

Developing excellence in 4 minutes

Rosalie McFarlane

Principal, South Auckland Adventist Primary School, NZ

Every day as you enter the classroom, close the door and turn to face your children, you are about to create something that will last longer than your career, perhaps even longer than your lifetime; a legacy built from the bricks of memory.

The legacy you leave

We tend to remember our teachers because what they do touches the soul of who we are and what we become. This is why Jesus speaks so strongly against those whose influence leads children to sin¹. Ironically, the teachers we remember most clearly are often the best and the worst. These recollections are usually vivid. It is no different for our students. Each day they are forming an opinion of us that they will carry around for the rest of their lives.

How would you like your teaching to be remembered? Would it be as a 'good' teacher or as a 'great' teacher? Or, might it be as an 'exceptional' teacher? If you were to overhear discussions about your teaching, or if you were to visit a website on which your teaching was being discussed, what would you want to be said, or written?

An exceptional teacher is not the product of chance or an accident of birth; an exceptional teacher is developed.

Developing teachers with blunt tools

I believe that most schools endeavour to support and develop teachers so they might become exceptional teachers. Unfortunately, many of the tools we have used are neither powerful or effective. As a result, principals and senior staff find themselves frustrated when professional development does not lead to a highly polished teaching force.

Inservice training carried out in isolation might, at best, allow teachers to carry one or two ideas forward into teaching practice. While there may be small adjustments in practice, ideas formed in isolation are unlikely to generate significant change in teaching practice. As a result, teachers may not be empowered to move forward and become exceptional teachers.

"The typical approach to formalised professional development is based on the assumption that there is one set of procedures that works for all teachers."² In this model, teachers are seen as a single entity rather than a group of individuals. Because teachers

are at different stages in their careers, information and skills that might be appropriate for a novice may be inappropriate for a teacher with more expertise.

Appraisal is promoted as a professional development opportunity that encourages reflection on practice. Unfortunately, all too frequently, appraisal focuses on compliance while masquerading as development. It is a 'one-size-fits-all' exercise. In addition, the manner in which appraisal is conducted creates an artificial environment where abnormal rather than normal practice is evaluated. Teachers may tweak the paperwork or do a late-night planning session to make sure they have a model lesson to 'show off'. Therefore, what is observed is not necessarily the norm. In situations such as this, feedback is given, but its effectiveness must be questioned.

Training, rewards, meetings, performance appraisal, mentoring, and observation all have a place in improving practice (Bodaken & Fritz, 2006), but they are limited.

Is it any wonder that the blunt tools we are using do not produce the changes in practice we hope for?

How can schools and teachers come together to develop exceptional teachers who provide exceptional education?

Research reveals the bottom line—teachers require direct, differentiated, sustained assistance. They need a process of evaluation and feedback which expands over time, which fits into the appropriate stage of their career, and they depend on appropriate interaction between themselves, their leaders and other professionals.³

Where the real power lies

Professor John Hattie (2003) eloquently and poignantly identifies the reality.

Interventions at the structural, home, policy, or school level is like searching for your wallet which you lost in the bushes, under the lamppost because that is where there is light. The answer lies elsewhere—it lies in the person who gently closes the classroom door and performs the teaching act—the person who puts into place the end effects of so many policies, who interprets these policies, and who is alone with students during their 15,000 hours of schooling.

I therefore suggest that we should focus on the greatest source of variance...[in student

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achievement]...that can make the difference—the teacher. We need to ensure that this greatest influence is optimised to have powerful and sensationally positive effects on the learner. Teachers can and usually do have positive effects, but they must have exceptional effects.

In the same paper, Hattie identifies the factors that have an impact on learning. This research makes it clear that the teacher is the single most important influence in improving learning. Two areas of teacher expertise—providing specific feedback and the quality of instruction—were identified as being highly influential (see Table 1).

You, the teacher, make the difference.

Although government authorities and school leaders might spend countless hours trying to address the variables that impact on the quality of teaching and learning in their systems, the combined efforts of all of these bodies exert less influence on learning than you, the teacher, can.

