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THE ROLE OF THE FORMAL OBSERVATION IN PROMOTING REFLECTIVE  
PRACTICE

Merryl B. Brownlow

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program

Submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of

Doctor of Education

In the Foster G. McGaw Graduate School

National College of Education

National Louis University

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## Document Origination Statement for Digital Commons @ NLU

This document was created as *one* part of the three-part dissertation requirement of the National Louis University (NLU) Educational Leadership (EDL) Doctoral Program. The National Louis Educational Leadership EdD is a professional practice degree program (Shulman et al., 2006). For the dissertation requirement, doctoral candidates are required to plan, research, and implement three major projects, one each year, within their school or district with a focus on professional practice. The three projects are:

- Program Evaluation
- Change Leadership Plan
- Policy Advocacy Document

For the **Program Evaluation** candidates are required to identify and evaluate a program or practice within their school or district. The “program” can be a current initiative; a grant project; a common practice; or a movement. Focused on utilization, the evaluation can be formative, summative, or developmental (Patton, 2008). The candidate must demonstrate how the evaluation directly relates to student learning.

In the **Change Leadership Plan** candidates develop a plan that considers organizational possibilities for renewal. The plan for organizational change may be at the building or district level. It must be related to an area in need of improvement, and have a clear target in mind. The candidate must be able to identify noticeable and feasible differences that should exist as a result of the change plan (Wagner et al., 2006).

In the **Policy Advocacy Document** candidates develop and advocate for a policy at the local, state or national level using reflective practice and research as a means for supporting and promoting reforms in education. Policy advocacy dissertations use critical theory to address moral and ethical issues of policy formation and administrative decision making (i.e., what ought to be). The purpose is to develop reflective, humane and social critics, moral leaders, and competent professionals, guided by a critical practical rational model (Browder, 1995).

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## **ABSTRACT**

Acheson and Gall (2011) wrote about the tension between teacher evaluation and clinical supervision. In their research they discuss the intent of clinical supervision to be a model for coaching and supporting professional growth as compared to more traditional models of teacher evaluation that were often associated with fear as a motivator. This program evaluation examines the nature of the formal observation in the teacher evaluation process and seeks to explore its role in developing reflective practitioners and promoting professional growth. This study involved researching the perspectives of teachers and administrators regarding their perceptions of the value of the formal observation process in improving teaching and learning. The data was collected through surveys and interviews and analyzed for patterns in responses.

As a result of the research from this program evaluation, it was determined that the current formal observation process mandating an in-person observation of instruction is limited in its ability to foster the development of reflective practitioners. Several factors create a context that devalues what should be an optimal opportunity for professional growth. The passive role of teachers in the process, the high stakes nature of the observation as the central component in the larger evaluation process, the lack of a collaborative structure and the administrator-driven nature of the experience result in a process that has little impact on improving instruction in this study. The recommendations from this program evaluation include the exploration of alternative models for the current structure of the formal observation in the teacher evaluation process in Illinois.

## **PREFACE: LESSONS LEARNED**

The impetus for this program evaluation stemmed from my own efforts as an administrator to create a meaningful evaluation process for teachers, with a particular focus on increasing the value of the formal observation as an opportunity for professional growth. As a former building administrator of twelve years, I repeatedly observed the anxiety produced from the formal observation despite my efforts to shift as much ownership as possible to the teacher in the process. The traditional in-person observation contextually limits the role of the teacher in this potentially formative process for reflection and professional growth. My research affirmed the structural obstacles that exist in promoting a more collaborative and reflective process for teachers.

The fact that the teacher's reflections on instruction during the formal observation must be constructed from notes taken by an administrator inherently limits the teacher role in identifying opportunities for improvement. In interviews with teachers, they repeatedly emphasized the administrator-driven nature of the experience and lack of opportunity for authentic reflection. Listening to teachers' perceptions brought me back to what I knew to be my most powerful professional development as a teacher, National Board Certification. It was the power of watching myself on videotape and being able to identify my strengths and opportunities that profoundly impacted my instruction and improved my skills as a reflective practitioner. These experiences prompted me to evaluate the current observation model to determine if the historical perceptions I experienced mirrored the current dynamic in my district. Not to my surprise, I found that the formal observation remains a devalued process. These results prompted me to want to explore this further by researching a model for change.

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## **SECTION ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Purpose**

The era of clinical supervision dates back to the early 1960s as described in a book published by Robert Goldhammer in 1969. In theory, clinical supervision was intended to provide a collaborative, supportive platform for discussing teacher effectiveness with respect to observed behaviors in the classroom and their impact on student learning (Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011). To date, much of the literature written on teacher evaluation continues to emphasize the historical lack of value placed on the formal observation process in improving teaching and learning (Acheson & Gall, 2011; Aseltine, Faryniarz, & Rigazio-DiGilio, 2006; Connally & Tooley, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Education Sector, 2008; Jay, 2003; Marshall, 2005; Zepeda, 2012). Yet, this formal observation process, often still mirroring the original clinical supervision model, plays a significant role in the evaluation of teachers.

Recently, research has emphasized the improvements made in the use of observations and evaluation of professional practice with a shift from strictly accountability to a focus on professional growth. However, the perceived high stakes associated with the formal observation experience has teachers pushing back (Connally & Tooley, 2016). Observations can have a significant impact on teacher effectiveness if they provide supportive, constructive feedback. It is most effective when emphasizing the teacher as reflective practitioner, promoting self-evaluation and intentional analysis of teacher to student interactions. This level of reflection allows teachers to see the impact of their behavior leading to improved instructional delivery (Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, n.d.).

The formal observation process remains a focal point for the collection of evidence with respect to evaluating teacher practice (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Yet, many teachers perceive the process as anxiety producing, passive and administrator-driven. The inherent hierarchy in the relationship between teacher and principal is also incompatible with the characteristics of an inquiry-based, reflective process that leads to continuous improvement (Danielson, 2016). The purpose of this program evaluation is to examine current practices related to teacher evaluation with specific emphasis on the formal observation process. The study is intended to determine the impact of the formal observation on developing reflective practitioners and promoting professional growth for teachers. With respect to this evaluation, the formative improvement and learning purpose is intended to improve the evaluation process with respect to the formal observation by examining how the current process can be enhanced (Patton, 2008).

The state of Illinois required all school districts to shift their practices of teacher evaluation to a standards based model by the start of the 2016–2017 School Year. One such standards based model is that developed by Charlotte Danielson, a leading researcher in the field of education. Danielson’s model is known as the Framework for Teaching and is the default model of evaluation in the state of Illinois. The framework consists of standards for professional practice outlined in four major domains with 22 components by which to measure and evaluate teacher performance. The domains examine teacher performance and are labeled as follows: Planning and Preparation, The Classroom Environment, Instruction and Professional Responsibilities. Each component within the four domains can be evaluated according to a four descriptor rubric ranging

from the lowest indicator of *unsatisfactory* through *basic*, *proficient*, and at the highest level of performance, *distinguished* (Danielson, 2011).

Century School District, at the heart of this study, is in the process of shifting its evaluation practices to a plan built upon Danielson's Framework for Teaching. The formal observation process remains a critical focus for gathering evidence with respect to teacher evaluation and is specifically relevant in three of the four domains on which teachers will be evaluated (Planning and Preparation, The Classroom Environment and Instruction). The formal observation process is an opportunity to positively impact building climate and create a culture of continuous improvement. When building administrators can find the balance and connect supervision, evaluation and professional development in a systemic fashion, it can have significant impact on teaching and learning (Danielson, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2013; Zepeda, 2012). The formal observation process is a vehicle that may be able to be utilized to build relationships that foster trust if it is viewed as a collaborative opportunity to develop teachers as reflective practitioners promoting professional growth.

An important part of the purpose of my program evaluation is to build a shared understanding of the role of the formal observation in professionally developing staff. Based on a utilization-focused evaluation model (Patton, 2008), it will also be critical that there is a clear, shared definition of what it means to be a reflective practitioner to generate reliable outcomes. Generating shared understanding in the context of a program evaluation is critical to generating useful results or recommendations. The process of the program evaluation needs to be facilitated in a way that both teachers and administrators can speak openly about the current formal observation process. This will lead to shared

commitments in developing a model that will support professional growth, ultimately improving student learning. The formal observation process in schools may be perceived very differently just based on the role of the stakeholder in the organization (Patton, 2008). In this case, the desired outcome would be for administrators and staff to have a shared vision for the role of the formal observation. For the purposes of this study, I will define the skills of a reflective practitioner as they are outlined in Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching, since this is the tool by which their professional practice skills are evaluated. In her work, Danielson defines reflective practice as a learned skill. She characterizes it as an ability to make accurate judgments about your own practice, citing specific examples, with an application across future instructional settings resulting in improved performance over time (Danielson, 2008).

