

# Observation and feedback

## Dandenong North Primary School, Victoria

Case study and materials connected to the video of effective existing performance and development practice

Dandenong North Primary School was established in 1956 in what is now the designated 'Hub Development' area of Greater Dandenong and enrolls a very high proportion of non-English speaking residents, including a significant and growing number of recently-arrived refugees. This Prep to Year 6 school has long achieved outstanding results, and in 2008 was included in a major study of high performing, high disadvantage Victorian government schools.<sup>1</sup>

### 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 others' 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)<sup>2</sup> 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.



### About

Dandenong North Primary School has long recognised the need to support teachers to improve their practice and a central component of their performance and development work is observation and feedback. Informal and formal observation and feedback informs teacher performance and development plans, supports coaching and collegiality, and improvements in professional practice.

### Questions for discussion

1. Have you identified what effective teaching looks like in your school context and with reference to the National Professional Standards for Teachers?
2. What protocols or procedures should be in place to use as a basis for carrying out classroom observations?
3. What processes and discussion should precede classroom observation?
4. How could your teaching benefit from receiving coaching or being a coach for others?

### School Context

**Dandenong North Primary School**

Dandenong, Victoria

**School type:** Government

**Stage of schooling:** Primary

**School location:** Metropolitan

The planning pro forma also includes: data gathering sheets on student assessments to support the learning-focused aspirational goals; the teacher's judgment of their own performance in relation to the elements of the E5 instructional model<sup>3</sup> used by the school; an overall performance assessment agreed between the relevant school leader and the teacher with the opportunity for the teacher to add comments of their own; and a teacher professional development pro forma to inform professional learning for the following year.

Prior to 2012, the principal and assistant principals conducted all formal review discussions. From this year, however, leading teachers and other team leaders are taking on more of a role. More specifically the principal will review the assistant principals and disability and integration coordinators, the assistant principals will review the leading teachers, team leaders will review the members of their own teams, and leading teachers will review any stand alone specialists who are not already covered as members of teams. This is designed to spread the load and ensure there is more consistent provision of feedback related to the different roles that teachers undertake in teams in the school.

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## 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 feedback<sup>4</sup> 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.

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## 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'.

## Implementation

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.

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## References

<sup>1</sup>V Zbar, R Kimber. & G Marshall 2008, How our best performing schools come out on top: An examination of eight high performing disadvantaged schools, Report commissioned by the Data and Evaluation Division, Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development.

<sup>2</sup>This is the equivalent of a full year of growth in the Victorian Essential Learning Standards for students.

<sup>3</sup>The E5 model comprises the elements of Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate and Evaluate.

<sup>4</sup>The Feedback on Teaching and Learning Questionnaires developed by Certain Knowledge.

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