

Feedback – *the breakfast of champions*

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Steve Francis understands the challenges and demands of being a Principal. He has led a number of Queensland State Schools from a one teacher school through to a large Metropolitan school. After 18 years of successful Principalship, Steve ventured with his family to Hong Kong as the Principal of an international school for four great years. He returned to Queensland to start a new business venture supporting leaders to reach their potential. Steve is passionate about work-life balance and supporting school leaders to reach their potential through a range of professional development programs. www.stevefrancis.net.au

Throughout my childhood I was led to believe that Weet-Bix was the breakfast of Champions. However, it was actually Henry Ford who is attributed with the saying '*Feedback is the breakfast of champions*'.

Feedback helps us improve by focusing our priorities. Through feedback we identify what is working well (*and therefore should be continued*) and what isn't working so well (*and therefore we should focus on improving*).

Feedback is seen as a vital aspect of improved performance in educational settings. Feedback to students on how they are doing and what they should focus on and feedback to staff on how they are doing and what they can focus on too. Establishing a feedback culture is essential to optimising the learning environment for children.

95% of people who work in educational settings want to do a good job. They are committed to continuous improvement and want what is best for the children.

However most staff are 'in the dark' and are not aware of what they need to focus on to improve. They operate in isolation. In most instances, the classroom teacher and aide work without feedback.

The *egg crate* analogy is generally alive and well in most early childhood settings. Individual teachers and assistants work away in their classroom with their own students. Day after day

they do what they think is right, with the best intentions, within the confines of their own class room. Many teachers and assistants continue to do what they have always done. They try to implement some of the initiatives they have learnt through professional development or through discussions with colleagues.

Giving feedback to children to help them learn is common in early childhood. We are used to praising the behaviour we like to see and highlight areas of need to help children learn.

However, giving colleagues, including teachers, feedback is not part of the culture in most learning environments. Changing that culture will inevitably lead to anxiety, barriers and resistance. The move to *de-privatise* classroom practice will be seen as *threatening* even to our best teachers and *terrifying* to our less confident teachers. Having a fellow professional observe us teach is not part of the culture in the majority of our schools.

Whilst acknowledging that it is a significant change in our culture that will bring with it anxiety and concern, the potential and importance of establishing an effective process that helps early childhood staff be the best that they can be, cannot be overstated.

High quality learning depends on high quality teaching. Aside from what students themselves bring to school, teachers and teaching account for the greatest level of variance of any other factor operating in a school. Hattie, 2003

The Hattie report continues to receive high acclaim. It confirms what many educators have believed for years. The controllable factor, that has the most impact on the success of student's learning, is the teacher. The quality of the day-to-day delivery of the art of teaching is therefore paramount to student learning.

As educators we espouse the importance of feedback as part of the learning cycle. Learning experiences are carefully planned, the series of experiences are provided to students, we assess their ability to apply the skills or content taught and then provide feedback to the student, with the aim of helping them make progress.

Whilst I believe that the de-privatisation of classrooms will initially be stressful for all concerned, and few would welcome any more stresses in teaching, there are also tremendous potential benefits that will ultimately boost staff morale and teacher satisfaction.

Through implementing an effective process that is intended to support staff to be the best that they can be, we can also provide REAL, relevant and specific praise for the great work that so many of them do.

The challenge is to move the focus from 'catching teachers out' to 'helping teachers be the best teacher they can be'. Don't get me wrong – I believe that we need high standards of professionalism. In valuing our students (and the vast number of highly skilled practitioners in our early childhood settings) we need to address the very small number of staff who are not of an acceptable standard.

The Grattan Institute report *What Teachers Want* noted the following alarming statistics:

Ninety-one per cent of Australian teachers report that in their school, the most effective teachers do not receive the greatest recognition. Nor does it recognise quality teachers or teaching, with 92% of teachers reporting that if they improved the quality of their teaching they would not receive any recognition in their school... Teachers and school principals report that problems in their schools need to be addressed. However, 63% of teachers report that the evaluation of

their work is largely done simply to fulfil administrative requirements. And 61% of teachers report that the evaluation of teachers' work has little impact on the way they teach in the classroom. (2010, p 4)

The Grattan Institute report concluded that teacher evaluation is not developing teachers' skills and the teaching that students receive.

I believe that if we can successfully change this culture, we will not only benefit our children but also boost staff morale through providing positive feedback and increasing the satisfaction that comes from teaching.

One of the key aspects of providing feedback to staff is to explicitly state what our expectations are. Whilst many organisations have position descriptions, they are often very 'dry' documents that include generic terms and inclusive statements. They provide very broad guidance about what is expected.

The most powerful step that leaders in early childhood settings can take is to lead the collaborative development of a rubric describing what is expected of each role within their setting.

A rubric for teachers for example, would identify the key areas that teachers should focus on, e.g. learning environment, learning activities, management of student behaviour, and relationships and communication. I like to call these 'the BIG Rocks'.

For each area (e.g. learning environment) descriptors are written into a four-step rubric. For the top level, write a description of what you would see in a fantastic learning environment. At the bottom level of the rubric, write what you would see in a very poor learning environment.

Through working together as a staff to clearly define and agree what quality looks like (*and doesn't look like*), we can provide clarity on what is expected. Being clear about our expectations or 'where the goal posts are', is the first step in providing helpful feedback. The other rubric boxes are used as a continuum to show

Very poor learning environment			Fantastic learning environment
Disorganised space that is not student-centred or inviting. Not student- focused. Student work not displayed and display opportunities not utilised. Hands-on resources not provided or not relevant. Many students not engaged or not on task. Noise level is disruptive.			Lovely, exciting and inviting learning environment. Student-focused. Colourful and attractive displays of student work. Interesting, enticing and relevant hands-on resources set up. All students actively engaged in learning and on task. Classroom noise reflects a happy and fun learning place.

progression from very poor to fantastic. Rubrics are powerful in that they not only highlight the current level of performance; they also show the next steps for improvement. The rubric is used to facilitate a discussion between the staff member and the person providing the feedback.

A similar rubric can also be developed to provide clear feedback about expectations of teacher aides and other staff.

The rubric is intended to provide REAL feedback to staff about how they are achieving and help them be the best they can be.

References

Grattan Institute. 2010. *What Teachers Want: Better Teacher Management*, Melbourne, Victoria.

Hattie, J. 2003. *Teachers Make a Difference: What is the Research Evidence?* University of Auckland, New Zealand.

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