Currently, the formal observation process in Century School District employs the structure of the clinical supervision model. Each teacher is expected to engage in a pre-conference with the evaluator that leads to a formal observation that lasts an instructional period, followed by a post conference that is based on evidence collected by the observer. As described previously, this structure often results in a conflict between the intended outcomes of supervision related to professional growth and the high stakes implications that come with the role of the observation in the evaluation process. The process is primarily facilitated by the evaluator and the teacher's role is to respond to notes and evidence provided to him/her via the identified tools for formal observation data collection. The notes or evidence from the evaluator are the context for the post observation conference. Thus, the teacher is at the receiving end of the feedback, rather than being the driver of the conversation with respect to the observed teaching and

learning experience. This program evaluation will examine the extent to which this model results in positive perceptions of the formal observation process with respect to promoting reflective practice and professional growth.

### **Rationale**

The formal observation process is often perceived as a high stakes event that produces anxiety and often results in a less than authentic teaching and learning experience in the classroom. Since the formal observation is often the driver for collecting evidence related to professional practice, the opportunity for the experience to support the development of reflective practitioners and promote professional growth is monumental. However, more often than not, it is not a highly valued experience for teachers and becomes something administrators see as needing to control for the purposes of collecting evidence for a final, or what is known as a summative, rating. Education Sector (2008) reported only 26% of teachers indicating their most recent formal evaluation was useful and effective (p. 3). Additional results from that report state that 41% called the observation “just a formality,” (p. 3), while 32% said it was “well-intentioned but not particularly helpful” to their practice (p. 3). From my professional experience and as identified by Myung and Martinez (2013), it takes a high degree of trust and collaboration to establish a formal observation process that is valued by both the teacher and administrator in a way that promotes best practices and improves student learning. Having served 12 years as a building administrator, I often had teachers expressing anxiety with respect to the formal observation process. While I had a high degree of relational trust in the districts where I served as principal, the nature of the

observation cycle and its role in teacher evaluation made it challenging to convince teachers to view it as an opportunity for professional growth.

The current model used in my district emphasizes an administrative driven process versus placing the ownership on teachers. The administrator is the one watching and reflecting, with the responsibility to provide notes on what was observed to the teacher. The teacher is expected to reflect by recalling events without having the opportunity to observe first-hand how his/her interactions with students played out over the course of the lesson. If we were to apply the research behind Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching to the formal observation process, we could argue the need to provide teachers with an opportunity for an authentic context for their reflections, increasing ownership and promoting professional learning in the process (Danielson, 2011).

The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards requires reflective experiences as part of the certification process. The research has suggested that by comparison National Board Certified Teachers (NBCTs) typically yield higher levels of student achievement compared to non-National Board Certified teachers. Increased learning in these classrooms has yielded results that suggest student gains are on the order of an additional one to two months of instruction. This improvement in student outcomes is mirrored by NBCTs achieving stronger results on leading measures of teacher effectiveness, including distinguished classroom observations and student achievement scores (National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, 2015). Another indicator of the value placed on the promotion of reflective practice are the recent changes in the pre-service teacher requirements. The new pre-service teacher program in Illinois is known as



Illinois edTPA, The process was officially implemented in September 2015 and requires reflections on videotaped lessons, student work and planning and assessment documents from teacher candidates. These components contribute to the overall initial teacher licensure approval, emphasizing the value placed on self-assessment and reflection in the observation process (Illinois State Board of Education, 2015a).

As a two-time National Board Certified Teacher, I had the firsthand experience of videotaping my instruction and diagnosing strengths and opportunities for improving student learning. The opportunity to self-assess was the most powerful professional development I have experienced with respect to developing my skills as a reflective practitioner. The power of reflection became clear as I was able to examine my planning, preparation and assessment development in direct relationship to the teaching strategies executed in the classroom by observing my own practice firsthand.

Because of my experiences with National Board Certification, I sought to find ways to flexibly implement evaluation processes within the state and district guidelines to further develop teachers' skills as reflective practitioners. In previous districts as a building principal, I was able to use the context of the Danielson Framework for Teaching, particularly the component that addresses reflective practice, to create a more collegial approach to the formal observation process. By taking the stance that teachers are the ones that ultimately need to be able to reflect daily without the support of an administrator's observations, I was able to shift some of the ownership to teachers. I spent a great deal of time in classrooms and teachers knew that I had a strong understanding of their instructional practices. This was also key in being able to utilize the formal observation as an opportunity to coach. The teachers recognized there was

evidence I could draw from all the other times I had been in and out of classrooms to evaluate their practices. This visibility, coupled with support from the associations and administration, allowed me to create alternatives to the traditional face to face observation model.

I started by offering teachers that expressed anxiety with in-person observations the option to videotape the lesson instead. This allowed the teacher and me to review the lesson independently, then come together to discuss the instructional experience. Teachers were able to own the post conference reflections, since they could lift evidence on their own directly from their tapes. The word spread as teachers found value in this approach and the request by teachers for this model grew. It is important to note that I was administering in this capacity before the shift in current evaluation practices based on identified standards and the required informal visits to classrooms.

Strong instructional leadership requires high visibility in classrooms coupled with an ability to support the development of reflective practitioners through a culture of collaboration committed to continuous improvement beyond the formal observation (Aseltine et al., 2006). The current model of teacher evaluation typically requires formal scheduled observations lasting forty-five minutes to an hour in length. Tenured teachers require at least one of these formal observations during an evaluation cycle, while non-tenured teachers often require two to three formal observations within an evaluation cycle. Depending on the number of teachers on cycle to be evaluated, the time commitment involved in these formal observations can hijack time from being able to conduct more frequent, formative informal classroom walk-throughs and reduce overall visibility and connectedness to what is happening daily across the school environment.

In a 2005 article in Phi Delta Kappan, Kim Marshall shared that he believes the way to be sure teachers are using effective practices all the time is to increase the unannounced classroom visits (Marshall, 2005). Marshall also shared that informal observations reduce stress for teachers and build trust in that administrators know what is happening in classrooms. Danielson (2016) suggested that it is the responsibility of the person in the position of power to cultivate a culture of trust and create an environment where it is safe to take risks. While there has been a recent shift to incorporate more informal observations in evaluation models in support of this outcome, the nature of the formal observation has remained unchanged. The question remains whether the formal observation process in its current model contributes to cultivating a culture of trust that also supports the development of reflective practitioners.

### **Goals**

When I became an administrator, I decided to implement a more flexible model for the formal observation process. When teachers questioned their abilities to demonstrate a natural learning experience during an observation, or when they indicated they had difficulty recalling events because of the anxiety it produced, I allowed teachers to voluntarily videotape their lessons for formal observations. Teachers were able to go back to the videotapes to frame the reflections for the post conference rather than having to rely on my observations and notes. I could also view the videotape outside of the instructional day in preparation for the post conference. This opened up time in my schedule to conduct informal observations building my capacity as an instructional leader in my school. The feedback from teachers about the increased value of the formal observation in their professional development led me to want to investigate the possibility

of improving the process for all teachers. I have the opportunity to evaluate whether my perceptions of the lack of value surrounding the formal observation is prevalent in my current system. If findings support this perception, I would like to investigate ways to frame the formal observation process to increase the value for both teachers and administrators while supporting development of skills for reflective practice. If findings suggest that the formal observation is valuable for the purpose of promoting reflective practice, I will be able to identify under what conditions that perception exists to improve upon the process in contexts where it may not be valued.

Creating a diagnostic disposition around teaching practices is aimed directly at improving the student learning experience in the classroom. The goal of a reflective practitioner is grounded in a philosophy of continuous improvement. Teachers who reflect well are able to move themselves along a continuum of performance based on indicators of accomplished practice such as those outlined in the Framework for Teaching by Charlotte Danielson. The components in the framework related to classroom environment and instruction are at the heart of improving student learning (Danielson, 2008). These are the domains that house the components that are directly addressed in the formal observation process, as administrators document evidence of teacher effectiveness in these two areas. If the formal observation is a valuable tool in promoting reflective practice, a teacher should be able to take that experience and apply it to their next steps for continuous improvement based on the continuum of distinguished practice described in the framework. Given that the formal observation is viewed as a focal point in the teacher evaluation process, I am interested in maximizing it as a vehicle for promoting teacher growth, particularly with respect to reflective practice.

