Classroom Walk Throughs: Conversations for Change

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School leadership conversations that clearly focus on the learning of students need to be the subject of school improvement. The Principal as learning leader can model and use structured dialogue to establish relationships and connections. Leadership conversations need to fully utilise the tool of conversation to build relationships and at the same time, interrogate data related to student achievement. Developing physical and verbal rapport via questioning is a significant tool for enhancing changes to thinking.

The classroom walk through, originally developed by Downey et al (2004), is a planned and systematic approach to professional dialogue that supports teachers to reflect on and change their practice. As a result the teacher gains new knowledge and uses it to improve his or her teaching. When school leaders have a clear, objective picture of what is happening in the classroom, they can establish standards for practice, guide professional learning, support reflective dialogue, and develop best practice among teachers. A classroom walk through enables school leaders to effectively collect classroom observation data about the teaching and learning process.

The idea behind classroom walk throughs is about teachers and school leaders reflecting on teaching practices collaboratively through conversation. Classroom walk throughs engage school leaders and teachers in collaborative conversations as opposed to supervisor/employee conversations. The most important part of the walk throughs are the post walk through conversations. These conversations need to be focused on professional growth and reflection rather than conformity. The use of clarifying and probing questions to reflect on evidence of learning suggested by Earl and Timperley (2008) in these post walk through conversations encourage all professional staff to be involved in continuous reflective inquiry. These non-judgemental questions should encourage thoughtful dialogue and deeper thinking about lessons, curriculum, and teaching strategies. Classroom walk throughs are a formative assessment tool that should focus on improving school-wide program implementation and should be clearly linked to school strategic direction and resourcing.

Reflective discussions between the leader and teacher on the classroom walk through learning evidence leads to action planning, which informs instruction and classroom practice. Analysis of whole school evidence collected through classroom walk throughs provides professional development opportunities for individuals or groups of teachers, and suggests professional learning for the whole school.

This article describes how classroom walk throughs became a reflective conversational tool at Nightcliff Primary School, a large urban Northern Territory school. A particular whole school focus on the teaching and assessment of students reading was the subject of classroom walk throughs in 2008. The following steps were taken in turn to implement the classroom walk through process.

1. Setting strategic direction

The 2008 Nightcliff Primary School operational plan had a clear shared goal - that of developing shared practice around the teaching and learning of reading. At a professional development day in July, all teachers engaged in identifying reading achievement goals for each student and in particular targeted five students in their class for specific strategy application. It was anticipated that each targeted student would achieve their learning goals by December. The
leadership team decided that conversations about reading achievement, strategies employed, and improvement in student engagement particularly in relation to these five students, would become the classroom walk through conversation focus during Term 3, 2008.

2. **Sharing the picture of a classroom walkthrough**

The school leadership team had identified that they wanted the walk throughs to be conversations of trust rather than viewed as 'checking up on' compliance mechanisms by teachers. Discussing the protocols of the walk through at a staff meeting seemed a way to create trust. The following chart displays the classroom walk through process. Discussion of this chart was used as a conversational tool at the staff meeting.

*Nightcliff Primary School: Pre walk through planning*

- Understand the purpose of the walk through. Discuss the purpose of the walk through.
- Include the following points in the discussion;
  - The focus is on the reading, in a particular reading program that focuses on the five students identified during the data analysis process;
  - The activities the students have been working on;
  - The learning outcomes the students are working towards;
  - The kind of feedback to be provided: positive aspects of the program; other tasks and activities that could be part of the reading program.
- Who will participate in the walk through?
  - Identify the five targeted students who are part of the program.
- When will it take place? Day and time.
- How will you prepare for the walk through?
  - Have a range of work samples the students have completed available.
- What will you need to be doing at the time of the classroom walk through?
  - A reading lesson/activity needs to be in progress at the time of the walk through.

*During the walk through, what will be observed and what will happen?*

- The walk through will be pre-organised.
- Between 5–10 minutes will be spent in the classroom during the walk through.
- Observation will be for evidence that supports – or not – the planned reading program and strategies. Evidence can be by displays, work students are engaged in, student work in books or portfolios, teacher questions and responses. If student work is not displayed around the rooms, what is on display in the classroom?
- Interaction with the students will take place during the walk through.