While external measures are applied with the aim of improving learning, change will only happen when we make the change. Being exceptional is in our own hands, for as teachers, we make the decisions behind that classroom door.

A new way forward: *The 4 minute walk-through*

The 4 minute walk-through is a unique adult learning process. It aims to:

- reduce the paperwork around teacher development;
- provide teachers with vicarious opportunities to reflect on personal practice;
- provide an effective framework that draws leaders into classrooms yet can be completed in limited time; and
- use performance appraisal as a meaningful tool upon which to build, through observation and collaborative reflection, a powerful, dynamic professional learning community—one teacher at a time.

The 4 minute walk-through is based on an industrial model where leaders of industry got down to the floor of their businesses and learned about the reality of the workplace from those actually doing the job. It is a tool that can provide rich data on what is happening behind classroom doors and provide insight into the reality of what is happening in classrooms. More importantly, it provides opportunity for teachers to reflect on their practice and its effectiveness.

Currently, school administrators face a real dilemma. It is difficult to ascertain what is actually happening once the classroom door has been closed. There exists no single ‘truth’ or perspective of what is going on as a teacher engages in teaching. Meaningful discussions of practice

are made more difficult by this lack of precision; consequently feedback is limited in its impact. In essence, *The 4 minute walk-through* uses a *new lens through which to observe teaching* and a *new voice through which to talk about teaching*.

In many ways, teaching can be likened to a photo mosaic. Traditional models of assessment or appraisal capture several snapshots of the teacher’s task. The engagement thus reflects only small portions of what occurred. As a result, discussion is likely to focus on specific, and at times, unrelated and isolated events which occurred during the period of observation or interaction. Using the mosaic metaphor, the appraiser might focus the discussion on an aeroplane, a doorway, or a red car—the micro-photos that make up the big picture. Misunderstandings may occur when the teacher, whose perspective and lens is very different, cannot understand the comments made by the appraiser.

The lack of data which is offered by a narrow series of snapshots means that there is opportunity for considerable mismatch between the perceptions of the teacher and the appraiser. *The 4 minute walk-through* process is designed to provide greater data, and more frequent snapshots of reality, thus providing for more holistic discussion and reflection on teaching and teaching practice. As a result, a more complete picture of reality is created.

A *Walk-through* is:

- a snapshot of teaching and learning in a classroom,
- an opportunity to gather rich data,
- a picture of what is,
- an opportunity to reflect on teaching and learning practice.

“Being exceptional is in our own hands”

Table 1: Factors influencing student achievement (Hattie)

Influence on Student Achievement	Size	Source
Feedback	1.13	Teacher
Student’s prior cognitive ability	1.04	Student
Instructional quality	1.00	Teacher
Direct instruction	0.82	Teacher
Remediation / feedback	0.65	Teacher
Student’s disposition to learn	0.61	Student
Class environment	0.56	Teacher
Challenge of goals	0.52	Teacher
Peer tutoring	0.50	Teacher
Mastery learning	0.50	Teacher
Parent involvement	0.46	Home
Homework	0.43	Teacher
Teacher style	0.42	Teacher
Questioning	0.41	Teacher
Peer effects	0.38	Peers

It should be noted that none of these implies a judgment on practice. It is about seeing what is. Over time what is seen develops a picture of learning in the classroom. Leaders and teachers alike can get a sense of what is really happening. From observing others, teachers will, more often than not, find themselves reflecting on their own practice and effectiveness in their own classrooms.

A *Walk-through* is not:

- an assessment or judgment of a lesson,
- an assessment or judgment of a teacher's practice,
- a written appraisal,
- data from which to give immediate 'feedback'.

The *Walk-through* protocol

Take nothing with you. Paper suggests evaluation. Don't make appointments. You want to 'see it as it is', not as it is set up for you. Enter quietly and make no eye contact with students or the teacher. Be as close to a fly on the wall as possible. There may be a need to ask about learning in step 2 but do this in a way that will keep the fly-on-the-wall illusion.

