Why a Focus on the Teacher?

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The purpose of this special edition in short is to showcase not only the talented teachers and how they are influencing the future generations but more importantly, how expert teachers use action research as a vehicle for effecting school improvement. This special edition has its genesis from two camps. Understanding the work of teachers and the moving away from the one size fits all professional learning approach offers school leaders a more targeted approach to improving teacher performance. Secondly, the influence of Schon's (1983) ideas about reflection on practice centres the quest for school improvement squarely in the hands of the class teacher. Coupled with the focus of practical inquiry (Richardson, 1994), the emphasis here is the desire to improve one's own practice.

Introduction

Education across the world is seeing greater scrutiny on the role of the teacher as the focus on international measures like PISA, TIMMS and PiRLS offer comparative data on student achievement. The upshot of this spotlight is the identification and the subsequent examination of what effective teachers do to raise student attainment levels. Traditionally, teaching was concerned with the teacher controlling the learning environment; deciding the content, standing and delivering the learning, expecting to fill all students with the same knowledge, at the same time, using the same teaching tools.

Fortunately, education has evolved into a multifaceted array of pedagogies as we refocus our purpose for educating our children. The movement from the factory model of schooling[1] through to the knowledge economy era and now into the learning to learn era[2] has seen the necessity of the teacher continually learning new teaching pedagogies and skill requisites. The notion that all the teacher needs to know is taught at university has long disappeared. The onset of life-long learning practices, coupled with our graduated knowledge of how one learns, has forced the classroom teacher to keep up with new "technologies of and for learning".

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[1] https://digitalauthorshipuri.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/collins-halverson-3-eras-of-ed-chapter-6.pdf

[2] http://www.marktreadwell.com/marks_notes

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Towards Building an Outstanding School: Begin with the Teacher
"It is not the strongest of the species that survive, nor the most intelligent, but the one most responsive to change" Charles Darwin

Intuitively we know that effective teachers can have a lasting impact upon the lives of their students. Teaching is a complex craft yet parents can quickly identify the teacher they want their child to be with each year. They can cite various reasons why particular teachers are more suited to teaching their child than others. Teachers are change agents for learning in their classrooms and must continually adapt to their school context and the students in their charge. Effective teachers (Strong, 2007) identifies several specific characteristics of teacher responsibilities and behaviors that contribute directly to effective teaching. These characteristics can be divided into the following categories:

- The teacher as a person SEP
- Classroom management and organization SEP
- Organizing and orienting for instruction SEP
- Implementing instruction SEP
- Monitoring student progress and potential SEP
- Professionalism

There is now much written about the importance of the classroom teacher as the main agent of change and the key person that has the greatest impact upon student progress. Hattie (2012), through his substantive visible learning research concludes that the key to making a difference in student learning was making teaching and learning visible. This places the importance squarely on the shoulders of the classroom teacher. Supporting the work of Marzano, Marzano and Pickering (2003), providing clear strategies that effective teachers use to influence the learning process is Hattie's meta-analysis of the influences on learning (Hattie, 2008). How teachers decide on which strategies to use is dependent upon the quality of research into what is working and what is not in their classrooms.

Actively focusing on our own teaching practice leads the effective practitioner to teaching improvement when an action is implemented. This cycle of reflection, consideration of targeted instructional strategies to meet the learning needs of the students, implementation and evaluation of the teaching practice and then back to reflection is, (in itself), a form of action research.

Teachers engage in action based research daily in their classrooms. It is not a new phenomenon. Each day the classroom practitioner considers the evidence in front of him/her and then makes decisions and implements relevant actions. Whether grouping students or reflecting on assessment strategies or debating about the type of intervention strategies to us, the teacher is undertaking research.

However, teachers should not just happen upon classroom based research. It should not be left to chance for teachers to stumble upon data to guide decision making. Teachers need to be collecting evidence with a purpose in mind. In short, they should be focused on improving student learning and they need to attend to it in a systematic way.

Literature is rich with illustrations of how teachers as researchers have positive impact upon both schooling and student outcomes (Kincheloe, 2012; Mertler, 2008). These include:

- Raising student attainment levels
- Improving teacher practice
- Increasing collaboration across the school
- Fostering innovation and creativity in teaching
- Building learning communities

Evolving from the notion of action research, the teacher researcher focuses on a problem to solve or on an aspect of teaching and learning they want to change. The establishment of a question is the starting point for the researcher. It is from there that the systematic collection of evidence begins. The answers to such questions leads the teacher to engage in a change process and once the cycle is initiated, supports the path to school improvement.

