



Professional Learning Groups: is it possible to reimagine appraisal culture?

New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work, Volume 19, Issue 1, 5-14, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

Appraisal is a contentious issue for teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand schools and this has become increasingly controversial due to the ways in which it has been implemented (Benade, 2015, 2018; Sinnema & Aitken, 2011). The underlying methodology of appraisal, examined in this case study, was previously termed Teaching as Inquiry (TAI) now Professional Growth Cycles (PGC's), and involves teachers reflecting on their pedagogy through action based research (Benade, 2015). Recent developments (2019-2020) regarding appraisal have highlighted arguments between unions for well-being and the regulatory body for accountability (Brady, 2016; Holloway & Brass, 2018). The outcome of this national debate has been legislation removing the use of TAI and the regulatory body replacing its terminology with PGC (Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2021). Trust has been lost in foisting changes on an appraisal system which lies at the nexus of teaching pedagogy, professional learning, attestation and accountability. This case study is one response to this issue, attempting to implement a collaborative approach through Professional Learning Groups (PLG's) to reimagine appraisal culture against a broader performative neoliberal agenda.

The case study reflected on here is a co-educational high school with approximately 1400 students and 90 full time staff. In 2017, this author was asked by the Deputy Principal to update the paperwork for the appraisal documents. While the process was initially considered to be small; in fact, it was quite a significant task, and a meeting with the Education Council revealed that the school's processes needed significant updating. At this point in time, the school's system for mentoring and appraisal was based on the then Education Council's Registered Teaching Criteria. This necessitated dating and recording evidence for twelve different convoluted and overlapping criteria. Overlaid on this process within the teaching context were requirements from all manner of initiatives and what one colleague termed 'wheelbarrows' being pushed by aspiring leaders. The subject of this case study is the appraisal system, which this author was involved in helping to lead and helping to review during 2018-2019 as outlined by the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. The aim of this process was to increase collaboration between teachers and increased autonomy supported by Professional Learning Groups (PLG's). To that date, cumbersome bureaucracy

and various responses to leadership created compliance in some teachers and an oppositional culture for others. This resulted in staff “remain[ing] sceptical of the vision for change and distrustful of management” (Strebel, 1996, para. 39). This anecdotal evidence correlates with Rogers’ (2003) ideas about change, organising people into: innovators (first 2.5%); early adopters (next 13.5%); early majority (next 34%); late majority (next 34%); and “laggards” (next 16%). While some colleagues spent hours meticulously curating evidence others who resented the ‘bureaucratic control’ exerted on their classroom autonomy, fiercely resisted any such interference (Fitzgerald, Youngs, & Grootenboer, 2003; Grootenboer, 2018, 2000). These resisters were impervious to all manner of change and suspicious of any perceived overreach foisted upon the citadel of their classrooms.

As such, appraisal lies at the heart of the contested milieu of pedagogy, with cycles of Professional Learning (PL) directed towards competing aims of teacher support and accountability (Charteris & Smith, 2017; Elliot, 2015). Historically, teachers sat through whole school PL sessions to meet appraisal requirements. However, under new policy, PGC’s (formerly TAI) have shifted the onus of accountability onto teachers to seek more personalised forms of PL as they reflect individually on their pedagogy (Berliner, 2004, Blömeke, & Klein, 2013, p. 1034). As Benade (2018) identifies, systems that support PL, when concurrently aiming to fulfil statutory accountability requirements ought to be resisted. Appraisal can be used as a means of creating next steps for teachers through PL, yet require models of self-reflection and delivery that meet different learning needs of staff who use a diversity of practice (Holloway, 2018). This paper therefore seeks to reflect on the barriers and challenges to creating such a system to best meet competing aims of support and accountability by examining the question: how do we reimagine appraisal culture to promote teacher excellence alongside accountability?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Since the 1980s, neoliberal market-based reforms have driven a globalised education reform movement, with governments imposing standardised testing on students and teacher performance through appraisal (Lingard et al., 2013; Sahlberg, 2006; Sellar & Lingard, 2013). The subsequent focus and efforts to improve teacher effectiveness, reported *ad infinitum* through PISA testing scores, compose for teachers the “terrors of performativity” (Ball, 2003, p. 217). This neoliberal agenda has created pressures on teachers by imposing systems of appraisal through inquiry to raise student outcomes (Codd, 2005; Doherty, 2007; Parr, 2010). In the New Zealand context and equally applicable elsewhere, using a standardised approach for appraisal fails to take into account that good teaching is grounded in “ethical teacher professionalism” (Benade, 2015, p. 190). As one particularly forthright colleague remarked to me: “of course we all want to improve student results, we do all of this [inquiring into student results] constantly, but appraisal is just a waste of my time.” Appraising teachers in educational settings requires innovation to adapt to ever-more complex requirements, pushed by the invisible hand of competitive market forces (Doherty, 2007).