The Five Steps

These five steps may seem daunting at first glance, however, through strategic, well-trained observation, they should take a maximum of four minutes (sometimes less) to cover in a classroom.

As you spend your time in the classroom, use your observations to focus on the following areas:

Step 1: Student Orientation

Where are the students focused before they see you?

This question identifies how the students are being taught and managed in the learning process. Were they focused on the teacher, on individual work or on group work, or were the students not particularly focused? None of these foci are good or bad within themselves. They are simply an indication of what is happening in a room. Over time, for example, it might become apparent that a teacher prefers only one style of teaching. This would then be cause for further investigation and discussion to explore why it is the preferred practice.

Step 2: Curriculum Decisions

Three questions help focus on curriculum.

What skill / knowledge / content / strategy are students learning?

It is imperative that an observer is able to identify what is being taught. If someone coming into the room cannot detect what is being learnt, then chances are there will be students having the same difficulty. This observation is also a powerful way of

identifying if a teacher has planned a lesson. If what is being taught is consistent with the long-term plan, chances are that the teacher is prepared.

How do I know students are learning?

Answers to this question may appear obvious; however, attending and focus do not necessarily indicate learning. Are the students 'busy' or are they actually learning. Learning is demonstrated by an ability to describe, define or explain what is being learnt or by giving thoughtful responses—not merely attentiveness. It may be necessary to ask students what they are learning.

What level of thinking is the teacher taking the students to through teacher talk, questions, board work, student activities, or worksheets?

This question focuses on the level of thinking in Bloom's Taxonomy. Is the work mostly knowledge and comprehension or are the students using higher levels of thinking.

Step 3: Teaching Decisions

Three questions help focus reflection on the teaching decisions being made.

What do great teachers do that this teacher is not?

While the question may sound judgmental, it is not. It is a question that supports reflection on the observer's knowledge of teaching and what may have made the lesson more effective.

How is the teacher incorporating school-wide initiatives / thinking in teaching?

This question confirms the rigour of school-wide annual goals and targets and the extent to which they are taken on board by teachers. It also helps to keep the school-wide culture consciously in the minds of teachers as they are observing.

How does the teacher cater for non-routine students or learning?

This provides an opportunity for considering the students and situations that are outside what would normally be part of the school programme.

Step 4: Use of the Environment

How is the teacher using the room to deliver the curriculum and to enhance student achievement?

Consideration here is given to what displays are on the walls, who has done the work and the purpose and value of it being there. It explores decisions that have been made to enhance learning through the environment as a key teaching and learning resource. A well-intentioned, positive classroom environment can do a significant amount of the teaching.

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Step 5: Health and Safety

What obstacles / barriers exist which could cause harm or injury to the student / teacher?

This question asks the observer to notice any factors that may impact on safety in the classroom.

Further Dialogue

When the observation is finished, take a few moments of reflective time to write up what was seen. This data will form the basis of later discussions. The entire process is designed to encourage reflection.

Teachers need the opportunity to enter into quality professional dialogue and receive appropriate feedback. The difference between good and exceptional is the ability and opportunity for a teacher to reflect on practice. From this they can develop their practice to empower learning at the highest and most appropriate level. *The 4 minute walk-through* is about taking snapshots of reality, and then engaging in reflective conversations. The nature of these conversations will vary greatly, depending on the experience and expertise of the teacher. Over a period of time, a trend or pattern may appear or questions arise about the decisions

teachers are making and the criteria they are using when making decisions about curriculum delivery or instructional approaches. In any quality professional dialogue both parties are learners.

The 4 minute walk-through is one effective approach—perhaps more powerful than many of the blunt tools we currently draw on—that we can use to empower teachers to become exceptional.

Are you satisfied or do you want to grow? **TEACH**

Endnotes

¹ Matthew 15:5-6

² Marczyk (2001)

³ Interlead Consultants (2008)

References

- Bodaken, B., & Fritz, R. (August 2006). The managerial moment of truth. *The Systems Thinker: Building Shared Understandings*, 17 (6) 2-5.
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