



REVIEW: Hans A. Andrews, Recognition vs merit pay for our best teachers, Ottawa, Matilda Press, 13 978-0-9923182-7-7, 2014, pp. 94

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This latest publication by Hans A. Andrews provides an easy yet insightful read into the world of recognition programmes and merit pay systems for exceptional teachers. The book makes a clear distinction between a strong recognition system and simple merit pay as a reward for teaching excellence, sending a definite message that pay alone does not result in higher motivation for instructional excellence and a formal and consistent programme of recognition gives more incentives to teachers to perform excellently. Teacher recognition programmes for excellence can be awarded in a variety of ways. Every school can provide awards and recognition at affordable costs – these usually come in the shape of small, one-time bonuses, public recognition, a letter of commendation or a special dinner for the recognition winners, rather than salary increases. Merit pay, on the other hand, links teachers' salaries to periodic assessments of their performance. It is used by both Australia and the United States as an attempt to improve student learning outcomes and part of a drive to implement more accountable teacher evaluation systems and processes in compulsory education.

To the more sceptical among us who are not convinced of the benefits lauded by such celebratory systems, this book speaks about the importance of building a teacher recognition system and also describes how to design such a system for success. Andrews mentions a number of assurances which help recognition programmes become more relevant. It is duly recognised by the author that both teachers and school leadership teams must cooperate in order to develop effective school recognition systems. These need to be context-based and reflect the specific teaching attributes of the school or institution in question. Another important consideration raised by Andrews relates to the requirement of ascertaining that the basic levels of teacher needs are met and an adequate base pay is to be

made available to all teachers. Moreover, a successful recognition programme is supported by intrinsic motivators such as professional recognition, esteem, challenge and autonomy.

An appealing characteristic of Andrews's style of authorship is the way he intertwines past and current research, testimonials and exemplars from schools across different countries with his effortless attempts at commending good recognition programmes. He exposes readers to effective ways of incentivising teachers together with occurrences which have resulted in failures, or in less desirable systems, specifically those built on merit pay programmes, which, when offered on their own, can be problematic. One could understand, through these examples, the scale of teacher recognition being practised, however, they are not always sufficient to persuade the reader that recognition systems are 'a universal need for teachers worldwide', as claimed by author himself. The research backing these claims is not comprehensive and countries like Malta which did not participate in this research, may provide different scenarios. The motivational theories cited help to explain why teachers will respond positively when they are incentivised, but factors which can impact negatively on teachers' sense of accomplishment are not suitably investigated.

One of the most obvious conceptual difficulties of a recognition programme and merit pay system is the flawed premise that teachers who are excellent in their work with students should be thanked. Students are entitled to have excellent teachers and as a critique to the author's stance, he fails to ideologically explain, successfully, why teachers should be awarded recognitions to incentivise them to perform better. The ethical considerations of recognising best practice at the expense of undermining teachers who may be perceived as performing less effectively, or who need support, would also have helped to place this topic on a less problematic level.

It is widely recognised that teachers have a profound impact on the success of students in the classroom and merit pay links teacher expectations closely to classroom results. The book does question whether this system of rewarding 'good' teachers leads to improved educational outcomes and highlights the controversy associated with merit pay systems which base teacher performance on improvements in standardized test scores, placing the burden of improving schools on the shoulders of school teachers and ignoring

factors outside a teacher's control that can equally impact student achievement. It is important to acknowledge that the evaluation of school and teacher performance is not altogether straightforward and schools have goals beyond standardized test scores that cannot be easily measured and are often difficult to attribute to a single teacher. Test based accountability is an unstable and inaccurate measure of teacher effectiveness and an evaluation system, with potential recognition programmes linked to it, needs to be created based on fairness and transparency.

The author's research also helps to explain how recognition programmes and merit pay systems help to retain talented young teachers who are leaving the profession because they are not being appropriately compensated, or who move onto administration as a way of being recognized or paid. Furthermore, he draws attention to the fact that it is very difficult to fire an ineffective teacher and within a single-salary system, the person still enjoys the same benefits and job security. Through good recognition programmes, the work of teachers can be redesigned so they are interdependent and their interdependence can be acknowledged through group performance rewards. Such rewards help to enhance collegiality. On the other hand, if this aspect is ignored, the competition may create animosity and divisiveness between teachers and disincentivise cooperation.

Albeit not overtly, this book revolves significantly around school evaluation systems and highlights the need for all schools to adopt thorough and meaningful evaluations which also encourage and offer opportunities for professional development, affording every opportunity for success. As Andrews acknowledges, effectiveness can never be measured perfectly, but the attempt of measuring it and having some consequences attached to it is an important signal that the school cares about effectiveness and wants to reward and recognise it.

References

- Harvey-Beavis, O. (2003) Performance-based rewards for teachers: A literature review. Paper presented at the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Greece Conference 2003.