

An Examination of How a Principal Motivates Teaching Staff to Practice Self-Evaluation to
Improve Performance

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Abstract

Background: In the 2011-12 school year, for the first time in the history of public education in New York State, teachers will be evaluated based on student achievement. Due to the uncertainty and controversial nature of the initiative, principals are being given the responsibility of presenting the new evaluation tool and process to teachers. How this information is presented will be vital to its success.

Purpose: This study examines how a principal's interactions with her supervisors and teachers motivate the teaching staff to self-evaluate to improve their performance when faced with a new and difficult mandate.

Research Design: Framed by the theoretical lens of distributive perspective of leadership practice, in this qualitative study, a narrative research design was used. The data collected consisted of interviews, journal entries and reflections, a document, and an observation. Themes emerged as data was transcribed, reread multiple times, and restoried.

Findings: The principal's interactions were influenced by a situation whereby she had very little guidance and information but used the opportunity to present herself in a genuine and collaborative manner. The themes of insecurity, collaboration, and support were evident as she empowered a teacher to use a contentious mandate to self-reflect in order to improve or validate her performance. Empowering the teacher by relating to her values intrinsically motivated the teacher to want to improve her own practices as well as assist her colleagues.

Conclusions: Honest and supportive interactions between a teacher and a principal can foster an opportunity for a teacher to self-reflect in order to improve performance. When a teacher's values are perceived as important, then he/she becomes intrinsically motivated.

Keywords: empower, motivation, interactions, self-reflection, collaboration

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Introduction

As one of the most dramatic and broad school reforms begins implementation this school year, principals across New York State are wrestling with how to successfully align teacher performance evaluation tools with the practice of teaching and improving student outcomes. This is the first year in the history of New York State public education that public school teachers will be held accountable for the performance of their students. Education Law 3012-c requires a new performance evaluation system for classroom teachers and building principals (NYSED, 2011). The new annual professional performance review (APPR) is designed to measure teacher and principal effectiveness based on performance, including measures of student achievement and evidence of educator effectiveness in meeting New York State teacher and school leader standards (NYSED, 2011).

In June 2011, the New York State Education Department approved nine rubrics that school districts may select as an evaluation tool or they may create their own. If a school district decides to create its own or adapt one of the approved rubrics, they must apply to the New York State Education Department for a variance.

Under the new statute beginning in the 2011-2012 school year, as the new evaluation is phased in, only teachers of English Language Arts and/or mathematics in grades four through eight will be evaluated by the new system as will the principals who supervise them. As school district leaders— more specifically principals—begin to understand how the new evaluation can affect teaching and learning, a delicate balance exists between teachers understanding how the

criteria in the selected rubric can benefit their practices and how principals use those criteria to improve classroom instruction. Encouraging teachers to see the bigger picture and use the evaluation rubric for the betterment of the students can lead to empowerment (Short & Greer, 2002).

The best-case scenario would be for teachers to be able to use the evaluation experience to self-reflect in order to improve upon their performance. Therefore, it becomes increasingly more important as to how the information regarding the process and the criteria is disseminated to teachers. According to Osterman and Kottkamp (2004), “Reflective practice thrives in an environment of open communication and collaboration” (p. 184). Because the interactions between principal and teachers and the perception of leadership create the social and human capital in a school, a principal’s influence becomes vital to the success of any initiative (Spillane, 2007). If leadership is practiced effectively, a principal’s influence can empower and motivate teachers.

Research Questions

In this study, I will examine:

- How does a principal motivate staff to self-evaluate in order to improve performance?
- How do the interactions between principal and teaching staff foster motivation?
- How do the principal’s interactions with her superiors affect her interactions with her teachers?

Researcher’s Perspective

With so many unanswered questions from the New York State Education Department and very little direction from central office administrators as to how the new mandated, statewide, teacher evaluation system is to be introduced to teachers and implemented by administrators, I

felt this was a challenging, yet timely topic to pursue. For partly selfish reasons, because I, too, am being evaluated on the success of my teachers, it is important to me that teachers find the new evaluation process a useful tool to monitor their own practices for purposes of pedagogical improvement. The ultimate goal is to increase student outcomes. As administrators, this is about the children and community we serve. It is about improving the classroom instruction of the teachers we supervise. If we can use the State-approved rubrics to accomplish that, then principals' evaluations will be positive.

