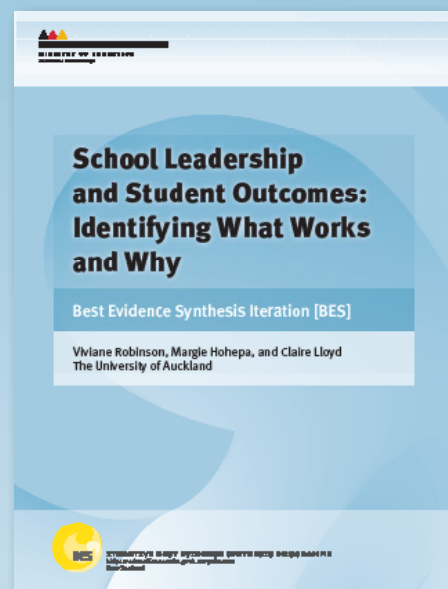


Treat appraisal as a co-constructed inquiry into the teaching–learning relationship

This is one of a series of cases that illustrate the findings of the best evidence syntheses (BESs). Each is designed to support the professional learning of educators, leaders and policy makers.



BES cases: Insight into what works

The best evidence syntheses (BESs) bring together research evidence about ‘what works’ for diverse (all) learners in education. Recent BESs each include a number of cases that describe actual examples of professional practice and then analyse the findings. These cases support educators to grasp the big ideas behind effective practice at the same time as they provide vivid insight into their application.

Building as they do on the work of researchers and educators, the cases are trustworthy resources for professional learning.

Using the BES cases

The BES cases overview provides a brief introduction to each of the cases. It is designed to help you quickly decide which case or cases could be helpful in terms of your particular improvement priorities.

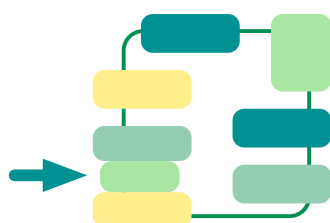
Use the cases with colleagues as catalysts for reflecting on your own professional practice and as starting points for delving into other sources of information, including related sections of the BESs. To request copies of the source studies, use the Research Behind the BES link on the BES website.

The conditions for effective professional learning are described in the Teacher Professional Learning and development BES and condensed into the ten principles found in the associated International Academy of Education summary (Timperley, 2008).

Note that, for the purpose of this series, the cases have been re-titled to more accurately signal their potential usefulness.

Responsiveness to diverse (all) learners

Use the BES cases and the appropriate curriculum documents to design a response that will improve student outcomes



The different BESs consistently find that any educational improvement initiative needs to be responsive to the diverse learners in the specific context. Use the inquiry and knowledge-building cycle tool to design a collaborative approach to improvement that is genuinely responsive to your learners

Treat appraisal as a co-constructed inquiry into the teaching–learning relationship

This case demonstrates how school leaders can support the improvement of teaching and learning by ensuring that appraisal focuses on the teaching–learning relationship.

The research in this case involved year 1–8 students in 28 schools. The researcher found that, during appraisal, teachers want to talk about the impact of their teaching on learning. Leaders can support teachers to do this by: ensuring that appraisal goals are linked to student learning and achievement (not just teaching); reinforcing the link between teaching and learning in all appraisal-related documents (such as policies, performance indicators, and templates); and leading evidence-based conversations with teachers.

Leading teacher appraisal

Appraisal is a *performance management process* aimed at *improving the quality of teaching and learning*. It typically involves (i) identification of performance expectations and appraisal goals, (ii) classroom observations, (iii) teacher self-appraisal, (iv) discussion of the teacher's self-appraisal and the appraiser's evaluation, and (v) the setting of new performance goals.

Leaders at different levels of the education system have responsibility for the quality of appraisal: policy makers set national guidelines; school management teams and boards of trustees develop and approve school policies and procedures. If appraisal is to achieve its aim of improving teaching and learning, it should not function as a compliance-based evaluation of teaching. Instead, it should be an opportunity for leaders and teachers to inquire together into the impact of teaching on student learning.

Introduction

Much of the New Zealand literature reviewed in Chapter 6 showed that data-based inquiry into the relationship between what is taught and what is learned impacts positively on student achievement. This case describes how a researcher conducted a series of studies to determine if the appraisal policies and procedures operating in primary schools are encouraging inquiry of this kind. She found that educational policy makers and school leaders play a crucial role in determining whether they do.

