

# Teacher Appraisal: Current Views and Issues

The growing demand for accountability in education will require that schools and their staff members develop self-evaluation and assessment measures. A survey of attitudes to appraisal among teachers in special and ordinary schools in England is reported on.

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## INTRODUCTION

All Local Education Authorities (LEAs) in England, under the terms of the 1986 Education Act, will begin the phased introduction of teacher appraisals later this year. Teachers have responded to this prospect with mixed feelings - some, apparently, regard it as a challenge to be welcomed whereas others tend to be apprehensive. The purpose of this article is to present some of the current views expressed by teachers and, taking note of these, to suggest guidelines for the implementation of an effective and fair system of teacher appraisal.

## THE BACKGROUND TO APPRAISAL IN EDUCATION

Since the '60s and early '70s there has been a growing demand for the education service to be more open and accountable. Five elements have been identified in this public pressure.

1. Research has clearly shown that children benefit educationally when their parents are involved in their schooling.
2. There has been a rapid growth in the recognition of the rights of consumers.
3. Members of the public, who finance the education service, increasingly want to know how their money is being spent.
4. There is a greater readiness to question the work of institutions and those in authority.
5. Considerable concern has been expressed about educational standards in schools (Beecher, Erout and Knight, 1981).

These questions about the quality of education encouraged schools to look at themselves more searchingly and in the 1980s the government welcomed moves towards self assessment by some schools and their staffs. For example, the Inner



London Education Authority produced self-evaluation packs for both its primary and secondary schools and subsequently issued one specifically for special schools (ILEA, 1982). However, the government believed that self-assessment was, of itself not enough. It argued that "the regular and formal appraisal of the performance of all teachers is necessary if LEAs are to have the reliable, comprehensive and up-to-date information necessary for the systematic and effective provision of professional support and development and the deployment of staff to best advantage" (DES, 1985 p.55).

The Department of Education funded pilot studies in six education authorities to explore some of the issues in teacher appraisal. These projects set out to examine the training requirements and the resource implications both for LEAs and schools but, above all, to suggest a set of national guidelines. A final report of the work of the pilot authorities is due to be issued later this year but, in the meantime, some interim results have been published (Makin, 1989). In addition, and predating the pilot schemes, some teacher appraisal schemes had been initiated by individual schools and colleges (Turner and Clift, 1987).

### **PURPOSES OF APPRAISAL**

Mathias and Jones (1989) include the following reasons for justifying the appraisal of teacher performance.

1. To inform the teacher of current performance and to provide feedback and recognition.
2. To stimulate, where necessary, improved performance.
3. To encourage the acquisition of new skills to improve performance.
4. To assess the professional skills present within the school.
5. To aid planning promotion.

### **METHODS OF APPRAISAL**

Many of the existing teacher appraisal schemes consist of three parts: self appraisal, formal observations of teaching and an appraisal interview.

### **SELF-APPRAISAL**

This is intended "to encourage those involved to reflect upon their work over the past year and to think through their development goals for the coming year and beyond" (Hewton, 1988, p.26). Such a self-review can be facilitated by the use of a pro-forma in which teachers are asked, for example, to define their job description, review their year's work identifying satisfactory and unsatisfactory elements, specify the key aims for the next year and to consider how their job performance can be improved.



## **CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS**

The Government (DES, 1983) and a number of educationalists firmly believe that classroom observations are a crucial element in any appraisal scheme. Wragg (1987) has suggested that those looking at a teacher's classroom competence would want to examine one or more of three aspects.

1. The response of the pupils - for example age appropriateness and value of class activities; and extent of on-task behaviour.
2. The professional skills of the teacher - for example ability to explain and ask questions; management and organisation of the class; and evidence and monitoring of progress.
3. Outcomes of teaching - for example the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values acquired by the pupils.

## **APPRAISAL INTERVIEW**

The self-appraisal record is frequently used as a basis for this interview. It is usually conducted by a senior member of staff and the teaching performance and professional responsibilities of the appraisee over the previous year are reviewed and professional goals and plans for the coming year are agreed. It is important that the time allowed for these interviews should be as long as necessary.

