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Current and ideal performance appraisal: Employee perceptions in an Australian faith-based education system

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Key words: Teacher appraisal, teacher evaluation, school leadership, faith-based education

Abstract

This article discusses performance appraisal in an education system context. With teacher quality key to improving student performance, school education systems must consider the role of performance appraisal on both teacher and principal development and improvement. This article describes the perceptions of employees within a faith-based education system as to current and suggested improvements in performance appraisal processes. This study utilised a qualitative approach for research design, adopting semi-structured interviews to collect employee perceptions. The employees indicated mistrust in the present performance appraisal processes, noted inconsistent use of performance appraisal, identified a need for evaluator training, and suggested the use of both an internal and external person in the evaluation and development space. These faith-based education system employees indicated that a district wide approach to the performance appraisal process, with flexibility at the local school level, would be beneficial for both the respective schools and the education system.

Introduction

Research consistently shows that effective teachers are the key to improving student performance (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2007; Ferguson & Ladd, 1996; Hattie, 2002; Haycock, 1998; Jensen & Reichl, 2011; Maharaj, 2014; Nye, Konstantopoulos & Hedges, 2004; Rice, 2003; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Whitehurst, 2002). It would appear then, that ensuring teacher quality and implementing strategies that enhance teacher

development is of fundamental importance in any educational setting.

This would suggest there is still a place for effective performance appraisal in the education sector. However, as Smith and Kubacka (2017, p. 3) state, “Teacher appraisals, traditionally an instrument for continuous formative teacher feedback, are increasingly morphing into summative tools for high stakes accountability purposes”. Reports from the Australian education sector have identified that “Australia’s systems of teacher appraisal and feedback are broken” and in dire need of being addressed (Jensen & Reichl, 2011, p. 3). This echoes sentiments expressed globally that teacher appraisal systems are in need of being reformed to improve instruction by enhancing teacher development and quality of performance (Donaldson, 2009; Papay, 2012; Weingarten, 2010).

Performance appraisal is defined as “the ongoing process used for identifying, measuring and developing an individual’s performance in accordance with an organisation’s strategic goals” (Elliot, 2015, p. 102). This definition highlights three major components of performance appraisal: identifying, measuring, and developing educational performance. Unfortunately, it appears that the developmental component of performance appraisal, is given little or no weight in this process by school-based educators.

This research project explores educator’s perceptions of performance appraisal systems within a faith-based school education system. The effective implementation of performance appraisal within a specified context needs to start with a comprehensive understanding of these educator’s perceptions of the performance appraisal system. A better understanding of the evaluation and leadership development views of staff within this specific education system is required if a rational case for improvement of this practice is a desired outcome.

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Research in this domain is limited in that it is more often based in the Canadian and American contexts, rather than that of the Australian school context. More significantly, in the review of the school-based performance appraisal literature, no Australian faith-based education system studies were found. A gap in the literature has emerged, and a need for further research accessing the appraisal practices of the faith-based education context exists.

Literature Review

The terms *performance appraisal and evaluation* are often used interchangeably within the literature. The literature identifies a long and tumultuous history with regards to teacher performance appraisal, characterised by mistrust of teacher evaluation processes. Peterson's (2000) extensive literature review of over 70 years of empirical research on teacher evaluation concluded:

Seventy years of empirical research on teacher evaluation shows that current practices do not improve teachers or accurately tell what happens in classrooms.... Well-designed empirical studies depict principals as inaccurate raters both of individual teacher performance behaviours and of overall teacher merit. (p. 18)

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More recently, Dandala (2019, p. 8) suggests that “The lack of enthusiasm among teaching employees can be interpreted as a token of distrust in the [teacher performance appraisal] process”.

The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2013, p. 17) notes that “Combining the improvement and accountability functions into a single teacher-appraisal process is not straightforward”. As outlined by Papay (2012), while developing an evaluation system that can assess teacher performance accurately is important, if teacher evaluation is to benefit students, it must promote continuing teacher development. Evaluation processes that improve teacher instructional effectiveness are the aim, meaning more emphasis must be placed on the feedback component of performance appraisal and the ability of the process to drive continued instructional improvement. Yet studies of teacher performance appraisal tend to downplay the ability of effective appraisal to improve teaching practice, rendering one of its most important elements as a side component, often not followed up on, communicated or actively encouraged.