In this case, we identify three leadership dimensions that influence the extent to which appraisal is used as a tool for improving the quality of teaching and learning:

- Planning, coordinating and evaluating teaching and the curriculum;
- Establishing goals and expectations;
- Selecting, developing and using smart tools.

Three related studies investigated the appraisal policies and practices of Auckland primary and intermediate schools:

Study 1 investigated what teachers talk about in their appraisal discussions. Eleven teachers (four appraisers and seven appraisees) from three schools were questioned about their most recent appraisal discussions. The schools ranged in size from 358 to 695 students. Two were decile 10 and the third was decile 3.

Research context

Study 2 established the extent to which appraisal goals, jointly developed by appraisers and teachers, focused on data-based inquiry into student learning. The findings were based on the responses of 68 teachers from eight primary and intermediate schools to a questionnaire about their appraisal goals.

17 primary schools were involved in **study 3**, which investigated (i) the emphasis on student learning in appraisal policies and (ii) performance indicators developed to assess staff against professional standards. The schools were located in four Auckland regions and included year 1–6, year 1–8, and year 7–8 schools. Their rolls ranged in size from 200 to 1000, and the decile level from 1 to 10.

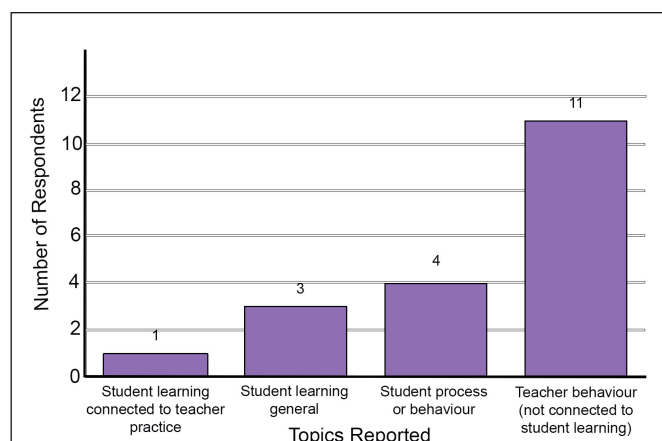
Planning, coordinating, and evaluating teaching and the curriculum

In Chapter 5, we found strong evidence that a leader's ability to encourage teachers to use student data as a basis for evaluating their teaching is critical to improving student outcomes. Appraisal discussions are a prime time for such evaluation.

What do teachers talk about during appraisal discussions?

Of the 11 teachers interviewed about their appraisal discussions, only one described a conversation that focused specifically on student learning. Three others reported talking about student learning, but only in general terms. They did not discuss either the specifics of what students had learned or the relationship between what was learned and what had been taught. For example, one teacher said she had mentioned that a lesson was really pleasing because "... the art work came out how we wanted it to look". Another recalled talking about "improved numeracy skills" and "children ... making progress".

Leadership dimension 3



Leadership dimension 3

With limited emphasis on student learning, teachers had few opportunities to engage in evidence-based inquiry into the relationship between how they had taught and what had been learned. Appraisal discussions focused instead on classroom teaching or organisation. All 11 teachers reported discussing teaching approaches, strategies, and techniques (planning, questioning, using resources, managing student behaviour, preparing lessons, modelling, organising the classroom, organising school events, grouping students, etc.). They also discussed various personal qualities, traits, or characteristics (such as confidence, willingness to learn, and openness to new ideas). The relationship between such qualities and student learning was not considered. Furthermore, when describing their appraisal interviews, teachers attached particular weight to the affective dimension; most talked about the positive feelings generated: “It gave me confidence”, “It made me feel really good”.

The evidence reviewed above shows that appraisal, as practised in these schools, was not being used for data-based inquiry into student learning. By focusing primarily on teacher behaviour and not exploring its impact on student learning, appraisal was not fulfilling its potential to foster student success.

Establishing goals and expectations

In chapters 5 and 6, we discussed the importance of setting and communicating goals for teacher and student learning. In the context of appraisal, ‘development objectives’ or ‘appraisal goals’ are agreed on by the teacher and appraiser at the start of each appraisal cycle and then provide the basis for subsequent observations and discussion.

There are two leadership roles in the goal-setting process. First, appraisers exercise leadership as they work with teachers to develop clear and specific goals, which, if they are to promote student learning, must emphasise achievement outcomes and be embedded in classroom routines. Second, principals and senior managers exercise leadership as they support appraisers and teachers in using evidence about student performance as the basis for goal setting.

