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Making a Shift in Teacher Evaluation

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Abstract

The educator evaluation process can be a compliance task as well as an arduous process causing stress and anxiety for educators and their evaluators. The evaluation process in this suburban district is changing. Educators and evaluators are working together to create a new knowledge base and share it amongst their school community and others. Educators are being allowed voice and choice when determining how they will be evaluated and the areas in which they are going to focus their own personal growth. Teachers are becoming school-based experts on the topics that they are learning and researching. This has allowed for not only trust and genuine mutual respect to grow but also innovative practices to be fostered within the school community. Educator evaluation is changing, and it is becoming a tool that is offering our educators and schools new opportunities for self-reflection and growth.

Keywords

evaluation; feedback; supervision

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Introduction

Evaluation. It can be a harsh word in the world of education. Teachers often feel as though it is a process done to them, rather than with them (Marshall, 2009). Newer processes adopted by states around the country specifically added components to their evaluation processes that include announced and unannounced observations, SMART goal design, student surveys, and other district-determined measures. So what is the value of teacher evaluation? What is the purpose? What are the outcomes? Why do we “waste” so much time on this process? Does it really work?

The purpose of this article to share some common perceptions of teachers and their evaluators and to discuss how these perceptions connect with recent literature on teacher evaluation. The author is a Massachusetts suburban elementary school principal who has worked to change the face of evaluation in her school district by making it more relevant to teacher growth as well as giving teachers more autonomy concerning their own learning as it applies to teaching. A recent pilot of a self-directed study program has been a successful initiative within the school district because of the level of trust among teachers, the two principals (the evaluators) and the Superintendent.

We have had national and statewide changes in teacher evaluation over the past several years (Hill & Grossman, 2013). What has not changed is the feeling that teachers experience when they are being evaluated, whether it is a positive or an adversarial process. Teacher stress and anxiety concerning being observed and judged by their evaluator is a large component of the evaluation process. Evaluators experience stress and anxiety when dealing with timelines, paperwork, and difficult conversations with teachers who may not be meeting expectations.

Even though most districts are using a standards-based evaluation structure, including rubrics or scales, the process is not (and should not be) a black and white one. It is still a subjective process, based on the evaluator’s perceptions and biases as well as prior experiences. As with many things in education, experiencing success with teacher evaluation often depends on the relationship between the teacher and the evaluator. It is clear that relationships matter.

What’s the Purpose of the Teacher Evaluation Process?

Many current scholars write about the purpose of teacher evaluation. Danielson (2012) states that the two reasons for teacher evaluation are to ensure teacher quality and to promote professional development. In 2011, Marzano et al. posited that “The purpose of supervision should be the enhancement of teachers’ pedagogical skills, with the ultimate goal of enhancing student achievement” (p. 2). For the purposes of this article, it should be understood that the process of evaluating teachers is a part of supervising them. While evaluation and supervision are not synonymous, they are very much connected. In order to have effective supervision of your teachers and staff, evaluation must be a part of the process. Additionally, teacher evaluation is typically prescribed.

Current research about teacher evaluation are far different than the mindset of the 1970s, when Castetter (1976) described evaluation as more of a punitive practice, intended to help administrators make “employment decisions”. It is clear within the current literature that the

purpose of being evaluated by an “instructional leader” is to allow for teachers to grow their craft. While the ultimate goal of supervision, observation, and evaluation is to improve student achievement, before we can improve student achievement we must focus our efforts on improving teacher performance (Marzano et al., 2011). So if the purpose of teacher evaluation is to improve teacher performance in an effort to improve student achievement, why is there so much angst surrounding it?

Why is It So “Messy”?

Effective teachers are very invested in their teaching, and often refer to it as their “craft.” One teacher explained her level of anxiety when receiving feedback from her evaluator: “I don’t care who that evaluator is because I’ve had both male and female, young and old. Because our profession is so personal, it’s your craft, it’s your soul...You can’t help but personalize it as...an attack because it’s so a part of me, a part of everything that I do, you can’t help but personalize it.” When an evaluator comes into a teacher’s classroom, observes and gives feedback, it can have a huge effect on a veteran teacher’s self-efficacy. However, feedback is an essential and necessary part of the process. And even the most effective teacher may receive some necessary, critical feedback from their evaluator.

The entire process within my district is similar to most evaluation processes in Massachusetts: it is time consuming and can be messy. Except for the number of unannounced observations and the length of the plan, teachers with professional teacher status (PTS) and teachers with non-professional teacher status (NPTS) experience very similar evaluation processes. For some teachers and their evaluators, it is simply a task of compliance and there is no real strategy for teacher growth. At the beginning of the school year (or their evaluation cycle), the teacher comes up with SMART (strategic, measurable, attainable, rigorous, and time bound) goals; one goal is for professional practice, the other one is for student growth. For those teachers with PTS and on two-year cycles, the professional practice goal may stay the same. For all teachers, the student learning goal tends to change—as it should—as students change year to year. Unannounced or announced observations occur between one and four times a year. Conversations should occur before and/or after these observations. This is where the missed opportunities often occur, when conversations do not happen, or if they do, it is well after the fact, without the immediate feedback that is sometimes necessary.

