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Research Associate Summary Report

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Exploring the links between performance management and improved standards

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Introduction

Appraisal and Performance Management (APM) has been a part of the national debate in education at various times over the past 20 or 30 years. Since its inception in 2000, the national policy on performance management for teachers has become the norm in almost all schools. Indeed by 2003, Ofsted found that 80 per cent of schools had implemented the policy to some degree (Ofsted 2003).

Surprisingly though, there has been little attempt to explore the connections between APM and improvements in levels of student attainment. Instead, published literature on APM in schools has historically focused on two main areas. Firstly, there is substantial evidence on the positive impact of appraisal on the continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers. At the same time, a second strand of writing has been concerned with the degree to which APM, as part of the wider new public management agenda, is motivated less by a desire to promote CPD and more by a push to increasing the accountability of teaching professionals (Jennings and Lomas 2001). Since the early 1990s, the greater emphasis has been on the former of these themes.

This study explores four secondary schools' experiences of how APM contributed towards improved learning outcomes in young people. The research considers the impact of APM on standards of learning, teaching and leadership in the four schools.

Methods

The four schools were selected according to differences in which they had implemented APM and variation in levels of value added (VA) by the school. All four schools were mixed comprehensives in challenging circumstances and were improving in line with the national trend. Leadership had been assessed by Ofsted to be a least 'good' in each school. Particular attention was placed on exploring the effects of the five key areas of APM, these being:

1. lesson observation
2. baseline data
3. target setting
4. CPD
5. objective setting (as in appraisal)

Data was gathered through interviews with headteachers, teachers and other staff in the schools. Fieldwork was undertaken during 2005.

The objectivity and therefore reliability of the research findings were assured by connecting teachers' explanations of their perceived practice with the established research literature. This approach, based upon the principles of Scientific Realism, is rarely, if ever, used in education research and evaluation (Pawson and Tilley: 2003).

Findings

Lesson observation

All interviewees indicated that lesson observation helped to improve teaching in their school in a variety of ways. For instance, behaviour management, use of iwbs, presentation and communication skills are useful examples. In the schools with higher levels of VA, more emphasis was placed on how lesson observation directly affected student learning, with dialogue on this issue more focused on learning processes than in the schools with lower levels of VA. In this instance then, it is possible that APM's focus on observation has a positive effect on the broader school culture.

Baseline data

Interviewees noted how data analysis supported reviews of students' progress, the development of improved learning strategies and direct research on learning needs. This potential effect on school climate may also explain the contribution of data analysis onto wider student progression.

Target setting

Target setting was seen to motivate students more than teachers in each of the case study schools. However, in the schools with higher VA, greater connections were made with monitoring and evaluation processes than in schools with lower levels of VA. This in turn, could be viewed as having a greater impact on the leadership of learning.

CPD

The general perception of interviewees was that CPD primarily supported the development of teaching skills, but also contributed to leadership capabilities. This was also consistent with teachers' belief that it was through CPD that APM had been successful in gaining engaging teachers. The general assumption in each of the schools was that improving teaching skills would inevitably result in enhanced student learning. While this would seem to be a reasonable assumption, it should be noted that some writers have found evidence to contradict this view point (eg Niedderer, H, 2001, National Strategy, 2007). Many interviewees commended the role of CPD in developing leadership skills, particularly when delivered within a structured APM framework. To a lesser extent and with variation across schools, CPD had some motivational effect on teachers.

A belief in the value of CPD appeared to be the single biggest factor in teachers' commitment to the broader APM framework.

Objective setting

Like CPD, objective setting (as in appraisal) was found to contribute to enhanced teaching and leadership skills by promoting a more structured and systematic approach to professional development. It was not, however, perceived to have any significant impact on intrinsic motivational levels. There was no indication that greater and more explicit connections between personal objectives and financial reward would have a detrimental affect on teachers' commitment to APM as a whole.

Other contextual factors

In considering the contribution of APM to improved standards, it is critical that other changes in education are also taken in account.

Attainment, as indicated by the percentage pass rate for 5A*– C at GCSE, has increased more rapidly five years since the introduction of APM than five years prior to its introduction. However, a range of other initiatives and changes have also been embraced by schools during this period. Particularly important factors identified by interviewees in the schools surveyed included: curriculum development, staffing changes and the increased allocation of resource.

While views on APM were generally positive, the introduction of a more coherent APM framework was not, by itself, seen by interviewees as contributing markedly to increased attainment. Instead, it was the contribution of individual elements of APM (eg CPD and lesson observation) that made the greatest contribution to increased standards.

However, it could be argued that while its significance may not have been readily identified by interviewees, it is through its ability to integrate different aspects of school improvement that APM has made its greatest contribution. APM is perhaps best viewed as not only enhancing CPD, but rather as an approach for building capacity and facilitating processes which support enhanced learning and organisational performance.

Conclusions

This study found that teachers' support for APM was most likely to come from a commitment to broader CPD and a recognition of the benefits this brings.

The study also established evidence of a link between APM and improved standards. This came foremost through enhanced monitoring and evaluation, centred on a more systematic approach to data analysis, lesson observation and target setting. However, the impact of a systematic approach to addressing the CPD needs of teachers was also a factor in this.

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