Appraisal goals

The lack of emphasis on student learning in appraisal discussions does not mean that the teachers were unconcerned about student learning or that they did not want their teaching to have greater impact. Indeed, nearly all responded positively to the researcher’s suggestion that they focus on data about student learning during appraisal discussions:

I think that’s great ... so you’re using hard data of learning to then get the teacher to focus in on their teaching practice.

I actually really enjoy getting that kind of feedback.

It would be useful ‘cause that’s what we’re here for, ‘cause that’s what really matters.

Rather, the explanation for the limited focus on student learning lies in the nature of the goals that were developed by the teachers and appraisers. Only three of the 11 teachers had developed goals that were directly related to student learning. Most goals focused only on what was taught, because it was assumed that certain teaching practices would automatically advance learning. One teacher, who had a goal relating to social studies planning and decision making, reported that her appraisal discussion had centred on how she and her team had investigated and implemented learning centres, graphic organisers, and cooperative learning. Her comments reveal big assumptions about the impact of particular teaching practices on students:

... ‘cause this one [goal] is all about planning, and planning affects students’ learning. ‘Cause planning obviously, you know, it must, it must connect with the students’ learning ‘cause it’s part of that planning, learning, assessment, teaching cycle.

These findings were confirmed and extended by study 2, which asked 68 teachers in eight primary and intermediate schools about their appraisal goals. The vast majority of goals (90%) focused on aspects of teaching such as implementing a new arts curriculum, supporting teacher aides with an autistic student, or maintaining a student-focused classroom environment.

Only 11 (4.5%) of the 244 goals identified by teachers were about student learning. These included:

- develop independent learners;
- developing literacy in year 1;
- upskill all the children in my class in the use of ICT;
- improve numeracy skills and teaching and numeracy thru [sic] NUMP;
- upskill literacy at year 1 and 2 level (reading/writing);
- improve written language throughout whole school (school-wide goal).

Leadership dimension 1

Leadership dimension 1

Most of the goals in this group were expressed in general terms, so it was not clear what would count as 'goal achieved'. Even though their focus was on enhancing learning outcomes, the extent of improvement was wide open to interpretation.

Fewer than 4% of all goals emphasised inquiry, and none specified the use of data.

A learning goal is a necessary but insufficient condition for improving student outcomes: goals must also be specific and challenging. The small number of goals that focused on student outcomes, and the vague, unchallenging nature of those that did, in large measure explains why the teachers in this study did not inquire into student learning during their appraisal discussions. Indeed, what emerges is a picture of appraisal as a process for helping teachers to engage in practices that are assumed to be beneficial for students, rather than an opportunity for inquiring into the teaching-learning relationship.

Selecting, developing, and using smart tools

In Chapter 6, we identified the role smart tools play in the improvement of teaching and learning. The appraisal policies and supporting documents that schools develop as part of their performance management systems can be such smart tools, influencing every aspect of the appraisal process: goal setting, classroom observations, self-appraisal, and appraisal discussions/interviews.

It is the role of leadership to ensure that appraisal tools are aligned to the core aim of improving teaching quality and student learning. In keeping with a distributed conception of leadership, there are opportunities for alignment at every level of the system, including boards of trustees, where board and principal determine school policy, and senior management, where principal and senior managers develop the supporting documents (performance indicators and appraisal templates)—all of which have a powerful influence on how appraisal is conducted.

Appraisal tools

Leadership dimension 8

The second explanation for the lack of emphasis on student learning in appraisal discussions concerns the tools used to guide the process. When asked why they did not discuss student learning during their appraisal interviews, teachers said that:

- they thought that the purpose of appraisal was to evaluate their teaching, not to develop their ability to promote student learning;
- they assumed that there was a connection between certain teaching practices and student success;
- they discussed student learning in other contexts;
- they viewed appraisal as an opportunity to celebrate teacher success and provide support.

These reasons centre on the teachers' views of the purposes of appraisal and their assumptions about effective teaching. One way in which leaders can use appraisal to promote data-based inquiry is to ensure that appraisal tools are designed to challenge assumptions about effective teaching and develop teachers' capacity to inquire into the impact of their teaching.

Study 3 investigated what emphasis there was on student learning in three appraisal tools: school policy statements, performance indicators, and appraisal templates. The findings demonstrate the potential of tools to promote data-based inquiry into student learning.

