

Teacher Appraisal: Through the eyes of beginning teachers

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Abstract

This paper outlines the results of a study that sought to reveal the understandings of beginning teachers in relation to how data is gathered in the process of their compulsory teaching appraisal. In Queensland Australia, the context for the research presented here, beginning teachers undergo appraisal at the conclusion of their first year of full time employment. This appraisal is conducted by their primary supervisor, usually the principal. The results reported here indicate that beginning teachers believe that appraisal data is gathered by the principal through a number of specific approaches. These approaches are outlined along with a series of recommendations for the principals who are responsible for beginning teacher appraisal.

Introduction

In education systems throughout the world there is a shared desire to identify and replicate 'good' teaching. To this end, the large majority of teacher registration organisations and employers of teachers continue the search for an accurate system that recognises and rewards competent teaching performance. Throughout the western world, teacher appraisal schemes continue to create discussion and debate. While American schools debate the wisdom of regular, compulsory teacher appraisal, teachers in the UK are forced to deal with the debilitating effects of mandatory appraisal of competence (Ingvarson & Chadbourne, 1994). Similarly, Australian education bodies are involved in the complex process of developing a nationally recognised set of professional standards for teachers (Board of Teacher Registration, 2002), on which accurate appraisal may be conducted.

The available research on beginning teachers reveals a substantial number of issues including the transition from university to school, teaching concerns and a range of developmental stage theories. These theories argue that teachers experience professional growth in a sequential series of stages from pre-service practice teaching to later career teaching. Most stage theories locate early career teachers at the beginning of the continuum, and suggest that these teachers are identified by their limited classroom experience (Berliner, 1988; Kagan, 1992;

Kuzmic, 1994; Steffy, Wolfe, Pasch, Enz, 2000). For the purpose of the research presented here, beginning teachers are defined as those who have completed or are about to complete their first year of full time employment. This definition of time sits nicely with the formal judgement of beginning teachers' competence at the conclusion of their first year of full time service.

Close scrutiny of performance is an accepted part of the profession for early career teachers in Australia. Specifically in Queensland, the context for the research presented here, beginning teachers are required to serve a twelve-month period of provisional registration, before they are formally accepted into the teaching profession. This process is a prerequisite for all beginning teachers and is overseen by the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration. In Queensland schools, responsibility for the appraisal of beginning teachers rests with the principal (Invarson, 1989). This important task therefore requires beginning teachers to be judged against a set of criteria contained in a checklist and interpreted by the supervising principal. The focus of the research presented here is in gaining an understanding of the appraisal process as experienced by this group of early career teachers.

Background to the study

After a twelve-month period of provisional registration, beginning teachers are formally appraised by their principal on behalf of the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration. On the report form, the principal makes comment on a number of teacher characteristics before making a recommendation as to whether the beginning teacher is deemed competent. A positive report enables the beginning teacher to achieve full registration. Alternatively, the beginning teacher is considered not yet competent and is required to undertake more teaching under provisional registration. Each of the beginning teachers involved in this study had experienced a successful appraisal report and moved to full teaching registration.

An analysis of beginning teachers' responses to the question "how did your principal know that you were competent?" forms the cornerstone of this paper.

The results provide an explanation of beginning teachers' beliefs about the appraisal process, specifically, how their principal gathered information that contributed to a formal judgement of the beginning teacher's competence. In essence, the paper highlights beginning teachers' understandings of how their competence was appraised.

Methodology

The primary focus of the research on which this paper is based was to reveal the conceptions of competence held by beginning teachers. However, it is almost impossible to discuss competence without some exploration of appraisal, as it is the appraisal process that seeks evidence of competence. It is the secondary focus – the beginning teachers' understandings of appraisal that is of interest here, although the methodology discussed was responsible for the elicitation and analysis of both beginning teachers' conceptions of competence and their conceptions of appraisal.

