A culture of observation in the school

The school has long recognised the need to help teachers to improve their performance, with classroom observation as a central plank, and has worked to develop its approach for more than fifteen years.

In the first instance, the school established a small observation room with a two-way mirror in a larger classroom to enable volunteer teachers to watch each other teach. So positive and valued was the experience that it quickly spread, with the result that teachers at Dandenong North now regularly observe each other’s classes and visit one another without a second thought. Teachers, and for that matter students, are sufficiently comfortable with the presence of others that the principal has recently taken to capturing snippets of classroom practice on video to demonstrate particular effective teaching techniques for sharing with the whole of the staff.

The school’s approach to performance and development builds on the culture of observation it has developed, and includes a mix of immediate oral feedback from those who observe the teacher in class, followed by formal written feedback from the principal where a global assessment of classroom performance (using the categories unsatisfactory, good, very good and outstanding) is made. The positive effect of classroom observation and feedback on teacher performance is such that all teachers within the school have now been judged as very good or above.

This whole approach in turn is linked to the development of a teacher performance plan. A particularly noteworthy feature of the pro forma is the inclusion of an ‘aspirational plan for achieving continuous performance improvement in the literacy and/or numeracy goals’ as outlined in the school’s strategic and annual implementation plans.

With the agreement of staff, this aspirational statement specifies in all teacher plans that ‘on average, the students in my class will achieve a reading and/or numeracy improvement of 0.5 VELS levels (one VELS level in Prep) in the school year, apart from students funded through the D&I program or who are eligible as New Arrivals/ESL Transition attendees’.

The plan then specifies:

- expectations in relation to planning and professional learning, with the opportunity for teachers to rate themselves on a three-point scale and provide the evidence for the assessment they have made
- the teacher’s use of data to inform their teaching along with their use of technology
- wider school responsibilities the teacher undertakes, including an indication of the feedback they give and receive and their contribution to their team
- professional aspirations.
The school community has worked to develop its approach for more than fifteen years. Established a small observation room with a two-way mirror in a larger classroom where teachers initially volunteered to observe each other teach and provide feedback. This progressed to teachers regularly visiting and observing each others’ classes and discussing practice.

An early lesson was that the more complex the performance and development processes the more difficult they are to adhere to. Performance and development is a continually changing process and needs to evolve in line with the school context and experience, and staff feedback. Each year the performance and development process is reviewed and revised.

Coaching for efficacy

Welded on to the approach that is outlined, is a growing focus within the school on coaching for individual and collective efficacy so performance is spurred by the realisation that ‘I and we’ can make a difference for the students we teach.

The school is progressively training all leaders and teachers on how to coach others with whom they work, and mutual coaching in teams increasingly sits alongside the classroom observation as the key means for generating improvement in the school. There is active consideration in this context of working in groups of three (triads) as the means of conducting classroom observations, giving structured feedback and identifying problems of practice for collective action as a result. The school also is using a structured survey to gain student feedback⁴ to inform professional discussions in teams and the strategies that teachers use.

While the school has yet to determine a measure of efficacy with which it is fully comfortable, one approach it has used to promote discussion at least, is to ask the staff to line themselves up along an efficacy continuum, that is then recorded to monitor shifts from one year to the next.

A positive response

Discussions with both leaders and staff reveals that teachers support and are on board with the approach. This in large part reflects a strong belief in the school that we all ‘deserve feedback’ and it helps the quality of our work and contributes to job satisfaction as well. Coaching and classroom observation are described as going ‘hand in hand’ and teachers observe that, as one simply described it, ‘we get a good sense of how we are going, mainly from the team leader but also the coaches and the prin, as well as a lot of informal observation that happens every day’. As another added, ‘we are comfortable with sharing ideas and observing each other and then discussing what we observed in our teams’.

References


⁵This is the equivalent of a full year of growth in the Victorian Essential Learning Standards for students.

⁶The E5 model comprises the elements of Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate and Evaluate.

⁷The Feedback on Teaching and Learning Questionnaires developed by Certain Knowledge.

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Implementaiton

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