

**BAR01275**

**AARE Fremantle, 2001**

**Title: Managing teacher performance in the non-compulsory years of school.**

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### **Abstract**

In Western Australia, the state education system has systematically placed the non-compulsory years of school (K&P) on to primary school sites. In this context it is the principal's task to undertake the performance management of their early childhood teachers. Early childhood teachers are unsure of this performance appraisal framework as they perceive themselves working from a different pedagogical base than many of their primary colleagues. This paper draws on data collected as part of a larger study on teacher accountability. The research found that early childhood teachers questioned the principals' suitability to assess their work. The paper suggests therefore that principals and their pre-primary teachers need to work together to cross the pedagogical boundary that often divides the non-compulsory years of school and the primary school.

### **Introduction**

Increasingly at all levels of the educational process, teachers are being asked to justify and explain curriculum practices in a push for increased accountability. The call to increase accountability has risen in part from the economic considerations involved in the push towards a global economy and the marketisation of the education sector. The ideology of the market place is used in policy formation based on the idea that "market –forces would solve economic and social problems" (Woodrow & Brennan, 1999, p.79). This ideology is reflected in the Australian education sector with a push for decentralization of administrative control to a local level and a tighter control on curriculum. In Western Australia, two main changes brought about by the decentralisation of administrative control have impacted on the work of early childhood teachers. Firstly, the non-compulsory years of school (K & P) have been increasingly moved onto school sites so those primary principals are now the line managers of early childhood teachers and their programs. Secondly, the task of performance management of all teachers at the school, once the jurisdiction of the district superintendent, has been passed to primary school principals or a delegated nominee.

The process of teacher performance management as promoted in Western Australian government schools is based on "School performance. A framework for improving and reporting" (EDWA, 1997). One strategy involved the principal or nominee meeting with each

teacher in the school to discuss the teachers' work with regard to implementing the school priorities as outlined in the school development plan. Moving into the whole school arena has changed the way in which teachers in the non-compulsory years of school are asked to account for their work. In Western Australia, pre-primary and kindergarten classes have been associated with "play" and this area of education has traditionally rested upon the practices of "nice women who like children" (Stonehouse, 1989, p.61). As enrolment is non-compulsory explanations for practices have not generally been sought but as school move to a corporate plan of development, teachers can no longer operate autonomously. However problems have arisen where it is assumed that early childhood education will fit neatly with existing analyses applied to schools (Woodrow & Brennan, 1999).

The growing push for educational reform across the world has seen a renewed focus on teacher performance. However, the evaluation of teacher performance illustrates the policy practice tension often inherent in an education system. There is a deep rooted tension between the policy makers push for increased quality and accountability and the practitioners push for increased autonomy (McLaughlin & Pfeiffer, 1988). The dilemma of judgement and the purpose of the evaluation heighten the summative formative pull of management techniques. This is reflected in the blurred definition of performance management as given by EDWA.

EDWA (1996, p.3) defines performance management as " the continuous process of reflecting, negotiating, developing, reviewing and making decisions about an individual's performance in achieving organisational goals".

### **The Study**

This paper is drawn from research data collected as part of a larger study on teacher accountability (Barblett, 2000). The purpose of the study was to investigate what pre-primary teachers knew about accountability and their actions associated with accountability. In this study the context and the spheres of influence that impact upon the work practices of the pre-primary teachers and the teachers justifications of these were important understandings. Therefore an ecological approach as developed by Bronfenbrenner (1979) was used which is oriented towards the context and viewing the interaction between the individual and the environment. The ecological approach of this study takes into account the radiating influences of the macrosystem (the outer ring that includes the culture and subculture) through to the exosystem (where government is situated) to the mesosystem (the wider school community) and finally the micosystem (the innermost system, where the teacher constructs and experiences everyday reality). Harms & Clifford (1993) refined Bronfenbrenner's model for studying early childhood settings and this model has been further refined to focus on the teacher within the pre-primary setting. This was done, not to provide an analysis of teaching and learning but to illuminate in these settings how teachers justify what they do.

### **Method**

This study draws particularly on the interpretive-constructivist traditions, which allows for a creative research process that strives to weave meaning, description and illustration. In interpretive-constructivist work the quest to understand the participants' perspective is a critical feature (Greene & Carachelli, 1997). It is this understanding in situated contexts that allows access to contextual issues that are important to consider in an ecologically bound conceptual framework. In this study, a pragmatic approach (Datta, 1997; Greene & Carachelli, 1997) has been applied where research methods were selected that best met the research dilemmas posed. By using mixed methods of research that are compatible the

quality of the research is enhanced and "situational responsiveness" is improved (Datta, 1997).