## **Research Questions**

Charlotte Danielson's (2016) recent reflections on the formal observation process as part of the evaluation process justify my interest in examining its value in relationship to professional growth for teachers. Danielson pointed out that typically the process is passive for teachers and they recognize that the administrator is doing all of the work. The primary research question that drove this study speaks directly to the perceived value of the process. It reads as follows: Does the formal observation process promote the development of teachers as reflective practitioners? Related to this question were some secondary questions that inform the primary research question. The following related questions were considered in the study:

- Are there demographic patterns (i.e., years of experience, tenure status, teacher leadership) that are related to the perceived value of the formal observation as a tool for promoting reflective practice?
- Do teachers view the current formal observation as an opportunity to develop their skills as reflective practitioners?
- Do perceived high stakes surrounding the formal observation impede its role in serving as a professional growth experience?

As mentioned previously, the ability of a teacher to reflect on their practice directly impacts the learning environment and student achievement. If we put it in the context of improving professional practice, there is an identified relationship that suggests that the rating based on Charlotte Danielson's framework acts as a predictor of a teacher's impact on student achievement (Danielson, 2008).

## **SECTION TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Teacher evaluation is currently undergoing significant reforms across the United States (Darling-Hammond, 2013). In Illinois, all school districts are mandated to implement a model of evaluation that incorporates standards for professional practice combined with measures of student growth to determine summative performance for teachers (Illinois State Board of Education, 2015b). The reason for such reform stems from agreement that the current system has minimal impact in its attempt to promote teacher learning. Moreover, the recent urgency for reform stemmed from the national spotlight on funding related to the “Race to the Top” initiative launching teacher effectiveness into the center of the debate. This has created a major focus for policy reform with the evaluation tool being at the heart of the discussion on how to identify, retain and promote accomplished practitioners, while identifying those that are not satisfactory (Darling-Hammond, 2013). A recent policy paper on evaluation as a tool for professional growth emphasized that the intent of these new federal policies was to improve teacher quality through a supportive approach and not just to serve as a measure of accountability (Connally & Tooley, 2016).

The scrutiny around teacher evaluation practices is not new. Darling-Hammond began studying teacher evaluation in the early 1980s. At that time, she found that there was little evidence that evaluation systems provided useful feedback for teachers or information to contribute to sound personnel decisions (Darling-Hammond, 2013). Given the effort to create systems of evaluation that promote professional learning and growth that ultimately impact student achievement, examining the components of the process to identify those with potential to support the desired outcome is a worthy task. This

program evaluation was designed to provide more specific insights on how the role of the formal observation can be promoted as an instrumental tool in fostering continuous improvement on the part of teachers, ultimately increasing student achievement. The continuous improvement stems from the idea that the observation process may significantly contribute to the development of educators' skills for reflective practice and target professional opportunities for growth.

In the review of the literature, the role of reflective practice was an important element to examine because of the evidence surrounding its value in improving teaching practices (Aseltine et al., 2006; Danielson, 2016; Fendler, 2003; Jay, 2003; Zepeda, 2012; Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, n.d.). It was also important to examine the current overall context of teacher evaluation prior to examining the role of the formal observation process. In studying the literature on teacher evaluation, there was an intent to describe the intended outcomes for such systems, examine the successes and challenges related to those outcomes and identify possible improvements to the process.

From examining the role of reflection and the overall evaluation system, the literature review led to a specific focus on the formal observation process. In studying the literature on the formal observation process, the lens that framed my research was the impact of the observation experience on teachers and their perceptions of the process with respect to professional growth. The review included research on the constructs of the formal observation process, current successes and challenges and implications for improvements with respect to its potential impact on improving teacher practice.

## **Formal Observations in the Context of Teacher Evaluation**

The emphasis on teacher observation as a central component of the evaluation process dates back to the late 1800s, early 1900s. There have been critical junctures at which the protocol or focus was adjusted in relationship to the times. One of those junctures came in the late 1970s when the clinical supervision model took the profession by storm. With the clinical supervision model, came the notion of the formal observation which was preceded by a pre-observation conference and followed by a post-observation conference for the purpose of evaluators sharing feedback with teachers (Marzano et al., 2011).

Today, we face another one of those critical junctures. The current climate is requiring that districts move to an evaluation process that defines the standards for professional practice, inclusive of those embodied in daily instructional practice. The formal observation process has now become a vehicle by which to collect evidence with respect to the standards in order to draw a summative conclusion about teacher effectiveness leading to an evaluation rating. Darling-Hammond (2013) recently affirmed the need for a system that outlines how this would operate based upon research and current best practices. It is only natural that most districts have gravitated to those noted for developing those standards, one of whom is Charlotte Danielson. Although the way evidence is collected and discussed has shifted in this recent transition, in Illinois the clinical supervision model is still the procedural guide that overlays the implementation of the formal observation process.

In 1980 when clinical supervision was first researched, the process created feelings of conflict as teachers wrestled with its intent to focus on teacher growth and



development and the accountability requirements that came with it. This is still an issue in today's systems of evaluation (Acheson & Gall, 2011). Several studies have identified the formal observation as a process that is inhibited in its impact to improve teacher performance because of its juxtaposition to accountability in the teacher evaluation process and the anxiety that produces. Many teachers perceive the presence of an administrator in the room as fear provoking and threatening which leads to feelings of apprehension, inadequacy and mistrust (Danielson, 2016; Marshall, 2005; Myung & Martinez, 2013; Ness, 1980). Given its role in evaluation and this inherent conflict in the intent of the formal observation process for professional growth and the reality of teachers' perceptions of the process, it is important to examine ways to shift the mindset of teachers and find a way for the observation process to be valued and productive. Without the ability to shift perceptions, the potential of the formal observation to promote professional growth and improve practice is compromised.

It has been noted that formal observations can have a strong impact on teacher effectiveness if the process provides supportive, constructive feedback emphasizing the teacher as reflective practitioner and promoting self-evaluation. The teacher is the one that needs to analyze and understand the impact of the instructional decisions they make. When the teacher can see the impact of his or her own behavior on instruction, it can lead to improved implementation of instruction. Teachers need to be at the center of the process and not bystanders (Danielson, 2016; Myung & Martinez, 2013; Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, n.d.; Towndrow & Tan, 2009; Zepeda, 2012). While the standards based framework provides concrete indicators that improve the quality of the post-observation conference and the feedback teachers receive, the

evaluator remains in the driver seat doing the heavy lifting (Consortium on Chicago School Research, 2011).

In order to empower the teacher in the formal observation process, the teacher has to be the one doing the intellectual work (Danielson, 2016; Myung & Martinez, 2013). More active listening on the part of the evaluator can reduce anxiety and lead to higher quality conversations. By allowing teachers to drive the conversation, administrators can promote teacher responsibility for evaluating their own work and also demonstrate respect for a teachers' ability to self-critique. When teachers share their own reflections of successes and areas of improvement, they are readily demonstrating their skills as reflective practitioners, allowing administrators the opportunity to support teachers in honing those skills (Myung & Martinez, 2013). When teachers play an active role and become the self-reflecting practitioner, there is potential to capitalize on the opportunity for growth (Towndrow & Tan, 2009). Self-reflection and the ability to view your own instruction can be invaluable for teachers at any point in their careers (Frontline Technologies, 2016). Teachers owning the reflective responsibility to find evidence of good teaching is highly effective in improving practice (Archer, Cantrell, Holtzman, Joe, Tocci, & Wood, 2015).

### **Standards Based Performance: Formal Observation and Reflection**

In order to evaluate the potential for the formal observation to support the development of reflective practitioners, it was important to examine its context in the overall teacher evaluation process. The requirements for the new teacher evaluation system include a professional practice component grounded in research based standards for accomplished teaching. In the state of Illinois, the default model is Charlotte

Danielson's Framework for Teaching (Danielson, 2011). Century School District based the development of its professional practice on the Danielson's framework. Across the country, the development of professional practice models for teacher evaluation are incorporating standards based systems based on best practices (Darling-Hammond, 2013). While theoretically, these systems are intended to improve processes and promote increased professional growth, the policy only lays the groundwork to exercise that intent. The operationalization at the local level will ultimately determine the impact of a new system. The potential for evaluation systems to improve teaching will only result from a deliberate and valued connection between the evidence and targeted professional development identified as a result of the evidence (Connally & Tooley, 2016). Darling-Hammond (2013) also suggested that the standards of practice identify elements of effective teaching, and if the specificity around evidence for demonstrating effective performance is not defined, the reliability and validity of the process may be impacted.

Inherent in standards based systems that school districts implement is the emphasis on the formal observation as a central component for the collection of evidence in evaluating teacher performance. There are specific indicators within the standards that evaluate performance based on the observed interactions of teachers and students during instructional experiences. These components within the frameworks lead to the emphasis of observation as a primary vehicle for collecting evidence of performance. Within framework standards for evaluating performance, and related to the formal observation process, reflection is identified as a critical component as it relates to effective teaching practice (Danielson, 2011; Marzano & Toth, 2013).