Corporate executive forms have been applied in appraising educators by encouraging reflexive practice through business coaching models (Smardon &

Charteris, 2014). Peter O'Brien (2015) cautions against the misuse of this self-reflection as it limits the collaborative power for teachers to collectively solve problems. Despite this caution, one widely used model is known as "GROW," allowing for the teaching practitioner to set Goals, look at the Reality, explore Options, and ask What next (Whitmore, 2002). Some of the implicit assumptions in such coaching models are that teachers are proficient in reflecting on their own pedagogy and are able to identify their next steps in PL (Vidmar, 2005). While the use of such a coaching model is useful in many respects and allows Niesche & Haase's (2012) "ethical work" to occur, the use of such executive market based models has led to highly individualised reflections with unintended consequences.

One of the unintended consequences of the neoliberal focus on teacher performance is the relegation of teacher well-being and a reduction in collaboration. Performance management approaches intensify teacher burnout, with some scholars suggesting burnout stems from performance anxiety for some teachers (Ball, 2003; Holloway & Brass, 2018). Burnout has wider social repercussions, for instance in exacerbating current teacher shortages, as exemplified in New Zealand by teacher strikes during 2019. This has added another layer for senior leaders and government departments to pay closer attention to improving teacher well-being (Brady, 2019). Parr (2010) employs Habermas' philosophy to suggest that inquiry based PL has become colonized by competing aims, leaving teachers with greater individual autonomy but counterintuitively, less opportunity for shared PL. Furthermore, in a performativity culture curated by the neoliberal agenda, Cain and Harris (2013) assert that these appraisal models have eroded trust between teachers rather than building opportunity for collaboration.

CASE STUDY

Professional Learning Groups (PLGs) were an initiative for this case study school in 2018-2019 in response to new requirements from the Teaching Council of Aotearoa New Zealand. This innovation was designed to meet the needs for accountability as well as promoting teacher collaboration. PLGs were used as a tool that could positively shape teaching practice in order to improve student learning. As shown in Figure 1, the intention of PLGs was to create a collaborative structure to provide both informal and formal support as well as opportunities for PL, mentoring and further professional development. Rather than previous approaches that focused on whole school professional development, PLGs allowed for individual teachers to access more relevant and timely PL that was more aligned with their chosen focus. PLGs were designed initially to provide a platform where teachers could work collaboratively to celebrate knowledge and expertise. Teachers were to articulate an inquiry focus for the year, which was centralized and overlaid against the school's strategic goals and vision. The key aims of these groups were to:

- Become evidence and research informed
- Be an embedded aspect of teacher practice
- Ensure alignment with school wide focus as envisioned in the school vision
- Be on-going and iterative

- Involve both structured collaboration and elements of individual choice
- Introduce PLGs in the appraisal process
- Introduce critical friend roles within the PLGs

Practically, this involved timetabling PLG times at least twice a term, using a rapid cycle of action-based research. The distributed loading of this structure also shifted the management responsibility towards the individual teacher. PLG time was used to share practice, work collaboratively and help sustain practice. In the case study context, these practices were fostered through:

- Coaching sessions that unpacked how teachers were using the Teaching Standards;
- Action based research to explore teaching practice;
- Supporting teachers in their professional development with high quality PL opportunities;
- Working through the appraisal summary documentation; and by; and
- Observing other teachers' pedagogy via a structured observational tool.