The study consisted of five phases with each phase linked to the subsequent phase of the inquiry. The first phase of the study centred on the case study method that focussed on three pre-primary teachers in their centres. "Susan", "Jane" and "Glenda", the case study teachers were selected to reflect rather than represent the range of views of pre-primary teacher accountability in EDWA schools. In the second phase, 67 metropolitan pre-primary teachers were surveyed across three metropolitan regions. The survey sought multiple viewpoints to queries and notions that were uncovered in the case studies. The third phase was to develop an accountability framework that pre-primary teachers could use to connect their work in a meaningful way to the school context. In the fourth phase of the study, seven focus groups that covered four metropolitan regions were convened to discuss the framework and pertinent issues related to pre-primary teachers' work. A total of 145 teachers, 6 principals and 4 early childhood curriculum advisors participated in the groups. The final phase was the refinement of the framework. For the purposes of this paper the data discussed has come from the case studies, the survey responses and focus group discussions.

## Findings

The intensity of feeling about performance management was a surprising outcome of the larger research project and it was an issue that came to the fore in the beginning of the data collection period and was found throughout the study. The larger study investigated issues of teacher accountability but the case studies, survey responses and focus group discussions showed that the pre-primary teachers believed that performance management was inextricably tied to their accountability. Yet this study revealed that most pre-primary teachers did not engage in system nor school based performance management.

### Different views on performance management

It became apparent throughout the study that pre-primary teachers and their performance managers had varying views as to what did or should constitute performance management. The EDWA (1996) definition includes "...achieving organisational goals" which are the priorities of the school as determined by the school staff outlined in the School Development Plan. In the case studies Glenda was the only teacher who implemented the school development plan and the only one of the three teachers who had undergone any performance management. At Glenda's school the principal met with each teacher twice a year and reviewed their management plan and assisted teachers on the basis of their plans to identify areas of professional development. The principal when interviewed described the detail that Glenda wrote in her management plan that was quite unlike any other teachers in the school. She wrote lengthy explanations of the strategies she employed to implement the school priorities and went to great length to alter her assessment and information gathering techniques so she could provide evidence of the children's progress in the priority areas. Glenda spoke of her disappointment that changes EDWA had made to performance management did not directly appraise a teacher's performance. She said, "teachers had a professional responsibility to evaluate their performance and address the needs they have" (Interview #1,21.3.97).

In contrast the other two case study teachers had not undergone any performance management. Susan did not agree with the school's priorities and therefore spoke of making her own professional judgements about their implementation. Susan spoke of recognising her own level of professionalism and "having to decide if the school's priorities were relevant to the needs of her children in her class" (Interview #1,14.3.97). When describing the

implementation of the school's priorities, she said, "I'll do the bare minimum to acknowledge the development plan...but if I believe that maths or language are far more a priority than technology in the classroom, then I'm going to do it (Interview 1, 14.3.97). The third case study teacher Jane had spoken of attending professional development on performance management but that nothing had happened on the topic in the school. In Jane's school the school priorities included "reading recovery for years 4-7", a priority for which Jane could not implement in the non-compulsory years of school nor be assessed upon. She spoke about the pre-primary being viewed by school administration as being separate to the school. Jane believed that the pre-primary teachers had to be more vocal than primary teachers on the same staff for recognition in the whole school context.

Further investigation of performance management was undertaken in the survey as such differences had occurred in the case studies. The questionnaire found that many pre-primary teachers had the same experiences in performance management as Susan and Jane. Just over half of the 67 teachers surveyed indicated that they had undergone some type of performance management. On further inquiry, nearly a third of these teachers (22) had undergone a performance appraisal through an interview with the principal. Some (10) cited attending professional development as their performance management. A small proportion indicated appraisal through a temporary teacher return (4) and teacher portfolio assessment (2).

Muddying the issue of performance management was the differences found in the definitions held by Principals and pre-primary teachers in Red Focus Group 1. Principals argued that performance management was different from accountability and the ensuing discussion showed that teachers believed it was an integral part of the accountability process. Indeed EDWA (1996) in the "Policy Framework for Performance Management" states "Performance management is a means of demonstrating accountability and provides good opportunities for growth and development" (p.i). It would appear that teachers and principals have taken a position that recognises only one aspect of the definition.