With an ever-increasing desire to remove myself from the political quagmire regarding the implementation of the new APPR, my personal goal is to use the system to benefit my teachers and, in turn, my students. As an elementary principal with 15 years experience, both in New York City and on Long Island, I have found that you cannot fight "City Hall." I refuse to expend my energy on the fight when it has to be done anyway. According to Kouzes and Posner (2007), "You can't lead others till you've first led yourself through a struggle with opposing values" (p. 346). No one knows for sure whether or not holding teachers accountable for their students' performance on standardized tests improves teacher performance. It is too soon to assess, but I certainly believe in better teacher and principal accountability. However, at this point in time, my energy is better spent increasing my own and my teachers' understanding of the rubric they will be evaluated by, and helping them to meet the criteria to become highly effective educators. Fullan (2011) reminds us to make change as simple as possible by stripping away the clutter and focusing on the actionable items.

Under these circumstances, the interaction between administrator and teacher(s) is crucial to achieving buy-in, not resistance, especially with the overriding sentiment of distrust attached to the legislation. Maintaining open and trusting relationships with teachers so we can continue

making the best possible decisions together on behalf of our students can be perceived as undermined by the new mandate.

When rolling out a mandated initiative with such uncertainty, assisting those who will be affected by it the most to establish a sense of security and continue to take risks in their practices will not be easy. The goal of alleviating teachers' anxiety so the evaluation rubric encourages self-reflection and purposeful growth is hopefully a reality for those entrenched in it. Barnett and O'Mahoney (2006) define reflection as "a learning process examining current or past practices, behaviors, or thoughts in order to make conscious choices about future actions" (p. 501). If this definition can be embraced through leadership that is perceived as empowering, then this initiative could possibly be successful.

As a building principal who has been effective in two very different environments, I feel strongly that the way the new APPR is presented to teachers is critical to the shifts a school will make—both in culture and in instruction. Because I am operating in isolation, for me, understanding that my perception of the new APPR is not unique is important for the achievement of my students, the confidence of my staff, and my credibility as a valuable building leader. To validate my own practices within this process I seek to understand how other principals will successfully implement this vital stage of the introductory process. The lens in which other principals perceive and apply this critical stage of the new teacher evaluation agenda will help shape its implementation and its success in improving student outcomes.

Method

This study focuses on how a principal takes a contentious initiative and motivates teachers to self-reflect in order to improve their practices.

Context of Study

Participants. For purposes of this study, I examined the distributive leadership process of an elementary school principal from a small, suburban elementary school. She was selected because we share similar insights and philosophies regarding current educational trends as evidenced by personal discussions as well as her input at local administrative meetings. This is her fifth year as a principal after serving as an assistant principal for three years in a neighboring district from the one she is presently employed. She is a principal I have mentored and with whom I developed an open and mutually respectful relationship. Therefore, I can hope that what I observed and examined is indicative of who she truly is as a leader, not what she perceived I wanted or expected to see. Our interviews centered on: (a) how she felt the new APPR process should be introduced to teachers; (b) how she felt they would react; (c) her role in easing the assumptions of the legislation; and (d) how she would support her staff going forward.

The second participant was the fifth grade teacher the principal met with during the meeting I observed. It was important to gauge the teacher's perspective and feelings because the data is being examined through a distributive leadership lens.

School. The principal used for this study leads an elementary school with 169 students in grades kindergarten through grade 5. The school has one or two classes per grade. The school is located in a middle-class, African-American and Hispanic community of single family homes. The suburban school district is not a Title I district and, therefore, has no free or reduced breakfast or lunch program. Achievement levels have fluctuated over the years and based on the 2010-2011 New York State standardized test scores, proficiency levels in literacy and math decreased from the prior school year.

Data Collection. Framed by the theoretical lens of distributive perspective of leadership practice, in this qualitative study, a narrative research design was used. Data used included the

Danielson's Framework for Teaching rubric (2011 Revised Edition), which is one of the approved rubrics selected by the New York State Education Department, one principal-generated memo pertaining to this initiative, two unstructured interviews conducted with the same building principal, one unstructured interview with a fifth grade teacher in the observed principal's school, three journal entries by the researcher during the interviews, and three reflections, one after each interview. This data was collected over a one-month period. The data were reviewed, transcribed where necessary, and reread multiple times.

Data Analysis. It was analyzed with coding for recurrent themes by the researcher.

Findings

According to Spillane (2007):

A distributed perspective presses us to look not only at who takes responsibility for particular leadership routines and functions but also how the practice of leadership takes form in the interactions of these leaders with followers and with the situation (p. 526).

While analyzing the data using a distributive leadership lens, three themes emerged; insecurity, collaboration, and support. Each is a direct result of the principal's interactions with others.

