

Teachers are the key: Strategies for instructional improvement

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Ms. Lynette Virgona is a Principal Consultant with Classroom Management Strategies (CMS), a professional learning program operated by accredited classroom teachers for the Department of Education in Western Australia. Since 2003, CMS has provided interactive and reflective workshops on behaviour management and instruction to promote student engagement followed by in-class observation and coaching for teachers. CMS also offers a range of support for school-wide instructional improvement, including the development of peer coaching teams, better aligned behaviour management processes, and assistance for Principals in long-term strategic planning. The programs are highly regarded by teachers and principals with more than 7000 participants in the training with demand growing.

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Abstract

Recent research is unequivocal on the importance of effective teachers in improving outcomes for schools (Jensen, 2010) and the critical role that high quality professional learning plays in increasing teacher effectiveness (McKinsey, 2007). One powerful way to do this is in real classrooms in the form of expert or peer coaching. (McKinsey, 2007) This revelation often overlooks the fact that it comes in the context of a profession that is largely unfamiliar with receiving direct feedback, is generally uncomfortable being observed, and can be wary of being evaluated unfairly (Elmore, et al., 2009). This seems especially true with our more experienced teachers. Despite this, we know that teachers want effective feedback, to have their work valued and to improve their teaching (Jensen, 2010) – and, I would add, if it can be done in a respectful and professional way.

This paper seeks add to the body of knowledge on effective professional learning through in-class coaching for teachers and its place in school improvement by sharing the research

findings and the experiences of the Classroom Management Strategies (CMS) professional learning program from the Department of Education, Western Australia.

Background

Classroom Management Strategies (CMS) was initiated by the Department of Education in Western Australia in 2002 as a key part of its Behaviour Management & Discipline (BM&D) strategy. It was conceived as a proactive and practical support for teachers with an initial focus on behaviour management in classrooms, commencing full operations in 2005. It has had strong support across all education stakeholders since its inception. CMS has been part of the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (2006, 2008, 2011) with the State School Teachers' Union of WA since 2006 and has bipartisan political support. CMS now works in close partnership with all the teacher-training universities in Western Australia with the exception of Notre Dame University.

Despite the behaviour management focus of the initiating strategy, it was evident from the beginning that it was not possible to impact significantly on teacher practice by attending to teacher skills in isolation. In order to achieve its aims CMS had to cover a wide range of teacher behaviour. Effective behaviour management, the original brief of the program, could only ever be one aspect of the complex instructional repertoire of an effective teacher. Managing student behaviour does not operate in isolation from other teacher skills and is only useful if it leads to the creation of a classroom environment where learning occurs. Students can be well behaved but cognitively disengaged. In addition, teachers cannot perform at their best if the school culture is dysfunctional or non-supportive of good classroom practice. Consequently, CMS should be seen as a professional learning program that aims to increase effective teaching practices within effective school cultures.

Since 2005, CMS has conducted more than 38,000 in-class observation and feedback sessions (called 'conferences') on effective classroom management and instruction with over 7000 teachers in Western Australian public schools. The program operates in K–12 classrooms (see Table 1) across all socio-economic bands and in rural, remote and metropolitan settings (see Table 2). CMS teacher consultants work alongside teachers at every stage of their careers (see Table 3), including supporting those in leadership positions to plan and implement whole school instructional improvement.

Table 1

Major teaching level: 2005–2011

Level taught	Foundation program	% of total participants numbers	Instructional strategies	% of total participants numbers
All years	118	1.6	12	0.7
ECE	396	5.6	96	6.0
Primary	3 754	52.6	760	47.5
Middle school	274	3.8	27	1.7
Secondary	2 576	36.1	700	43.7
Not specified	22	0.3	6	0.4
Total	7 140	100	1 601	100

Source: Internal Department of Education WA evaluation data 2012

Table 2

Regional information: 2005–2011

Region	Foundation program participant numbers	Number of participating schools (% of schools in region)	Instructional Strategies participant numbers	Number of participating schools (% of schools in region)	Total number of schools per region
Metropolitan	3 542	305 (65%)	874	143 (30%)	474
Goldfields	486	32 (61%)	87	17 (33%)	52
Kimberley	406	19 (86%)	18	5 (23%)	22
Mid West	452	42 (82%)	193	29 (57%)	51
Pilbara	270	18 (58%)	109	12 (39%)	31
South West	1 115	83 (85%)	104	32 (33%)	97
Wheatbelt	576	67 (93%)	116	29 (40%)	72
Total	6 847	566	1 505	267	799

Source: Internal Department of Education WA evaluation data 2012

Additional notes:

- 389 participants' regional information from 2005 is not included in this data.
- A participant may complete more than one program.
- 2012 information is not included as not all pre-program survey data is currently available

- Transience on staff means that many rural schools lose trained staff to the metropolitan schools over time.