## **TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF APPRAISAL**

The results that follow have been summarised from two sources.

1. Structured interviews with 32 headteachers of special schools in the north west of England carried out in the summer term 1988 (Williams & Petrie, 1989).
2. Early returns of an open ended questionnaire distributed in the north west from 99 teachers (45 secondary, 36 special and 18 primary). These questionnaires generated a wide range of responses but the views of the special educators and their mainstream colleagues are generally quite similar but where differences do occur they are noted. The number of respondents is, of course, quite small and their views may not be typical.

## **ELEMENTS OF APPRAISAL**

Teachers were invited to comment about the three components of teacher appraisal, that is, self-appraisal, classroom observations and the appraisal interview.

Self-appraisal was regarded as a valuable component by all respondents and they clearly welcomed the opportunity it provides to formally reflect upon their own teaching performance. Self-evaluation was considered valuable in fostering



professional growth and some teachers, in fact, argued that improvement in teaching depends more on self-appraisal than on being appraised by others.

There was considerable variation in the comments made about classroom observations. There was a majority view that, if these were undertaken they should be carried out by senior colleagues, that is, heads, deputies and departmental heads. However, some teachers wanted external assessors and others wanted appraisees to be given the opportunity to be able to choose their own appraisers, or at least have some say in the choice. It was also recognised that class teaching would not necessarily constitute all of a teacher's professional responsibilities - in some cases it could be a small part.

Although the desirability of classroom observations was not specifically raised a significant minority of the respondents, and this was particularly true of heads of special schools, argued that formal observations of classroom teaching were not necessary. It was pointed out that many teachers would feel threatened if they were observed teaching and, in any case, the competence of teachers was well known among both staff and children. Other respondents made the more general point that agreed criteria for good teaching were lacking. Turner and Clift (1988) have also recognised "that the greatest problem associated with the appraisal of teachers is that there is virtually a total lack of validated criteria" (p.21).

As might be expected there was general agreement that the appraisal interviews should be conducted by a senior colleague and a clear majority thought that this should be the head teacher. However, a minority wanted the appraisal interviews to be conducted by outsiders and advisers, inspectors and heads of other schools were particularly mentioned. Wilson (1988) has suggested that "an ideal arrangement would be a team of three persons - one from the subject's own school, one from a neighbouring school, and one from the advisory service or training institution" (p.101).

There was strong support for the view that it was the appraiser's responsibility to ensure that the interview would take place in a positive, supportive spirit. Clearly there was a strong feeling amongst most respondents that the whole experience should be conducted with sensitivity and tact. This certainly emerged from the DES pilot studies and in Newcastle for example, the term "professional discussion" was introduced as being a less threatening term than "appraisal interview".

### **FORMATIVE OR SUMMATIVE APPRAISAL**

Most respondents would prefer teacher appraisal to be firmly identified with a formative approach, that is focusing upon professional development, the improvement of practice by identifying strengths, weaknesses, INSET needs and interests rather than following a summative approach where the emphasis is upon selection, promotion, redeployment and the dismissal of teachers.

However, although the teacher who welcomed the prospect that teacher appraisal would enable the profession "to get rid of its dead wood" stood almost alone, many



respondents did recognise that although incompetent teachers might be few in number they do present the teaching profession with a challenge which cannot be ignored. Of course, positive steps, including advice, support and training, should be taken to help the incompetent teacher, but if these fail the best solution for a school is probably for that teacher to be removed.

On the other hand, however, respondents made no mention of using the appraisal process as a basis for identifying "master" teachers in order for "merit" payments to be made.

### **BENEFITS OF APPRAISAL**

A striking result was that nearly one sixth of the sample saw little or no benefits at all in teacher appraisal. Some of the comments were quite tart - for example, "another step in the attempt to impose the philosophy of commerce and industry", "I'm very sceptical of the whole thing" and "only to keep Kenneth Baker quiet".

Nevertheless the majority of the respondents did feel that teacher appraisal could improve the quality of teaching but this acceptance for most was conditional upon a number of stipulations being met. For example, the appraiser should be a competent and effective teacher who enjoys the professional respect of the appraisee. One teacher summed up the prospect as:

"The whole system if carried out properly could be excellent but the fact that it is so vulnerable to abuse renders it dangerous".