Traditional research of teacher effectiveness has tended to study only isolated dimensions of the performance of the teacher, with methods usually focusing on something other than the thoughts and ideas about the content of the teaching itself (Kroksmark, 1995). In a departure from the traditional methods of researching elements of the teaching and learning processes involved in formal education, the present study adopted a phenomenographic line of enquiry because phenomenography can assist those interested in education, to be conscious of the complexity of the phenomenon of teaching. After all, the basic premise of this methodology is that the world is not just the world, but the world as experienced by someone (Marton, 1996). As the object of a phenomenographic study, it is the teachers' conceptions of their teaching that take centre stage and it is only when these conceptions are "embedded in the teacher's real world that they become logical and comprehensible" (Andersson & Lawenius, 1983, p. 8).

Phenomenography is ideally suited to the research presented here as it not only assists in the revelation of individuals' conceptions of a given phenomenon, it

also identifies the variation that exists between and among the recognised conceptions (Velde, 1997; Pong, 2000). Analysis of phenomenographic data produces an outcome space detailing the variation in conceptions of the phenomenon under investigation. This outcome space represents all possible ways that groups of individuals may conceive of a phenomenon. Only when conceptions, and the variation between and among them have been identified, may researchers glean a complete understanding of how these groups experience aspects of the world around them.

Data for this type of research is usually collected through individual phenomenographic interviews that are taped and transcribed (Velde, 1997). The interview utilises a small number of questions to elicit rich, descriptive accounts of how the phenomenon under investigation is experienced by interviewees (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). In the research presented here, beginning teachers were asked to respond to the following question: "How did your principal know that you were competent? How was the evidence collected?"

After transcribing the audiotapes of the 19 individual interviews, the iterative process of phenomenographic analysis revealed five conceptions of appraisal as held by the beginning teachers in this study. The following section of this paper outlines these conceptions and provides supporting examples from the transcripts.

Results of the study

The results of this study suggest that the process of appraising beginning teachers is neither straightforward nor clearly mandated. Although being supplied with some basic guidelines from the Queensland Board of Teacher Registration, principals are largely responsible for the decision, and for the collection of the data required to make the decision. It is beginning teachers' beliefs about the collection of this data that provides the main interest of this paper.

The responses of participating beginning teachers reveal that principals undertake the appraisal process to collect information about competence in a range of ways that are described as follows:

- *Appraisal is inspectorial* – the beginning teacher believes that the principal gathers appraisal data through judgement of teacher performance.
- *Appraisal is observational* – the beginning teacher believes that the principal gathers appraisal data through general observations.
- *Appraisal is consultative* – the beginning teacher believes that the principal gathers appraisal data through consultation with others.
- *Appraisal is incognito* – the beginning teacher believes that the principal gathers appraisal data through informal methods, most frequently without the knowledge of the beginning teacher.
- *Appraisal is blind* – the beginning teacher believes that the principal does not gather appraisal data and makes a decision with no evidentiary basis.

Approach one: Appraisal is inspectorial

According to the participants in this study the inspectorial approach is the most formal of the processes used by principals to gather information about the competence of beginning teachers. Within this approach principals use prearranged discussions, meetings and classroom visits to determine beginning teachers' progress. These occasions are generally predetermined by the principal and then conveyed to the beginning teacher, although at times negotiation takes place prior to the publication of a schedule. The purpose of the meetings and visits is so that principals can see and hear first hand, how beginning teachers are adapting to their new professional responsibilities.

Part of the inspectorial appraisal approach may involve formal inspection of the beginning teacher's planning documentation.

This is to do with planning. With my planning, my principal just, I suppose, just wanted to see the overview of what we were doing. I still did detailed English units, Maths, Science, Social Studies and

reading scheme etc. And that was plus the weekly one, I suppose. And that was, sort of my principal could actually see from that, that I was competent in that regard. [Interview 1, Male].

Another element of the inspectorial approach involves predetermined visits to the classroom of the beginning teacher for the purpose of a 'lesson observation'. Very often, these lessons are scheduled early in the term or year so that the beginning teacher has every opportunity to be prepared.

Well, he (principal) came – at the start of the year he said like as part of my probation I had to have twenty lessons observed. He'd be there twenty times in the classroom. [Interview 14, Male].

In addition to gathering appraisal information from observation of planning and classroom behaviour, principals use meetings and discussions with beginning teachers in an attempt to make judgement of their competence. For some beginning teachers, regular formal meetings are a prerequisite of their first year in the classroom.

