Redefining Appraisal: Giving Teachers Ownership of their Practice

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ABSTRACT

Appraisal has, for many years, been seen as something 'done' to teachers. It has simply been that bit extra that needed to be completed each year to ensure teachers could teach one more year. It was seen as having little benefit or significance, simply being a 'tick box' exercise. This article reports on a study aimed to change this view and give teachers ownership of the appraisal process through self-directed professional development within a collaborative and collegial environment. The study demonstrated the need for teachers to direct their own professional development and learning within an open and supportive environment where they felt safe to 'take a chance'. In enabling and supporting teachers to do this, a structured portfolio 'skeleton' was developed. Teachers were then able to 'flesh out' and personalise their portfolios in order to demonstrate their individual professional practice.

INTRODUCTION

Performance management, the umbrella under which appraisal sits, plays a key role in education in ensuring the quality of teaching staff. In spite of other on-going changes in education, performance management appears to have remained fairly constant. However, with greater expectations being placed on teachers (Codd, 2005) and with the development of the New Zealand Teachers' Council's (NZTC) new Registered Teacher Criteria (RTC), much more pressure has come upon the teaching profession. Appraisal must meet these changing needs. However, many systems currently undertaken in schools across the country do not meet this increased need, with teachers seeing little value in the process (Piggot-Irvine, 2001). This article is based on research carried out to identify an appraisal process that not only meets the changing requirements of performance management but also meets the needs of teachers to drive their own appraisal based on their individual professional learning and development goals.

WHAT IS APPRAISAL?

Appraisal is evaluating teachers against a set of standards, ensuring their competence to teach. It is, as McLellan and Ramsey (2007) state, 'an issue once removed from students; it is about encouraging the development of teachers that will, hopefully, flow on to better student experiences' (p. 2). McLellan and Ramsey add that in the long term, focusing on appraisal with greater intensity helps both

the school and its teachers and creates improvement in student learning. However, appraisal is about evaluating teachers in 'a framework of professional accountability' (Collins, 1997, p. 8); in other words, judging a teacher and estimating their worth – both highly subjective and value-laden processes.

To be effective, appraisal must integrate both formative (on-going and developmental) and summative (accountability focused) assessment, and these forms of assessment do not appear to sit well together (Dymoke & Harrison, 2006). The NZTC and the Ministry of Education (MOE) stress that appraisal (formative) and attestation (summative) are aimed at teacher improvement and to raise professional standards (Julian, 1997). Yet it seems that the focus of many schools is not on learning and development but rather on accountability. More emphasis is placed on teacher performance which is directly related to remuneration. If not performing 'satisfactorily' a teacher's pay increment can be deferred until such time as the criteria are met. This arrangement does not promote a positive culture within which to learn and develop.

There are other associated issues. The current appraisal cycle as directed by the MOE is completed over a year, yet the NZTC's Registered Teacher Criteria (RTC) – required for teacher registration – are to be covered over a three-year cycle. A one-year cycle allows insufficient time for the embedding of professional learning. Bailey (1993) categorically states that appraisal must be 'a continuous process not a once a year event' (p. 4). Adhering to the NZTC's three year cycle encourages teachers to explore and build on professional learning opportunities, something not possible under the MOE's one-year appraisal cycle. Time is needed to ensure professional learning is embedded in a teacher's practice.

A second issue relates to who is responsible for appraisal. Ultimately it is the Boards of Trustees (BoT) who are 'the employers' of the school's staff. However, they tend to devolve this responsibility to the senior management of the school. This delegation is usually not due to a culture of 'passing the buck' but more a case of assigning the task to those with more expertise to undertake the process. However, senior and middle management have little, if any, training to facilitate this task, especially where issues of competence arise. It is assumed that competency knowledge is gleaned as a teacher progresses up to management positions, but this is not always the case. Appraisers can find it difficult to inform teachers of poor performance and so because the teacher is not told, he or she assumes everything is all right. Consequently, '*the undelivered message does not reach an unprepared audience*. Such hidden negative dynamics guarantee that the unfavourable situation [of having less than competent teachers on the staff] will never improve' (Yariv, 2009, p. 457, author emphasis). Being told that performance is not at the expected level is akin to an attack on the person. Senior management appraisers wish to avoid this situation at all costs. Conducting these difficult conversations is an area that needs training, but this is not prevalent in the current education climate.

