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The Supervision-Evaluation Debate Meets the Theory-to-Practice Conundrum: Contemplations of a Practitioner Turned Professor

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Abstract

This article explores the tension between instructional supervision and teacher evaluation inherent in the professional literature and in practice. Moreover, it suggests engaging in formal appraisal processes less often to allow instructional leaders and classroom teachers more time for formative support for growth and improvement. Finally, this piece offers a range of formative development options and advocates teachers as educational professionals at a time when teacher quality and retention to the profession are paramount.

Keywords

instructional supervision; teacher evaluation; principal preparation; formative development

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Introduction

May 2020 marks the end of my 20th year in higher education. While I am gratified to have reached this professional milestone, it actually represents less than half of my career in education. Prior to becoming an educational leadership faculty member, I served in public schools for over two decades, most of that time as a building principal. Having had a foot in both camps provides me unique perspectives on each role.

As a student of and a scholar in the field of instructional supervision, I know, however, it is perilous, even inappropriate, to rely too heavily on past experiences or anecdotes. That said, there are events from my practitioner life that have stayed with me over time, years after stepping away from the principalship. Even twenty years into the professorate, these images linger and contribute to the supervision-evaluation strain I continue to grapple with. The crestfallen faces of accomplished teachers contemplating their "summative rating." The innumerable hours spent poring over complex evaluation checklists and rubrics. The veteran classroom teacher, apprehensive at the prospect of an in-class evaluative observation, breaking down in front of her class.

More recent teaching experiences reinforce the memories and confirm that similar circumstances are surely alive in today's schools. In an instructional supervision course I teach in the second semester of a five-semester principal preparation program, a series of course-related activities and subsequent student reactions indicate little has changed about teachers' perceptions of annual evaluation processes. In this course I introduce Sergiovanni's (2009) notion of appraisal systems having three overarching purposes – quality control, teacher motivation, and professional growth and development. Then, providing each student with an empty pie chart, I ask them to consider the appraisal system in their respective districts. At this point, these aspiring leaders are classroom teachers, many of them accomplished educators with years of experience. Semester after semester, the results are consistent. The majority of students indicate that most of the pie should represent *quality control*. Moreover, students find it amusing to think about evaluation and appraisal systems as *motivating* or as processes that contribute to their *professional improvement and growth*.

In the same course, I introduce the five-step clinical supervision cycle (Glickman et al., 2018) as a form of direct assistance to improve instruction. Additionally, we explore data collection methods based on what the teacher – who is the focus of the cycle – is curious to know about his or her classroom. Students are roundly delighted, even surprised, that they have never experienced such a model in practice and are pleased by the concept of someone gathering and sharing data *they* desire to help improve *their* teaching work. As one student wrote in a recent end-of-course reflection,

> I know for myself, the introduction to such an effective process [the clinical supervision cycle] for improving instruction leaves me wondering why we do not see it used more often. I am in my tenth year in education, and I have never had any administrator offer to provide me with such an amazing opportunity to learn more about myself as a teacher.

How, then, should instructional supervision scholars and instructors reconcile this quandary of instructional improvement with the realities and policies of contemporary school practice? As a principal practitioner who appraised hundreds of teachers across my career, I failed to 'evaluate' a single one to greatness. Are circumstances any different today?

Perhaps the real issue is how we choose to accomplish monitoring and accountability as compared to teacher growth and development. Some posit teacher evaluation, in general, does little to actually improve classroom practice; it is largely a 'dysfunctional ritual' (Zepeda, 2017; Hazi & Arredondo Rucinski, 2009). As Hazi reminds us, no research actually links teacher appraisal systems to improved classroom practices or better student performance (2012, 2014, 2016). Standardized appraisal instruments are simply not conducive to the kind of experimentation and self-reflection consistent with true growth and improvement (Derrington & Brandon, 2019). While periodic summative appraisal is inevitable, many teachers see it as threatening, "which is counteractive to the trusting, risking-taking environment necessary for professional growth" (Gordon & McGhee, 2019, p. 16). Compounding these matters is the time-consuming nature of most appraisal systems. Myriad tasks compete for a principal's time, challenging the leader to divide his or her energies and attentions to balance building management with instructionally-related work. But, without question, it is the principal who is accountable for the performance of every faculty and staff member in her or his building (Derrington & Brandon, 2019). Unfortunately, when formative supervision is conflated with summative evaluation – evaluation wins (Zepeda, 2017).