Professional Learning Groups

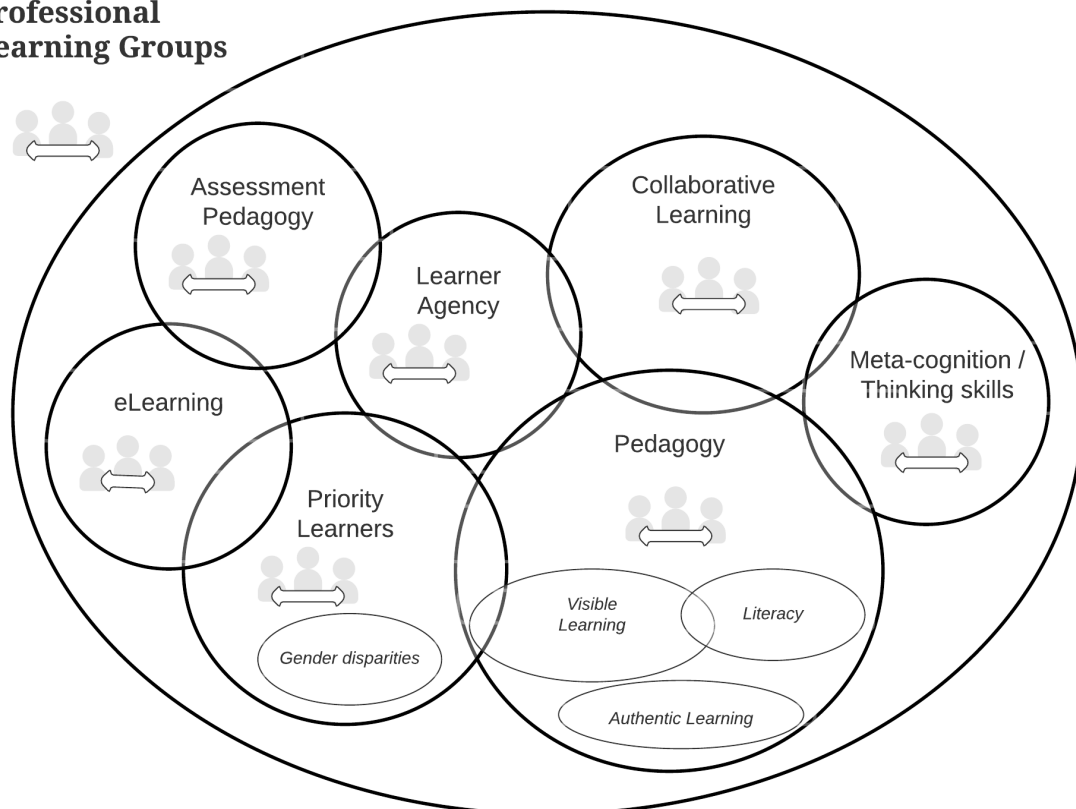


Figure 1 - Professional Learning Groups (PLG's) clustered by themes, showing small groups of teachers acting as "critical friends" reflecting together on pedagogy.

This case study highlights both the many challenges and successes of attempting to innovate using PLG's for appraisal and these aspects will be discussed in turn below.