Insecurity

During the first interview with the principal, her comfort level with the new evaluation process and Danielson rubric was discussed. She stated, "I am comfortable with the rubric. It is a comprehensive document, but I have spent time familiarizing myself with it so reviewing it with teachers would be easier and hopefully, productive." She was very clear that she was unsure if she was doing the right thing because she received no directives from her immediate supervisors regarding the implementation of the new evaluation process and its alignment with

the Danielson rubric. As evidenced by the statement, “I feel like I am flying by the seat of my pants,” she further indicated that she was frustrated by the lack of direction. In a second follow-up interview one month after the first, when asked if she has done any more work with her teachers and the rubric, she responded, “No.” When questioned as to why not, she replied, “This whole process has such negative connotations, I am afraid to go further without direction from my supervisors.”

While observing the initial meeting between the principal and a teacher regarding the evaluation process and the instrument being used, I observed a very collegial relationship; one where mutual respect was evident, however, uncertainty about the process was discussed. The principal stated, “I don’t know much about how this is going to play out but, as of now, this is the criteria you will be evaluated on as per state regulations.” The teacher’s reactions were congenial, however, she expressed her dissatisfaction with being evaluated based on her students’ test scores. The principal shrugged with an empathetic look, yet did not reply. The teacher did not comment further on the use of test scores. I noted in my journal entry that the principal’s lack of a response and facial expression appeared to be one of frustration and minimal confidence.

When the meeting was over, we discussed her reaction to the comment made by the teacher regarding the impact of students’ scores on her evaluation. The principal responded, “I understand how teachers feel, but I am not sure I agree with them. I am not sure how I feel about all of this because no one talks to me about it. Most of them will do well, but this will be a wake-up call to the ones that don’t. I can only hold their hands so much.” Prior to the start of the meeting between the principal and the teacher, she clarified that this was a talented teacher whose students do well. The principal’s high regard for the teacher was evident in her

interactions with her, but her lack of information emanated clearly in the meeting, i.e., “I am not sure what point values are being given to each domain or component, I think the teacher’s union is negotiating that.” The teacher was aware of the teachers’ union involvement but did not dwell on this point. The principal’s honesty regarding the lack of information about the process did not hinder her interactions with the teacher in any way. The teacher valued the principal’s honesty. It contributed to the trusting relationship they appeared to have.

Collaboration

It is evident that the principal created a collaborative environment with the teachers. In this meeting she had to use her legitimate power as the building principal due to the context of the situation—a new mandate with little information and direction.

The principal began the meeting by cheerfully greeting the teacher and explaining the purpose of the meeting, “I am sure you are aware of the new evaluation system that has been put into place this school year for teachers in grades four through eight who teach ELA and math. I think another teacher sent you the rubric.” The teacher was aware of the mandate and acknowledged receipt of the document. The principal had informed the teacher prior to the meeting that there would be an observer. The principal briefly introduced me, handed the teacher the rubric and said, “Don’t panic! I see the look on your face. As a team, let’s focus on the language in the document so we can start to understand it.” After the rubric was presented to the teacher, the principal gave her a sheet she created that clarified the format of the rubric. The rubric consists of four domains.

Each domain specifically identifies elements for each of five components within that domain. Each element then has indicators to help assess if the elements are being implemented

in four categories (a) Distinguished; (b) Proficient; (c) Basic and; (d) Unsatisfactory. The principal highlighted Domain 3—Instruction (Danielson, 2011) and reviewed each of the five components within the Instruction Domain.

As she went through each component, she repeatedly told the teacher how effective she was at implementing each of them, “You can do this with your eyes closed. This is part of your daily classroom practice.” The principal then indicated to the teacher that she would probably be calling upon her expertise to help colleagues understand the particular practices within this domain. The teacher was delighted by the compliment and responded by stating, “I would love to help. You know I would do anything to help make this easier for all of us.” They looked through the Instruction Domain together and discussed some of the indicators. As the principal described the format and pointed out one of the examples given for a specific indicator, the teacher said, “We are going to be held so much more accountable but for those of us who work hard, this is so validating.” The principal agreed, “This is your snapshot. It will help you personally reflect each day.” The principal then suggested, “Maybe we can create a chart similar to the one I gave you, that encourages reflection and becomes an easy tool to keep one focused and in-check with what they are being evaluated on and where they stand within each domain.” She ended the meeting by reminding the teacher, “Don’t forget at the end of the day our work is effective; we will work together to make this a valuable tool for all of us.” The teacher clearly left the meeting more comfortable than when she entered as indicated by her body language and facial expression—her shoulders were more relaxed and she left with a smile.