Charlotte Danielson (2016) recently revisited the importance of reflective practice as a component of teacher evaluation. She emphasized the importance of the practitioner playing an active role in analyzing and understanding the teaching and learning exchanges in a classroom and the importance of those interactions with respect to the instructional decisions made in the course of a lesson. In order for reflection to be owned by the teacher and to maximize its potential in improving practice, Fendler (2003) argued that those supporting the work of teachers need to be aware of the limits we place on promoting reflective practice when we make an assumption that we need to “teach” teachers to be reflective. Her argument is that educators are inherently reflective and that institutional models created by those other than teachers for how to reflect limit the impact reflection can have on improving instructional practices. In order to lead to critical examination of the status quo, Fendler addresses the need for a context of discourse to promote the kind of inquiry that leads to examination of underlying assumptions promoting improved practice.

Jay (2003) also argued that reflection is a critical aspect of improving practice that leads to positive change. The idea that teachers are the main stakeholders with respect to this notion begs us to examine why teacher voice is often missing from the research on the impact of reflection on improving practice. Considering the emphasis on the value of reflection implied in the research reviewed, it validated my interest in exploring the role reflection plays in the formal observation process as one of the main components in teacher evaluation.

For the purposes of this program evaluation in examining how evidence based systems for evaluating performance are implemented, Charlotte Danielson’s Framework

for Teaching (2011) was the focus. Since this is the default model in the state of Illinois and the one chosen for the basis of evaluation in Century School District, it was important to further explore this particular framework, and the role of the formal observation with respect to the professional practice standards it sets forth. The next section provides a full description of this framework.

### **The Framework for Teaching**

Charlotte Danielson developed the Framework for Teaching as a means to promote clear and meaningful conversations about effective teaching practice. Her standards for practice identified a continuum with four levels of performance across four domains and 22 components. The four major domains included in the framework are: 1. Planning and Preparation, 2. Classroom Environment, 3. Instruction and 4. Professional Responsibilities. Each of the domains contains five to six components that more specifically address the performance standards associated with it. In its inception, the framework was for promoting self-assessment and reflection on the part of teachers with respect to these standards of performance. This reflection was intended to lead to professional conversations with colleagues at any level to identify areas of success and opportunities for refining instructional practices to improve overall student achievement. The research behind the framework has linked the teacher behaviors outlined in the framework and the levels of performance to student achievement (Danielson, 2011).

Within the framework, there are what is known as “on stage” and “off stage” behaviors that shape the complexity of teaching. The “on stage” behaviors are directly observable and are described in Domain 2 (Classroom Environment) and Domain 3 (Instruction). When using the framework for evaluative purposes, evidence for these

domains are typically gathered during formal and informal observations of instruction. The “off stage” behaviors or those indicators in Domain 1 (Planning and Preparation) and Domain 4 (Professional Responsibilities) are not always directly observable. The evidence for these indicators is often provided to the evaluator through artifacts or conversations shared with the administrator by the teacher being evaluated (Danielson, 2008).

For the purposes of this program evaluation, it is important to note that the Framework for Teaching provides the agreed upon expectations for teaching and learning as it relates to the instructional context in Century School District. Teachers and administrators have received comprehensive training in the framework and have a shared understanding of the expectations for achieving levels of competency as outlined by Danielson. The standards for the components in Domains 2 and 3 are the basis for the evidence collected during formal observations.

### **Improving the Formal Observation Process**

As districts have transitioned to the more sophisticated evaluation systems based on standards, there is an increased burden in collecting evidence during the formal observation. As we strive to create structures where teachers have ownership to increase the impact on improving performance, the literature has suggested constructs that may support districts in that work.

Providing constructs where the teacher owns the reflective practice process is the foundation of what is referred to as a Performance Based Supervision Model (Aseltine et al., 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2013). Performance based models ask educators to individually and collectively reflect on and analyze student work and to use that evidence

to create a plan for improvement. This type of model gives teachers ownership of the reflective practice process.

Research suggests that teacher effectiveness as measured by improved student achievement is evident in performance based assessment measures such as National Board Certification, the Connecticut BEST assessment and the Performance Assessment for California Teachers. These models all promote the collection of evidence through videotapes, student work samples and teacher reflections about the decision making with respect to instruction. The process of licensure for pre-service teachers known as edTPA is also based on the principals of performance assessment. This process embeds the use of student work and videotaped lessons as a major component of the self-analysis. Performance assessments are self-led with guidance and feedback from outside observers. These methods have been found to lead to improved performance and positive changes in teaching practices (Darling-Hammond, 2013).

In reviewing the literature with respect to the formal observation process and reflective practice, it became clear that that the teacher has to play an active role in becoming a self-reflective practitioner in the formal observation process to maximize the opportunity for improving student learning (Archer et al., 2015; Aseltine et al., 2006; Danielson, 2016; Myung & Martinez, 2013; Towndrow & Tan, 2009). Lessons from the literature can inform next steps in improving the formal observation process in Century School District as the new evaluation system is implemented. The program evaluation is designed to identify the current reality surrounding the role of the formal observation and how the district might capitalize on the opportunity for this process to significantly improve instructional practices and ultimately increase student achievement.

## **SECTION THREE: METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design Overview**

Century School District is small by comparison to most Illinois school districts. With less than 1,700 students, the district is comprised of five schools that employ less than 160 certified staff members. The administrative team at the building level all have three or less years of experience in their current positions. Four of the five principals have less than five years of experience as building principals. The leadership styles and building dynamics represent very unique cultures and climates in each of the buildings. The relative newness of the administrative team at the building level presents an opportunity to share our beliefs and values with respect to teacher evaluation. We have a new Superintendent who began her tenure in July 2016 and under her leadership we have the ability to collectively implement the new evaluation system with an emphasis on professional growth and continuous improvement, particularly with how we shape the formal observation experience.

Given the opportunity in the district, my program evaluation methodology led me to take an interpretive approach in answering my primary research question. Within this approach, I engaged in a district-wide study of staff perceptions around the formal observation process and its role in teacher evaluation. The district represents a diverse population of staff with respect to experience, supervision models and building cultures. My program evaluation is intended to provide information that may lead to enhancement of the implementation and outcomes of the evaluation process with respect to the formal observation. Intended users of the evaluation will be the administrative team and certified teachers they evaluate. Patton (2008) described this approach as developmental in nature



attempting to examine formative and summative outcome recommendations for program improvement. The utilization-focused approach to the evaluation allowed me to involve stakeholders, consider relationships and design a methodology that matched the needs of the organization in which the evaluation was executed.

Program evaluations can take many shapes in a utilization focused framework. One has to be intentional about the intended outcome of the program evaluation to determine the approach best suited to the study. Patton (2008) described the approach as “personal and situational” (p. 37). He also makes the argument that for the purposes of program evaluation, the idea of involving stakeholders in the process is necessary to provide a context where the learning can occur for participants and the evaluator.

After examining the appropriateness of various data collection models related to process use and knowing I wanted to analyze and interpret findings with stakeholders, it led me to take a district-wide case study approach to my question (Patton, 2008). With the case study, I wanted to understand the impact of the perception of the formal observation process in facilitating the development of reflective practitioners. Through the program evaluation, I expected to be able to identify contextual variables that supported the perceived value of the formal observation process. Through my research I hoped to enhance the shared understanding of the intent of the formal observation and bring together the perspectives of teachers and administration to determine how to maximize its role in facilitating professional growth through reflective practice. The shared understanding that might result from the program evaluation takes a transitional approach and is intended to enhance the overall impact of the teacher evaluation process, particularly with respect to the formal observation (Patton, 2008).

In order to collect and interpret the data through my case study, I decided to begin with a survey of certified staff members and the building principals to gain insight on their perceptions surrounding the formal observation process. As part of that survey, it was important to identify the situational factors that might impact the responses of participants. Therefore, it was important to get a demographic profile of each of the respondents with respect to the indicators identified on the demographic portion of the teacher survey (Appendix A). As part of the survey development, the questions were shared with a group of certified teachers from across the school district. By involving stakeholders in like positions as part of the question development, I was able to determine if the questions were being perceived as intended in the survey design. Responses were coded for those that valued the formal observation process for promoting reflective practice and professional growth and those that did not. Based on the coding of the survey results, a theoretical sampling of respondents was selected for additional data collection in the form of semi-structured interviews.

The interviewees were selected based on identified patterns in the data that led to a perceived value or lack thereof with respect to the role of the formal observation process in supporting the development of reflective practitioners. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in a one on one setting and were designed to get at the perceptions of the staff members regarding their formal observation experiences. Two principals were also interviewed to compare perceptions of the formal observation process and its role in promoting professional growth with staff members. By exploring the perspectives of both administrator and teacher, the goal was to establish the contextual factors that led to perceptions of perceived value in the observation process.