*After the walk through*

- How will feedback be provided and when will this take place?
- Both warm and cool feedback will be provided with concrete examples and evidence from the walk through.
- You will need to come to the feedback session with evidence of learning (artefacts) to support the strategies you are implementing in your reading program to discuss.
- Comments will be phrased as questions where and when possible.
- Probing questions may be used during the feedback session.
- Suggestions for improvement may be provided.

Through the staff meeting discussion, trust was created because teachers were able to clarify that evidence of student learning was the subject of the evaluation. The focus would be on observation and interaction with the students over a very short time period spent in the classroom by leaders. After the staff discussion, dates and times were agreed on between the leadership team and individual teachers to begin the classroom visits.

3. **The actual walk through**

The classroom walk through happened with minimum interruption to learning. Initially school leaders looked for visible artefacts that supported effective teacher programs and also evidence of achievement towards individual target students' goals. These artefacts included: materials; whole class explicit instruction; small group explicit instruction; student centred learning; phonics awareness and vocabulary; fluency; displays of relevant student reading books; magic word reading lists; use of big books; use of guided reading groups; student engagement; off task activity.

Conversations with individual targeted students about what they were learning and what their reading learning goals were, also elicited powerful data about explicit learning in the classroom.
4. Reflection: Post Walk through Conversation between School Leaders and Teacher

A reflection conversation commenced with the quality picture the teacher held of reading practice in the classroom. The school leaders needed to listen to this carefully to establish rapport and trust and also to compare the picture of what the evidence gathered, showed of the ‘real’ classroom practice. These initial conversation questions were asked of the teachers, with the leaders giving positive feedback, to build trust in the process:

- What was your expectation of the learning in this lesson?
- What teaching and learning strategies and processes were occurring to positively achieve target individual reading behaviours and skills?

The school leader then offered positive feedback on visible artefacts that supported effective reading instruction.

The conversation then was facilitated to a deeper level, with the leader using clarifying and probing questions (Earl & Timperley, 2008) rather than giving the answers or asking questions that did not require either clarification or deep thought by the teacher. Clarifying questions were used by the school leader simply to clarify or check assumptions or understandings. Probing questions were used so the teacher could offer further or more in-depth information to the person asking the question. School leaders used these types of clarifying questioning techniques to encourage reflection on student needs:

- What are our students’ individual learning targets?
- What skills and language are students already on familiar terms with?
- What sources of evidence have we used to monitor student achievement towards individual targets?
- What skills and language do students need to learn and do?
- How do we progress what students know?

These types of probing questioning techniques encouraged reflection on teaching needs:

- What are our own specialised learning needs?
- How have we assisted students to achieve targeted outcomes?
- What do we already know that we can use to support achievement of targeted outcomes?
- What do we need to learn to do to improve targeted outcomes?
- What sources of evidence knowledge can we utilise to meet our learning needs?

The reflective one-to-one conversation between school leader and teacher was a powerful driver for school improvement. As one teacher stated “The conversation encouraged us to focus on our practice and really try to improve results. My targeted students are well on their way to achieving their reading achievement goal.”

5. Whole School Walk through Reflection

School leaders discussed the implications of the walk through with teachers at a staff meeting after the individual reflective conversations. The following threads were used as discussion starters:

- What are the overall trends in the teaching and learning of reading at Nightcliff Primary School?
- What has been the impact of our changed actions?
- How useful has what we have learned and done been in promoting our students’ learning and well-being?
- How can our whole school snapshot of reading via classroom walk throughs inform professional development and strategic planning in the school?

Summary

Classroom walk throughs are an empowering tool for critical reflection in a school because they “build a culture of critical reflection and learning for continuous improvement within their school community, maintain professional standards of teaching and allow school leaders and teachers to engage in critical reflective practices and contribute positively to a culture of continuous improvement” (NTDET, 2007, APIF).

The classroom walk through experience at Nightcliff Primary School has been encouraging for all involved and has resulted in a culture of developing shared language and expectation. A commitment has been made by all to utilise, expand and refine the process in 2009.

References