Tools of appraisal

A. School policy

Leadership role	Potential for promoting inquiry	
	Strong	Weak
Each board of trustees approves an appraisal policy that is consistent with Ministry of Education guidelines.	<p>Policy focuses on the improvement of teaching and learning:</p> <p><i>“To improve the quality of student learning through classroom observation and analysis of classroom processes”;</i></p> <p><i>“To enable staff to improve teaching effectiveness and enhance student achievement.”</i></p> <p>Policy emphasises that the appraisal process should focus on data-informed inquiry into the relationship between teaching and learning.</p>	<p>Policy includes, but does not emphasise the improvement of teaching and learning.</p> <p>Policy emphasises completion of appraisal processes (a compliance approach).</p>

Findings. Seventeen schools of varying size and socio-economic status submitted their appraisal policy documents for analysis. Of the statements specifying purpose, only 15% referred to student learning, while 70% made reference to teaching. Once again, the assumption appeared to be that a focus on teaching would be beneficial for students.

B. Performance indicators

Leadership role	Potential for promoting inquiry	
	Strong	Weak
<p>School leaders include performance indicators in appraisal policies to guide classroom observations and discussions.</p> <p>Indicators are based on the national Interim Professional Standards.</p>	<p>By asking which students are succeeding, indicators require the appraiser to investigate student outcomes, for example:</p> <p><i>“Demonstrates appropriate emphasis and successful learning in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics”;</i></p> <p><i>“Students are achieving success.”</i></p>	<p>Indicators assume a causal link between certain teaching behaviours and improved student outcomes:</p> <p><i>“Demonstrates an attractive, busy, and challenging physical environment that promotes student achievement and further learning across the curriculum.”</i></p>

Findings. Only 3% of the performance indicators from the 17 schools (all from just six schools) focused directly on student learning and encouraged evidence-based inquiry by raising questions about student success. A further 3% of indicators (from eight schools) focused indirectly on student learning. This latter group of indicators reflected the assumption that certain teaching behaviours will inevitably improve student outcomes.

The remaining indicators focused on dimensions of professional knowledge, teaching techniques, motivation of students, classroom management, and communication).

C. Templates

Leadership role	Potential for promoting inquiry									
	Strong	Weak								
Templates are developed by school principals and senior managers . They provide frameworks for classroom observations and follow-up discussion.	<p>Templates prompt appraisers to focus on the teaching–learning relationship and to record and consider student learning data.</p>	<p>Template headings are general and do not require or encourage a focus on student learning. For instance:</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Things seen</td> <td>Describe</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Things heard</td> <td>Impact</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Suggestions</td> <td>Coach</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Focus</td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	Things seen	Describe	Things heard	Impact	Suggestions	Coach	Focus	
Things seen	Describe									
Things heard	Impact									
Suggestions	Coach									
Focus										

Findings. There was no reason appraisers could not record data and comments about student learning on the templates. But the generic headings neither required or encouraged them to do so. Under the heading ‘Impact’, one appraiser recorded notes about the impact of teaching on students’ behaviour, not on learning outcomes. Student engagement, interest, and motivation were assumed to be indicators of cognitive engagement and achievement, and formed the basis of subsequent discussion.

Leaders play a key role in determining the extent to which appraisal is used as a process for enhancing student outcomes. They can ensure that appraisal tools—national and school policies, performance indicators, and appraisal templates—are aligned to the goal of improving teaching and learning. They can do this by selecting, developing, and using tools that require and support inquiry into the relationship between what teachers do and student achievement and well-being. Given the highly contextual nature of teaching, appraisal tools should not reinforce the assumption that particular teaching practices will inevitably impact positively on student learning. This study found that the appraisal tools used by the schools fostered assumptions about, rather than inquiry into, the impact of teaching on students.

Key questions

1. Do your school's appraisal policies and performance indicators require appraisers and teachers to use evidence about student learning as a basis for appraisal?
2. What are appraisal goals in your school based on? Do they arise out of an inquiry cycle in which evidence is analysed and student needs discussed?
3. What professional development might you design to help teachers and appraisers learn how to use student data to inquire into their teaching practice? (Refer to Case 3, page 226).

Source

Sinnema, C. E. L. (2005). *Teacher appraisal: Missed opportunities for learning*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Auckland.

Further reading

Sinnema, C., & Robinson, V. M. J. (2007). The leadership of teaching and learning: Implications for teacher evaluation. *Leadership and Policy in Schools*, 6(4), pp. 1–25.

Nuthall, G. A. (2004). Relating classroom teaching to student learning: A critical analysis of why research has failed to bridge the theory–practice gap. *Harvard Educational Review*, 74(3).

Cardno, C., & Piggot-Irvine, E. (1997). *Effective performance appraisal: Integrating accountability and development in staff appraisal*. Auckland: Longman.