The interview structure and questions are outlined in Appendix B. As suggested by the participatory action research model, using the survey was a way to establish a theoretical framework from which to identify the interview subjects to carry out the research based on the related questions (James, Milienkiewicz, & Buckman, 2008). This approach allowed the interview structure to provide a context for gaining a more complete picture of how the formal observation process impacts stakeholders of varying contextual demographics across the district. The data collected from the surveys and semi-structured interviews were utilized to create a profile for the building leadership and set the context for a change process to improve overall instructional leadership through the formal observation process.

### **Participants**

For the purposes of this program evaluation, the study requested all staff members evaluated according to the certified staff evaluation plan participate in the survey (Appendix A). Among the staff surveyed there were forty-eight classroom teachers serving kindergarten through fifth grades, twenty-four staff members serving specialized segments of the student population and nine staff members teaching specialist subject areas. The staff members participating in the development of the survey were among the staff surveyed. The responses from the stakeholder group involved in the development of the survey were coded to be able to determine if their involvement led to any patterns in the data. Since the survey was anonymous, identities were able to be protected.

For the purposes of the semi-structured interviews, a subset of the staff surveyed were interviewed. The interviewees included nine staff members with demographics

representative of those surveyed. This provided the opportunity to more deeply examine the factors that contribute to dispositions regarding the formal observation process.

In recruiting participants, it was made clear that the survey was strictly voluntary and that choosing not to participate in the research would not result in any negative consequences. Since there was no identifier with respect to building or grade level, the survey responses had a high degree of anonymity. For the selection of interviewees, I used the demographic patterns to identify appropriate staff members and contacted those individuals directly to solicit their participation. When I contacted the potential interviewees, I provided each with a written invitation to participate and emphasized that the participation in the interviews was voluntary. By providing a written invitation, it reduced the pressure of responding in a face to face context, which made the decision to decline easier if individuals were uncomfortable participating in this phase of the research. In the invite, it stated that participants had the option to decline with no negative consequences associated with choosing not to participate.

### **Data Gathering Techniques**

#### **Survey**

As mentioned in the design overview, data was gathered through the use of an initial survey administered to all certified staff in the district. The survey was intended to gather perception data related to the formal observation process and to serve as a tool for identification of interview participants. The questions began with a collection of demographic data and perceptions about the anxiety the formal observation may produce. The remaining questions asked participants to share their perceptions of the formal observation process based on a Likert scale of 1 to 5. The questions centered around the

context of the formal observation and its role in fostering reflective practice, as well as its perceived value in supporting professional growth.

The survey responses were analyzed for patterns in the data based on contextual and demographic information. Questions about levels of experience and how anxiety impacts performance were disaggregated to determine if there were any obvious patterns in the data with respect to the Likert scale questions around the perceived value of the formal observation. The intent of analyzing the survey data in this way was to establish the contextual variables impacting the perceptions of the observation process.

The Likert questions were analyzed to determine if there were any patterns with respect to the observation process (questions 10, 12, 13, and 15) and its role in promoting reflection and growth (questions 11, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19 and 20). In order to further analyze identified patterns, a cross-section of teachers was selected for interviews. The interviewees represented a cross section of the demographic characteristics to include years of experience, instructional roles, the number of evaluators experienced, and the number of school districts in which they worked.

## **Interviews**

A semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B) was developed to gather additional data related to the perceptions of teachers about the role of the formal observation as a tool for professional growth. In order to gain clarity or expand on the perspective of the interviewees, probing questions were asked as a follow up to the predetermined interview questions during the course of the interview process.

Specifically, the interviews were intended to better understand the underlying rationale or influences for the responses generated by the survey. The outcome was to identify related

contextual factors that contribute to the perceptions of the role of the formal observation in promoting or inhibiting reflective practice.

### **Data Analysis Techniques**

The initial survey was distributed to 81 staff members across four elementary buildings in Century School District. Of the 81 potential respondents, 38 staff members completed the survey. The demographic breakdown included 15 classroom teachers, seven specialist subject teachers, 15 small group instructors and one school psychologist. The demographic breakdown of respondents including years of experience, number of districts employed and number of evaluators of respondents is documented in Tables 1 through 3 below.

*Table 1. Years of experience.*

Answer Choices	Responses	
▼ 0-3 years of experience	15.79%	6
▼ 4-6 years of experience	10.53%	4
▼ 7-10 years of experience	13.16%	5
▼ 11-15 years of experience	28.95%	11
▼ 16-20 years of experience	15.79%	6
▼ 21+ years of experience	15.79%	6
Total		38

*Table 2. Number of districts employed.*

Answer Choices	Responses	
▼ Only District _____	21.05%	8
▼ Two school districts (including District ___)	39.47%	15
▼ Three school districts (including District ___)	26.32%	10
▼ Four or more school districts (including District ___)	13.16%	5
Total		38

Table 3. Number of evaluators.

Answer Choices	Responses
Only my current administrator	2.63% 1
Two administrators	26.32% 10
Three administrators	15.79% 6
Four or more administrators	55.26% 21
Total	38

The survey was analyzed for patterns in the perception data around the value of the formal observation process. Scores of four and five indicated that the staff member values the components of the formal observation process with respect to promoting reflection and professional growth. Those responding with a one or two see little to no value in the formal observation process for reflection and growth. In addition to examining the perception data, the categories of responses were then compared to the descriptive statistics related to the demographic data to determine if there were any common contextual factors related to the themes in the perceived value or lack thereof of the formal observation in promoting reflective practice.

The survey results did not yield any significant demographic patterns with respect to the primary research question regarding the role of the formal observation process in promoting the development of reflective practitioners. The survey results are described in more detail below.

Once the survey data was analyzed, it led to the identification of the subset of participants interviewed. Since there were no obvious demographic patterns in the responses, the interview data was coded by demographic variables to identify a representative cross-section of respondents for the interviews. Initially the plan was to interview three respondents who valued the formal observation process and three who

may not have valued the process across the demographic groups represented. In the absence of the demographic patterns, I chose to interview nine survey participants to incorporate a broader cross-section of the group surveyed.

Those interviewed included six classroom teachers and three small group instructors. There were not any specialists volunteering to be interviewed. Among the nine teachers interviewed, two had six years of experience or less, five had between 10 and 20 years of experience and two had 20 or more years of experience. This provided perspectives across the levels of experience from those surveyed. All of those interviewed had been evaluated by two or more administrators over the course of their experiences. Of the nine interviewees, two have worked only in Century School District. The remaining seven have taught in two or more school districts over the courses of their careers. The interview data was synthesized based on the attitudes and feelings of the respondents to determine if there were common contextual factors among staff leading to the perceived value of the formal observation process in the development of their skills as reflective practitioners.



## **SECTION FOUR: FINDINGS & INTERPRETAION**

### **Findings**

The survey data yielded valuable results with respect to the overall question of the role of the formal observation in promoting reflective practice. The survey results yielded no obvious findings that identified a relationship between demographic patterns (years of experience, tenure status, leadership roles, etc.) and the perceived value of the formal observation as a tool for promoting reflective practice. With respect to the additional related questions, there was a great deal of inconsistency in responses regarding the questions focused on reflective practice and professional growth. As a result, the survey findings led to additional questions regarding how the term “reflective practice” was being defined in the context of the survey and how that impacted perceptions of the value of the formal observation for the purposes of instructional improvement and professional growth.

The data in Figure 1 below indicates that 71% of those surveyed value the formal observation process as a tool for promoting reflective practice. However, the percentage of those respondents agreeing that the process provides an opportunity to demonstrate their skills as reflective practitioners drops to 66% as illustrated in Figure 2 below. In addition, respondents valuing the process for professional growth drops even further to 42%, while the raw numbers of people indicating they do not value the process increased (see Figure 3). There were less respondents that felt neutral about the process relative to professional growth. One would expect that these questions would yield similar results with respect to the role of the formal observation in developing reflective practitioners. The variability in these results suggested that there was a perceived disconnect in the

formal observation process that did not link its perceived value in improving instruction and promoting the development of skills as a reflective practitioner with its role in promoting professional growth. This suggested disconnect was further explored in the data collected through the interview process.

*Figure 1.* Formal observation as tool for promoting reflective practice.



*Figure 2.* Observation post conference as meaningful opportunity to demonstrate skills.