As far back as the early 1970s, Wolf (1973) reported that teachers felt:

that current appraisal techniques fall short of collecting information that accurately characterizes

their performance. They perceive the ultimate rating as depending more on the idiosyncrasies of the rater than on their own behaviour in the classroom. As a result, teachers see nothing to be gained from evaluation. (p. 160)

Many similar concerns have arisen over the years relating to the appraisal of teachers. Papay (2012) stresses that one typical concern relating to standards-based observations is that prior prejudices may subconsciously limit the effective evaluation of classroom teacher practice. Another relates to the lack of training many performance appraisers have had. Yet another suggests teacher performance appraisal, if not seen to be implemented appropriately, can represent a disturbance to school organisational climate (Dandala, 2019). Badly designed evaluation processes, and reports of little or no meaningful feedback (Weisberg, Sexton, Mulhern & Keeling, 2009) also regularly appear in the educational appraisal literature. The opportunity for appraiser bias is a well-documented concern in the performance appraisal process, yet Papay (2012, p. 129) notes that “Limiting bias in standards-based observations presents challenges because such observations rely on human judgements”.

Literature from the United States context identifies a number of education districts making use of a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program as part of their appraisal and teacher development initiatives (Johnson, Fiarman, Munger, Papay & Qazilbash, 2009). As Johnson et al (2009, p. 4) note of the PAR program, it is “a program to improve teacher quality by having expert teachers mentor and evaluate their peers”. The program utilises Consulting Teachers (CT) who conduct formal observations, keeping detailed records of teacher performance. This allows these CTs to provide support which will assist these classroom teachers in meeting teaching standards as established by the local school education district. It is well established in a number of districts nationwide, and has had significant success in the teacher development area.

The literature around teacher evaluation mentions a number of different time frames in which performance appraisal is identified to take place. Derrington and Campbell (2018) note in one US state that prior to 2011, principals were expected to evaluate each teacher once in every five years. The implementation of new policy in the 2011-2012 year meant principals were expected to then evaluate each teacher in their school on a yearly basis. Maharaj (2014), examining Ontario Canada's teacher performance appraisal, recommends that teachers be evaluated every two years.

Teacher performance and evaluation policies on a worldwide scale notes that numerous differences in implementation practice exists (Barzano & Grimaldi, 2013; Derrington & Campbell, 2018; Flores & Derrington, 2015; Larsen, 2009; Mango, 2013; OECD, 2013; Zhang & Ng, 2017). However, the most frequently utilised appraisal process remains observation-based, which is widely regarded as the best, given it provides the only setting in which all aspects of teaching can be observed (Dandala, 2019; Donaldson, 2013; Murphy, Hallinger & Heck, 2013; Zhang & Ng, 2017). It is through classroom observation that the evaluator can best take on an understanding of teacher effectiveness, as it allows physical classroom environment, student engagement and teacher standards of conduct to be considered (Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Zhang & Ng, 2017). While researchers encourage the use of multiple appraisal instruments, seeing this as having advantages over a single evaluation source of data, there are a number of other appraisal methods that are being used in various places. These include teacher self-assessment, student surveys, teacher portfolios, measures of teacher’s content knowledge, teacher interviews, parent feedback, student performance, and more recently, value-added models as a means of evaluating teacher effectiveness (Attinello, Lare & Waters, 2006; Danielson, 2011; Danielson & McGreal, 2000; Hallinger, Heck & Murphy, 2014; Kane & Staiger, 2012; Murphy et al, 2013; Peterson, 2000; Stronge & Tucker, 2003).

It would seem appropriate that for school leaders to develop staff, oversee and lead school improvement efforts, they too should be the subjects of performance management processes. In the past two decades the role of school administrator has changed significantly. The performance appraisal of school administrators is now more important than ever. However, Normore (2004, p. 288) identifies that “administrator evaluation has remained substantially unchanged” and are still clearly ineffective, focused on accountability requirements and not administrator growth and development.