In summary, beginning teacher reaction to the inspectorial approach to appraisal is that it is almost second nature. This is perhaps due to their recent transition from an undergraduate teaching program that required close scrutiny and judgement of their competence. Regardless of the type of procedure described, beginning teachers take this appraisal approach very seriously. Although based on quite a traditional model, inspectorial appraisal is obviously a widely used means of gathering data from which to make judgements of beginning teacher competence.

Approach two: Appraisal is observational

The essence of this approach to appraisal is that principals form opinions about the competence of beginning teachers through observations of the beginning teacher's involvement in a range of school activities and events. These

observations are not made at prearranged meeting times, but rather on an ad-hoc basis throughout the year.

Beginning teachers may be observed in the general conduct of their classes. In fact, they seem quite aware that their performance will be closely scrutinized during their period of provisional registration. Beginning teachers believe that principals are making ongoing assumptions about them, based on what is seen and sometimes heard.

Yeah. She (principal) says if she can hear us downstairs we're gonna be too noisy. You know like, its just a bit of a joke but at the same time you know that within that school you would not be expected to exceed a certain noise level. You know like, if it's distracting other teachers, it's distracting other things. [Interview 16, Female].

Although these observations can happen within the classroom, beginning teachers understand that their performance outside of the classroom will also provide important data for their appraisal. When questioned about the types of observations that principals made as part of the appraisal process, one beginning teacher explained that “generally it was more of what I did outside of the classroom than inside. Like that (principal) got to know me.”

Beginning teachers believe that principals are looking for much more than expert pedagogy. Principals make frequent and constant observations of how beginning teachers conduct themselves in all aspects of the profession, including interaction with members of the school community.

Probably informally observe like their rapport with children and how they deal with the other children at school as well as their own children. And how they deal with the parents in the school. [Interview 15, Female].

Principals' opinions of the competence of beginning teachers may also be influenced by the beginning teacher's level of involvement in school activities and events. Beginning teachers maintain that they will be more favourably appraised if they make an effort to involve themselves in a range of extracurricular activities "coaching sports", "turning up to meetings", and "singing in the morning".

I guess the way you participate in school functions. Like involvement in committees and your point of view towards things in the school. Things you have achieved like the Level 1 computing and just, I've done that so I guess that I've proved that I can do that.

[Interview 3, Female].

According to beginning teachers, principals gather appraisal data through a series of observations, the results of which are used as evidence of competence or incompetence. During their first year of employment, beginning teachers are closely monitored by the principal both inside and outside of the classroom. It is the belief of the beginning teachers involved in this study that such observations assist the principal with the process of appraisal.

Approach three: Appraisal is consultative

At the core of this approach is the belief of beginning teachers that principals consult with others prior to making any judgements regarding competence. Beginning teachers maintain that principals are not alone in the appraisal process. Rather, their decision is influenced by the opinions of other members of the school community.

At the forefront of the list of individuals consulted for an opinion of the progress of beginning teachers are the *teaching partners*.

I: Tell me some of the ways you think the principal may have got information about you.

BT: Just well through the staff and like I think the teaching partner I have beside me. I think like they'd talk to each other. And I think I've got a pretty good working relationship as well. I used to go to her with my planning and ask her questions and that. I think she could realise that I could handle it.
[Interview 14, Male].

Evidence from the transcripts suggests that beginning teachers are neither insulted nor distressed by this consultation, but consider it a natural part of their period of provisional registration. In fact, beginning teachers accept that principals will consult with most school community members with whom the beginning teacher interacts. Teacher aides are often an important source of information about the beginning teacher's classroom performance.

And she (principal) was also in contact with the teacher aide that I had as well. You know, just asking various questions. This and that and how she thought I was going. [Interview 1, Male].

First year teacher mentors are also seen as able to supply information to the principal.

I: So you had some meetings?

BT: Yeah, just, well that was mainly through our mentor. It wasn't actually with Mark (principal). Our mentor had like chats with us. Then I would assume that that went to him.
[Interview 4, Female].

Another group who is consulted regarding their opinions of the progress of beginning teachers is the teaching staff. Beginning teachers agree that this information is gleaned by the principal through "chatting to some of the other teachers ... casually about what they felt..." These inexperienced teachers understand that their more experienced colleagues may be invited to express an opinion.

