4-1-2010

The Impact of Evaluation upon Teacher Leadership

Ismael Abujarad
Noraini Yusof

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj
Part of the Educational Leadership Commons, Higher Education Commons, and the Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholars.fhsu.edu/alj/vol8/iss2/41

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FHSU Scholars Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Academic Leadership: The Online Journal by an authorized editor of FHSU Scholars Repository.
Mary Olsen took over the Principalship of a large elementary school of over 1500 students in a crowded urban area. From day one, things did not go as she had planned. The first day it rained, upsetting her plans to have an outdoor line up and greet the students and parents together. When meeting the teachers, she expected a sense of collaboration and willingness to work hard. Instead she faced two diverse groups of educators: one was the veteran work force who did not want any changes, having been at the job for twenty plus years. The second group was the newbies (italics mine), recent college graduates who came in wishing to roll up their sleeves and work. However, this set was strongly influenced by the veteran teachers who persuaded them to put forth minimal effort in order to keep the status quo. How could Mary Olson bring these two divergent groups together under a unifying mission, especially since she and the school needed to affect change and evidence student performance increases under the mandates of No Child Left Behind?

These are the questions and issues faced by many school leaders today: how to work collaboratively and still assure that students are showing progress in their performance. If the teaching and administrative staff are to work in partnership towards this end, then both groups must view their mission through the same lens.

We’re on the same side

The first thing Mary had to do was turn around teachers’ perceptions of how they viewed the school, the Principal, and their own roles as teachers. Michael Fullan, in Turnaround Leadership (2006) says that as leaders we need to focus on building both capacity and accountability within our buildings with a relentless focus on results. All members of the school community must believe in a shared vision rather than direct their energies towards tension and union issues between teachers and the Principal. The invisible line between faculty and administration has to be erased so all school members are able to focus on one common goal.

Mary Olson went before her faculty and described her dream for the school. She told her teachers that no longer would the school operate on the philosophy of business as usual that they may have experienced in their former schools. She offered all of her teachers a hand in their own work, their own learning, and their own evaluations. This is an important step because in order to grow, school communities need to bring in new people to share their own thoughts and collaborate in decision making (Cambron-McCabe and Quantz, 2000).

How to Do This

Principals need to reflect on the best way to inspire teachers to move forward while working with them in a risk-free collaborative environment. One way to do this is to change the vision of teacher evaluations from a summative assessment to a formative one. “In administrative evaluation and support, an administrator provides judgments and feedback related to teacher performance. These judgments may be tied to decisions of continued employment and other high-stakes decisions, such as
promotion or merit pay. The process involves a preconference, observation, written summative assessment, and a post conference” (Carr and Harris, 2001, 13).

The whole procedure is often terrifying to new teachers as they feel that their whole careers hang on the performance of a solo observation during one point in time. Veteran teachers gain little from this type of evaluation, especially if they are receiving the same type of recommendations every year. Rather than use one observation as an evaluation tool to judge the sum total of the teachers’ performance, Principals can use this visit as a formative one to help improve teacher practice. This can only be done if informal observations are conducted throughout the year on a regular basis.

Ongoing informal observations: Get the buy-in

It is important for faculty and administration to approach resolution to the issue looking through an identical lens with the same point of reference. If supervision is not to be a one shot deal or dog and pony show (italics mine), then the observation of the lesson needs to be real and truly meaningful to the teacher being observed. In the Skillful Leader, Platt et al. (2000) states that mediocre teaching is one of the biggest problems faced by school leaders. Often teachers can turn into mediocre instructors because they do not know (italics mine) to reach for excellence. It is the job of the Principal to train teachers to reach for this excellence in teaching, and strive for quality instruction.

Observations need to take place regularly to ensure superior instruction is taking place on an ongoing basis, and to provide immediate assistance to support teachers in this endeavor. This can occur through unannounced observations, but will only prove to be successful if the initiative is decided upon with the cooperation of the faculty. There is a greater possibility that excitement will be instilled in teachers if they are part of the decision making process and if they understand the reasons behind the new protocol. To be really effective at doing this, supervisors need to see teachers’ unhearsed daily instruction which can only be accomplished through unannounced visits. Staff members will be more likely to agree if both teachers and supervisors come to a joint understanding regarding the accepted course of action. For example, if the Principal walks into a classroom and it is not a good time for the teacher (i.e. he/she is not feeling well), then both decide that the visit can occur at another time. When teachers realize that if they agree to this procedure, and administrative classroom visits are occurring continually throughout the year, there will be no surprises during the evaluation visit, and therefore no unsatisfactory ratings. Inadequate practices will be discussed and strengthened during the routine visits before the official classroom evaluation occurs.