Teachers also spoke of principals not understanding or valuing early childhood terms and pedagogy. In the Brown, Focus Group 3, one teacher spoke of the mismatch of language between her principal and herself. She said that she used terms associated with early childhood domains when describing her planning and "the principal thought it was a bit lacking". The teachers' perceptions that the principal did not have an understanding of early childhood education permeated the issue of performance management.

### **The principal as performance manager**

In the case studies only one of the teachers thought she was managed properly. Jane and Susan hotly debated the issue of the principal as performance manager in the case studies. Jane did not consider herself managed by the principal, as it was Jane's opinion that the principal would only be able to make an appraisal of her work based on what she told him. She said, "I just feel like, if he doesn't get any complaints about me, he doesn't want to know" (Interview #2, 27.8.97). She went on to say that he would have to research early childhood pedagogy in order to make an assessment of her program but "he doesn't want to make the effort to learn about early childhood..." (Interview #2, 27.8.97). Similarly, Susan spoke of her loose ties to the principal, as he didn't visit the centre often. She spoke of having her paper work ready for him to see at any time but she thought that he hadn't been interested. In contrast, Glenda's principal was an integral part of pre-primary life. The principal was the only one of the three case study principals interviewed who showed an understanding of early childhood pedagogy when he discussed Glenda's philosophy as "coming from a domain perspective rather than learning areas" (Principal interview, 27.2.97).

In the questionnaire, about half (32) of the teachers surveyed echoed the sentiments of Jane and Susan. The descriptive reasons given by surveyed teachers for making the negative assumption on the principal's ability to make performance management decisions fell easily into two themes. The descriptions clustered around the first theme, depicted the principal without an early childhood educational background or experience. One teacher wrote on the questionnaire, "Accountability can only be effective when the person who you are accountable to, knows and understands what is happening both in theoretical and practical terms." Another teacher wrote, "Principal feels we do a babysitting service. As long as everyone is happy, he's happy to let us do as we think best. Doesn't have any idea of pre-primary philosophy or research." This comment echoes Jane's opinions about her principal. The second theme rested on the premise that the principal showed no interest in the pre-primary program and never visited the centre. One teacher wrote, "The principal never visits the pre-primary, never speaks to the pre-primary children, never looks at the pre-primary program. Shows very little interest in what we do in general."

The reasons teachers gave when indicating that the principal could make decisions about their work were placed into four themes. The first theme was the pre-primary assessment program fed into the school's Managing Information Systems (MIS) or the principal was aware of the children's academic progress. One teacher's answer indicative of this theme is, "Because of the progress of children and the fact that the Principal checks records etc." The second theme related to the principal seeking advice by conferring with more knowledgeable others in the early childhood field in order to make decisions that related to the pre-primary program. The third theme described the principal as having early childhood experience. The final theme of answers described the principal as genuinely interested in the children's welfare and the teacher's development. Related to this theme one teacher wrote, " Because he is an excellent and well informed principal and educator – aren't I lucky?" Interestingly, a small number (6) indicated "yes" and ' no". One teacher wrote next to her yes and no response "yes – he's my principal and no- hardly sees much or spends time here to make an informed decision. This is a huge concern of mine."

One teacher commented on her questionnaire that she would prefer appraisal by a third party, the district superintendent. She wrote: "I miss the days when the superintendent came to your class, looked at your planning, records, teaching skills and chatted with all the kids (this was when I was in the country) I think that it's a more real way of making teachers genuine about accountability and such visits provide nice feedback that is real. I think it is too easy to write on feedback sheets to the principal that you're doing it all, so he can show them to the superintendent when he comes through."

Teachers in five out of seven focus groups initiated the issue of performance management as a topic for discussion and one of their main concerns was the role of the principal as performance manager. Just over three quarters (100) of the teachers that participated in the focus groups agreed that the principal had to be more involved in the pre-primary program in order to make performance management decisions. However, in discussions on this topic one teacher in Brown, Focus Group 1, said that she had responded by disagreeing to this statement because, "It wouldn't matter how involved he was, he still wouldn't know what he is looking at." Final debate of this topic rested on the focus groups teachers' perceptions that the principal did not want to be involved in the pre-primary, with a minority suggesting that the principal's involvement was based on the principal's personality. One teacher summed up the common opinion across the groups when she said, "principals need to be in-serviced for early childhood education especially for performance management." In Black, Focus Group 2, the discussion became quite heated about principals' lack of expertise in the early childhood area and the district curriculum officer suggested that teachers needed to initiate contact with principals. She went further to suggest that the pre-primary teachers could

make small presentations at staff meetings about the importance of the work of the pre-primary teacher.