So what is the teacher actually assessed against during appraisal? Over the years there have been numerous assessment measures, ranging from inspectors to the Education Review Office's (ERO) standards, to the MOE dimensions and professional standards, to the current NZTC Registered Teacher Criteria. While this plethora of measures has lessened, there are still two sets from which to work: the RTC aimed at maintaining high standards for teacher registration, and the professional standards negotiated between the teachers' unions and the MOE aimed at pay progression and competency issues. Knowing

which set to use for what purpose adds to the complicated nature of appraisal. It must be noted here, however, that a teacher failing to meet the RTC is then assessed against the professional standards for competency. In the worst case scenario, if the teacher fails to improve his or her practice, they are then referred to the NZTC for deregistration. At this point in time the teacher is again assessed *against the RTC* as a final measure of his/her practice. So why is there a need for two separate sets of measures?

Even with only one set of measures, issues can arise. The central aim behind appraisal is the development of teachers (Ministry of Education, 1999). Standards cannot be a checklist of discrete observable behaviours that can be 'ticked off' as this will not necessarily demonstrate quality teaching: 'it is possible to tick off a list of competencies and still not have quality teaching' (Upsall, 2001, p. 174). Sachs (2003) supports this view, adding that 'standards cannot and should not be frozen in time; they must be flexible to the changing conditions of teaching and learning as they occur inside and outside of schools' (p. 175). Appraisal must encourage quality improvement which focuses on teachers' professional development, learning and career advancement over the long term and focuses on the teacher as a person rather than a commodity (Sachs, 2003). Hager (1993) noted that 'standards are typically about outcomes' and that they should be left 'open as to how the outcomes are achieved' (p. 6). A process that had such openness would give teachers a choice about how to 'demonstrate' their abilities and what evidence to collect to support this, thus allowing them to build their practice through professional development, while meeting both teacher registration and MOE performance management requirements.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Professional development (PD) is quite simply learning and developing skills and attributes that will enhance professional practice. It is important that PD is not 'ad hoc' in nature but is targeted to the specific needs of the teacher. PD needs to be 'long-term, embedded in practice and context, professionally informed, and sustained' (Piggot-Irvine, 2007, p. 3). It needs to actually benefit the teacher and the teacher's practice. However, transference of learning from a course into the classroom does not always happen, making much PD ineffective. Remedying this lack of transference reflects the essential need for teachers to develop a professional learning plan that is linked into their appraisal, and that is of their choosing. High quality professional development targeted to meet individual teacher's needs will help to improve teacher practice and student learning. As Poskitt (2005) states:

> Teachers have varying requirements for professional development and it is important therefore that professional development programmes *adapt* content and delivery to suit the individual needs of teachers and schools. Moreover, teachers need to be involved in analysing their own professional needs and determining the content, pace and style of professional development if they are to develop their expertise, altruism and autonomy and enhance their professional identity. (p. 140, author emphasis)

Programmes of professional learning should meet the needs of the teachers and provide them with the opportunity to think about their practice. In order for learning to become embedded in a teacher's practice, time is needed to internalise the learning. Glickman (cited in Poskitt, 2005) points out that '*successful teachers* are *thoughtful* ones, contending that the ability to think about what they (teachers) do should be the aim of professional development' (p. 145, author's emphasis). Above all else, learning – for the teacher and their students – should be a focus. The *development* of the teacher is no longer enough – he or she must be seen to be *learning* (Easton, 2008). For professional learning to be effective, teachers must claim ownership of it and it must support their needs and the needs of their students. To strengthen this process, collaboration within a collegial climate is essential. This allows teachers to discuss and reflect on their learning to help embed it into their practice. Yet, if this is to happen, how will teachers evidence their best practice and how will senior management have confidence in this evidence? Portfolios could be the answer.