Table 3
Teaching experience 2005–2011

Years teaching	Foundation program	% of total completing the course	Instructional Strategies program	% of total completing the course
0 - 2	1821	25.5	175	10.9
3 - 10	2182	30.6	523	32.7
11 -20	1560	21.9	307	19.2
21 - 30	1108	15.5	310	19.3
31 – 36+	416	5.8	248	15.5
Not specified	53	0.7	38	2.4
Total	7140	100	1601	100

Source: Internal Department of Education WA evaluation data 2012

The Model

The CMS professional development model is based on the premise that significant transfer of learning primarily occurs in teachers' classrooms. The conferencing is the most important part of the professional learning. It is not a deficit model and is designed to make experienced teachers more consciously aware of the effective skills they already use, and to add to those skills through teacher self-reflection and peer discussion. It assumes as a starting point that teachers are already skilled practitioners in a highly complex and demanding profession. Teachers are asked to volunteer to attend although the aim is for all teachers in Western Australian public schools to complete the programs.

Program delivery focuses on a series of interactive workshops spread over a number of months. Expert in-class conferences occur after each workshop. In the CMS Foundation program, for instance, there are five whole-day workshops where participants are presented with opportunities to label and deconstruct effective teaching skills and practise them in a forum that encourages reflection and discussion. Following each workshop, participants have a trained consultant visit them in their classroom to provide a structured, non-evaluative feedback and reflection session.

The focus is on participants developing:

- an increased competence and confidence to engage students and manage unproductive behaviour
- an increased repertoire of responses to address attention-seeking behaviour, including low key responses, giving choices and effective consequences
- an awareness and comprehension of teaching skills to effectively deal with escalating behaviours including diffusing power struggles
- a common language to discuss student behaviour and their teaching practices
- a shared set of beliefs about student behaviour
- reflective, collegiate structures in their schools to promote professional learning communities
- an awareness and comprehension of instructional skills, with a strong emphasis on effective questioning techniques to increase student academic engagement.

CMS also offers an extension course called the Instructional Strategies program that provides a special focus on increasing student academic engagement and higher order thinking. These programs always use the workshop/conference model for delivery.

The CMS teacher consultants are all classroom teachers who have received rigorous and extensive training in the observation, deconstruction, and analysis of teacher behaviour. They are highly skilled at providing respectful and professional feedback to teachers. They do not play an evaluative role and they work outside of the performance appraisal process used in WA public schools. That being said teachers often request CMS training as part of their professional development.

Theoretical underpinnings

When the program was designed its structural underpinnings were heavily influenced by the work of Madeline Hunter (Hunter, 1990) in terms the coaching model and Michael Fullan (Fullan, 2001) in terms of implementation of professional learning for systemic change. Initial training of consultants was carried out in 2003 by Barrie Bennett and Peter Smilanich, Canadian educators with a strong background in these areas. The contemporary content of the course is based on current and, where possible, an Australian evidence base of effective teacher practice, although much of the more practical behaviour management skills are based on the work of established theorists like Kounin and is largely summarised in texts of Bennett and Smilanich, (Bennett & Smilanich, 1994), more recently in *Classroom Management* (McDonald, 2010).

Content is only accepted as part of the programs where research and classroom experience agree that the skills are effective in the West Australian context, and is mapped to the National

Standards for Teachers. While the theory is critical to the underlying quality of the course, it only occupies a small part of the delivery of the program, however. CMS defines teaching as a set of behaviours that can be learned through practice and experiencing the results in authentic classrooms. We learn by doing.

External evaluation

In 2008, the Department commissioned Edith Cowan University to conduct an independent review of the Behaviour Management and Discipline (BM&D) strategy, of which CMS was a key component. BM&D ‘was intended to improve the behaviour of students with challenging and disruptive behaviours, improve the learning outcomes for these students, increase attendance rates, and make schools a safer and more positive learning environment for all students and their teachers. As well the strategy was intended to increase the competence and confidence of teachers to support and engage students who are alienated or who exhibit challenging behaviours’ (Robson et al., 2008, p. v).

The evaluation of the BM&D strategy drew information from a range of qualitative and quantitative data sources, including surveys, focus groups, case studies and statistical data obtained from the Department.

The review states:

All the evidence points to the Classroom Management Strategies program having provided a significant and valued benefit to schools. It was the program most often reported by principals to have contributed to an improvement in student behaviour [see Table 4] and teachers in the focus groups described how it integrated easily with other professional development programs to improve classroom management skills. The enthusiasm for the low-level responses and common language it has promoted was widely evident.

(Robson et al., p. 35)

CMS was judged by 73 per cent of respondents to the survey of principals to have been useful, leading to improved behaviour management practices by teachers. It was the professional learning program most frequently reported by principals to have made a difference to student behaviour in their school (Robson et al., p. 62). CMS was ‘the program that drew the most comments from focus group participants’ (Robson et al., p. 25).

The Review also noted ‘the design of the central delivery model coupled with school-level discretion was a powerful combination’ (Robson et al., p. 37).

CMS use of central planning, training and delivery of the programs ... and school-level control of resources have made it possible to train teachers in a wide range of professional contexts. Given the

connectedness between the training and classroom teaching practice, this achievement should be acknowledged. It would not have succeeded without effective implementation at each level of the organisation.