The other part of the typical evaluation process for this district is the “evidence” that the teacher is responsible for submitting and the evaluator is charged with reviewing and rating on a rubric. This entails teachers collecting artifacts of their work, such as units of study, lesson plans, and communication samples, to name a few, to upload in the PD management system along with a description of each artifact. The evaluators then judge this evidence, using a rubric to rate the teacher’s performance as part of a formative or summative evaluation. Even in situations where the district has only asked for submission of a specific amount of evidence or a specific number of artifacts, teachers will often go above and beyond, “just in case.” This leads to evaluators spending a lot of time looking at a teacher’s evidence, or, in some cases, barely looking at it. This is where the issue of compliance comes into play. Teachers are submitting evidence because they have to, and evaluators are looking at it, or not looking at it, depending on their level of compliance.

Feedback and Support

Hallinger et al. (2014) developed a theory of action underlying teacher evaluation and school improvement, including the components of feedback and support. Hill and Grossman (2013) found that personalized feedback is effective in cases where teachers are given explicit, actionable ideas that they can implement immediately in their work with students. This explicit feedback and support, in theory, helps to improve a teacher's teaching practices. Hallinger et al. (2013), through their study, determined that:

the four domains of feedback and support include: providing actionable feedback to teachers, creating professional communities in which teachers share goals, work, and responsibility for student outcomes, offering tangible support for the work of teachers and forging systems in which teachers have the opportunity for professional learning. (p. 22)

So what does such feedback and support look like in practice, and how does it change educators' working relationships? Feedback and support often result in discussions and conversations between principals and teachers and among teachers (Carreiro, 2017). The conversations allow the principals to view their teachers in a different way, often giving them information and insight that they normally would not have. Principals are often able to offer feedback and support to teachers based on these conversations. While research tells us this kind of feedback and support is vital for teacher growth (Hallinger, et al., 2013), it doesn't happen in all school districts.

Also, feedback and support connect with teamwork and collegiality throughout the evaluation process. Teachers often work together on projects or goals with a common purpose. Teachers rely heavily on each other and may support each other through the entire teacher evaluation process. It is believed that a positive team dynamic creates a stronger, more cohesive group of teachers.

Feedback and support can also contribute to teacher-principal relationships as the principal facilitates practice consistent with the school's vision. Feedback, support, and relationship-building help teachers to embrace and meet high expectations. How the principal delivers the feedback and support is important to teachers. In my district during the SDS pilot, principals offered critical feedback in a safe way, often asking questions that encouraged the teachers to think a little deeper. This approach led the teachers to feel positive and to enjoy engaging with the principals.

So What Needs to Change?

We have established that the process is difficult and time-consuming, and causes stress and anxiety to teachers and their evaluators. But teacher evaluation is an act of compliance that needs to be completed according to predetermined timelines. In Massachusetts and some other states, the data must be submitted to the state and becomes part of the school and district report cards. How do we simplify this process to ensure that teachers are still getting what they need regarding immediate feedback and support, with evaluators not stifled by a rubric or hindered by a timeline?

Our district, a small suburban district in Massachusetts, piloted a new practice three years ago that allowed teachers and their evaluators to sit and discuss an interest of the teacher or a need of the school. In these conversations, the teachers were challenged by their evaluators to think about a topic that they wanted to research and learn more about, develop an action research statement, and carry out the action research to improve their teaching. The intent of this pilot was to mainstream the evaluation process and put the emphasis back on growth, rather than collecting evidence. Within this process, the formal professional practice and student learning goals, a written formative assessment, mid-cycle and end-of cycle progress reports, and the upload of artifacts all were eliminated.

The action research, or self-directed study (SDS), has opened doors for both teachers and evaluators within the district. The opportunities that this process has afforded our teachers, students, and their families is palpable. The process is different, as the evaluator and the teacher meet to determine what the action research statement or problem will be, decide on an appropriate timeline, and identify materials or supports that the teacher may need. The teacher and evaluator then meet 2-3 more times during the year to discuss the progress that is being made. The most valuable part of this process is the opportunity for the teacher and the evaluator to reflect on the work that has been done thus far. This is the part that helps to build the relationships that are so necessary in our field. Having these meaningful conversations helps the evaluators to build relationships with teachers. These positive conversations also establish trust and respect that set the stage for those times in which the conversations might not be as positive.

The other difference between SDS and our district's traditional evaluation is that in SDS there is very little "compliance" work for either the teacher or the evaluator. Once the action research topic, statement, and timeline are determined, they are entered into a Professional Development Management System (our district uses Frontline). Then the teacher initiates the research. Teachers read books and articles and take part in professional development surrounding the chosen topic. Year 1 is the research year, and some teachers focus just on doing research the first year. Year 2 is the year when the research is applied. However, in our experience, some teachers have combined research and application across both years.