When the principal and I spoke briefly after the meeting, she was pleased that the teacher left feeling comfortable and empowered. About half way through the meeting she stopped and said to the teacher, “Tell me your thoughts.” The principal stated, “When she told me that the

rubric actually eases many concerns because the criteria are right there, I felt so much better. I know how hard this is for all of us, especially with so little information.”

Support

Within this one meeting, the collaboration and support themes are closely connected yet subtly different. The principal trusted this teacher as indicated by her decision to move the teacher with her students from one grade level to the next; the principal said, “you looped with this class for a reason.” The teacher acknowledged how the students have grown since she began with them as fourth grade students. They both agreed that [looping] the teacher remaining with these students for two years was beneficial for the children. The class has made significant progress in the little over a year she has been their primary instructor. As they reviewed the Instruction Domain from the rubric, the teacher pointed to significant gains by her students based on some of the indicators in the rubric, specifically component 3a—Communicating with students. She said, “Understanding where my students come from has been critical in their growth; they know I care about them, understand them, and share their life with them, but I’m not sure if they are pleasing me or themselves.” The principal praised her for her work with this at-risk group of students. She made the suggestion of having the students reflect more on their work and their successes. She emphasized that it might assist in clarifying their personal goals and facilitate them taking ownership over them. The teacher liked the idea, and they briefly discussed methods for student reflection such as journals or exit cards. The principal offered to come to her classroom and model some reflective strategies with the students. Although short, this brief discussion was powerful. The teacher was enthusiastic about taking away good strategies to assist both her students and her.

As the teacher began to recognize how useful the new evaluation rubric could be as a self-reflection tool for improvement, it was noted in one of my journal reflections that she became almost excited, and her exhilaration projected the concept of self-reflection as a useful tool for her students as well. She exclaimed, “Wow, I can see how this process can benefit all of us.” The principal responded, “This is a learning experience for all of us. We will get through this together. My rubric is coming down the pike and then we will all be in this boat together.” The principal briefly touched upon the principals being evaluated in the same manner as teachers except the criteria would be a bit different to reflect a principal’s role. This information was conveyed empathetically. It was at this point in the meeting that the teacher felt the principal truly empathized with the new evaluative mandates in which teachers are being placed. The teacher’s reaction, “I forgot you have to do this too,” was said with a sense of surprise yet compassion. The interactions between principal and teacher were mutually supportive as evidenced by the principal’s willingness to be hands-on in the classroom, and the teacher’s compassion for the principal when she realized they would be delving into this APPR journey together.

Discussion

The analyses of the data provided evidence that the situation drove the leadership practices of the principal. It is clear she wants to empower her teacher by encouraging her to use the evaluation rubric as a tool for self-reflection. Both the principal and the teacher clearly saw the evaluation rubric as a tool to improve classroom performance and/or to validate strong instructional practices. Short and Greer (2002) refer to empowered individuals as those who have the skills and knowledge to take action when necessary to improve upon a situation. In this

case, the situation is a State mandate with very little information for its implementation which has positive and negative ramifications.

The collaborative nature of the principal was obvious. She referred to herself and her staff as a team more than once. According to Fullan (2011), focused collaboration motivates the majority of an organization to come up with creative ways to work together for purposes of improvement. The teacher understood she would be a part of the process. Based on this meeting alone, she knew the principal valued her as a professional because the principal clearly stated that she moved the teacher up a grade in order to remain with the same students. She was successful in moving the students forward academically. Fullan (2011) stated, “Realized effectiveness is what motivates people to do more (p. 52). Because the teacher feels valued, she is intrinsically motivated to work hard and to be effective. This was evidenced by her past successes and her enthusiasm with a new tool to further her growth and development. Kouzes and Posner (2007) further supported this thinking by stating, “For leaders, developing competence and confidence of their constituents (so that they may be more qualified, more capable, more effective, and leaders in their own right) is a personal and hands-on affair” (p. 261). DeFour, DeFour, and Eaker (2008) emphasized that interactions among teachers and principal has a critical impact on how a school functions. Spillane (2006) concurs when he stated, “Leadership is a relationship of social influence” (p. 499).

Because communication is critical to the success of this process, the principal was very forthcoming initially with information about the rubric and how it could be used, however, due to her own lack of knowledge and direction about the process, she ceased communicating about the process shortly after this meeting took place. She stated in our second interview, “I am

unsure how to proceed or if I am even doing the right thing so I will just wait for further directions.”