In the survey section on performance management some teachers wrote of their concern about who would appraise a teacher's accountability. They described the difficulty of a uniform review. As one teacher pointed out in the questionnaire, "I feel assessment on performance is very subjective and would vary from teacher to teacher and school to school. In year levels we have tests to compare over the class, state and nation." Others described their uneasiness of being held accountable for an

educational program that others at the school did not value or understand. One teacher wrote, "I think one of the most important issues is our credibility with other teachers and the principal. Our work doesn't appear to be either understood or valued by other staff". Another teacher wrote, "There has to be a better understanding of what we are achieving and how we are achieving it by our colleagues and administration staff...".

### What's important to pre-primary teachers in performance management?

Glenda had spoken of her disappointment that her performance management did not appraise aspects of the early childhood educational program that she implemented. Both Jane and Susan spoke of having different priorities from the school and the gap between the pre-primary and the primary school administration was evident. So what did early childhood teachers consider important if appraisals were to be made directly on their work? A list of items was devised with the case study teachers input, added to from the literature on quality early childhood programs and put to the surveyed teachers. The results of teachers' reflections on this list are shown in Table 1.

Items teachers consider important when making performance appraisals (N=67)

Item	Yes
The atmosphere of your centre	65
Teacher relationships with children	65
Developmental appropriateness of your program	63
Teacher relationships with families	63
Planning, preparation and delivery of your program	63
Qualities of best practice observed	62
Self evaluation of your work	61
Accomplishment of your work aims	60
Successful professional relationships	57
Records kept on children	54

Teacher explanation of decisions made	53
Success of pre-primary children in Year one	37
Accomplishment of school priorities	36

The top-ranking item was "atmosphere of the classroom". This would be a difficult item for which to account, as the perception of atmosphere would be influenced by the viewer's pedagogy, experience and the context of the setting. Most items met with teachers' approval but two items that indicated a split in the sample were "accomplishment of the school priorities" and "success of the children in Year One." Yet, the "accomplishment of the school priorities" for which they are currently appraised was seen as an inappropriate indicator. Indeed the majority of teachers throughout the investigation did not discuss their accountability in terms of accomplishment of school priorities. This is a concern when school accountability and teacher performance in EDWA schools is tied to the accomplishment of school determined priorities. Further concerns raised by the survey respondents rested on what form the accountability review would take.

### **How would an accountability review of teachers' performance be structured?**

Some teachers in the questionnaire had concerns about the structure of an accountability review, arguing that the importance of developmental learning and the context of the pre-primary needed to be shown. A point made by a few teachers in the questionnaire related to the purpose of accountability measures. The teachers offered differing opinions on the uniformity of teacher accountability measures. One teacher wrote "An across the board formula for assessing/addressing accountability in the pre-primary." In contrast, another teacher wrote, "I believe accountability is an individual thing ...discussed between the principal and the teacher... not handed down from EDWA in a standardised form." Accountability measures using the words of two surveyed teachers needed to show "the value of our efforts" as well as the "importance of developmental learning and the unique situation of the pre-primary children." Added to the complexity of how accountability and teacher performance would be demonstrated, one teacher wrote of the difficulty in documenting the area of social – emotional development. She wrote, "Social growth is often difficult to program and monitor into little boxes. The most valuable things we do are often the most difficult to monitor."

Linked to the structure were the concerns from two of the surveyed teachers as to the uses of performance management. They argued that appraisals should not be a regurgitation of information about the pre-primary to the principal instead they described accountability information being used purposefully for the benefit of the program. This argument was illustrated by one teacher's comment when she wrote, "I consider accountability important as long as its not used for taking information back to the principal – rather it would or should be used information or required information and stored for a reason."

### **Discussion**

All of the 207 pre-primary teachers in the study were employed by a single school system. In principle these teachers were required to implement the same policies and guidelines. Yet viewing the teachers' performance management practices and requirements through an ecological lens has revealed a number of contextual influences that impacted on their performance management. Performance management policy is constructed in the exosystem (this ring encompasses the State Government educational policies) and

implemented in the mesosystem (aspects that make up the school community) and more directly in the microsystem (the teaching setting). This study has shown that contextual influences such as the principal's leadership role impacted upon the degree of fidelity in implementation of performance management policy. There are a number of issues that need to be resolved before pre-primary teachers meaningfully engage with EDWA policy on performance management.

