

A framework for continuous STUDENT improvement

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MUCH HAS BEEN written about the characteristics of an effective school and about the practices that are most likely to produce effective teaching. This paper borrows from the concepts of the effective schools and effective teaching movements and rather than discussing what characterises an institution committed to continuous improvement, it describes some of the preconditions that will lead students on a continuous improvement pathway. It builds on the simple but powerful idea that students need to understand that sustained effort, rather than ability, is the key determinant of improvement in achievement.

WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

School improvement efforts in Victoria are directed to ensuring that all students experience educational success, achieve to the maximum of their potential, and are fully equipped with the knowledge, skills and personal qualities needed for further education, work and life. The school accountability framework has been designed to provide schools with key indicators of effective performance and clear expectations of the standards expected in relation to these indicators. It is also designed as a continuous improvement framework whereby areas for improvement identified

through school and external analyses of performance data become the focus for renewed effort within the new school charter.

This commitment to continuous school improvement is greatly aided by practices such as:

- The setting of school goals, priorities, targets and improvement areas
- The collection and analysis of key indicator data
- Training schools in the interpretation and use of indicator data
- Making explicit the expected standards and benchmarks of achievement
- Engaging schools in self analysis and reflection on their achievement data
- Requiring schools to annually monitor and report upon their progress towards charter goals and priorities
- Using external reviewers to assist schools to be strategic in their identification of areas for improvement
- Involving schools in a discussion about the implications of their data with external reviewers
- Drafting a report that captures the essence of the school's achievements, identifies performance improvement focus areas and targets and provides some suggested strategies for generating improvement
- Reporting school achievements to the broader school community
- Linking the review of school improvement to the development of new school goals, priorities, targets and areas for improvement.

Whilst these accountability practices are helping to support a continuous improvement ethos in our schools, we would suggest that they also offer insights into the kinds of practices that teachers might adopt to promote continuous improvement within the classroom. In other words, student learning would benefit from pedagogical practices framed around features such as the use of benchmarks, techniques for data gathering and analysis and self reflection.

IMPROVEMENT IN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

We note that teacher data in Middle Years Research and Development (MYRAD) surveys¹ indicate that student effort in the majority of schools in the project was less than satisfactory. Indeed, the task of sustaining student engagement and effort and motivating them to do their best is a primary task of the teacher. Without sustained effort, students usually have great difficulty in keeping up with the learning tasks they are expected to do and with reaching required levels of understanding and skills. However, many students attribute success at any given task to ability, luck or other people rather than effort². They do not understand the link between achievement and effort. Belief in effort being the most important factor in achievement is critical as a motivation for work and this belief can be taught to students.

Whilst student achievement is a combination of student ability and effort, it is arguably the effort factor that has the greatest bearing on achievement and it is almost entirely the effort factor that produces student improvement. Simply put, doing one's best regardless of ability requires hard work and effort. So if achieve-

ment and improvement are outcomes of students' sustained effort then the more that the teacher can do to establish the conditions for continuous student improvement the more effective will be the teaching and learning that takes place in the classroom.

However before outlining a possible and partial framework for continuous student improvement, we would like to unpack the concept of student effort. When faced with the problem of poor student effort, and especially when this is being displayed by 'at risk' students, teachers often feel caught in a bind. They want their students to work harder but they do not want to get students off-side by making demands that students construe as being unreasonable and thus further discourage them from staying in school. A way through this bind is to make the concept of effort more tangible by asking what are the indicators of student effort. Students are more able and likely to respond to tangible behavioural requirements than to an abstract concept. Indicators of effort would include:

- Attending class on time
- Bringing required books and materials to class
- Paying attention whilst in class
- Contributing to class discussion
- Completing homework and assignments on time.

If teachers select one or two of these tangible indicators of effort and work concerted to ensure that they become expected and accepted student behaviours and then move on to instill commitment to another tangible behaviour then student effort will be enhanced. Changing a culture in which effort is not valued is not easy, but as teachers have allowed this culture to develop, and by inaction have reinforced it, it is up to them to change it. Adopting the attitude that if students do not want to learn then that is their problem simply reinforces an inappropriate learning culture that has been set by students. Teachers must take responsibility for setting the learning culture and a practical way to do this without further alienating students or being seen to be unreasonable is for teachers to agree on the 'tangible' behaviour change or changes they will target, to work with students to explain the necessity for the change and be relentless in the pursuit of the desired behaviour improvement.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CONTINUOUS STUDENT IMPROVEMENT

As was suggested above, the following ideas are still embryonic, but are offered in their fledgling state as a means for stimulating others to flesh out the ideas further. Our framework attempts to provide insights into the kinds of practices that teachers could adopt to instill a commitment to continuous improvement within their students. Whilst described separately, many of the proposals are inter-connected³, just as the various processes adopted in the accountability framework work together to help to promote continuous school improvement.

1. Clarify expectations

One of the pre-conditions for continuous student improvement is to take the mystery out of schooling and give students a clear sense of expectations. Benchmark data in school reviews serve this function for schools. Strategies that could be adopted to make learning expectations more explicit include:

- Involving students in developing rubrics of expected standards
- Providing students with rubrics of expected standards—of behaviour and learning
- Providing students with work samples that exemplify expected standards
- Providing students with assessment criteria and indicators.