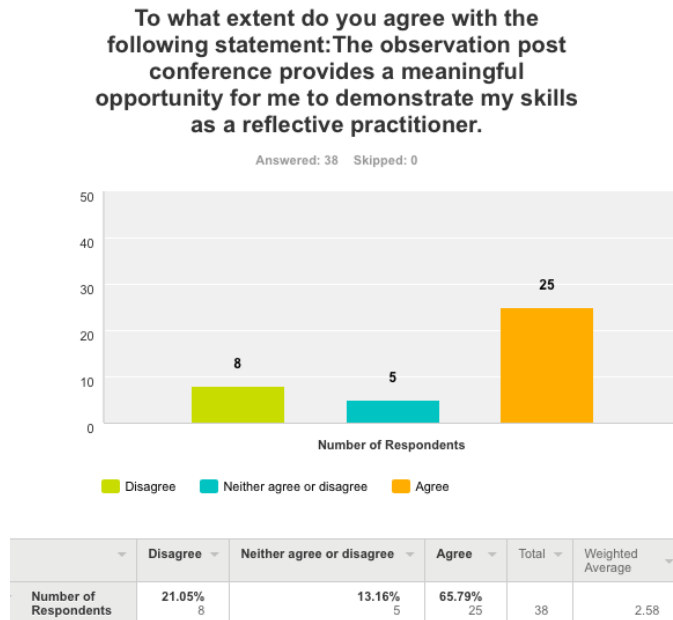
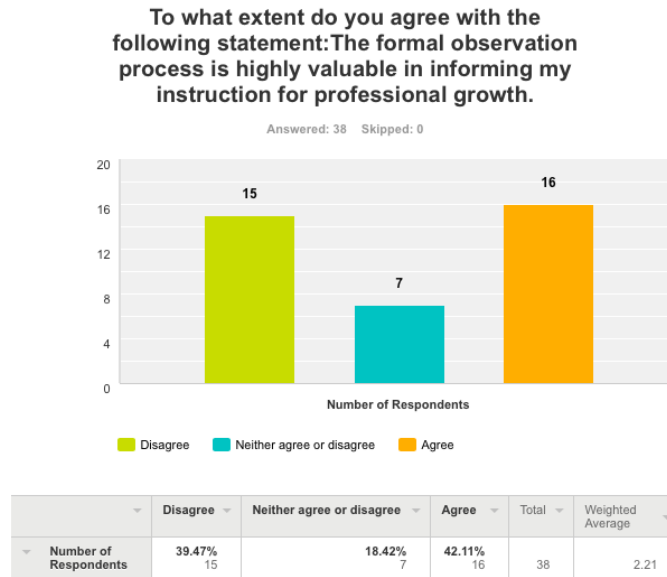


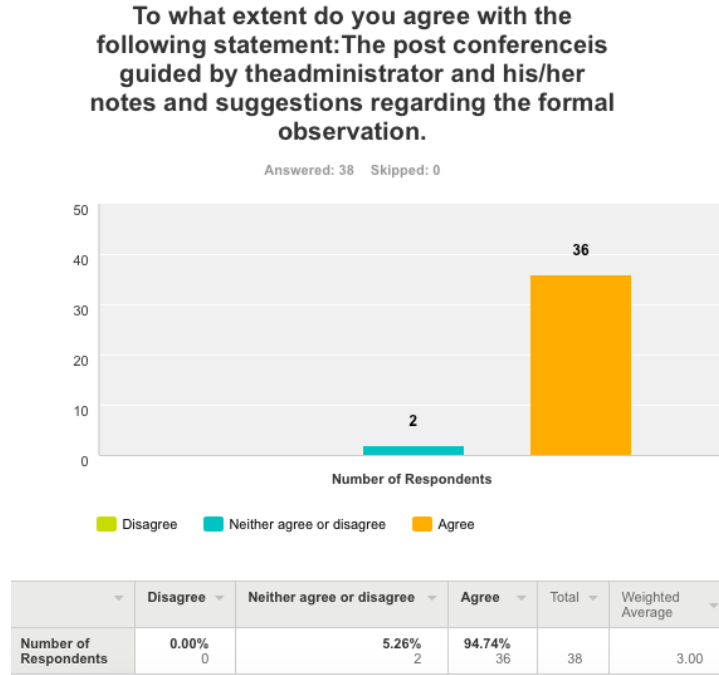
Figure 3. Value of formal observation for professional growth.



While the survey data was absent of any demographic patterns in the responses, it did yield some results that were consistent with the literature review with respect to the roles of teachers and administrators in the process and how that might impact the formal observation as a tool for developing reflective practitioners. As cited in the literature review, the relationship between the formal observation process and reflective practice is linked to the teacher as the active participant in the formal observation process to promote professional growth and maximize the opportunity for improving student learning (Archer et al., 2015; Aseltine et al., 2006; Danielson, 2016; Myung & Martinez, 2013; Towndrow & Tan, 2009). When asked about the role of the administrator in the post observation conference, 95% of survey respondents indicated that post observation conferences were guided by administrators and their notes from the formal observation (Figure 4). Given the literature review’s emphasis on the importance of the teacher’s role in the process, this was a critical factor to explore further in the interview process to

determine its impact on the formal observation process as a tool for promoting reflection and professional growth.

Figure 4. Guidance of the post conference.



In addition to the administrator’s role in the post conference, the survey also explored the level anxiety associated with the formal observation process. As demonstrated in Table 4, the findings suggest that anxiety is present at some level for the majority of respondents, regardless of their levels of experience. Only two of the 38 respondents indicated that they experience no anxiety at all.

Table 4. Presence of anxiety in participants.

	High level of anxiety	Moderate level of anxiety	Minimal level of anxiety	No anxiety at all	Total
Q5: 0-3 years of experience (A)	0.00% 0	100.00% 6	0.00% 0	0.00% 0	15.79% 6
Q5: 4-6 years of experience (B)	0.00% 0	50.00% 2	50.00% 2	0.00% 0	10.53% 4
Q5: 7-10 years of experience (C)	40.00% 2	20.00% 1	40.00% 2	0.00% 0	13.16% 5
Q5: 11-15 years of experience (D)	27.27% 3	27.27% 3	45.45% 5	0.00% 0	28.95% 11
Q5: 16-20 years of experience (E)	16.67% 1	50.00% 3	0.00% 0	33.33% 2	15.79% 6
Q5: 21+ years of experience (F)	33.33% 2	50.00% 3	16.67% 1	0.00% 0	15.79% 6
<b>Total Respondents</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>38</b>

While the anxiety was present for respondents regardless of the perceptions of the observation process in developing reflective practitioners, the role of anxiety with respect to the perceived opportunity for professional growth was important to pursue in the follow up interviews. In the literature, it was identified that the perceived positional power of an administrator as fear provoking and threatening leads to feelings of apprehension, inadequacy and mistrust that can compromise the value of this process for professional growth (Danielson, 2016; Marshall, 2005; Myung & Martinez, 2013; Ness, 1980).

The interviews provided the opportunity to further explore the findings identified in the survey data. The responses of the interviewees provided some insights to the conflicting responses regarding the higher percentages of those surveyed finding the formal observation process valuable for promoting reflective practice versus the lower percentage of those responding indicating that it was valued for promoting professional growth. In examining the high percentage of teachers agreeing that the post conference provided a meaningful opportunity to demonstrate skills as a reflective practitioner, coupled with the percentage of respondents indicating that the post conference is administrator-led, it became apparent that many had interpreted the term “reflective practice” as the opportunity to use administrator notes or feedback to support them in thinking about their practices in the isolated context of the formal observation. Mrs. B shared, “No matter what, I always sit and reflect on [the administrator’s] thoughts.” Mrs. P stated, “I do definitely take things from it and try to change or use whatever best practice or ideas I might gain from those conversations,” in response to a question about the value of the formal observation in developing skills as a reflective practitioner. When

asked if reflections in a post conference were based on the information the administrator provided, Ms. M replied, “That’s what it was. It was administrator driven.” This indicated the need to clarify the definition of reflective practice as described by Danielson (2016), particularly within the context of the formal observation throughout the interview process. In all nine instances, it was necessary to revisit questions regarding reflective practice using this common definition to clarify the value of the formal observation in promoting the development of reflective practitioners.

After defining the term “reflective practice” for the purposes of the interviews, the responses to questions about how the observation process promotes the development of these reflective skills yielded important information. Seven of the interviewees did not find the formal observation process valuable for promoting reflective practice based on the shared definition. When probed as to why they did not perceive the process as valuable, the comments included, “I feel like it is an opportunity for me to put my best foot forward...and [I am] reflective much more often throughout [my] school year than on this one particular lesson.” When asked about the process being valuable, Mrs. D replied, “I put on more of a performance and I did not say much because I did not know where they were coming from,” when referring to an observation experience with a principal that she did not know very well. From another the response was, “It’s, like, okay, you did this very well and then you just kind of move on.” Several of the responses yielded similar comments stating that they appreciate the feedback from administrators, but that they were not provided with experiences that impacted their professional growth or changed their practices. The two teachers that shared they somewhat valued the process for reflections characterized the process as a way to respond to what their

administrators suggested were ways to improve their practices. It should be noted that the two teachers who valued the feedback from their administrators, despite the process being evaluator driven, have less than five years of teaching experience and are non-tenured. The same two teachers also shared that there is still a great deal of anxiety that is attached to the process because of how they view it in relationship to their overall summative evaluation ratings. Ms. G shared, “I feel like the observation is 90%,” referring to the summative rating. When Mrs. P was asked what percentage of the summative rating is based on the formal observation process, she replied, “All of it.”