We began the pilot process using the SDS at two elementary schools. While many teachers wanted to be involved, we chose approximately 8 teachers at each building to take part in the pilot evaluation process. Now, three years later, almost all PTS teachers are using the SDS model for their evaluation.

This process has been highly valuable to the educators who have participated in it thus far. It allows teachers creativity and provides an opportunity to learn something new. It encourages risk-taking and offers a forum in which a teacher can explore and try new things. It has been freeing for these teachers and has allowed them to see the possibilities of what research, new knowledge, and application can do to make learning innovative and engaging for students. It has breathed new life into veteran teachers who are feeling trusted, respected, and supported and feel as though they have been given the opportunity to take risks with their own teaching. While still a rigorous process, teachers and their evaluators are finding significant value in this new process

as it allows teachers to take risks with their teaching and learn new things that they are passionate about.

While some SDS projects are stronger than others, the district definitely has a number of examples of exemplary self-directed studies that have changed the current thinking at our schools. One example is an art teacher who researched how to change her curriculum from “art” to “Artovation.” This teacher has paved the way for innovation in our school and has modeled what it looks like at the elementary level. She began small; however, this research and her ability to take risks ignited a fire inside of her, causing her to want to share her learning with not only our staff and her peers, but at several national conferences. She and a colleague created a STEAM carnival for teachers, students, and their families. She hosted social engagements in our art room after school so that classroom teachers and other staff could experience some of the activities that her students participated in during art class. She also has shared her own learning on two different podcasts for educators. This art teacher’s self-reflection grew by leaps and bounds, and in a very short time she became an esteemed teacher leader in our school and within the art educator learning community. The SDS proved how it can increase teacher capacity and self-efficacy for this teacher. This art teacher’s SDS project also built considerable excitement for our staff and students and the school community as a whole.

Another exemplar SDS project, by a kindergarten teacher, researched how to integrate movement into the curriculum. Her action statement was, “If I research movement in the classroom and implement some new movement practices and strategies, then I theorize my students will have increased attention, greater memory, and more participation in class discussions and activities.” One way that she integrated movement was by collaborating with the physical education teacher. As the schedule allowed, the classroom teacher and the PE teacher worked together to create centers to practice patterning, counting, and addition skills—all while moving, jumping, and hopping around the gym during math class. The teachers’ students have shown an increase in their universal screening scores, but more importantly, she noticed that the students have greater attention to task and are more participatory overall.

Other SDS projects involved a teacher who read the works of Tony Wagner, and as a result became an innovative teacher, radically changing how she managed her classroom and what she expected from students; an educator who explored social emotional learning and how it applies to her classroom; a teacher who studied growth mindset and mindfulness and how they apply to herself and her students; and an educator who researched anxiety, how it manifests in students and adults, and how to better support students in the classroom.

There is no tangible product required at the end of the two-year process. SDS teachers need not worry about submitting a project or a binder of information to be stuck up on a shelf. The formative and summative reports that are written by the evaluator are based on the conversations between the evaluator and the teacher as well as the self-reflection of the teacher. Teachers are expected to self-reflect on their two years of research and what they implemented or changed as a result of their SDS. This is the beauty of the SDS; the feedback is based on the work that the teacher has conducted over a two-year process and the teacher’s own self-reflection on the process, including what they learned and how it has changed their practice. It truly is a growth model, and the required paperwork is a joint effort of the teacher and the evaluator.

Some might ask if there is any risk that some educators may just “go through the motions” with SDS in order to “get it done.” This is why it is important for the teacher and evaluator to meet several times over the course of a school year. These conversations are what keep the project alive, fluid, and moving along. The immediate verbal feedback that teachers get from their evaluators is immeasurable. In the pilot program, if a teacher came to the meeting underprepared, there were no chastising or uncomfortable moments. Rather, the meeting became more of a planning session for what the next steps would be. In fact, every meeting ended with planning the next steps, as well as a discussion of what teachers were most proud of, and supports needed from the evaluator.

We learned from piloting the SDS that some projects were more engaging, and perhaps more rigorous, than others. We currently have another group of teachers going through this process. The teachers who completed the pilot program now are the “experts” on their topic. This means that, if other teachers should need support regarding a topic that I know a teacher has just spent two years studying as part of their SDS, I anticipate and expect that the teacher who has completed their SDS will be happy to share their learning with others. SDS is an opportunity for us to grow our collective knowledge base.

Has the shift from the antiquated evaluation process to the SDS process changed everything? No, there are still new teachers who need to go through the regular process until they earn their PTS. Also, teachers need to be in good standing to participate in the SDS process, so there may be teachers who are PTS but still use the regular process, either by choice or because they are not eligible. The changes we have made, however, allow many teachers a voice and a choice in their own evaluation. It allows teachers to learn and grow and gives them the opportunity to explore a passion or an interest. It assumes that evaluators will trust that their teachers are professionals and treat them as such. SDS validates the hard work that our teachers do each and every day.

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Author Biography

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