-reflect on their practice, collaborate and provide effective appraisal and feedback through observation, provides a means for identifying the gap between the ideal and the reality; the ideal being where one wants to be with one's teaching as opposed to the reality of where one is presently.

Table 1: Darwin Middle School – Student Survey 2012 on Teacher Practices

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
<th>Agree %</th>
<th>Disagree %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Know students and how they learn</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers explain how new ideas relate to what we have previously learned</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers actively walk around the classroom and talk to students about their work</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know the content and how to teach it</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers are knowledgeable in the subject areas they teach</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers give clear instructions at the beginning of each lesson</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have enough materials and supplies to support our learning</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what I'm supposed to do in class and it is made clear why what we are learning is important</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plan and implement effective teaching and learning</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers set challenging yet achievable learning goals</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers make their lessons engaging and interesting</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers encourage students to problem solve and to think critically to further develop our knowledge</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create and maintain a safe learning environment</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers are very welcoming and care about the students in their class</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers provide a safe and orderly classroom environment where learning is the priority</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers explain how we are supposed to behave in class</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assess, provide feedback and report</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers give me feedback and comments that help improve my learning</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know how well I'm doing in class</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers make it clear to me how I am being assessed and what we need to concentrate on</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My teachers give us guidelines for assignments (rubric, charts, grading scales etc.) so we know how we will be graded</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Effective teacher appraisal and feedback requires school leaders to set clear objectives, develop explicit expectations of teachers and students, and identify and promote effective teaching.

In essence they are beginning to have a pre-observation and post-observation discussion. By doing this, it is hoped that the teacher being observed will begin to feel more comfortable by having another teacher in the classroom. Through this process, observers are encouraged to look at the teaching practices occurring in the classroom, both strengths and weaknesses, and offer some feedback or indeed pick up something that they may wish to try in their classrooms.

Leadership
The challenge for an educational leader is to make things happen within the classroom. School leaders must realise the major role they play in creating the conditions in which teachers can teach effectively and students can learn.

Leaders who create a stimulating, collaborative professional learning community, with shared vision and goals for learning, and a strong sense of teacher efficacy and collective responsibility; enhance teacher development and student success (Robinson, Hohepa & Lloyd, 2009).

Building the capacity of school leaders to improve student learning is essential. According to Fullan (2003) capacity-building is "about giving people the training, resources, and opportunities to pursue complex tasks and then to hold them accountable". By improving your leadership capacity you are essentially creating a strong leadership base that has a shared clear vision and direction for the school. As Zbar, Kimber and Marshall state in their paper, Getting the preconditions for school improvement in place: How to make it happen (2010), Strong leadership that is shared is the pre-condition of all preconditions for school improvement.

School leaders play a vital role in designing the system of teacher appraisal and feedback in their school. The evidence shows that the greatest impact comes from teacher appraisal that provides meaningful feedback. Effective teacher appraisal and feedback requires school leaders to set clear objectives, develop explicit expectations of teachers and students, and identify and promote effective teaching.

Darwin Middle School places teacher quality at the very centre of teaching. The school asserts that, in order to be effective, teachers need a deep understanding of their subject area, knowledge of how students learn specific subject matter and a range of strategies and practices that support student learning. The research also affirms that engaging teachers in high quality professional learning is the most successful way to improve teacher effectiveness (Elmore 2003).

Having a command of effective pedagogical practice puts paid to any lingering conceptions that teachers simply need good content knowledge, or simply need to be classroom adaptive. The importance of new pedagogical understanding is attributed in part to Shulman’s (1987) conception of ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ as encapsulating the essential knowledge base of the teacher. It is a case of knowing the content, knowing the context(s), and being literate and competent in joining these to good effect.

Conclusion
The importance of effective teaching in global, knowledge-based societies cannot be overstated. Teachers need in-depth knowledge of the subject areas they teach, how students learn that content and an understanding of classroom environments that optimise learning. They need access to ongoing, high quality professional learning opportunities to develop and enhance the necessary skills and understandings.

Investing in teacher professional growth is the key to ensuring that schools become learning communities where teachers work together, learn from each other and share best practice on effective teaching and learning.

The first necessity for school improvement is to drive down to the learning level. It has become increasingly apparent that unless school improvement strategies impact directly on teaching and learning then we are wasting our time.

Darwin Middle School recognises that creating powerful and effective learning experiences for students is the heartland of school improvement.

References
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