Some of the returns, more particularly from heads, pointed out that teacher appraisal was only one element among a number which could improve the quality of teaching - others included the effectiveness of initial teacher training, induction and probationary support, inservice training facilities and adequate resources.

A small number of respondents, in the main middle management teachers, were anticipating with some enthusiasm the implementation of teacher appraisal and, indeed, felt that its introduction was long overdue.

Mathias and Jones (1989) consider that the appraisal process benefits both individual teachers and schools. Our respondents, not surprisingly perhaps, emphasised individual and professional benefits rather than those concerned with institutional advantage. Those advantages highlighted include support for teachers and teaching; identifying the specific individual and INSET needs of teachers; encouragement to improve performance; and providing praise and recognition of a teacher's importance.

### **THE APPRAISAL OF LEA STAFF**

There was near unanimous agreement that LEA officers, including advisory staff and educational psychologists, should be appraised. Some respondents believed that such appraisals should be carried out by administrative and advisory



colleagues, but an equal number thought that schools and teachers should also be involved.

### **PROBLEM AREAS**

It is significant that all our respondents identified some disadvantages and problems which could be associated with teacher appraisal. In general these concerns revolved round personality clashes between appraisers and appraisees, the ability of appraisers to make objective and unbiased judgements, the generation of ill-feeling among colleagues and the process being perceived by appraisees as professionally threatening. Specific points made included: with explicit monitoring teachers might be less adventurous in their teaching in order to avoid the possibility of being seen as a failure; and appraisal would demand time and energy which are at a premium in schools.

One teacher summed up her concerns as follows:

"Teachers feeling and being threatened; teachers feeling and being compared; teachers teaching to suit head teachers - who may be wrong; teachers being judged unfairly and condemned wrongly".

It is important to note that this teacher, in spite of her anxieties, did support and see value in the process of staff appraisal.

### **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS**

Confidentiality was considered an important element in teacher appraisal with the majority of respondents arguing that appraisal records should be restricted to the appraisee and appraiser (and headteacher if different). There was unanimous support for procedures being available for appealing against poor appraisal reports although establishing such procedures might be difficult. Other respondents, too, felt very strongly that there were political overtones in the current emphasis being placed on teacher appraisal instead of resources.

### **GUIDELINES FOR APPRAISAL**

It is possible, by drawing upon the literature and the data from these modest surveys to begin to outline a set of guidelines for the implementation of appraisal schemes which are professionally acceptable, effective and fair.

1. The introduction of formal teacher appraisal should be carefully planned, be preceded by staff consultations and negotiation with the aim of producing an agreed scheme. Teacher appraisal is more likely to be accepted by the teaching profession if it develops from a process of decision making in which all the teachers have been included.
2. The focus of appraisal in education should be formative, emphasising professional development, support and INSET needs. Any managerial



requirements for dealing with irremedial incompetence should be dealt with quite separately.

3. Appraisers and appraisees should be trained and appraisers need to be sensitive and empathic and held in high regard and professional respect by the appraisee. An agreed outcome to the appraisal process is essential but can only be achieved if the appraiser - appraisee relationship is a positive one.
4. Both 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' procedures should be employed in teacher appraisals. This is not merely a matter of equity but also of efficiency.
5. Cooperative and collaborative teaching are highly regarded in many educational programmes, particularly when special needs are being met, and schemes of teacher appraisal should be designed to foster these approaches rather than threaten them.
6. The current emphasis being given to teacher appraisal should not obscure the necessity for all professionals in the educational services to be appraised. Furthermore appraisals of individuals should be supplemented by the evaluation of institutions and services.
7. Nisbet (1986) has succinctly pointed the way forward for teacher appraisal:  
"It should be linked to a developmental programme which will provide support to improve staff performance. It must not damage or distort the processes of learning and teaching. It must not damage morale, destroy relationships and trust, discourage initiative or diminish the whole-hearted spontaneous and unforced commitment which many teachers give to their work far beyond the call of duty" (p.15).

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