Challenges of implementation

PLGs highlight the many challenges implementing change within the highly contested space of appraisal. One major challenge is the use of language and wording such as accountability, appraisal and inquiry, which continues to hold connotations of bureaucratic overreach (Fitzgerald, Youngs & Grootenboer, 2003). Despite PLGs reducing some requirements for teachers, there remained deep suspicion amongst staff, wary of the introduction of national policy surrounding performance management (Timperley & Robinson, 2010). This corresponds with the critique of neoliberalism, that appraisal has become another "tick box" exercise mandated by performance-based reviews (Ball, 2016; Sahlberg, 2006). A second challenge of PLGs is that teachers must adopt a disposition of inquiry in their role as action-based researcher. The class is the data set and the methodology is interpreted through literature and evidence. This creates a further barrier that the method imposes a high burden of expectation on pragmatic educators to become experts in a specific field, wading through masses of data interpretation (Lewis & Holloway, 2018). Another challenge to PLGs was the lack of expertise to solve fairly major issues beyond the scope of any one classroom teacher. PLGs examined complex inquiry topics that reflect oftentimes intractable societal issues beyond the responsibility of individual teachers to solve. While PLGs made inroads for some students, it did not solve or provide the 'silver bullet' to create school wide systemic change (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2015). The paradox exists also that such a devolved system has potential to result in teachers working cross purposes if there is not simultaneously a method of centralising these inquiries, so that small groups of teachers can work together to collaborate and solve some of the "wicked problems" (Buchanan, 1992) that are more systemic in nature. The timing of New Zealand teacher unions, who were critical of workload pressures exacerbated through appraisal systems, announced that they expressed "no confidence in teacher appraisal, noting there is a lack of evidence that appraisal lifts teacher quality or improves student outcomes" (PPTA, 2019, para. 1). This exacerbated a loss of trust and eroded any faith in a system, with PLG's effectively shelved in the case study school since this time with the only remaining element being the use of critical friend coaching sessions. Finally, barriers remained in the appraisal process, due to a lack of critical reflection on pedagogy. While the method of coaching was employed to increase the capacity of teachers in this regard, it met with varying levels of success.

Successes of implementation

The major success of PLGs was to produce a higher degree of autonomy for teachers to drive their own needs for PL. Teachers need significant time to "make meaning of their classrooms" (Korthagen, 2009, p. 100). Meaning-making work is rarely successful in isolation and requires collaboration to share what works in the classroom (Hattie, 2015). PLGs and critical friends sharing in the inquiry process enabled this to occur. For teachers who externally process ideas, and enjoy problem solving collaboratively, PLGs could be perceived beneficially. This is not every teacher though, with different personality types engaging with a wide

degree of variance in the process (O'Brien, 2015). Another added benefit of organising the groups in the manner illustrated in Figure 1 was that it centralised and helped to align appraisals within overarching school goals (Education Review Office, 2013; 2016). This also gave a sense for senior managers of the issues faced by teachers, and provided insight into the areas that needed further school-wide supports. The shift towards more rapid cycles of action-based research was more manageable for busy working teachers (Murphy, 2013). Reducing the workload involved by shifting towards a shorter and precise inquiry meant a more meaningful inquiry. Having timetabled PLGs also meant that teachers were given more regular time to reflect on their teaching practice (Tuytens & Devos, 2012). These more regular meetings resulted in teachers reflecting more consistently throughout the year, not simply in the final term when the paperwork was due.

CONCLUSION

It remains possible to reimagine appraisal culture, yet this case study highlights the many challenges of trying to implement innovation within this space. The resulting system in this case study school is a compromise between governance of teaching standards and collaboration between teachers to drive their own learning needs. Competing perspectives on this dichotomy are not easily ameliorated and further alignment is needed at both the school and government levels of leadership to transform praxis. The attempts at innovation in this case study underscores the difficulties for pragmatic and often highly cynical antipodean teachers to engage in action-based research (O'Brien, 2015). However, it seems that the best way that teachers can get the most out of appraisal systems is to become the driver of their own PL with particular students in mind. Keeping student outcomes at the forefront relies on teachers being critically reflective of their pedagogy, as well as leaders being receptive to reforming systematic issues. While intractable issues continue to face schools, PLG's provide one avenue to discuss problems and the opportunity to think creatively about solutions in a collaborative manner. Working collaboratively helps to address the excesses of performative neoliberal reforms, which allows groups of teachers to access PL and to contextualise these ideas for their own practice. This requires consistent leadership that aligns these smaller efforts into a more coherent whole. In such a context, teachers can collaborate effectively against the "wicked problems" (Buchanan, 1992) facing students.

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