Similar to the two teachers above, all interviewees perceive the formal observation to be the basis for the summative evaluation rating. Seven of the teachers also explicitly shared that they felt the formal observation stakes are high, with the process representing 90-100% of their overall evaluation ratings. In the literature review, one of the identified issues reducing the value of the formal observation was its juxtaposition to the overall summative evaluation rating. As affirmed by the interviews, the high stakes result in high anxiety, and in turn create a context where the formal observation is not valued for reflection or professional growth (Danielson, 2016; Marshall, 2005; Myung & Martinez, 2013; Ness, 1980). The accountability and high stakes that interviewees associate with the formal observation led to six of them characterizing it as a high anxiety producing event. The three interviewees that do not experience anxiety attribute that to the relationship with their administrators. When there was a high degree of trust, the teachers shared that the process did not produce a great deal of anxiety, but they still did not associate the formal observation with a high degree

of authenticity. These responses were related to its role in the context of the summative rating and the teachers' desires to be excellent or perfect in that context.

To illustrate how teachers in Century School District have responded to the idea that the formal observation is an all or nothing event that limits its role in promoting an authentic experience for promoting reflective practice, I share the following characterizations. Mrs. A stated, "If I don't make that basket when he's in my room, I'm shit out of luck, right? I'm going to get a bad evaluation." Mrs. L shared, "I have felt like it was more of a gotcha process. I was very worried that I wasn't checking the boxes that needed to be checked...I actually would stand in front of a mirror and practice it." When talking with Mrs. B, she stated that heading into an observation she will probably do the old tried and true that she knows she is going to succeed at. When I asked why she chooses lessons for observations that are "canned" versus related to the needs of her current students, she replied that observations make her extremely nervous and, "When I get nervous, I make mistakes. I forget to do things." She chooses the familiar to reduce her anxiety. From Mrs. M's perspective, the experience is like, "You're doing your best performance...you're kind of put out, like, kind of put out on a stage like an actor. I mean, some of it is not really authentic that way...you're obviously putting on your best performance, which you know, because you feel like that your whole evaluation is the formal observation." Mrs. H reiterated this sentiment by sharing, "I would say in my building people feel very stressed out about [the formal observation]. They will have anxiety for weeks. I feel like the high stakes piece of it makes it not feel like it's very useful."



In the interviews, I was able to explore the idea of trust and the role of the teacher to administrator relationship, as it surfaced in each of the interviews when responding to the question regarding the authenticity of the process and conversations with administrators, some of which were captured in the responses above. All of the interviewees described the nature of the experience as less than authentic. Teachers indicated that the process was administrator driven with little to no opportunity for teachers to own the process. This led to teachers putting on what Mrs. D and Mrs. O characterized as “the dog and pony show”. From the interviews, the high stakes also led to elevated anxiety around the process. These factors resulted in perceptions of the formal observation process as an “isolated event” and not a time they would want to identify areas of improvement for fear of judgment in the overall rating. Mrs. L shared that the desire to do things perfect during the formal observation can lead to feelings of being attacked when she receives feedback. She also stated, “...it feels like you are being punished and not that this is something as an area for growth.” The isolation of the process from ongoing evaluation and professional growth was validated in responses that indicated that there was little to no connection between the formal observation process and future discussions regarding improving instructional practice.

Mrs. D’s perspective illustrates the lack of authenticity. She shared, “I think that it’s not authentic because it’s not continual. It’s just a single snapshot...when teachers are having two [observations] in a year, I still don’t think that’s enough, like I feel like just smaller doses over a longer period of time, as we know works with kids, I think it’s the same with adults. Like we get a greater picture of the whole culture of the classrooms and

of you as a professional and how you handle all types of situations rather than this one that you tried to control all the elements as best you can and that's not teaching."

While in the current system, the formal observation process did not yield results that suggest it is valued as defined for reflective practice or professional growth, in the few situations where there was some appreciation for the process, it was overwhelmingly in situations where there was a trusting, respectful relationship between teacher and administrator. Mrs. P, who likes receiving feedback from her administrator so she can strive for perfection around the final rating shared, "I've actually been lucky to feel pretty comfortable with both of my administrators." Mrs. G also shared, "I've honestly felt comfortable with all three administrators I've had." Other teachers interviewed suggested that while there is always anxiety involved and the process limits opportunities to develop their skills as reflective practitioners, their ability to be open to the feedback (even in an administrative-driven process) is largely dependent on the relationship they have with the administrator. Mrs. D reported, "If you feel comfortable with the administrator and you understand that they know you as a teacher then [I'm more likely to take a risk]." In situations where relationships are not perceived as healthy or positive, it was obvious that the formal observation process ends up completely compromised. For example, Mrs. O characterized her feelings this way, "I've been told that my administrator is out to get me. And so how can I respect anything in an observation from him when I realize that that's the situation I'm in." She also followed up these comments later in the interview by sharing, "I'm the subordinate and that [perception of authority] is going to be there unless there is trust between the administrator and the teacher. Because if that trust isn't there, I just don't see you're willing to go on that journey with that

person. [With someone you trust], you're willing to take their responses credibly because you respect them and you trust them. But, if it's not there, then you can't. It's going to always have that little rug waiting to be pulled out." These statements lead to some opportunities for interpretation on how to improve the process in Century School District.

### **Interpretation**

In reviewing the findings related to the survey and interview data, the responses impress upon us the importance of attending to the research as it pertains to the parameters outlined for the observation process to be valued as a tool for promoting reflective practice and professional growth. In Century School District, there is little evidence of teacher ownership or perceived value around the observation process. During the interviews, follow up questions were posed related to hypothetical models for the formal observation process that might promote greater teacher ownership.

Overwhelmingly, the nine teachers interviewed would welcome the opportunity to be in the position to lead the reflective conversations. Mrs. G shared an experience where she had the opportunity to lead the process. Her insights were that she saw the most growth in herself when she had that opportunity. She was able to ask herself, "How can I better myself?" In that situation, she said the administrator opened the conversation, but then she did most of the talking. Mrs. B suggested that it would be more powerful if she could have the opportunity to reflect and share how she would "solve" situations that arose in the formal observation prior to an administrator providing that feedback. She indicated she would love the process to be more teacher-driven. When asked if she were given guiding questions and expected to lead the conversation around those questions if it would improve the nature of the post conference, Mrs. B replied, "Yes!" Some of the

other suggestions from the teachers in Century School District are to use peer observers' notes and videotaping as a means for teachers to own the reflection and lead the conversations with their administrators in a model where the positional power of the administrator was eliminated.

As Jay (2003) pointed out in her research, the teacher's voice is often missing in the process, and the data here indicates this to be true in Century School District. In order to promote more teacher ownership as suggested by Danielson (2016), the data indicates that we need to examine the structure of our current evaluation system and the nature of the formal observation process within its context. With the formal observation being cited as the emphasis of the summative rating, there is little opportunity to view the process as a constructive opportunity for growth, unless reflection and growth are valued as strong indicators of accomplished teaching. Although a framework such as Charlotte Danielson's (2011) provides the opportunity to create this kind of structure, the administrator's implementation of such a model seems to be at the heart of how that is achieved in a school.

The perceived emphasis of the formal observation process on the summative rating, coupled with the positional power of the administrator, suggests that the culture and climate in a building are also factors that may influence the ability to create a structure where the formal observation process can be utilized to promote professional growth. The interviews indicate that we examine the structure of our overall evaluation process, along with the way we develop school cultures built on trust and mutual respect between teachers and administrators. The current structure of the formal observation process is impeding the opportunity to have authentic conversations about professional

growth. Its structure as designed, according to the teachers interviewed and the survey results, indicate that the process is almost entirely administrator-driven. In Century School District, the interviews also indicated that the anxiety associated with the process along with the positional power and the nature of the administrator-teacher relationship all play a role in compromising the potential for developing teachers to be independent, reflective practitioners. As the research suggests, teacher voice and ownership in the development of their skills as reflective practitioners are critical factors for improving performance and ultimately student learning (Archer et al., 2015; Danielson, 2016; Marzano & Toth, 2013; Myung & Martinez, 2013, Towndrow & Tan, 2009).