Hall (2008) posits that leadership development should be every leader’s responsibility. He suggests that every administrative and supervisory job description should have leadership development as an essential job function, and the results of this should be included in performance appraisals. Other researchers such as McKinsey and Company (2010) support the idea that school leaders should be effective developers of people, arguing “High performing principals focus more on instructional leadership and developing teachers ... their ability to coach others and support their development is the most important skill of a good leader” (p. 7).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative orientation adopting semi-structured interviews to collect data and adopts grounded theory for the analysis of these interviews. The study is directed by the following research question:

What are the perceptions of those working within the private faith-based education system, relating to the role and process of the present performance appraisal system, and of potential future improvements?

The data for this study was collected as part of a larger research project exploring the perceptions of elements of school leadership development held by those working within this faith-based education system. Approval was granted to approach employees within a particular district of this education system. Data was also accessed relating to the perceptions of a number of system administrators. Interviews were conducted in a face-to-face setting at a number of school locations, with the interviews lasting approximately 30 – 40 minutes in duration. The interviewees provided written consent for the interviews to be audio-recorded. Twelve employees, from seven of the ten schools within this education system district, were invited to participate in the open-ended interview process, and all agreed to be involved in this research study.

The interview data was first transcribed from the audio recordings, and then subjected to grounded theory processes—an inductive process, “based on concepts that are generated directly from the data” (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 411). This allowed the textual data to initially be broadly coded, then these codes were refined into a smaller number of categories, and finally, these categories were mapped into substantive themes (Byrne, 2017).

Results

There was a general perception amongst all interviewees that at the present time, an ad hoc approach to performance appraisal exists in this education system. As one notes, “*I don’t think that there’s a consistent appraisal tool used across the region/district. I think every school is responsible for its own staff appraisal*”. This has partly contributed to employee perceptions which lack in confidence and support for performance appraisal in this education system.

One consistent aspect of performance appraisal in this education system, however, is that employees fear the process because it has been used in the past to emphasise teacher ineffectiveness, rather than emphasising the benefits of what effective performance appraisal can offer. This sentiment is

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strongly expressed in quotes such as:

I think there's also a massive fear with appraisal in our system. There's a fear that any weaknesses will be used and exposed as an opportunity for questioning employment and it's always said that it's not, but, in my experience of what I've seen, it is used often down the track as a piece of evidence to terminate someone's employment".

Appraisal done well would address this significant concern, and initiate a culture change relating to performance appraisal that respondents see as vital.

Interviews with present school principals made it abundantly clear that no performance appraisal processes for school leaders are currently in place. One experienced school principal, when asked whether leadership development should form part of the performance appraisal of school leaders, stated,

I haven't had a formal appraisal ever. I've done a lot of appraisal of those below me, but I've never had it and I think that is one of our weaknesses. I think we need that and I would value it, but it [performance appraisal] sort of gets up to a point and then it falls away. (Principal 1)

Asked the same question, another principal stated,

I think we all have to be open to appraisal and we all have to be open to feedback about where we're heading and what we're doing well and what we're not doing well, but also, what we're doing for the future of our school. Are we forward thinking? Are we identifying people that are the layers in our leadership system in our school? (Principal 2)

These comments clearly indicate that school leaders are open to being appraised and are open to what it could mean for them in their leadership roles.

Concern was also raised regarding the ability of the evaluator to accurately and fairly assess the teacher's performance. Quotes such as,

I also think in general with appraisal there is a fear amongst staff that sometimes the people appraising them don't necessarily have the skills to assess how they're going in a fair or relevant manner.... So there is a big fear there...

highlight that for a number of teachers there remains a question as to how well trained and objective the performance appraiser may be. Additionally, it was identified that "*personality clashes*" between the teacher and the appraiser could exist, and there were concerns from interviewees about this.

