

Stage teams and lesson study

Lakemba Public School, NSW

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

Lakemba Public School serves a culturally diverse mix of students at the junction of Wiley Park, Punchbowl, Belmore, Roselands and McCallum's Hill in the inner south west of Sydney. It is a culturally diverse area and more than 40 languages are spoken by families at the school. While the predominant group is Arabic, there is a growing number of Urdu, Bangladeshi, Hindi, African and Vietnamese students enrolling in the school. A School as Community Centre was established a number of years ago to support families with children from birth to eight years of age make a successful transition to school. The school experiences significant student mobility and its enrolments increased from around 350 six years ago to more than 400 today.

Generating Dense Conversations

Up to five or six years ago, the school's approach to the NSW Teacher Assessment and Review Schedule (TARS)¹ process was limited to a quick interview twice a year. It was haphazard and a need was identified to build a more comprehensive system to monitor and improve performance in the school linked to the teaching standards in New South Wales which, in 2013, are being replaced by the National Standards that Ministers have agreed. With this in mind, the school's leaders instituted a lot of 'dense conversation' around practice supported by a recently-retired principal who initially coached the principal and then the whole of the leadership team and increasingly staff.

National Partnerships money has been used to ensure that all four members of the executive group are off class and instead working to lead their teams, including observing their practice, ensuring the school plan is reflected in what happens in classrooms across the school, collecting and analysing data, and supporting cross-team reflection through a whole-school lesson study approach. The school is also starting to introduce learning walks as part of the ongoing development of an approach that is leading to more professional conversations amongst staff.

Each of the school's stage-related teams² meet for half a day each fortnight, with a slightly varied arrangement for specialists who aren't in stage teams, for professional learning linked to the school plan and the teaching standards which the staff collectively unpacked as a means of gaining a shared view of what effective teachers do. The learning undertaken is specifically tailored to what their data shows and/or to meeting identified team learning needs. While the time-off is supported by external funding, the approach is one that will be maintained even when funding has ceased, since in-school coaching and mentoring is the prime source of improvement in the school.

It is an approach which requires a lot of input and skill, but has proven successful because it builds capacity in collaborative ways and contributes to sharing in ways that spreads good practice through the school. It also crucially means that professional learning and data collection are seen as part of the work that teachers do, and not additional to it as sometimes is the case.



About

Over the last six years Lakemba Public School has worked assiduously to build on their performance and development processes, to build the professional capacity of the teachers and to improve student outcomes. In addition to utilising the services of a principal mentor the school has restructured the roles of the executive group so that they can support the professional development of teachers, established stage related teams, scheduled fortnightly professional development sessions for all teachers, and introduced a lesson study focus.

Questions for discussion

1. What issues do school leaders and teachers need to discuss in the lead up to introducing a lesson study approach?
2. Stage related teams at Lakemba meet for a half day every fortnight. If involved in such a team, what topics would you like to focus on in that regular meeting time?
3. How might the resources, funding and/or timetable in your school be creatively restructured or redeployed to be able to introduce measures such as the lesson study approach or extended team meetings or to enhance performance and development opportunities in other ways for teachers?

School Context

Lakemba Public School

Lakemba, NSW

School type: Government

Stage of schooling: Primary

School location: Metropolitan

Lesson study to improve practice

For the last three years, teams have undertaken lesson study focused on a major priority of the school which, in 2012, is numeracy. Each team starts by developing an agreed demonstration lesson which includes the core of what is to be taught, assessment strategies and the like. This is written up by one member of the team and then collectively revised, before being taught by a volunteer from the group who is watched by all. Discussion about the lesson, for which the principal joins the team, is based on the NSW quality teaching framework and seeks to identify modifications to the lesson plan which may be required. The revised lesson is then taught by a second volunteer — on the understanding that all team members will teach a demonstration lesson and be observed during the year — and the lesson modified again if needed before being taught by all members of the team.

The first time this occurred some teachers, naturally, were 'petrified' and hence a need existed to really develop trust in the process that is used. This has been helped by the fact it genuinely is non-judgmental with the result that a level of comfort has developed amongst the staff about the approach, particularly as they not only do it, but also find that it helps. This in turn is assisted by the participation of the principal in all of the lesson study discussions, which elevates its importance and accords it a priority it otherwise would not have. Three years on the school is at a stage where lesson study is simply described as 'just part of what we do'.

Pro formas and documents to make it manageable

Having come out of the requirement to engage in the TARS process, the school decided to focus on one element of the teaching standards per semester to guide its feedback and subsequent development of plans. One, related to teachers continually improving their professional knowledge and practice, is consistently maintained since it is required for teachers' accreditation, while the other reflects the priorities of the school in each year. In 2011, for instance, the second standard chosen was 'teachers know their students and how they learn', whereas the focus is 'teachers plan, assess and report for effective learning' in 2012.

The school then provided a set of 'probing questions' to inform teacher reflection and subsequent discussion in their teams. Team members rated the team against the standards and their elements using a set of action research questions from guidelines the principal provided. The principal then provided feedback on the team along with recommendations on where to go next. In terms 3 and 4 the focus shifts more to individuals and their professional learning, which sees teachers first evaluating themselves and then presenting to their team, with the principal present, including evidence to support the judgment they have made. As with the teams, the principal provides written feedback to individuals which is discussed in a one on one meeting with the teacher concerned.

Team leaders coordinate the process for their teams and in future the school intends to look more towards the teams and individuals themselves identifying the second element of the standards they will focus on, in consultation with the principal and executive team. There also is interest in generating some more sharing across the teams to get a perspective of what happens in different learning contexts and thereby develop more of a whole school understanding within each team.

A critical factor behind the acceptance and success of the approach is the continued priority the principal accords it and her own participation in all of the steps; including sharing her own assessment of performance against the leadership standards that apply.

Implementation

Implementation of the lesson study approach was challenging. For a number of the staff the prospect of teaching a lesson in front of the Principal and their peers was daunting to begin with. But this concern was overcome as a result of the process being non-judgmental and supportive.

Another challenge lay in supporting meeting time for all staff in their stage related teams and the time off formal teaching for the senior staff responsible for leading and supporting each of these teams. The Principal made teacher performance and development her first priority in the school and directed funding to this area. Even when she loses some of her current funding, the Principal intends to retain as much of her current approach as she can by reallocating resources and reviewing timetables and positions.

References

¹The TARS process, embodied in the relevant teachers' employment agreement, requires a teacher's performance to be appraised by an annual review arranged by the teacher's principal or nominee. The review is supported by conferences between the teacher and their principal/nominee, observations of educational programs and review of documentation such as lesson planning, lesson material and student work, plans, evaluations and reports, as appropriate.

²There are four teams in all: Early Stage 1 (Prep), Stage 1 (Years 1 and 2), Stage 2 (3 and 4) and Stage 3 (5 and 6).

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