PORTFOLIOS

Portfolios are a collection of artefacts, planning, student surveys and other such evidence compiled by the teacher to support a particular purpose, such as appraisal and/or professional learning. They allow for the gathering of 'authentic assessment' material (Gelfer, Xu, & Perkins, 2004, p. 127) not possible during many other forms of assessment. They are used in the USA, Australia, England (Jones, 2001), Israel and the Netherlands (Smith & Tillema, 2007). They are also in use in New Zealand, particularly in pre-service and tertiary education, and in nursing.

Showcasing teachers' work is only half the portfolio story. They also provide teachers with the ownership of their appraisal through determining the content of the portfolio and their professional development path (Attinello, Lare, & Waters, 2006). Of greater importance, perhaps, are the reflective and collaborative aspects of the process that allow a teacher to grow, develop and learn at greater depths than can be expected in isolation. Portfolios give a teacher the opportunity to take control over their professional learning, goal setting and career advancement, empowering the teacher in the process (Zepeda, 2002).

The process of data collection and reflection is best undertaken in a group scenario where collaboration, advice and support can be provided. Portfolios develop many skills for teachers yet, as Zepeda (2002) points out, without collaboration much of the value of the processes involved would be lost. Suddaby (1998) adds that the portfolio must be reflective rather than simply an accumulation of artefacts. Zepeda (2002) argues that a model for teacher growth should be based on 'the "what" (what is collected), the "so what" (analysis of artefacts), and the "now what" (recommendations and strategies to improve students' performance)' (p. 86). She adds that if a portfolio simply becomes a collection of artefacts it loses its value and will stagnate. However, reflection and self-assessment during the portfolio process provide the possibility to improve teacher practice. Ideally, portfolios should be structured around and be inclusive of the dimensions and/or standards of the profession. However, as Cameron and Gunn (1999) explain, the standards for use in the portfolios have to be 'translated' so that teachers could 'fit' them to their particular context. Teachers might then

develop a shared understanding of what is required and how the standards relate to their practice.

Portfolios do have drawbacks: there is a considerable time factor involved both in the development of the portfolio and in its evaluation. They can also be seen as another 'add-on' to an already busy professional life. A further negative could be that even though a portfolio may be 'glitzy' it still could be full of insignificant data and it may not necessarily reflect the competence of the teacher. In other words, 'failing' or poor teachers could put together a document that was astoundingly good but not be an accurate reflection on their competence.

Portfolios can be of benefit *over time* as they can track changes in practice, identify goals and their accomplishment, and reflect the progress of PD opportunities into the classroom (Zepeda, 2002). Tucker, Stronge, Gareis and Beers (2003) add, 'there is encouraging news regarding the application of portfolios for the accountability and professional growth purposes of teacher evaluation' (p. 577). It would therefore seem that portfolios can be part of a teacher-driven appraisal system based on identified professional development needs.

TWO KEY FINDINGS FROM THE STUDY

The impetus for this study came from two main areas. First was the author's previous research into the competence process which identified the need for greater input from teachers in their appraisal and the need for an increased focus on professional development leading performance management. Second was an identified 'gap' in the performance appraisal process at the school where the research was carried out.

As the study progressed, the value of portfolios to create a scaffold for appraisal soon became clear. Not only did they provide the base documents teachers needed to develop and reflect upon their practice but from a practical point of view, portfolios also provided a starting place in which to focus and store collected evidence sources. Portfolios were not the only significant outcome from this study. Two key areas of findings emerged; the first were themes, the second the appraisal process.

The themes

The first set of findings that emerged from this study are grouped around six key themes:

1) *Professional development*. The value of PD came into question, especially whole staff PD. One member of the research group stated: 'While it may be amusing and make you feel good at the time, maybe even make you laugh, its usefulness in the classrooms was negligible' (Participant B). This view was supported by others: 'Whole school PD was not targeted at individual teacher's needs or areas of interest, rather at a global aim of whole school improvement or bonding' (Participant A). It was also found that the value of PD was often limited as there was no follow up from courses to see how the learning was embedded or what changes occurred from it. The overwhelming consensus from the research group was that PD had to be meaningful to the teacher individually or it was not worth attending. The group also made the point that professional development and learning was

not dependent on external agencies; having a large staff at the school meant that PD could be sourced from other staff members within the school and that follow-up from these sessions was more likely to happen. The final point developed was that finding appropriate external PD was not easy – knowing where to look was critical. Recent changes meant there were no longer PD booklets or pamphlets provided for the staff; sourcing PD had to be done on-line which meant that, given the busy lives of teachers, it did not happen often.

