

Creating Communities of Practice

To stimulate professional learning, we need to move beyond teacher evaluation based on numbers, ratings, and rankings.

Charlotte Danielson

Today's teachers and administrators are caught in a squeeze of conflicting demands. Virtually all teachers care deeply about children and their learning. They work hard to create classroom environments that are simultaneously well organized and purposeful, warm and supportive, and intellectually challenging. That's a tall order in the best of times; and it's even more difficult in a policy environment in which teachers are under great scrutiny and subject to greater accountability than ever before.



Principals are also feeling the crunch. They're confronted with the pressures of time-consuming teacher evaluation systems, often imposed from above, making it harder for them to provide teachers with meaningful and effective instructional support. Meanwhile, principals must be attuned to the needs of students and parents and responsive to requirements from the central office.

Many educators are left wondering how they can manage all these ever-increasing demands. They may feel that pressures from all sides—especially mandated evaluation systems that come across as punitive rather than supportive—are making it hard for them to do the things for which they went into education in the first place. It's a sorry state of affairs when teachers fear that they're being forced to compromise their most important responsibility—serving the students in their charge.

I don't think I'm the first person to observe that current approaches to teacher evaluation in many states are undermining the very professionalism that's essential to creating positive learning environments for students. To be sure, evaluation serves an essential policy function, ensuring that all teachers in a school meet or exceed certain standards of proficiency. Safeguarding teacher quality is an essential requirement for any school receiving public (or even private) funds. But the proportion of teachers who don't meet basic standards of practice is no more than 6 percent, according to most estimates (Pallas, 2013). If the 6 percent figure is close to correct, what about the other 94 percent? Surely, any professionally responsible personnel policy would also place a priority on helping these already-good teachers become even more skilled in their practice.

Two Basic Realities

As we think through strategies to ensure that all our students receive not just adequate instruction

but also an excellent education, it may help if we remind ourselves of some realities of teaching, learning, and life in schools.

Teaching is complex work.

Teachers make hundreds of decisions each day (literally—researchers have counted them) (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Shavelson & Stern, 1981). And regardless of how good, even inspirational, a teacher's practice is on any given day, it can always become even better. This statement is not intended to downplay the wonderful work that many teachers do every day with their students; it simply reflects the complexity of teaching. The impossibility of reaching perfection is in the very nature of creative, professional work. Therefore, part of the mission of every school must be to create a place for learning, for teachers as well as students, in which teachers are continually engaged in learning new skills and acquiring new insights that can enhance their practice.

Current approaches to teacher evaluation in many states are undermining the very professionalism that's essential to positive learning environments for students.

Current evaluation programs aren't fulfilling their potential.

Although teacher evaluation can contribute to teachers' professional learning, it doesn't always do so. In many schools and districts, teacher evaluation has become simply a matter of numbers, ratings, and rankings. In some jurisdictions, teacher rankings are even published in the newspaper. No one should be surprised that growing numbers of teachers have become seriously disenchanted with the profession. I receive frequent e-mails from teachers expressing their dismay over what they perceive as a serious distortion of their mission to engage students in meaningful learning.

For teacher evaluation practices to lead to real professional learning, the system must include self-assessment, reflection on practice, and professional conversation. The planning and reflection conferences between teacher and observer before and after a classroom observation should never be eliminated; many educators find that the full value of the observation is realized only in those conversations. Although training of teacher evaluators has greatly improved our ability to determine where individual teachers fall on the curve of teacher effectiveness, that's not enough. We need to actually move the curve.

Promoting Professional Growth: The Principal's Role

Many educators have concluded that teacher evaluation, even if it's carried out in a way that maximizes reflection and professional conversation, is not the best approach to stimulate teachers' learning about their complex and important work. Schools should not rely on evaluation as their main engine of teaching improvement. Instead, they should embrace comprehensive personnel policies that establish the school as a place of learning for adults as well as students.

What is the principal's role in promoting this kind of professional learning? In considering this question, it's important to employ the most accurate analogies for teachers and their work. In some approaches to teacher evaluation, individual teachers are viewed like door-to-door salesmen, each one responsible for a territory (classroom), with his or her success unaffected by coworkers in neighboring territories. That is, teachers are similar to independent contractors, and their success is determined solely by the achievement gains made by "their" students. In this analogy,

the principal is an inspector, analyzing each teacher's practice and the results of each teacher's work.

But a different analogy might serve our purposes better: that of a symphony orchestra. In this situation, each individual, whether violinist, or oboist, or percussionist, is a part of a larger whole, and the sound that emanates from the orchestra is a function of how they work together. In this analogy, the principal's role is that of a conductor, ensuring the right balance between the different sections of the orchestra and monitoring the effects of their collective effort. In other words, the principal's role is promoting the collective knowledge and skill of the faculty and ensuring that, working together, they can accomplish the best results possible with all the students in their charge.

Schools are a tangle of relationships among individuals and groups. The principal oversees this environment, but he or she is not the only player in it. The principal's most important role is to establish and sustain a schoolwide community of professional inquiry—a community in which educators learn from one another and draw on their colleagues' knowledge and insights to enhance their own teaching. Here are some guidelines for principals who want to create such communities.

Create an environment that's both safe and challenging.

Just as effective teachers establish a classroom culture in which students feel both safe and challenged,¹ effective school leaders establish a schoolwide culture in which teachers feel safe to express themselves and take risks, but are also challenged to actively seek new and better approaches to their practice.