Not the Whole Sink

When writing observational reports, our job as Principals is to improve classroom practice. The traditional way of writing observations is to include points of excellence, also known as commendations, and points of recommendations. Supervisors need to keep the objective of this protocol in mind as they write up what they see. If the objective is to discontinue a teacher, hopefully after many ongoing attempts to support the teacher and improve instruction, then Principals will write up as many recommendations as they observe. Even then we need to ascertain whether the lack of improvement is due to a misunderstanding of the instructional initiatives, or a refusal to implement them.

When looking to affect change, Principals need to exercise discreet judgment on the best use of
recommendations to assist teachers to move on towards next instructional steps. Following the old adage that you can get more with honey than with vinegar, Principals should adhere to a judicious use of suggestions. If our main objective is to affect change and create passion in our teachers, it would be prudent to limit these recommendations to one or two doable points, and look to highlight practices the teacher is doing well. Staff members will feel energized after receiving praise for things they have worked on, and be more likely to tackle the one or two pressing next moves that they can change. A laundry list of items that need to be immediately addressed will tend to overwhelm anyone.

The language here is crucial as well: choose words such as “next steps” rather than “recommendations” which imply progress on a continuum towards excellence rather than one of deficiency. One or two areas for growth are more likely to be acted upon rather than ten items which can promote feelings of hopelessness or resentment, leading to mediocre teaching, and extinguishing the passion for the very teaching we try so hard to instill. After the next steps have been addressed, the supervisor can always return to the classroom, praise the implemented changes and suggest another area for growth, always slightly raising the bar for excellence.

Take every opportunity to teach

Principals are the lead teachers of the building, and as such, need to avail themselves of every possible moment to be a teacher and bring learning to their staff members. If evaluations are seen as formative assessments, or assessments for learning (Ainsworth and Viegut, 2006), then the traditional post-observation conference can be turned into a time for teaching and learning. Instead of restricting thinking to what was done or not done during the observed lesson, school leaders can think of the teacher’s learning on a continuum, and evaluate what he/she has integrated into the lesson delivery system based upon the school’s instructional initiatives. Since the observation meeting becomes formative in nature, rather than summative and evaluative, teachers can see this as a genuine learning experience to perfect their craft instead of viewing it as an opportunity for a satisfactory or unsatisfactory year end rating.

This can become an excellent chance for the Principal to step out of the role as evaluator, and into the shoes of the coach. As two people working towards the same goal, the session can become one of collaboration, with the passion for learning unfolding as both Principal and teacher plan together on the best way to move forward. Principals can share their expertise and work with their teachers, poring over student work and analyzing data together in order to untangle challenges and plan a course of action. What a great opportunity for the Principal to be seen in the light of instructional leader!

Very often school leaders are sent to training sessions on current initiatives with the expectation that new ideas will be turn keyed at the school level. Again, Principals can avail themselves of every opportunity to introduce the new instructional initiative, using weekly newsletters for communication, faculty conferences for replicating scenarios inviting discussions, and grade meetings for teacher team planning. If Principals are excited about their own learning, that feeling of enthusiasm will envelop the teaching staff. Teachers can be given the opportunity to try new strategies on their own, supported by their colleagues at team sessions where they come back to share their successes or challenges and plan next steps. Principals can use their post observation meetings to discuss aligning teachers’ goals with district proposals, and then in the role of a coach, assist them in transforming these plans into reality.
Putting Teachers in Charge of their Own Learning

There is just so much we as Principals can continue to teach our faculty. There comes a time when the passion to learn is ignited and teachers want to carry on with their own learning journey. Vygotsky (1962) has stated that what learners can to today with our assistance they can do tomorrow independently. So too can teachers be offered to continue their learning through action research based upon an interest or built upon a pressing need seen among the students that they teach. This can be offered in lieu of the traditional formal observation evaluation, and consequently will prove more valuable in terms of the teacher’s own professional growth. Putting teachers in charge of their own learning will serve to inspire them and promote a culture of collaboration. “Principals can foster a school environment that leads to collaboration and teacher leadership by sharing responsibility with teachers as often as possible and by helping them develop skills that foster collaborative problem solving” (Kohm and Nance, 2009).