2) *Observations*. The key change made in this area was of developing an observation document that included a teacher focus – what the teacher wanted observed during the supervisor's visit. This change helped bring discussion into the appraisal process as supervisors had pre-visit meetings with the teacher to decide on the area of focus. This helped make the observation focused and more relevant to the teacher. The group also decided 'drop-ins' and 'open-door' policies worked well especially where there was a high level of trust within the school. This also helped to gain a more 'natural' view of the class rather than the 'staged' formal observation.

3) *Reflection*. This is a key focus of the RTC – and of any teaching practice. However, it is not something that is done well by many teachers. As Participant E stated: 'You don't think about a lesson until next year when you come up to this topic and you think, actually that worksheet didn't work that well so I'll [change it] ... but that's when you do your refection – this time next year'. An alternate view was that of Participant F: '[I am reflecting] constantly – inside my head ... But … say some of it is a bit hard to write down because it's fairly confidential'. Reflection was aided by the research group's discussions where they discussed ideas from their own action research cycles and the different teaching strategies they had trialled. Through these discussions a PD Reflection Log was developed where teachers listed the PD they had completed and where they reflected on its benefit and possible transference to their classrooms. This document was included in the final version of the teacher portfolio. Through meetings held with Heads of Departments the possibility of including reflection discussion time in department meetings was established.

4) *Time*. This theme came up time and again. Teachers felt that there was never enough time to do all that was expected of them. To help with this issue Participant H allocated non-contact time in her planning book to work and reflect on specific aspects of her practice. Other group members waited until the holidays to 'catch up' with planning and reflection. 'It's always been like "oh rats, I've forgotten about that" because there wasn't enough time to do it at the time' (Participant H). The solution to never having enough time to complete tasks like reflection is almost unanswerable. Each teacher has to find a way to make this happen that works for them. Departments, and whole school PD sessions, can help by scheduling reflection time in meetings.

5) *Discussion groups*. Repeatedly over the course of the study, the research group commented on the desire to keep the group running as they found the discussions were invaluable. However, scheduling the meetings was hugely problematic even when we all knew they had to be completed for

the research; making them happen later was actually too hard. Some of the problems associated with this were linked directly to time: Participant D noted: 'It does all come down to time doesn't it? ... It's time allocated specifically for professional discussion ... I mean these get-togethers [for this research] are just that aren't they? ... opportunities for professional discussion'.

6) *RTC*. Initially, no-one in the group/staff really understood what the RTC meant or how they could be used to support their professional learning. However, after unpacking them, both with the group and with the whole staff, different ways the RTC could be used were developed. What really helped the staff move on with these criteria was first coming to an understanding of what they were actually saying: Participant A commented: 'You need to translate them first' and B replied: '... akonga ... what's that?'. As a whole staff we developed a list of evidence sources specific to the school and these too were included in the performance management portfolios to support teachers in collecting their own evidence sources. What was most gratifying over the course of this research was the improvement staff gained in their understanding of the appraisal process and the RTC in particular.

The appraisal process

The final appraisal process was the second key outcome of this study. Figure 1 below shows the appraisal cycle developed through this research. Each cycle replicates the one prior, indicating that the teacher is not required to construct a new appraisal process each year but is to build on the previous one using a similar structure and a pattern that is familiar. Aspects within each cycle are the same, and again serve to reinforce the familiar. Figure 1 relates specifically to the school where the research was conducted so aspects of the cycles are specific to it. However, these cycles and each component could be adapted to other schools. Key components of each cycle are:

1) *PD Plan*. At this stage of the cycle the teacher's job description is updated alongside his or her PD Plan. Possible sources of PD identified. This usually occurs early in term one.