### **Shared Understanding**

The case studies, survey responses and focus group discussions revealed that many pre-primary teachers and their line managers, the primary principals, did not have shared understandings on a number of issues. First, teachers and principals disagreed about the definition of performance management and different definitions altered both parties view of the process and the perceived value of this process. Principals did not agree that performance management was an accountability issue where the teachers thought this was a function of performance management. Policy definitions constructed within the exosystem should encompass the knowledge base of those implementing policies through the systems. In addition, a definition of performance management that did not blur professional and bureaucratic images of accountability would be helpful in reaching EDWA's institutional goals.

Second, the majority of teachers in the study had not undergone any performance management and were unsure about the process. Pre-primary teachers need to be made fully aware of the process so they understand what is expected of them in terms of their performance management. This will be even more of a concern for pre-primary teachers with the introduction of the three phases of teacher career progression in the new EDWA teacher competencies to be released this year (Martin, 2000).

Third, pre-primary teachers need to be made aware of the value of engaging in performance management processes in a way that is meaningful to them. Pre-primary teachers such as Glenda were disappointed that performance management did not address issues in her early childhood program. Most pre-primary teachers did not implement the school development plan and therefore could not report on the implementation of school priorities, as is the process of performance management. In some cases, such as Jane's, the school priorities excluded the pre-primary teacher. Both the pre-primary teacher and principal have a key role to play in supporting school priorities that the pre-primary teachers view as appropriate and meaningful to the pre-primary context. This highlights the fundamental role of the principal as the leader of performance management.

### **Principal as leader**

There are two elements of the principal's leadership role that influenced pre-primary teacher performance management. The first was the principal's leadership role in performance management and the second was the role the principal played in linking the pre-primary teacher to the school. At Glenda's school the process of performance management was carefully laid out for all members of staff. In this school the pre-primary teachers were regarded as integral members of staff and were given no special treatment. In Jane's school, Jane had tried to forge links with the school but the principal called himself "the complaints" department and appeared to be content to let Jane be the instigator of issues concerning the pre-primary. In this school, issues of performance management for the pre-primary teachers had been left to rest. This was often the case as shown in the survey responses and focus group discussions as pre-primary teachers believed that differences in pedagogy and lack of early childhood experience hampered the principal valuing the work done in the pre-primary. Pre-primaries have been administered by the state school system and have been

amalgamated with schools regarding policy treatment for the last twenty years. Yet EDWA has done little to assist principals in this area. Six years ago Stamopoulos (1995) found that principals indicated their need for assistance in their roles as curriculum advisers and leaders in the pre-primary year. The role of the principal is vital as Fullan & Steigelbauer, (1991, p.143) argue that the principal is "probably the most potential source of help or hindrance to the teacher".

### **Pre-primary Teachers as Active Agents**

The motion of policy implementation needs to continually radiate through the interacting systems of a bureaucracy so that links in line management are continually forged. Pre-primary teachers need to be active in the area of performance management and step into the whole school arena to push for school priorities that are appropriate for their settings. Discussions with their principals give pre-primary teachers opportunities to make meaning about their programs and cement links to the school. Yet, teachers will have difficulty identifying areas of need in their teaching program without the assistance of knowledgeable others. EDWA is hoping that its new three tiered teacher competency program will assist in this area, however applying one set of standards across the teaching profession is problematic. Mason (1997) argues that the assessment must generate teacher discourse about teaching, and that adhering to the idea that one set of standards fits all automatically separates the evaluation from the individual teaching. Teachers in the non-compulsory years of school need to become active agents in their own performance management and lobby for change outside the school community in the mesosystem where policy is formed. This can be achieved by active participation in professional early childhood educational groups and meeting regular with other early childhood teachers to inform policy planners of issues that effect early childhood educators working in the government school system.

### **Conclusion**

This study found that in order for the performance management policies of the compulsory schooling sector to be successfully implemented by pre-primary teachers a number of issues needs to be considered. In many cases the pre-primary teachers did not implement the school development plan and so could not be managed on the implementation of the school priorities. Pre-primary teachers need to see the value of engaging in such processes, if not they will subvert them. This research has highlighted the need for change in the way that performance management policy is formulated, disseminated by school systems and enacted by its employees. Successful implementation of policy will occur when everyone in the management chain connects with the process because it is meaningful to them and roles and responsibilities are defined in the reality of the participant's work place.

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