2. Establish student goals and targets

Students would be assisted to sustain focus and effort if they were supported to establish short to medium term learning and achievement goals and targets and to regularly review these. One form of goal setting is provided through the adoption of individual learning improvement plans for all students.

Student goal setting and the systematic review and revision of goals and targets can start in the primary years and become a powerful tool for student reflection and motivation. However, teachers will need to facilitate this process and to ensure that time is provided for discussions with students about their progress towards goals and targets.

Just as schools have a clear set of goals, priorities, targets and improvement areas to guide their work, students would also benefit from similar guidance.

3. Give good feedback on performance

The collection and analysis of data is at the heart of the school review process. Data guides school improvement action. To enable students to develop a commitment to continuous improvement they also need good feedback on what they do well and on the areas they need to focus their improvement effort.

As well as the regular and timely feedback that is provided through reports and the marking of tests and homework assignments, other strategies that could be adopted to make students' learning strengths and needs more explicit include:

- Facilitating regular classroom discussions about how students are progressing and about their perceived barriers to learning (these could be a combination of whole class, group or individual based discussions)
- Making feedback 'corrective' by adopting the practice of first commenting on student strengths when marking student assignments and homework and the indicating areas that need to be improved and how they might be improved (students are generally made aware of their weaknesses but are less aware of their strengths, and are usually made aware of the faults but generally not the strengths in a piece of work)
- Facilitating student self assessments of effort, behaviours, knowledge and skills (these could be moderated by other students and could form the basis

of teacher and student discussions).

School self assessments based on an analysis of various performance datasets help schools to understand their strengths and weaknesses and to plan for improvement.

4. Build understanding of the learning process

As one of the pre-conditions for continuous student improvement is to take the mystery out of schooling students need to be taught to understand how learning takes place and how their own learning is progressing. Feedback as mentioned above is one way, and teaching students metacognition skills and using techniques that assist students to reflect on what has been learnt, on where learning might be progressed to in the next lesson and on how effective the learning session was are others.

Allied to this is the need to make students more aware of their particular learning styles and preferences and if needed to assist them to strengthen those styles that are most used in academic learning institutions. (Such an exercise is also useful for the teacher as it assists them match their teaching style with their students' preferred learning styles.)

5. Teach study skills and techniques

Many students appear to progress though school without acquiring the knowledge and skills required to effectively use their study and examination time. Specific study skills need to be taught and reinforced as students progress through school. This part of the framework complements the goal setting and self-reflection elements mentioned above by giving the students the skills they need to be effective note takers, to identify key points in an argument or text, to summarise, to plan and manage their study time, to structure an essay or report, to research the internet and to be effective listeners.

To be an effective student, a student committed to continuous improvement, a student needs to know how to study effectively. Study skills, and examination skills and techniques, must be taught and regularly revisited and reinforced. A school plan for this activity should be developed and implemented at every year level, probably from Year 5 onwards.

Allied to this need to teach study skills is the need to help disorganised students to become organised. At one level this may be as basic as helping students to tidy up their lockers and to structure their folders so notes and texts do not get damaged or lost or it may require reinforcement of the 'effort indicators' referred to above.

6. Build peer support

In order to build a culture of continuous student improvement, structures and processes that build peer support and positive peer pressure for learning need to be established. Whilst a number of students will be highly motivated and self-disciplined when it comes to school work, homework and study, not all students will be. The teacher can assist students to support each other by facilitating the

establishment of in-class, study and homework student teams or networks.

One strategy used to do this is to overlay student friendship groups with other learning support structures based on neighbourhood proximity (which eases contact logistics for after-school or night-time study). If households have the appropriate technology the teacher could also facilitate learning groups who communicate via email. The facilitation by the teacher is needed to ensure that all students are included in a learning/study support group. Peer tutoring that enables students to teach or share their knowledge with other members of the class is a further strategy for fostering peer support.

Even in a competitive examination climate, the more that students support each other with their learning, the better and more committed learners they are likely to become. The teacher can play an important role in assisting students to develop an appreciation that it is best to see their competition as being external to the school and that they and their classmates will benefit from building a strong internal focus on supporting each other to learn.

CONCLUSION

As we said at the outset, the above discussion is concerned with exploring ways to assist students to become committed to the goal of continuous improvement. Whilst we have suggested a few approaches that teachers could adopt to lift student effort and motivation, our main intent was to place this theme on the agenda for teacher consideration. After all, the effectiveness of teaching is greatly enhanced when all students feel the need to work consistently and clearly understand the link between sustained effort and achievement.

All education systems at this time are faced with the challenge of ensuring an education that provides success for all. This is driven by the economic and social demands of the global knowledge economy. This challenge can, however, appear overwhelming to schools and teachers. This article argues for a commonsense approach to the culture of the classroom and proposes a range of practical initiatives for teachers to adopt.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Less than 30 per cent of the 1,920 secondary teachers surveyed in the MYRAD Project considered that students work hard in class. (Russell, J et al, 2003 *Messages from MYRAD*, IARTV)
- 2 Marzano,R. et al, 2001 *Classroom Instruction That Works*, ASCD
- 3 We are not suggesting that the ideas contained in this article are new. Most of the suggestions offered are already regularly used in most schools. What we are suggesting is a new way of considering the effects of these strategies and how when they are combined they contribute to a coherent framework that helps to empower students with the knowledge they need to sustain effort (or pursue continuous improvement).