One strategy for supporting risk-taking is to encourage teacher teams to identify and share high-quality mistakes—approaches that didn't work very well, but from which the teachers learned important lessons. The principal can also model this practice; most principals have a catalogue of experiences in dealing with students, parents, or the district administration that did not work as planned, but from which they learned some important lessons. For example, one principal told about a time when he became aware that a parent, unhappy about a particular teacher, had been discussing her concerns with other parents and thus undermining the teacher's reputation in the school. On first hearing about this parent's remarks, the principal had not taken immediate action; instead he had ignored the situation in the hopes that the remarks would stop. Later, he decided that this had not been the best response—the problem didn't go away. From this experience, he passed on a lesson about the importance of clear communication and active support for colleagues.

When teachers have an instructional dilemma, they're more likely to approach fellow teachers for advice than to discuss the matter with an administrator.

Establish the expectation that colleagues will continually learn from one another.

We know that teachers learn more from their colleagues than from their supervisors. When they have an instructional dilemma, they're more likely to approach fellow teachers for advice than to discuss the matter with an administrator, who's likely to be an evaluator. This is hardly surprising. All learning requires vulnerability; teachers are unlikely to admit uncertainty or imperfect knowledge to a supervisor who might interpret such an admission as weakness or deficiency.

Therefore, the principal should begin by explicitly recognizing and reinforcing the idea that much untapped wisdom resides in the knowledge and experience of teachers. To model that it's acceptable to admit imperfection and to seek assistance, the principal might describe to the faculty a skill he or she is trying to improve (such as managing the budget or forging better relationships with neighborhood businesses), and invite teachers' suggestions about how he or she might build that skill.

Another way to reinforce the expectation that teachers will continually learn from one another is by instituting a system of mutual teacher observation. In most schools, teachers are observed by supervisors for the purpose of evaluation or by peer coaches who provide nonevaluative feedback. In both cases, however, the assumed beneficiary of the observation is the teacher who is being observed. Why not turn that assumption on its head and implement a system in which teachers routinely observe other teachers to learn from them? Perhaps a 3rd grade teacher is having difficulty using discussion strategies in her class; the discussions are flat, and only a few students participate. If she knows that a 4th grade colleague is highly skilled in this area, she might observe that teacher and note specific techniques to try.

This is a very powerful strategy, but one that some teachers resist because in their experience, another person coming into their classroom means they might be evaluated or judged. This combination of a powerful strategy and natural resistance creates a terrific opportunity for leadership. The principal might say, "It's important for the school that every teacher observe a colleague twice (or some other number of times) during the school year to gain some insights into your own teaching. Make arrangements with other teachers, let me know when you're planning to do it, and I'll cover your class."

Principals are also ideally situated to establish the schoolwide structures that enable teachers to learn from one another and to develop their collective wisdom. Many schools have found ways to institute common planning time for grade-level teams or departments during the school day. Setting aside the time is essential, but so is establishing expectations about what teachers should accomplish during such meetings, so that teams don't squander the time in complaining about a few students or dissecting the latest proposal from the district office. The best use of this time will, naturally, be influenced by current initiatives in the school or the district. But some options include understanding new curriculum standards and how those might be addressed in the classroom, analyzing student work, or engaging in lesson study. Such activities are most powerful when they are led or coordinated by a team leader, a department chair, or instructional coach.

Support teacher leadership.

Some of these activities imply different, or expanded, roles for at least some teachers. The roles of mentor, instructional coach, department chair, or team leader require skills somewhat different from those needed for teaching students. Providing the opportunity for training (perhaps with district support and coordination) so teacher leaders can acquire the necessary skills is another facet of leadership by the principal.

But establishing productive teams is not simply a matter of designating one individual as the leader and assigning responsibilities; every member of the team must be able to contribute, and feel invited to do so. Principals are the ones in the best position to make sure team participants get training in collaboration skills, such as actively listening to colleagues, summarizing a discussion, acknowledging and building on others' ideas, become proficient at not only problem-solving but

also problem identification, and so on.

The impossibility of reaching perfection is in the nature of creative, professional work.

It's sometimes important, also, to arrange for the infusion of expertise when it's needed. Although teachers can learn much from one another, they don't necessarily know everything required for substantive improvement. For example, they may need training in the techniques of conducting lesson study; or they may need to learn about research-supported literacy, mathematics, or science instruction. The principal is in the best position to identify these needs and provide expert coaches or professional developers as needed.

Time for a Shift

In our quest to improve teaching, it's time to shift from an emphasis on high-stakes accountability for individual teachers to an emphasis on schoolwide communities of professional inquiry in which educators learn from one another. Principals and teacher leaders are key players in building these communities. Instead of attempting to improve teaching solely by ranking and rating teachers, let's make evaluation part of a comprehensive system designed to enhance the individual and collective capacity of all educators in the school.

Copyright © 2016 Charlotte Danielson

Charlotte Danielson (charlotte@danielsongroup.org) advises state education departments and national ministries and departments of education, both in the United States and internationally. She is the author of [Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching, 2nd Edition](#) (ASCD, 2007) and [The Handbook for Enhancing Professional Practice: Using the Framework for Teaching in Your School](#) (ASCD, 2008).

References

Clark, C. M., & Peterson, P. L. (1986). Teachers' thought processes. In M. C. Wittrock (ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching*, 3rd ed. (pp. 255–296). New York: Macmillan.

Pallas, A. (2013, February 19). How many ineffective teachers are actually out there? [blog post]. Retrieved from The Washington Post Answer Sheet blog at www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2013/02/19/how-many-ineffective-teachers-are-actually-out-there

Shavelson, R. J., & Stern, P. (1981). Research on teachers' pedagogical thoughts, judgments, decisions, and behavior. *Review of Educational Research*, 51, 455–498.

¹Components 2a and 2b of the Framework for Teaching. See Danielson, C. (2007). [Enhancing professional practice: A framework for teaching, 2nd ed.](#) Alexandria, VA: ASCD.