

Evaluation as a challenge for discussion

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For its annual pedagogical day, the European School at Culham invited a keynote speaker to talk about evaluation. Spier ten Doesschate of APS, APS International Ltd, a branch of APS, National Institute for School Improvement in Utrecht, The Netherlands (see: www.apsinternational.nl) spent the morning working with the team at the School. She interpreted evaluation as a challenge for discussion. A hundred teachers participated in the APS service training the day after the school holiday, when the building was still rather empty.

As a warm-up to the evaluation theme, Mrs Ten Doesschate asked the teachers to assess the auditorium where the in-service training was being held, first individually and then through group discussion. The auditorium was 'abuzz'. Significant differences in terms of evaluation emerged, ranging from room temperature, to quality of the interior and comfort of the chairs. Group discussions revealed that everyone had a different opinion based on the various criteria.

Evaluation as a challenge for school improvement

Mrs ten Doesschate clearly indicated that evaluation is related to a school vision of what you are as a school and what you wish to become. This means that school management and teachers create this vision in discussion and give direction to collecting evaluation data. This demands curiosity about the needs of the school management and teachers as well as student performance. The combination of the vision discussion and curiosity promotes a 'habit of inquiry' (Earl and Katz 2006¹).

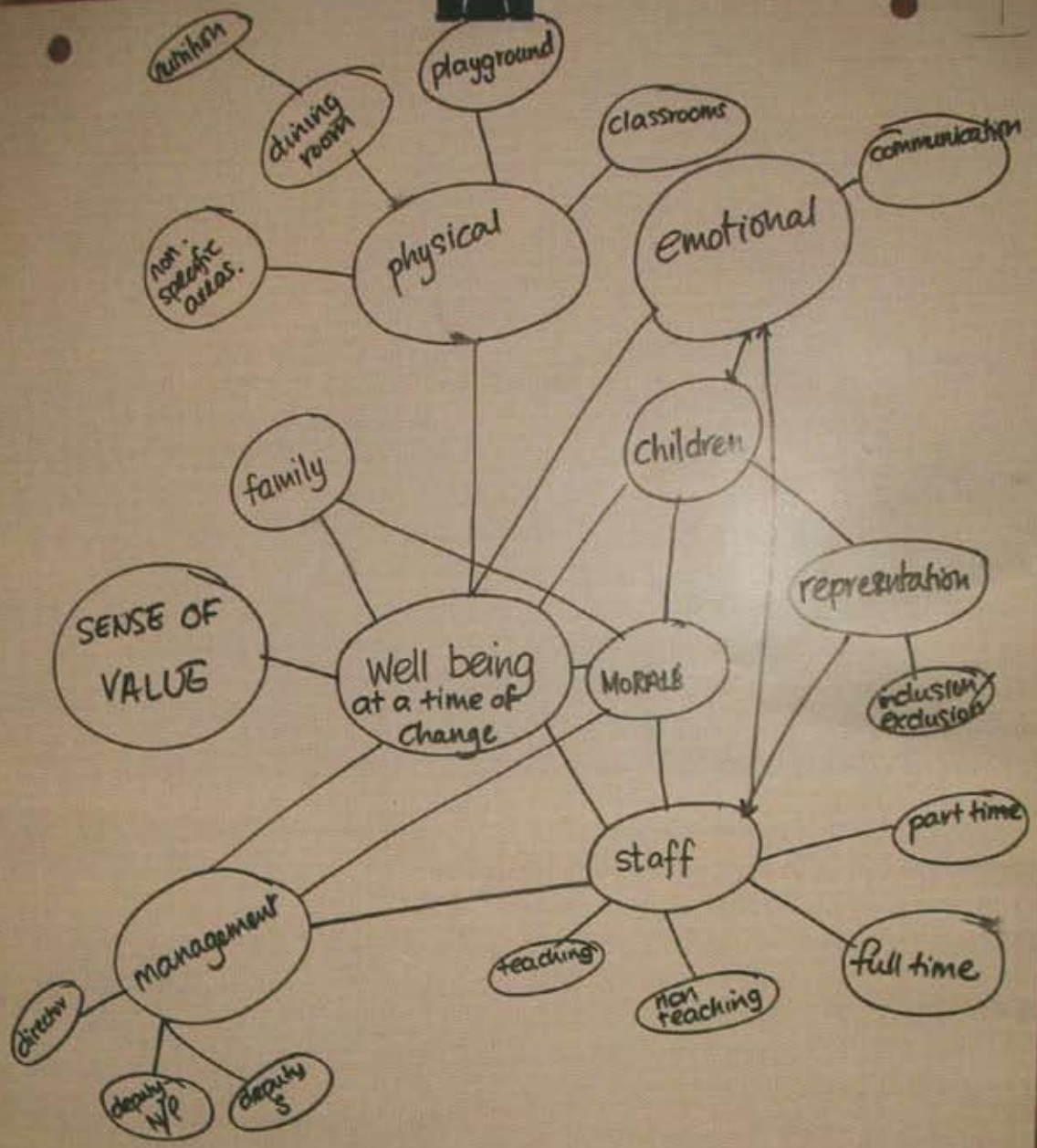
After her introduction, Mrs ten Doesschate invited the team to form groups to choose a theme it wished to explore and evaluate. The method used is to prepare a mind-map that unfolds into related topics. Examples of themes include: Playground situation, Communication (3X), School identity, Working together, Testing (3X), Well-being at a time of change, European dimension, Staff induction and Self-esteem. Five important evaluation questions were added to the mindmaps.

Mrs ten Doesschate then invited the school management to reflect on the various mind-maps. The most significant reflection was that many of the mind-maps dealt with internal and external communication.



¹ Lit.

Earl L.M. and S. Katz: *Leading schools in a Data-Rich World. Harnessing Data for School Improvement*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi, 2006



- How do we keep morale high for school community at a time of insecurity?
- Where should investment be directed? (money/energy/creativity)
- How can we ensure that all stakeholders have genuine involvement in the implementation of change?
- How can communication be better structured?



The groups then got to work with an APS evaluation toolkit. This toolkit includes a choice of various research methods such as: interview; questionnaire; discussion circle; stop, look and listen.

Using the toolkit, the groups discovered that it is important not to place all one's trust in a single source of data, but to use numerous sources to answer the evaluation questions.

Mrs ten Doesschate reflected on these group results based on the 'data literacy' concept. With data literacy, all sorts of monitor data and research data can be examined, understood and interpreted. This does not mean that teachers and school managers have to become researchers, but that they should see the importance of using various methods and sources. The second aspect of data literacy is that you can interpret this evaluation, deal with ambiguity in the data, and the data can provide significance from the school vision.

Spier ten Doesschate cited an example from one of her Dutch schools. The school interpreted test data exclusively at the individual student level, which gave the impression that 'all of its students'

functioned at a low performance level. She invited the team members to look at these same data, but from another vantage point: What do these individual student test data teach us about the policy we want to implement as a school? Using this form of evaluation, the school discovered diversity in performance levels among students as a group: while some students functioned well, other students functioned less well. There were indeed some students who simply functioned poorly. The school team became aware that the whole-class teaching approach was inadequate for the diverse group of students. Therefore, the school decided to introduce 'layered instruction'.

As a result of the day, the European School Culham decided to complete the various flysheets and distribute them among the teachers. It was also decided to examine the questionnaires that had been taken by the parents and teachers to learn about what the results could teach the school about future communication toward the parents and among the teachers.

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