While the literature regularly utilises examples of education context performance appraisal systems making use of student data, those interviewed were quick to dismiss student input in the teacher appraisal process. One teacher noted that in their experience, something as mundane as "*the kids were hungry before lunch when they filled out the survey*" could skew student-based feedback in the appraisal process. These teachers appeared content for appraisal to continue being carried out by classroom observations, self-reflections of teaching and in many instances, principal involvement either by classroom observation or formal discussion. However, it should be noted that there was very little acceptance of current appraisal practices, but rather, a certain reluctant acceptance of the appraisal process as a compliance issue that left very little room for optimism around its use or benefits to them as classroom practitioners.

A key concern identified by staff in this research study questioned whether the school principal should be assessed on their ability to develop leaders in the school setting. Comments such as "*My observations tell me that most leaders want to protect their throne of power and keep a good distance between them and all of the potential threats....*" and "*I think things like their job security and seeing people that could come through as a threat and so on could actually be factors*" suggest that a number of teachers are sceptical about the willingness and desire of some principals to grow the capacity of their school leadership colleagues as a cohort. Others expressed a desire to see leadership development taken ownership of at the local district level, one stating,

I think it's something that the [educational entity] needs to take charge of in the way of professional development. I think it would be cheaper to do that. I think our leaders in our schools have already got a lot on their plate

raising an important question: Whose responsibility is it for the development and growth of leaders in this faith-based system? Indeed, many interviewees felt it could be the domain of the individual, the school and its leaders, as well as the education system's responsibility, suggesting some ownership of this is required at each of these levels.

Additionally, it was perceived that implementing an appraisal system on a systemic level, would help to assist system staffing, and could be used to help identify, and evidence leader readiness. Again, the challenges of this were noted, with system-based administrators asserting that with the national education entity having no real executive authority

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over system districts, rolling out such an appraisal system on a education system level would be difficult.

These employees perceive that improved performance appraisal would ideally enable potential leadership candidates to state their merits with respect to available leadership positions, envisaging that effective performance appraisal can support their suitability for leadership positions. They perceive that this use of appraisals can only be effective if there is a consistent, ongoing and regular performance appraisal process within the school setting. Comments such as,

I think that's where first of all the personal appraisals, that are done each year, or at least, should be done each year by the leaders in the school to identify what an individual teacher's strengths are, then looking at those strengths and seeing how they can be utilised, then I guess I imagine it being a bit like a pyramid where those names would then be passed on to the principal of the school, or the education director, where we would say 'these are the skills that we have in our schools in this [district], how can we utilise these skills as a system?'. And then, passing that on to the [organisational administrative level] so that there's, that identification process, and then also asking people, 'Are you interested?'

provide a picture of how these employees see the potential for effective performance appraisal to tie into both leadership identification and leadership development.

It was clear that these employees saw the potential of effective appraisal processes for this faith-based education system. An education system administrator at the national level stated,

I've just been jogged here, we were talking about the strategies that are being used, to encourage people to come into leadership; the appraisal system that we have, is being used to greater or lesser effect in different places. I believe there is huge potential in an effective appraisal system, prompting people into leadership, prompting them to focus their skills, so appraisal done well will be a great source of support for that. (System Administrator)

This evidences a number of benefits that an improved appraisal process could demonstrate as organisational improvements achieved.

Discussion

Teacher perceptions identified some frustrations with

the current performance appraisal processes they see taking place in their schools. These findings support the notion found in the literature that teacher appraisal procedures and their results have become ineffective compliance measures which have lost their meaning and intended purpose (Darling-Hammond, Amrein-Beardsley, Haertel & Rothstein, 2012; Derrington & Campbell, 2018; Murphy et al, 2013; Weisberg et al, 2009; Zhang & Ng, 2017).

Additionally, by implementing effective performance management practices and regular performance appraisal, a significant opportunity exists to begin identifying high calibre individuals who can be added to the talent pool of future potential leadership candidates and thus made eligible for intentional preparatory professional development opportunities. It was further seen that school administrators particularly, need to have appraisal take place, with potential benefits identified as a result of this.

