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Teacher Appraisal: Missed Opportunities for Learning

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education,
The University of Auckland, 2005
The University of Auckland
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ABSTRACT

The improvement of teaching is now recognised to be a key to the sustained improvement of student achievement. Teacher appraisal, a central element of performance management, is intended to improve the quality of teaching (and therefore learning). This thesis examines whether teacher appraisal is achieving this purpose, through three empirical studies.

This thesis begins with a discussion of the context of teacher appraisal in relation to education reform of the last two decades. A normative model of teacher appraisal, one that focuses on data-based inquiry into student learning, is outlined, and the emerging education context in relation to that model is examined. Three studies, which explored schools’ appraisal documents, appraisal discussions and teachers’ appraisal goals, are presented.

The first study, a document analysis, investigated the emphasis on student learning in the statements of purpose in 17 primary schools’ appraisal policies, and the emphasis on student learning in the performance indicators developed to assess teachers against the professional standards. Results showed that while improved student learning was an intended purpose of schools’ appraisal policies, the indicators that were used to evaluate teachers seldom focused directly on student learning.

The second study examined whether data-based inquiry into student learning occurs in appraisal discussions, and the reasons for the level of reported inquiry. Eleven practitioners (four appraisers and seven appraisees from three schools) were interviewed about their most recent appraisal discussion to investigate whether student learning was a focus of the appraisal discussions and whether student achievement data were referred to in those discussions. Findings showed that appraisal discussions typically focused on teacher practices without exploring connections between those practices and the impact they have on student learning.
Only one of the eleven teachers described a discussion that included talk specifically about student learning. Furthermore, there were no reports of reference to student learning data in appraisal discussions. There was, however, a particularly positive response to the suggestion that appraisal should, and could, focus on student learning and on data relating to this learning. This study also highlighted the considerable influence of appraisal goals in determining the content and scope of appraisals.

In the third study, 68 teachers from eight schools responded to a questionnaire about their appraisal goals to establish the extent to which teachers’ appraisal goals focus on data-based inquiry into student learning. Less than five per cent of goals were found to refer to student outcomes. The vast majority focused on teacher processes and behaviours. Goals also tended to be vague, rather than specific, and were not explicitly challenging.

Findings across the studies suggest that only limited attention is given, in critical elements of teacher appraisal, to student learning. The final chapter of the thesis explores two key strategies for closing the gap between current appraisal practices and the ‘appraisal for learning’ approach argued for here – an approach that focuses on teacher learning about student learning and that is based on evidence. The first strategy involves alignment within appraisal elements, and to initiatives beyond appraisal. The second strategy is capacity building to ensure that personal, interpersonal and organisational capacities necessary for ‘appraisal for learning’ are developed. This research shows how teacher appraisal policy and practice has been a missed opportunity to improve teaching effectiveness and how it could be reshaped in ways that maximise student learning.
DEDICATION

A number of people deserve acknowledgement and thanks for their contribution to this research. I am particularly grateful to the teachers and principals who agreed, so willingly, to participate in the studies, and for the generosity with which they gave their time, and shared their experiences and ideas. My two supervisors, Professor Viviane Robinson and Doctor Judy Parr, deserve enormous thanks for their advice, support and encouragement. I have plenty of evidence to support a claim that their teaching helped me to learn. Gratitude also goes to the people in schools and educational organisations I have worked in during the course of my studies, for the assistance they have given me in pursuing my doctoral work. I am grateful, also, to professional colleagues and friends who have given support in many ways – reading material, engaging in dialogue, sharing ideas, and celebrating the milestones in the course of this EdD.

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