## **SECTION FIVE: JUDGMENT & RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Judgment**

In examining the primary research question, it can be concluded that in Century School District the formal observation process does not promote the development of reflective practitioners as defined for the purposes of this study. It can also be determined that in Century School District, the perceived high stakes associated with the formal observation process are impeding its role in serving as a professional growth experience. In addition to this main finding, it is also suggested that the context in which the formal observation process is operationalized matters. Both the relationship between the teacher and administrator and the administrator-driven nature of the process are obstacles in creating an environment that allows teachers to take ownership of the reflective process. Based on these conclusions, there is a missed opportunity in the current program with respect to teacher evaluation and more specifically, with regard to the formal observation process.

In examining the interview data, it should be noted that the two teachers who indicated the value in working from administrative feedback to reflect on their practices, although not self-generated reflections, were those that were non-tenured. This may be something to explore further since these two teachers indicated that they have more trusting relationships with their administrators. It should be noted that these two teachers were also hired by their current administrators and this factor might be something to explore with respect to the development of those trusting relationships.

Given the overall responses to the survey and the information from the interviews, Century School District has the opportunity to redefine the intent of the observation

process and create a structure that may influence a change in its perceived value, particularly as the program heads into an implementation year utilizing Charlotte Danielson's Framework for Teaching (2011). This model emphasizes the importance of the teacher's role in reflecting on practice and includes an entire component dedicated to the ability of a teacher to engage in reflective practice independently. In a recent conference I attended, I had the unique opportunity to hear Charlotte Danielson speak firsthand on her intentions with her framework. She spoke about the need to reevaluate our human resource policies as a profession because of what she described as the "tension between the purposes of teacher evaluation, that of accountability versus promoting professional learning and growth". Danielson described the need for a growth mindset and the ability to acknowledge teachers for their reflections giving them credit for being able to guide their own areas for improvement. In her comments, Danielson identified obstacles such as a punitive design to the implementation of most evaluation systems and school cultures lacking trust and expectations for inquiry between teachers and their evaluators. She went on to emphasize that context matters. An environment of trust and respect with an acknowledgement of positional power and how we use that to promote student engagement and learning are critical to improving our practices (C. Danielson, personal communication, July 15, 2016). This perspective leads to recommendations for Century School District's implementation of a new evaluation system.

### **Recommendations**

As Century School District implements the new model for teacher evaluation, it will be important to address the following structural elements to enhance the value of the formal observation process as it stands.

1. The administration must promote and implement the new evaluation system as one that values a growth mindset. In doing so, there needs to be an intentional emphasis on demonstrated reflective skills as an element of distinction in practice. In doing so, a shared definition needs to be established that promotes the teacher as the active participant in the reflective process and the one facilitating the reflective conversation in the structure of the formal observation process.
2. The formal observation process needs to be characterized as only one small component of the overall summative rating and evaluation system. The fact that evidence of professional practice can be collected in a variety of ways over time in the new model is an opportunity to reduce the perception that the final rating is based almost solely on a formal observation. This will provide a more likely opportunity for the process to be a reflective growth opportunity over the current “dog and pony” show. This has the potential to reduce the anxiety and high stakes currently associated with the process. Danielson (personal communication, July 15, 2016) suggested that the focus be shifted to more informal observations and conversations as opportunities for purely professional conversations.
3. Administrators need to focus on the development of school cultures that are built on trust and collaboration. The actions, conversations and opportunities they engage in need to support the development of relationships so that the schools are places where it is safe to take risks in the context of a formal observation with the intent of promoting improved practice and professional growth. The way the conversations are shaped is critical to supporting this type of context. As Danielson (personal communication, July 15, 2016) emphasized the informal



conversations as a huge opportunity for promoting a more trusting and collaborative school culture, she also suggests that administrators create a context of professional inquiry. She suggests this can only be accomplished if administrators develop stronger conversational skills where the context stems from the nature of teaching and learning and common expectations. The transparency of the administrator is what will allow the conversations to be more meaningful. Those conversations should be driven by questions that seek the teacher's thinking in the process.

4. Century School District has the opportunity to explore alternative models for structuring the formal observation process to promote a more authentic experience for teachers. In the interviews, suggestions of videotaping, peer observers and third party observers were all mentioned as ways to generate more authentic opportunities for promoting reflective practice. The idea of a teacher and administrator both being able to view a videotape may provide a more even playing field and reduce the positional power of administrator giving teacher feedback versus teacher having the opportunity to self-reflect. Third party observers might provide scripted notes to both evaluator and teacher, allowing the administrator to function as a coach around the evidence collected. These types of alternatives may contribute to reducing the anxiety associated with the current process.

Century School District is uniquely positioned to respond to the findings in this program evaluation given the upcoming implementation year for a new teacher evaluation system. Ultimately, these recommendations may yield stronger student

achievement results based on the research connecting reflective practice to improved student learning (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Jay, 2003; Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, n.d.). To restate the findings of Myung and Martinez (2013), it takes a high degree of trust and collaboration to establish a formal observation process that is valued by both the teacher and administrator so that it might promote best practice and improve student learning.

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## APPENDIX A: TEACHER SURVEY

**The Role of the Formal Observation in Professional Growth**

1. I have read the informed consent document.

2. Please identify your certified instructional role

3. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?

Bachelor degree

Master degree

Master +30 degree

Doctoral degree

4. What is your status in the district?

I am tenured in District §

I am non-tenured in District §

1

**5. Years of Teaching Experience**

- 0-3 years of experience
- 4-6 years of experience
- 7-10 years of experience
- 11-15 years of experience
- 16-20 years of experience
- 21+ years of experience

**6. Number of districts in which you have worked**

- Only District \_\_\_\_\_
- Two school districts (including District \_\_\_\_\_)
- Three school districts (including District \_\_\_\_\_)
- Four or more school districts (including District \_\_\_\_\_)

**7. Number of administrators from which you have received a formal observation**

- Only my current administrator
- Two administrators
- Three administrators
- Four or more administrators

**8. Have you ever been a member of a District 96 building leadership team?**

- I currently serve on the leadership team
- I served on the leadership team within the last three years
- I served on the leadership team under prior building leadership
- I have never served on the building leadership team

**9. To what extent do formal observations generate anxiety for you with respect to your teaching performance?**

- High level of anxiety
- Moderate level of anxiety
- Minimal level of anxiety
- No anxiety at all



10. To what extent does anxiety around the formal observation impact your teaching performance

- Significantly reduces my ability to perform
- Somewhat reduces my ability to perform
- No impact on my ability to perform
- Somewhat improves my ability to perform
- Significantly improves my ability to perform
- I do not experience anxiety around the formal observation process

11. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The formal observation process provides feedback that improves my instructional practices.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

12. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The formal observation serves as a tool for promoting reflective practice.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

13. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The evidence collected during a formal observation is objective.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

14. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Formal observation notes sufficiently reflect the nature of the instructional experience observed.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

15. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: I am easily able to recall the observation experience for the purposes of reflection at a post conference.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

16. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The observation post conference generates meaningful conversation about the evidence gathered.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

17. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The observation post conference provides a meaningful opportunity for me to demonstrate my skills as a reflective practitioner.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

18. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The observation post conference provides a meaningful opportunity for me to reflect on my practice.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

19. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The observation post conference is guided by me and my reflections of the instructional experience.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

20. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The post conference is guided by the administrator and his/her notes and suggestions regarding the formal observation.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

21. To what extent do you agree with the following statement: The formal observation process is highly valuable in informing my instruction for professional growth.

Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## **APPENDIX B: SEMI-STRUCTURED TEACHER INTERVIEW**

Candidates for interviews were identified based on the theoretical trends that arise out of the survey responses.

### **Teacher Interview Questions**

1. Tell me a little about yourself and what you have done prior to coming to Century School District\*.
2. What is your current position in Century School District\*?
3. What is your highest degree earned?
4. How many years have you been teaching in Century School District\*?
5. How many total years of teaching experience do you have?
6. To what extent do you value the formal observation in developing your skills as a reflective practitioner? Why is that?
7. How does the formal observation process encourage reflection on your instructional practice?
8. To what extent does the formal observation process cause anxiety for you? How does this impact nature of the observation experience?
9. In your opinion, to what extent is the formal observation an authentic experience for professional growth? What about the process has you characterize it that way?
10. How do you feel about the formal observation process as a tool for measuring your effectiveness? What are the factors that impact this perception?
11. How does the formal observation process inform your practice?
12. How does the formal observation process impact the quality of your instructional conversations with your administrator?

\*Century School District is a pseudonym used for anonymity.