One school used a format patterned after an investigative dissertation underscoring the need for research to drive practice. This action research project was offered to satisfactorily tenured teachers in lieu of a traditional evaluation. The project called for various components to be addressed as the school year progressed. It began with the teacher’s selection of a group of struggling learners in her classroom, and taking an educated guess as to why learning was breaking down for them. Following the need and significance of choosing this target population, the teacher reviewed the current research in order to peruse the background of what is known and accepted in the particular subject area chosen. The teacher subsequently would try out an instructional strategy within his/her classrooms, collect the data and report the results. Implications for the school as a whole would be discussed, with the results shared with staff members at the year end faculty conference. A timeline was distributed which detailed when work needed to be handed in to the Principal so that ongoing communication was ensured and assistance could then be provided when needed (Attachments 1-2).

Other options are for teachers to work together to come up with action research focusing on learning issues based upon characteristics across classrooms, across grades or across student populations. Time needs to be provided for teacher teams to meet regularly to discuss what learning problems students are encountering in the classroom, to discuss reasons causing these issues, and then to brainstorm possible solutions to try out in their own classrooms in order to find strategies that prove successful. “The power of teacher research lies in its capacity to make tacit problem solving processes explicit, and thus open up the possibility of improving practice by finding a better solution to the problem” (Robinson and Lai, 2006, 22). Results can then be shared school-wide so that successes may be applied to a similar population encountering the same issue. As Dufour et al. explain, “…The restructuring movement in education led to two significant conclusions: first, a strong professional community was critical to gains in student achievement, and second, the principals who led those learning communities were committed to empowering their teachers” (Dufour et al 2004, 141).

Putting it all together

It is up to every Principal to ignite that love of learning in all teaching staff, just as we, in our roles as teachers, do for our students. The job of school leaders is to train teachers by lending their own expertise in a collaborative relationship so they aspire to the next level of understanding and resulting practice. As Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2009) point out, the old model of traditional staff development whereby trainers come in and share their expertise with a group of teachers usually results in a
thorough dissemination of material but often does not culminate in a verifiable change in classroom practice. Employing action research empowers teachers to become part of the process to better understand and actually shape instructional practice.

We as Principals need to do our parts by staying on the cutting edge of what is new, and assuring we are up to date on the current research. Most importantly, we need to give the respect to our staff as professionals that we ourselves expect to receive. We can become learning colleagues for our teachers by keeping our conversations focused on instruction and using our faculty meetings to inspire our staff to reach for higher results. Being a true leader means recognizing when a staff member is ready to move on to a more challenging role, and supporting that growth, even if it means losing a valuable teacher in our classrooms. We should promote from within our schools, and then ask those promoted to train others to step into their former shoes, as they themselves are taking on positions of leadership. If teacher improvement is the goal, then staff members need our encouragement to strive for change and our ongoing support in order to be successful in reaching for that next step.

References


Attachment 1
Rationale:

Focusing on a target population allows us to study a manageable number of struggling students deeply in order to (a) better understand what interferes with their learning, (b) design learning experiences that accelerate their learning, and (c) apply the resulting organizational learning to other students.

Selection Criteria:

- When selecting your topic think in terms of the needs of the school and those students who are struggling. Your research should add value to our school and its community.

- The target population must consist of either a. A group of students you are concerned about, including those who are outside of the sphere of success or b. A group of students who are academically underachieving – in the lowest performing third of your class. The students are identified by first name only.

- Objective criteria for selection need to be employed. Criteria must be based upon indicators that are routinely reported at the school or system-wide level (for example: standardized test scores; grades; DRA and ECLAS results; attendance; suspension rates; conference notes; IEPs). Additional questions you may consider while selecting your target population are:
  
  – What kinds of questions would you need to ask to make certain that this is the target population?

  – What other forms of data would you look at to confirm and/or disconfirm the evidence you have gathered?

  – What other formative assessments did you consider? Are they available?

- The target population should consist of 15 students.

- Specifics for the narrative follow with a brief summary of each component along with due dates culminating in a presentation of your research at the May Faculty Conference.

Attachment 2

Action Research Guidelines

Due Dates
November 1

1) Introduction/Proposal (1 page)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 3</td>
<td>2) Rational/Need and Significance of the Study (1-2 pages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 7</td>
<td>3) Brief Review of Current Literature (2-3 pages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 17</td>
<td>4) Methods and Procedures (2-4 pages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) Sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>c) Instruments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>d) Treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>e) Procedures for Collecting Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 15</td>
<td>5) Results (2-3 pages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 30</td>
<td>6) Discussion and Implication for the school (2-3 pages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1</td>
<td>7) References (1-2 pages)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 7</td>
<td>Faculty Presentation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

VN:R_U [1.9.11_1134]