2) *Observation 1*. This is a lesson 'start up' observation occurring during the first half of the lesson and has a focus on start-up procedures and getting the class settled. Prior to the observation there is a meeting between observer and observee to establish an area of teacher focus. This observation is followed by a second meeting to discuss what was seen and how the teacher felt the lesson went. Observation feedback is then kept in the teacher's portfolio. This occurs near the beginning of term one.

3) *Act*. This is a very generic term and indicates that the teacher should be actively working on their PD Plan. This could involve observations of others or attending a PD session in or out of school. While it is placed near the beginning of the cycle, it is likely to continue over the course of the year – or longer – depending on the PD being undertaken.

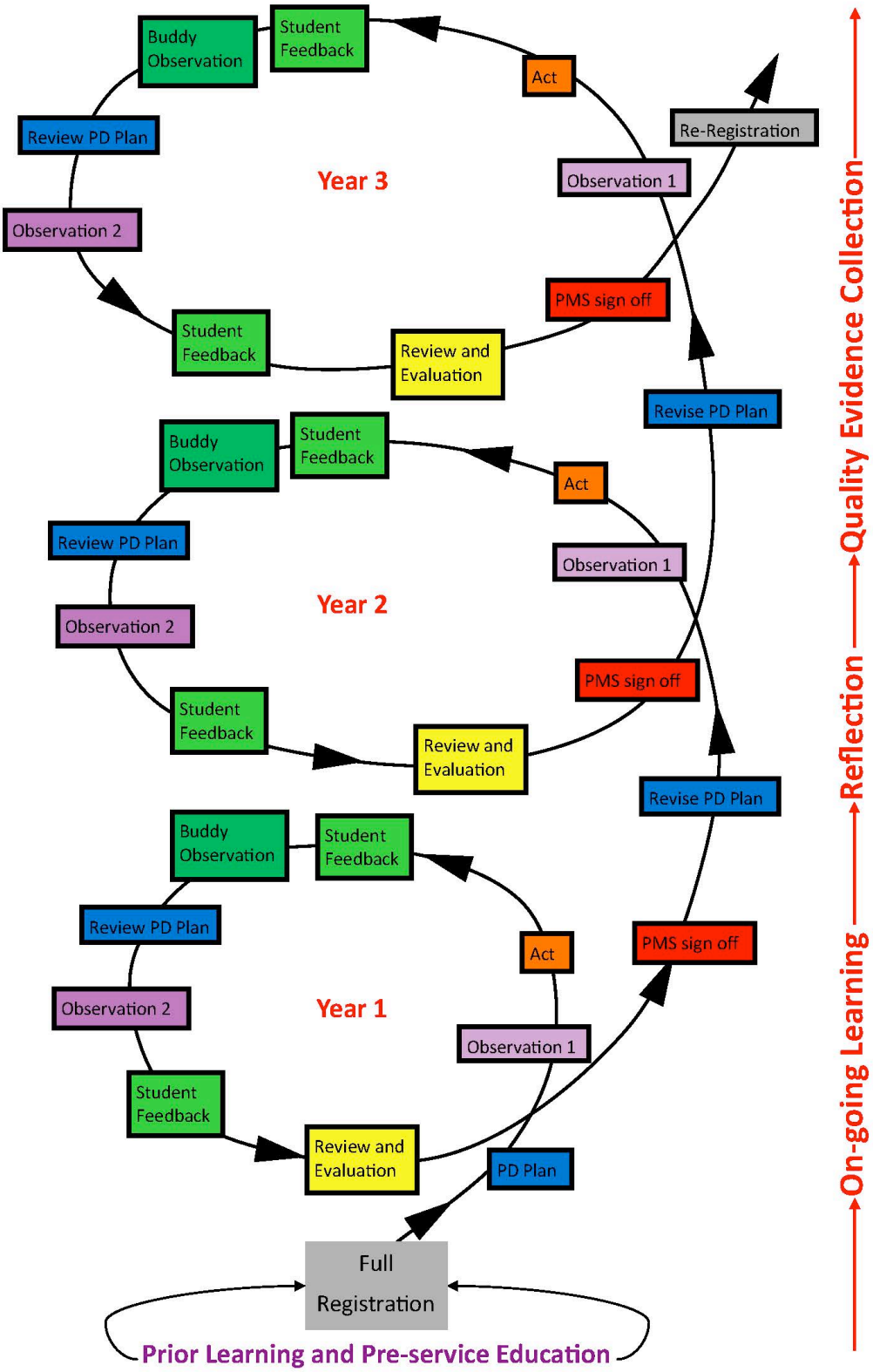

Figure 1. The Appraisal Cycle

4) *Student Feedback and Buddy Observation*. These usually occur together. The buddy (a fellow teacher organised at the beginning of the year) completes an observation which aims to provide commendations and recommendations (if necessary). The observation is not a critique but more a PD session for both teachers. At the end of the lesson the teacher being observed leaves the room and the buddy conducts student feedback with the class. This is then summarised and the summary given to the teacher when the post observation discussion is held. This occurs during term two.
5) *Review PD Plan*. This is, as stated, a review of the PD Plan to assess progress to date and see what further assistance might be needed. This takes place very early in term three.
6) *Observation 2*. This occurs during the last half of the lesson and has a focus on transitions and lesson closure. Again pre and post meetings are held to establish a teacher focus for the observation and follow up of the lesson. This occurs mid-way through term three.
7) *Student Feedback*. This occurs mid-way through term four. The buddy visits a different class toward the end of a lesson and completes the student feedback process with a summary, then given to the teacher.
8) *Review and Evaluation*. This is a review of the year. It examines how the PD Plan is progressing and identifies possible goals for the following year. Commendations and recommendations are made at this point by the supervisor, in discussion with the teacher. This usually occurs toward the end of term four.
9) *PMS sign off*. This is usually when attestation is completed. It signifies the end of an annual cycle, thus meeting the MOE's performance management requirements. It is to be noted, however, that this aspect can be completed at any stage during the cycle, which is often necessary as many teachers did not start their teaching career at the beginning of the year, meaning they have different 'anniversaries'. The prerequisite for this step is that there has been a 12-month cycle prior to attestation. So as long as the appraisal cycle above is being followed, then the attestation process can be legitimately completed on the anniversary date.