A Path Forward—Acknowledging Both, Exploring Both, Practicing Both

Mette notes, "supervision scholars must turn the attention of their supervision discourse community toward the future by acknowledging the current realities of practitioners who consume their scholarship…" (2019, p. 2). This is why I propose intentionally decoupling instructional supervision from teacher evaluation. Purposefully separating these matters, in scholarship and practice, opens up new opportunities for classroom teachers, school leaders, and the academics who study this work.

Many scholars, policy makers, and educational professionals share the belief that teacher evaluation systems do little to improve practice or truly inform personnel actions (Darling-Hammond et al., 2012). That said, because evaluation is fundamentally tied to human resource management in the field of education (Firestone, 2014), it is not going away anytime soon. However, adopting an every-other-year or every-third-year appraisal timeline for post-probationary educators could lessen the perennial discord between instructional supervision and summative evaluation and the resulting mixed messages that undermine trust between teachers and administrators (Zepeda, 2017). Engaging in formal evaluation less often would acknowledge the importance of accountability via evaluation while allowing professional development activities the time and attention to flourish.

With appropriate structures and time, teachers could pursue a wide range of professional development opportunities, suited to their individual growth needs, and facilitated by the principal. Such endeavors might include: clinical supervision cycles, classroom action research, collaborative learning walks, collecting and using student feedback, collegial support groups,

video or audio review of lessons, or portfolio development as pathways to professional improvement (see Gordon & McGhee, 2019). In addition to allowing teachers to establish their learning goals based on need and evidence from their own classrooms, formative improvement initiatives capitalize on the adult learner's desire for self-direction, immediate application, and enthusiasm for solving real-world problems (Glickman et al., 2018). In these situations, the principal or assistant principal's role is one of supporter and resource provider.

For example, several times throughout the year, the administrator might employ substitutes to facilitate release time, allowing teacher leaders to observe their peers in the instructional setting, conduct coaching conversations, collect data for a classroom colleague, or other peer-oriented collaborations. Aware of teachers' professional learning goals, campus leaders could conduct walk-though observations and provide follow-up information tailored to the teacher's area/s of focus. They might purchase books or other learning materials requested by teachers for book studies or classroom-based research. School-based funding could also endow opportunities for travel to professional conferences or meetings, or site visits to buildings and districts where various initiatives or innovations are practiced.

Finally, rather than being consumed with monitoring and assessing teachers, we should assume they possess professional competence. At a time when teacher quality and retention to the profession are paramount, it is essential that we adopt a more professional and supportive stance. For over 180 days each academic year, teachers, most of whom are the sole instructional professionals in the classroom, are ideally positioned to know their learners' unique needs. Moreover, they are well situated to develop productive relationships with students and their families. Teachers are the irrefutable *front line* in education. From greater degrees of satisfaction to improved teacher retention rates, there are countless benefits from establishing and sustaining an atmosphere of educator professionalism. According to Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2018), increased teacher professionalism yields a more democratic educational atmosphere and allows teachers to serve as designers and implementers of instructional innovations and improvements. As compared to deeply-rooted conditions fraught with isolationism, schools with greater degrees of collegiality and teamwork give rise to enhanced professional satisfaction and long-term commitment (Banerjee et al., 2017).

Conclusion

Rather than continuing to conflate summative evaluation with instructional supervision – which appraisal systems do – this piece advocates more time for formative support for teacher growth and improvement. Establishing a brighter line between the two could yield additional opportunities for time to support novice educators and those in true need of assistance. Given the inherent 'busyness' of school environments (Donaldson, 2006) and the hectic pace of life for those who work in them, less time engaged in the legal business of summative appraisals will allow for more intimate, growth-oriented interactions among teachers, their peers and colleagues, and the leadership practitioners who work alongside them.

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Marla W. McGhee is a professor of educational leadership and is Director of the Center for Public Education at Texas Christian University. Her research interests include instructional leadership, consequences of educational accountability systems, campus leadership for literacy learning, and the role of the contemporary assistant principal. Her works have appeared in such publications as *Phi Delta Kappan, Educational Administration Quarterly*, the *Journal of School Leadership, The Journal of Research on Leadership Education,* and *Library Media Connection* and *School Library Monthly*.