(Robson et al., p. 35)

Table 4

Programs identified as making a difference to student behaviour as a percentage

	Primary n = 142 %	Secondary n = 47 %	Combined n = 22 %	All n = 211 %
CMS	32	28	31	31
Class-size reductions	15	36	5	19
Rewards	18	4	46	18
Out-of-class activities	7	2	5	6
Tribes	6	2	0	5
Rock and Water	3	2	5	3
Restorative Justice	1	4	5	2

Source: Robson et al., An Evaluation of the Behaviour Management and Discipline Strategy 2001–2007, p. 63

BM&D strategy evaluation survey instrument. Principals were asked: ‘What would be the best example of an activity funded by BM&D that made a difference to the student behaviour in your school?’ ‘n = 211’ refers to the number of completed survey forms returned. The totals for each column do not add up to 100 per cent because not all principals identified one of the programs listed.

Individual case studies of schools that collected local data demonstrated a strong link between CMS and reductions in bullying behaviour and suspensions (Robson et al., p. 24)

The Review also makes this assessment:

[The CMS] implementation strategy has evolved into a well-articulated and dynamic delivery model. There are several features that differentiate the approach from comparable interventions.

- 1 A direct connection has been made between the professional development program and classroom teaching practice.
- 2 Central planning and management have sat comfortably with school-level choice; even though there was no requirement that schools participate in the program it has grown and developed because of the active participation of classroom practitioners.

- 3 The BM&D resource allocations to schools have enabled the schools facing challenges to mix and match the Classroom Management Strategies program with a wide range of programs of their choosing.

(Robson et al., p. 36)

The review concluded 'CMS was recognised through the survey, focus groups and case study school visits as a highly valued program that improved teachers' behaviour management skills in the classroom and playground' (Robson et al., p. 50).

Internal data¹

The positive impact that CMS reflective coaching sessions have on instructional practice at all stages of teaching experience is confirmed by the internal data available to the program. The evidence from pre and post survey data consistently points to an increase in skill level even in very experienced teachers. A common response from teachers after completion of the program is that they would have adjusted their pre-survey responses to a lower score; that is, they assumed before participating in the program that they had a higher level of skill and knowledge than they actually possessed.

Teachers consistently rate the workshop programs very highly. The average score for presenter skill and relevance of the material is 9/10. A common comment in the evaluations is that the CMS consultants are 'real' teachers and they understand what actually happens in 'real' classrooms.

It is also significant that many of the most positive participants are experienced teachers who, while initially anxious or sceptical about the program, typically embrace it fully. They feel that it validates their teaching, provides them with the language to share their expertise, as well as improve on their practice. The endorsement of the union is an important factor for many participants, as well as the non-threatening design of the delivery. In fact, once they experience the feedback and reflection of a CMS conference, teachers overwhelmingly endorse the process and are keen for more. This is evident from the high completion rate of the programs and the take-up of extension programs and further training in CMS. In many schools it is the first step in establishing peer-learning teams within their schools. Significantly these teams are teacher-driven, rather than administrator mandated projects.

¹ Internal data to support this is currently unavailable for publication.

In addition to the close work with teachers in their classrooms, CMS supports schools to plan and implement whole school instructional improvement programs in their individual contexts. Additional programs include specific support for pre-service teachers, graduates, school support staff, and school leaders. Many schools aim to train their whole staff and then set up a sustainability program to refresh and maintain the CMS ‘culture’ in their schools. Significantly, this has developed in response to specific and strong demand from teachers and school leaders and continues because of its successful impact on schools. The Department recommends a whole school CMS approach in schools identified as needing additional support through the school review processes.

CMS operates a rigorous accreditation program for the training and quality assurance of its consultants that can be accessed by schools that want to develop an internal CMS capacity to provide sustainability for their staff. Trained consultants are highly valued for promotional positions within schools. All of the accreditation training is mapped to the National Standards for Teachers framework.

Conclusion

CMS is a unique professional learning program for classroom teachers in terms of its scope, longevity and the systematic and systemic nature of its delivery and impact. In West Australian public schools a third of the workforce currently has a common language and understanding of teaching. Graduates are entering the profession already equipped with some of the same skills and understandings. Many teachers who have been through the program are now school leaders who use their knowledge and skills to set the agenda for their schools. CMS is linked into other professional learning as a vehicle for improving literacy, numeracy and other system agendas.

Its success provides some insights into how systems can support significant improvements to the current teacher workforce within a respectful professional framework. For whatever reasons, teachers have had little access to high quality feedback on their classroom practice in the place where it actually counts – their classroom. Many teachers actively resist efforts by leaders to be observed and assessed because when done badly such observations do more damage than good, however well intentioned. When done well the reverse is the case.

Teachers are the key to school improvement. More precisely, it is what happens between teacher and students in each and every classroom that determines the educational outcomes of any system. Learning how to open these classrooms to professional dialogue and reflection is the first step to real change in schools. CMS can provide some insight into how this might be achieved.

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