While no consistent appraisal mechanism exists in this system, it appears commonplace in the literature for school systems, or districts at the very least, to utilise common practices. Interestingly, the most recent education system company strategic plan states their desire for the current timeframe to be a time for new beginnings, stating "This document seeks to start the 'wind back', a 'going against the trend' by seeking to actively pursue a de-escalation in the apparent compliance arms race currently in vogue inside the education sector....This changes now in <location>" (Faith-based School Company, Strategic Plan, p. 8). This faith-based education system district realises that,

Operationally, the ... schools of the faith-based district are advantaged when they work together as a system, in alignment and in direct partnership: like 1 school with [multiple campuses]. Not homogenised, but in harmony with the collective mission: locally relevant and corporately aligned.

(p. 8)

Given this, it would appear to be an appropriate time to consider performance appraisal practices at a systemic level, given the ad hoc nature of the current appraisal systems identified to be in use by interviewees in this study.

While the ideal is to generate a nationally consistent appraisal system across regions, the current structure of there being nine education companies presents a significant challenge to the development of a widely utilised, consistent appraisal system. The national head office of this faith-based education system has no real governance authority to generate 'buy in' to such an appraisal system,

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meaning each of the nine respective education companies would not have to make use of such a system, decreasing the likelihood of successfully implementing a consistently used appraisal process. Politics have long been identified as an organisational context element arising in educational performance appraisal, with Zhang & Ng (2017, p. 199) stating that a “sophisticated political understanding of how to structure the development and implementation processes to optimise the support of various stakeholders” is required to implement an effective appraisal system. Other studies have identified the role of politics also, indicating that effective appraisal systems need to be both technically sound as well as politically viable (Bridges & Groves, 1999; Kyriakides & Demetriou, 2007; Stronge & Tucker, 1999).

It is important to note that while ineffective teacher appraisal efforts are often chalked up to flawed appraisal instruments, the real concern is primarily organisational, rather than technical. McLaughlin and Pfeifer (1988) assert that the most critical obstacles to effective teacher appraisal tend to be teachers’ and administrators’ attitudes toward one another, the role feedback plays in the process, and the purposes of appraisal. The egalitarian culture of schools, what Donaldson (2013) called the ‘culture of nice’, also limits the effectiveness and use of performance appraisal, due to evaluator’s reticence to give critical feedback or rate poor performance. Literature identifies that some principals, the most common evaluators of teacher performance, remain unwilling to identify teachers who are not meeting appropriate teaching standards (Johnson et al, 2009). There may be value in having external evaluators take part in the appraisal process, working alongside the principal.

While we have focussed on elements of performance appraisal, it is important to keep in mind that teacher evaluation allows another component of performance appraisal to surface – that being teacher improvement. One of the key purposes of teacher evaluation, as outlined by Papay (2012, p. 133) is to “improve instruction by developing teachers’ instructional capacity and effectiveness”. An emphasis on the feedback provided to teachers would allow teachers this opportunity, by identifying areas of strength in their teaching practice, as well as areas that need improvement, so initiating conversations around professional development needs at individual or school levels. Papay (2012) asserts, “The evaluation system can and should be seen as a professional development tool and should be evaluated on its ability to raise instructional proficiency and student learning” (p. 133).

Not a single interviewee indicated that change would not benefit the performance appraisal process utilised in their education setting. These findings raise

a number of questions that are important for system and school improvement. Where is the vision for where performance appraisal could go and how this education system could benefit from it? What stops us considering what it could become in this faith-based education system? What if this faith-based education system better encouraged our teachers to become leaders, and our leaders to grow more leaders? Is there currently another need higher in priority than to be developing leaders, when this faith-based education system, like other education systems globally, is experiencing a leadership crisis? (Bennett, Carpenter & Hill, 2011; Williams & Morey, 2015; Williams & Morey, 2018). What if this education system stepped out in faith and embraced honest, professional conversations, acknowledging it needs to create a new culture that reconsiders the purpose of this education system, and prioritises the growth and development of both teachers and leaders? Would appraisal still be perceived as “a dirty word” then?