I: How did your principal get information about your competence?

BT: I think a lot of it would be word of mouth. Because we're in a closed environment in some ways. I work closely with six other people and all the subjects are team taught. I think they'd have a fair idea what sort of teacher I am just from that.

[Interview 11, Female].

Another group who may have input into the principal's deliberations on the competence of beginning teachers is the students. Beginning teachers believe that principals, although not formally interviewing the students, are interested in what they have to say about their learning experiences and the conduct of the classroom.

*I mean everybody is going to have a problem in the classroom. But if you're having **major** problems and **major** conflicts with students, I think that would probably be detrimental to the way the Principal would look at you. But if you seem to be getting on well with the kids. And you seem to have a handle on everything. You're not panicking and freaking out Monday morning. You know, that would probably have a big, you know, a big weight on your judgement.*

Yeah. [Interview 8, Female].

Another influential group with whom the principal may consult is the parents. Beginning teachers have a strong belief that the parents of their students "definitely do talk to different people including the principal" about their opinion of the beginning teacher.

I: It's not a private profession anymore, is it?

BT: No. No, it's not. It's out there. And I do get a lot of parents coming in and helping and all that. And, yeah, so they might, you know, say something to the principal about what may have happened. [Interview 1, Male].

Beginning teachers acknowledge that as the “new kids on the block” they will be closely monitored by a range of school personnel and visitors to the school. They also understand that the principal may consult with these individuals or groups, prior to making a decision on the beginning teacher’s competence.

Approach four: Appraisal is incognito

Beginning teachers appreciate that it is the duty of the principal to gather enough information to make an informal decision about their competence. They are also aware that much of this information is compiled without their direct knowledge. Beginning teachers acknowledge that principals have a “sixth sense” about possible problem situations and that they often “wander the school” to ensure that problems are kept to a minimum.

Without being obtrusive, or trying to unsettle the beginning teacher, principals are able to move around the school knowing that their presence may have a settling influence on the behaviour of the students. During these “walks” principals can see and hear what is happening in the classroom and how the beginning teacher is coping with their new responsibilities.

I think sometimes you can get a decent picture if you’re just walking past... You’re not going to walk past my lesson every time I was teaching. But, you know, just generally around the school, if you keep on walking past, might have a look in and see what’s going on. Whether you’re in control or whatever. [Interview 12, Female].

Beginning teachers are in awe of the subtlety of the principal in “keeping an eye on” teachers who are new to the school. They speak almost in espionage terms about the covert operations of their primary supervisor.

He was there but he wasn’t there. Like he didn’t actually come in and physically watch me teach but he would walk in every now and then. Every couple of days. [Interview 4, Female].

Accepting that they will be under direct and indirect scrutiny during their initial teaching experience, beginning teachers understand that it is the duty of the principal to "sus out" possible problems. Beginning teachers also acknowledge the skill of the principal in maintaining close contact from afar. Principals are almost intuitive in what they glean about the beginning teacher, even without being physically present in the classroom.

covert
phantom
presence

Beginning teachers are not intimidated by the covert operations of the principal and accept without question, this subtle means of collecting evidence of their competence.

Approach five: Appraisal is blind

A number of the beginning teachers involved in this study argue that their principal did not have adequate evidence to make an informed decision as to their competence or incompetence. These beginning teachers are definite in their opinions that their appraisal was conducted without even minimal supervision, observation or mentoring by any member of the school community.

I: Who made the final decision on your report? Was it the principal? Deputy principal? Your head of your unit?

BT: Head of my unit.

I: Head of your unit. So what we assume is that this particular supervisor, for want of a better word, makes, does an appraisal with some sort of judgement and says "now you are competent". Or we judge you to be competent. How do they know?

BT: They have no idea.

I: Okay.

BT: Because, in my personal experience with that process, I had no one observing my teaching. I had no one look at any of my reporting documentation. Yeah, basically I had nobody who knew what I was doing. The principal had never even been down this way. Oh no, I'm sorry, he came down to find

another teacher to give him a message. And I grabbed him, made him sit in a chair and told how to listen about how I wanting to get out of there. But that was about it. The deputy principal was the same. Never actually came in and visited the class or looked at any, at anything. So I mightn't have been able to do it. So no one really cares anyway. So, yeah, none of those top dogs came and had an interest. My teacher-in-charge observed when she had to. So when it came to that bit of paper, I was a little bit cynical, obviously. [Interview 5, Female].