10) *Revise PD Plan*. This again is fairly straightforward. The PD Plan is modified based on the previous year's progress. This can be undertaken at the time of the previous year's review when goals are being set or at the beginning of the following year when potential PD opportunities are more readily available.

Alongside each cycle is the continuous process of on-going learning, reflection and quality evidence gathering:

1) *On-going learning.* This is part of the underlying philosophy of the RTC (Duncan et al., 2009) and is a key goal of the MOE through the Performance Management Systems (PMS) (Ministry of Education, 1997). In order to improve teacher practice, teachers need to continue to learn and develop new skills. This does not mean that old skills become obsolete but simply that skills evolve and broaden as a teacher progresses through his or her teaching career.

2) *Reflection*. This is again a critical area of all aspects of a teacher's practice. A key finding from this research is that it needs to be very formulaic to start with to get teachers into the habit of reflecting on what they do (which they are reasonably good at) and why they do it (which they are not so good at). In providing reflection questions within this research process and using the reflection questions associated with the RTC, the process has been supported and encouraged. Putting structures such as the PD Reflection Log in place to assist teachers has also aided this process.
3) *Quality evidence collection*. It is not the quantity of evidence that matters but the quality. Teachers in this research were beginning to recognise that one piece of evidence could support more than one of the RTC thus making evidence collection more focused and relevant. Significant, meaningful, relevant items are collected and changed as the teacher develops their practice.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research set out to discover *how* appraisal might be redefined and *how* teachers might gain ownership, not *if* they were possible. For this to happen, several aspects must first be in place. First, there must be a culture of trust and care. This allows teachers to 'take chances' without fear of retribution and through knowing that support and advice is there if it is needed. Second, there must be scaffolding in place on which to build practice – a skeleton for teachers to flesh out in their own ways to demonstrate effective practice, reflecting their individuality as teachers but also ensuring that certain stages or criteria are met. Third, there needs to be information available to assist with PD planning, advice and guidance. Often this comes from a person who has responsibility for this aspect of performance management. Fourth, there needs to be perseverance. For change to happen and to be retained, appraisal needs to be revisited regularly and kept in the forefront of each teacher's mind. Finally, there needs to be in place a process where teachers can 'have their say' about changes made and processes undertaken so that they have a sense of ownership of the 'big picture' as well as their place in it.