Recommendations

This research study strongly identifies that a mistrust has developed over time about the purpose and use of performance appraisal in this faith-based education system. Any attempt to return performance appraisal to the tool that provides so much organisational and individual benefit, starts and ends with gaining the collective ‘buy-in’ of staff. Eliminating much of the subjectivity and potential for bias that currently exists would be a crucial first step. In considering elements of implementing an evaluation program, Papay (2012) recognises that this would be contingent on developing a high-quality, standards-based appraisal system with clearly defined rubrics that identify what constitutes success against these standards. Those tasked with the role of evaluating teacher performance must be well trained, knowledgeable about effective practices as defined in the teacher and principal standards, and be able to evaluate observed practices to determine how well teachers are meeting these standards.

The teaching standards most commonly referenced by employees in this research project were those of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL). These standards have particular relevance because not only are they representative of the Australian education context, they also include professional standards for both teachers and school principals. The development of these standards was informed “by extensive research, expert knowledge, an analysis and review of standards in use by teacher registration authorities, employers and professional associations across Australia, and significant consultation” (AITSL website). Staff interviewed in this research project

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importantly identified that in addition to these teacher and principal standards, there would need to be added standards relating to the special character of this faith-based education system. This was seen by staff as the preferred initial consideration with regards to the development of an effective performance appraisal process in this education system. Rieger (2011, 2017), referencing the National Professional Standards for Teachers and Principals, has proposed, for faith-based schools an additional domain “Teaching Ministry” and provided specific profiles of standards and descriptors potentially informing appraisal system development. Utilising a standards-based appraisal system was also identified as likely to help eliminate any criticisms that evaluators are not knowledgeable with regard to grade level or curriculum subject area.

Based on the findings of this study, it recommended that school principal appraisal be implemented, highlighting the AITSL principal standard of ‘developing self and others’, given there exists a responsibility to lead and build leadership capacity in the local school context. It is recommended that a high-quality evaluator at district (conference) level be developed who is capable of making defensible assessment and judgements about the capabilities of the teacher and administrator, independent of them as an individual, based on the developed standards-based appraisal system. This individual would be solely responsible for the appraisal of the school principals in their conference, and also oversee the proposed teacher evaluation process. They would receive substantial training on the teacher and principal standards and how to evaluate staff against these, with emphasis placed on how to encourage and develop teachers and principals on how to improve their practice.

Additionally, identifying a number of ‘lead’ teachers within this education system, as defined by the AITSL standards, who could be trained as evaluators would aid in the appraisal process for classroom teachers. These lead teachers, ideally known as respected and expert teachers, would be provided release time from teaching and would take on a caseload of teachers in their geographic area, but external to their own school setting, who they would be responsible to mentor, assist and appraise. These lead teachers would observe classroom teachers, alongside the school principal, and provide detailed feedback on teaching practice, as well as offer support that they believe would assist them in meeting the standards as set out in the appraisal system. They would also keep detailed records about each teacher’s performance, completing reports and documenting each teacher’s progression towards or meeting of the identified standards. Completed

reports would be discussed with the individual teacher and then presented to the relevant administrators at school and district level. This may assist in the identification of future potential leaders where identified strengths indicate a potential for effective placement in administration. Adding to an identified pool of talent in this way while providing development and growth opportunities, ensures investment in the next generation of leaders, and assists in education system sustainability.

While a corporate education system approach is being recommended (and which appears consistent with the directive of this educational district), it is important to note that local variables must be able to be taken into account in any recommended or implemented performance appraisal system. It is recommended then, that key components of an effective appraisal system might guide, rather than mandate, an approach that fits the context of each individual school. Goe, Bell and Little (2008, p. 48) note that “Given that teacher contexts vary widely, it is essential that local input is considered when decisions are made about what to prioritise in a composite measure of teacher effectiveness”. Such an appraisal system has the potential to serve the two main objectives of effective performance appraisal: teacher accountability for professional practice, as well as incorporate teacher development and growth. **TEACH**

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¹Faith-based School Company is a term used to meet the ethics protocol requiring anonymity for the system researched.

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