Teacher Leadership: The Hidden Key
This new era for education (learning to learn) is founded on the expertise of the classroom teacher. As Hattie (2003) continually advocates, the teacher is the most important figure in raising student achievement in schools. Consequently, there is a need for teachers to take greater interest into how their performance in the classroom impacts upon student learning. Principals and school leaders alike advocate that a significant way to assess a teacher's effectiveness in the classroom is to critique their teaching performance. This includes not only what they do in the classroom but also the depth of progress their students make on achievement benchmarks.

At the heart of teacher leadership is the improvement of student learning. Reflecting upon and ultimately improving their own practice is a key feature of the teacher leader. Teacher leaders are at the forefront of coaching and mentoring other teachers. They are the vocal advocates for students and their families (Turner and Lynch, 2020; Madden et al, 2015).

As teacher leaders become more embedded in the school, the culture of the school begins to grow towards a wider collaborative enterprise. Teachers unconsciously begin working more collectively with their peers and focusing on student success. Teacher leaders are focused, determined and enthusiastic about creating the best conditions for learning.

Unpacking the Articles
This special edition illustrates that all teachers can be leaders and intentionally conduct research in their classrooms. The articles in this special edition provide insight into how teachers critically reflect upon their craft and ultimately, contribute to whole of school improvement.
In short, the flow of each article generally follows the simple six step research outline:

1. Identify problem/change to be studied.
2. Collect information from various sources and evaluate it

3. Configure a plan to address the issue.
4. Implement an intervention plan and collect ongoing data.
5. Continually analyze the data of the results of the intervention or change and make evaluations.
6. Implement a next step revised plan or intervention

Dr Maddens articles offers the school leader insight into four pillars for inculcating a positive staff culture. It sets up the foundations to allow teachers the freedom to inquire and reflect on their practice in setting the foundations for school improvement.

Bringing a whole of school framework to teaching and learning is the goal of all school leaders. Ambreen Mohammad's articles provides an inroad into the role of cooperative learning strategies and illustrates how the collaborative embedded professional development program can enhance a school's commitment to improved learning.

Asma Zaraf provides an outline of the process of how data can be used to inform teachers and in doing so, allow them to make informed decisions about student learning.

In Annie Madden's article the focus is on the role of the contemporary teacher librarian in supporting whole of school literacy programs. With the onset of the knowledge era and the progression into the learning to learn era, the engagement of the teacher librarian in meeting the learning needs of teachers as well as students is becoming a vital tool for schools striving to become outstanding.

Reem Rekieh unpacks the importance of not only assessment for learning but also analysing reading benchmarks to promote the coaching/mentoring of teachers in planning for intervention strategies. Using such a targeted approach has enhanced the literacy levels across the school. Tracey Cannon delves further into the early years of literacy learning with a report on the relationship between a creative writing strategy and students' self-assessments. Following this literacy pathway, Saiqa Zahoor reveals the road guided reading plays and the importance of matching reading texts to student reading and comprehension needs.

The complexities of teaching and learning within a bilingual environment are illuminated in the next few articles. Nassar looks at how students are supported when entering school with little or no English. This is followed by Jallad with an overview of a strategic framework for raising Arabic attainment and progress. On another level, Khantomani showcases how the link between school and home in a bilingual can be created through effective translation strategies.

Next, Hassan delves into how students can also be a vehicle for supporting school improvement practices through active engagement at the grassroots level. The focus of a student peer mediation program supports the notion of students leading students.

Knowing that effective teaching is strategically important to the learning process, Hastie et al. highlights how explicit instruction can be enhanced through the provision of a blended learning environment. The practicality of this article is explored further by Strydom where we understand the effect of virtual learning environments have in the second language classrooms.

Noting that success in schooling is not the sole domain of the school, Quinn highlights research that connects the parental support to the classroom teacher to support the intervention that targets student learning gaps. Showcasing student learning can be supported through the intervention of digital portfolios. Using an evidence-based approach, Harb brings together a pilot program where parents have immediate access to student learning. The outcomes of the project illustrate the positive power of parent (and teacher) feedback. Rounding out the triangle of feedback (ie, parent, teacher and student) is Macklin on how teachers' keep track of student work and the mechanism of written feedback in student copybooks. Jamal looks at the role of health and safety in supporting the teaching and learning program.

This edition concludes with Lynch and Madden with a summation of the teacher as researcher logic and its impact upon improving teacher performance.

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