Although being aware of their compulsory period of provisional registration, some beginning teachers are completely unaware of the procedures involved in the decision-making process. Many question the ability of the principal to make such an important decision where, to their knowledge, the principal has minimal awareness of the competence of the beginning teacher. These beginning teachers argue that their principals do not have an adequate understanding of what they have achieved during their first year of employment.

I've never been asked for any of my, any formal planning. I've had one program meeting and that was at the beginning of this year. Where I took along my planning. And took along my class program. And took along the IEP's of the kids. I took all that information along and didn't open my book once. I spent three quarters of an hour talking to the Principal. And for the first time, I actually had feedback. In all the time I've been there, I haven't had any feedback. [Interview 6, Female].

Some beginning teachers are quite sceptical of the whole process, stating strongly that "It's just a joke. It's a joke. To me it was a joke" and "He didn't really check up on me at all!" Another beginning teacher when questioned about how the principal knew that she was competent replied "I don't know how they think they know. They don't even really know me!"

It seems that for some beginning teachers, the appraisal process is a mystery and they have no idea how evidence is collected regarding their competence. Others actually question the notion that evidence is even gathered and wonder how an informed and accurate decision is possible. As such, they are cynical about the whole process, but do not make a formal complaint as long as the outcome is positive.

Recommendations from the study

Results of the present study suggest that although beginning teachers are aware of many of the ways that evidence of their competence is collected by principals, this is coincidental rather than by design. For many beginning teachers the process of their appraisal is quite a mystery, where they can only guess how their principal gets to know them well enough as teachers, to make an informed judgment of their competence. The very fact that some of these beginning teachers consider the appraisal process as 'blind', lends weight to a recommendation that the whole process is in need of greater transparency.

It is therefore recommended that in the initial stage of their period of provisional registration, beginning teachers are made aware of how they will be appraised. In this way, principals would meet with beginning teachers to provide details of how evidence of their competence will be collected. Additionally, a schedule of formal classroom visits should be made available to the beginning teacher. Naturally, informal 'drop-in' visits would still take place without prior organisation, yet knowledge of scheduled visits would at least enable beginning teachers to prepare in advance and allow them opportunity to display their professional capabilities. Equipped with greater understanding of the appraisal process, beginning teachers would at least be able to reduce their stress levels in one aspect of their initial year of teaching.

The second and most urgent of the recommendations posed by this study would see a revision and enhancement of the current process of beginning teacher appraisal. At present, this appraisal is conducted in quite a professional manner

by principals who largely have the best interests of beginning teachers at heart. The process, although adequate, has the potential to deliver much more. Currently, beginning teacher appraisal could be easily perceived as being 'done to them', rather than being 'done for them'. The research presented here argues that with some moderation, the appraisal process has the potential to become a powerful professional development tool for beginning teachers.

It is therefore recommended that beginning teachers be appraised periodically throughout their period of provisional registration and that the results of each appraisal act as stimuli for professional development opportunities. It seems quite pointless to appraise beginning teachers only at the end of their provisional registration, when regular feedback could provide them with a mechanism to enhance their competence prior to the final appraisal. Once again, closer collaboration between all parties involved in the process of appraisal would facilitate optimal results for each participant. For beginning teachers, opportunities to develop their craft would be provided whilst the benefits to principals would come in the form of a more competent beginning teacher workforce.

Conclusion

This paper reported the results of a study that sought to gain insight into beginning teachers' understandings of the process of their first year appraisal. Results of the study suggest that beginning teachers report several means by which their principals collect the information required to make an informed decision regarding teacher competence. Although the current system is generally well accepted by the provisionally registered teachers involved in the research, results of the study suggest that the appraisal process should be made more transparent. Additionally, it is recommended that appraisal of beginning teachers should not be an end in itself, but should act as a catalyst for the development and further enhancement of their professional knowledge and skills.

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