In the meeting with the teacher, the principal was resolute in her discussion about using the rubric as a self-reflective tool. When further discussed in the second interview, she was adamant about the value of the rubric but less confident about proceeding with the process. Other than not receiving further direction from her supervisors, she could not really explain why she did not continue to discuss the rubric with staff. Perhaps her lack of experience with new mandates has stopped her from forging ahead. Perhaps she is not a risk-taker in her own practices. Because a month had passed between her meeting with the teacher and our second interview, and no further direction was forthcoming, although, she was confident and resolute initially, she was becoming less so as time passes due to a lack of guidance. She was not even sure if the teacher was using the document as she intended it to be used. When questioned about it she replied, “She is a great teacher. We have had no follow-up conversations about the rubric, but I am sure she is using it as it was intended to be used. There are always wonderful things going on in her class, and the majority of her students, who were below grade level a year ago, are doing significantly better this year.”

According to Osterman and Kottkamp (2004), “Reflective practice is a process that empowers and motivates individuals and groups through an on-going process of professional development” (p. 189). Without consistent follow-up, this principal is not making use of the opportunity to move her school forward, especially since her school’s achievement levels are not consistent. Reflective practice at both the classroom and building level is empowering for a school community and can result in systemic change (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).

I sensed there was almost an impression of avoidance regarding the use of the rubric in the evaluation process and in conversations that involved the rubric in teaching and learning. Fullan (2011) stated, "...it's not about immediate perfection. It's about learning something over time: confronting a challenge and making progress" (p. 47). To some extent, it is not about the evaluation process but commitment to the self-reflection process. Although this initiative suffered from minimal central office guidance, the principal could not continue embedding the evaluation document into teachers' practices. Lack of communication from the principal's supervisors can be interpreted in many ways—do what you think is right, don't do anything until you hear something further, interpret the process as you see fit, etc. The principal's resistance to move forward can be viewed as a passive constructive behavior because she was refraining from further action, or it could be viewed as passive destructive behavior because she was avoiding further action (Runde & Flanagan, 2007). The study needed to be longer in order to determine which conflicting behavior was more prominent or if the conflicting behavior persisted.

The majority of public school teachers who see the new evaluation process as controversial is demonstrated by the on-going litigation in Albany. The meeting I observed was by no means contentious. Had I observed an initial APPR meeting with a different, perhaps not as effective teacher, it could have had very different outcomes. The interactions would have been different. By observing the interactions with only one teacher did not allow me to truly understand the bigger picture of leadership practices within this small school. In addition, my presence at the meeting was quite obvious because of the small number of participants. Having a third party observer in such a small setting could have also impacted the interactions. One can also see the potential for transformational leadership, however, the study was too short and not enough data were collected.

Conclusions and Implications

The principal's interactions with the teacher in the meeting I observed were supportive, collaborative, and genuine. She was open with her praise which always connected to the purpose of what was good for children. Because she was specific in her examples and could increase capacity by including the teacher in future staff development, the teacher felt intrinsically motivated. The teacher became part of the process. It was evident the teacher found the praise and suggestion of contributing to the comfort of the staff affirming. It was important to her—her values were tapped and because she could fulfill the task, her motivation was instantly heightened. “New energy comes from getting better at something that represents an important value” (Fullan, 2011, p. 151). The teacher concluded, because of the consistent praise throughout the meeting, that the rubric could be validating as well as a tool for improvement. Therefore, it became less threatening. Her practices were not being criticized, they were being confirmed. It was this construct the principal brought to the forefront of the meeting that fostered the teacher's sense of empowerment.

In addition, because the teacher was made aware, although briefly, that the principal would be going through a similar evaluation process, she displayed empathy—another factor in motivating her. “Believability goes up when leaders are personally involved” (Kouzes & Posner, 2007, p. 324).

Finally, even though the principal was clearly insecure in moving forward with the initiative, her lack of information did not negatively impact her interactions with the teacher. The principal's honesty was perceived as genuine. When Fullan (2011) discussed the development of trust, he concluded, “... they can smell rhetoric and lip service a mile away” (p. 116). Trust leads to risk-taking and risk-taking leads to empowerment. “Lightfoot (1986) noted

that a climate of experimentation and risk-taking provides empowering opportunities for teachers to shape the educational environment” (as cited in Short & Greer, 2002, p. 156). Positive professional interactions between principals and teachers can empower teachers to be motivated to improve their practices when they feel validated, appreciated, and respected. Leaders must be a part of the learning process in order to be perceived as genuine learners. Honesty builds a trusting environment where all practitioners can move forward confidently.

In order for the practice of effective leadership to take place, principals must always keep in mind what is important to the people they lead. This can be easily clarified in their interactions. Understanding and acknowledging people’s values will foster motivation and collaboration. Self-evaluation is an empowering practice to improve classroom performance, and even more so when teachers are led to discover this inquiry on their own.

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