It has to be noted here that while there has been a change in focus and PD is more central to the appraisal process, there is still a long way to go before this change is consistent across the school. As with any large institution, the change process can be slow and it will take some time before all staff have achieved the intended goal. Portfolios have the potential to both support and strengthen the appraisal process but this requires 'buy in' from all staff. A small number of teachers still feel there is too much to do to 'complete' them and some staff are only making a token gesture at completion. Both these groups are minorities.

There are implications from this research, both for the school and the wider education community. The school now has an improved performance management system that provides scaffolding for teachers to build their professional development and learning. Also, several staff members took up the challenge of continuing their own studies through university based on their experiences and my role modelling during this study.

The implications outside the school are far reaching. This system has the potential to be adapted into almost any educational institution from early childhood

to secondary. During the research process, I discussed my ideas with a colleague who runs several early childhood education (ECE) centres. She has used the processes developed in this research to modify her own appraisal system into a portfolio-based reflective practice that is inclusive of all staff, demonstrating the potential of this redefined process. This modified system could meet MOE and NZTC requirements in one simple structure. It could also provide the impetus for promoting collegiality and collaboration within schools, with the ultimate aim of developing learning cultures.

At a policy level, this research does seem to indicate areas where changes could be made:

- *Time*. More time should be made available to teachers in order to be able to undertake professional development and to ensure they can give adequate attention to the requirements of the PMS;
- *Training*. This should be provided for all senior and middle management in schools to ensure greater consistency within schools and across schools in relation to the performance management of staff;
- *Standards*. There should be only one set of standards – be they the professional standards the MOE and the Teachers' Unions have developed or the RTC developed by the NZTC; and,
- *Funding.* Targeted funding needs to be available not only for initial PD but also follow-up sessions to facilitate embedding of learning. This money could also be used to help train senior management and staff in charge of appraisal.

Finally, apart from those mentioned above, there are three other recommendations from this study:

- *Portfolios*. The system set up through this research provides a generic portfolio of core documents that both scaffold and support a teacher's learning and development. The portfolio allows teachers to individualise the folder and to collect evidence that they see as worthwhile and relevant to them.
- *Time*. This needs to be built into daily, weekly, termly schedules to ensure teachers have the opportunities to share their work, discuss issues and challenges, and reflect on their practice. While this is important for individual teachers, it is vital for those supervising others as well. Many teachers with appraisal responsibility have more than one teacher under their charge. Managing the appraisal for a number of teachers and making the process meaningful takes time – time supervisors do not always have.
- *Teacher-in-charge*. This is an important recommendation from this research. Establishing this role requires the allocation of both time and funding. The position requires sufficient 'power' to make things happen and ensure processes are followed. However, it is also important that this person is seen to be approachable and have a detailed understanding of the expectations of a teacher.

Appraisal is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, if not used appropriately, there is little benefit. Teachers see it as additional work and of little value if there are not the supports and the structures in place to make the system effective. However, it can be a very powerful tool when used appropriately. Through schools it can support teachers in becoming better and stronger practitioners, and thus improve the quality of teachers. In achieving this, the flow-on effect is better learning for students. Having a structure or skeleton which teachers can 'flesh out' individually can help strengthen the overall performance management system. It is important to remember, however, that while this structure for appraisal has been put in place and while is it mandatory for teachers to comply, it is equally important that teachers *must develop their own processes* for evidencing the RTC throughout the appraisal cycle. Greater ownership of the process is the result, with the flow-on of improved teacher practice.

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While looking into her next foray into study, she is enjoying some ‘family time’ and reading books other than research texts!

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